COVER STORY

Illustration by Neal Portnoy/photo by Mike Cunningham

Fort: Pros should subsidize NCAA sports

If Edward B. Fort has his way, NCAA schools will receive handsome bounties from the NFL and the NBA within the next three to five years.

Fort, who is president of North Carolina A & T, firmly believes that those two pro sports leagues should pay the NCAA for providing them with the athletic talent that stocks their rosters.

Some observers go as far as labeling college sports as a farm system for pro football and basketball.

Quite a few years have passed since a non-college player has forged a substantial career in the NFL and the NBA. Over the past 20 years or so, only Moses Malone of the basketball Washington Bullets, Darryl Dawkins of the basketball Detroit Pistons, and Eugene "Big Daddy" Lipscomb of the football Baltimore Colts have been able to land pro jobs without attending college. Keep in mind that both Malone and Dawkins have been pros for over a decade. Lipscomb played for the Colts in the late 50s and early 60s.

Fort caused a stir with his call for pro league subsidies during the NCAA Convention in January. At the time, there were mixed reactions to his proposal. Obviously the smaller schools with smaller budgets will find their athletic coffers in a healthier state if subsidies become the reality. The larger schools aren't too pleased with the idea, according to sources, primarily because they would have to share substantial revenues that they now earn via funds generated from post-season bowl games and the Division I basketball tournament.

At this juncture, the A & T chancellor isn't certain what the consensus of opinion is concerning his proposal. As a member of the NCAA President's Commission, he will make a full-scale presentation of his idea when the commission meets in late September.

"I haven't seen anything to suggest how it will be received nationally," Fort said. "I haven't really started to market the idea yet. My goal right now is to get it on the agenda for discussion. I don't have an any illusions about how the idea will be accepted. My concern is that we need to review and discuss this.

"There is a body politic (within the NCAA) that will have one believe that coaligning fiscal relationships (with the pro leagues) is an attack on amateur sports. I don't agree with that at all. The bottom line is that colleges are primary sources of talent for the pro leagues."

Fort is concerned that for decades on end, Division I and I-AA schools have provided the NFL and NBA with a constant supply of athletes. In return, those schools have never received any monetary compensation.

From a black college perspective, subsidies would go a long way in helping athletic programs further develop themselves. With heftier budgets, black colleges would be in a better position to attract a greater number of blue chip athletes - the kind that helps a school gain national recognition. When you gain that kind of notoriety, your recruiting horizons expand and you're able to better compete with schools who are usually better off financially.

In taking a look at the wide variance in athletic budgets at different schools, it's clear that all is not created equal. During a recent NCAA special forum held in Orlando, Fla., it was reported that there is a stark difference between some Division I programs. One unconfirmed report noted that the bottom of the budgetary totem pole was around $400,000 while the high level budgets are as much as $16 million for one school.

The subsidies, Fort added, should provide some equal opportunity for smaller budget NCAA schools to develop their athletic programs. The president admitted that funds from the pro leagues won't bring about true parity in college athletic programs. "There is no present mechanism that will produce parity," he said. "But the gap will close in some small way."

Funding from the pros appears to be a viable possibility to help black colleges enhance their athletic programs. But there are a lot of questions that have been raised as to how such a plan would operate. Here are a few of the most often asked questions:

• How much money would each league give to the NCAA?

• Who determines how the money is to be used? The NCAA body? The leagues? Each individual school?

• Is the money to be equally distributed across the board to all NCAA schools whether or not they have ever had a player to make it in the NFL or NBA?

• Which divisions of the NCAA will receive the bulk of the funds? The majority of pro performers are former Division I players.

• In the case of black schools, what about Divisions II and III? Of all the black colleges that have athletic programs, most are in Division II. Will those colleges be left out?

Answers to those questions, said Fort, are to be determined by an agency which is independent of the NCAA. His plan, if accepted in September, calls for the NCAA to hire a consultant to conduct a year-long study which will ascertain the best ways to implement his proposal. For the moment, Fort hasn't devised a formula on how subsidy funds would be distributed. He feels that decision would be best handled by the President's Commission. He did say, however, that he favors funds being distributed across the board to NCAA schools on some type of representative basis.

While NCAA members have had lukewarm enthusiasm concerning subsidies, Fort doesn't feel the pro leagues will want to ante up any bucks any time soon.

"I don't think the pro leagues are likely to be very supportive," the chancellor said,"primarily because that money will be taken from their bottom line. They aren't likely to see subsidies as being appropriate given the past historical relationship between the universities and those leagues."

There are however, some open minds in pro sports management. Steve Ortmayer, general manager of the San Diego Chargers feels that Fort's idea merits serious discussion and debate.

"Athletics in college are no different than classes in chemistry, physics, or biology," Ortmayer said. "If companies like Amoco, Texaco, and Lever Bros. can finance different academic departments in colleges, it may be feasible for the pro leagues to do the same with college sports.

"Like it or not, a lot of athletes come to college to prepare themselves for careers in the NFL or the NBA. So that's not any different than students who take engineering or botany to prepare themselves to work for Johnson & Johnson or NASA."

Ortmayer agreed that smaller schools need the financial boost that a subsidy can bring about. The large, powerhouse athletic programs, he added, don't need it. "The Oklahomas, Southern Cals and Nebraskas are doing better than a lot of pro teams," he said, "and the coaches make more than most NFL coaches except for Don Shula (Miami Dolphins)."

The question of colleges being subsidized by the pros will ultimately be answered by the colleges, Ortmayer feels. He cautions, however, that the perception of NFL teams having money to burn is inaccurate. "We're not working on gigantic budgets," he said, "and of course if you have a stake in a program, you're going to want to have some say in how that money is used.

"That's the one overriding factor that could determine if this ever happens or not. It's a real stumbling block and the reason why this hasn't become reality yet. The area of who will control how the money is used is going to be very difficult to overcome."

In the past that has been a major obstacle. Most knowledgeable folks will tell you that the colleges don't want to hook up a financial arrangement with professional sports. The rationale is easy to understand.

Let's say you're Barry Switzer at Oklahoma and you have a gifted kid who is an excellent quarterback in your run-oriented option offense. Pro teams, however, see this kid as another possible Walter Payton and suggest that you make him a running back instead.

Bingo! Conflict of interest. The pros are giving your program money and you're most appreciative. But what they feel is best for a player after his collegiate career ends isn't necessarily the best thing for your program while that kid plays for you. The vast majority of college programs may tend to avoid that kind of situation.

On the other side of the coin, there is some sentiment that the pro leagues may not want to become business partners with the NCAA.

"The first question that comes to my mind about this is whether or not I would want to have a working business relationship with college athletics," said Mitch Kupchak, assistant general manager of the Los Angeles Lakers. "As soon as there is a legal vehicle for money to change hands, you no longer have that complete separation between professional and amateur athletics. People involved are going to have to decide if they want college sports to continue to lean towards the ways of big business or if they want to limit the growth and go back to the way amateur sports was at one time."

There's little doubt in Kupchak's mind that college sports, on the whole, would suffer if the big business approach was ascribed to. "If college athletics went in that direction, with no artificial barriers or limitations, only the strongest programs would survive. The struggling programs would be eliminated because they would get fewer quality athletes to field competitive teams.

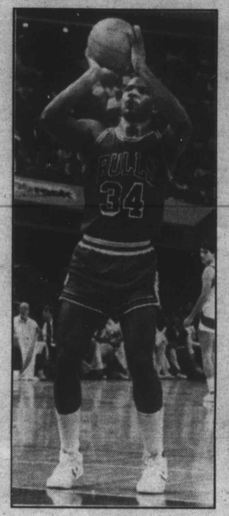
"I'm not so sure I'd like to see a direct business relationship between the pros and colleges. The focus should be kept on why those kids are there in the first place."

Fort doesn't see the concern over who decides how the money is used as a problem. "The colleges would have to have total autonomy. In this plan, there will have to be a control system to guarantee that the pro leagues don't have the ability to influence the decisions of the colleges. If that doesn't evolve, the plan, as I see it, is unworkable."

And besides, he continued, what his plan is calling for is not much different than how colleges receive funds from the federal government. "We avoided the control issue as far as government is concerned. They don't have any say in things like what our curriculum should be. If we can do that in the government sector, we can do it in the private sector.

Fort is hopeful that his plan can be implemented by 1991. "The wheels of equity move slowly," he reminded, "but they move."

– Craig T. Greenlee



photos by The Magnificent Eye

Black college athletics stand to benefit if NCAA schools are subsidized by the NFL and NBA. With healthier budgets, black schools will be more competitive in luring a larger number of top shelf athletes to their campuses. Above are two black college alums who currently star in professional sports. Top left is rebounding wizard Charles Oakley (Virginia Union) who was recently traded to the Knicks. At top right, 49ers wide receiver Jerry Rice (Mississippi Valley State) gets open on a pass route.