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December 22, 2002, Sunday

MAGAZINE DESK

Football Is A Sucker's Game

By Michael Sokolove (NYT) 7919 words

The University of South Florida sprawls over nearly 1,500 acres in a once sparsely populated section of Tampa, close to where the city bleeds into unincorporated Hillsborough County. The campus is pancake flat and in desperate need of more trees and shade. Grass comes up in stubborn clumps through sandy soil. I can't say that I was shocked when I learned of a previous use of this parcel of land: a practice bombing range.

In many other ways, though, the University of South Florida is attractive -- and useful. It has produced about 170,000 graduates in its four-decade history. It has a medical school and some well-regarded academic programs. Current enrollment stands at 39,000, and students tend to be grounded and hard-working rather than rich and entitled. (A professor told me that one challenge of his job is teaching morning classes to students who may have worked the late shift at Chili's.) What U.S.F. does not have is any kind of national profile. It has no standing. No buzz. The latest edition of the Princeton Review's "Best 345 Colleges" does not rank it low on the list -- it leaves it off entirely.

University officials want U.S.F. in the guidebooks. They want fewer commuters, more out-of-state students, more residence halls and more of a "traditional" campus feel, by which they mean a campus with a soul and some spirit. It is a big job, and the burden for getting it done has fallen, largely, to Jim Leavitt.

"Sit down," he says as I enter his office one morning this fall. It's clear to me that I'm not only supposed to sit, but to do so in silence. His office is a mess. Clothes are strewn everywhere. About 50 videotapes are scattered on the floor by his desk. Leavitt himself doesn't look so great, either. His brown hair is a tousled mop, a modified crewcut gone to seed. He gives the impression of being simultaneously weary and wired.

Leavitt continues at what he was doing before I arrived, drawing with a red pen on an unlined sheet of paper. At one point he reaches behind him on the floor for his Pepsi, which he drinks by the two-liter bottle. When he finally speaks again, his voice leaks out in the weak rasp of someone who does more yelling than sleeping. "I'm sorry," he says, "but I was in here late last night and I never even got to this. To be honest with you, there aren't enough hours in the day. But I've really got to get through it. It's important."

After several more minutes, when he is finally done, I walk around behind Leavitt to inspect his handiwork. On the white paper are a series of squiggles and arrows, 11 on each side of the page.

"What is it?" I inquire.

"A punt return," he says.

Football is the S.U.V. of the college campus: aggressively big, resource-guzzling, lots and lots of fun and potentially destructive of everything around it. Big-time teams award 85 scholarships and, with walk-ons, field rosters of 100 or more players. (National Football League teams make do with half

that.) At the highest level, universities wage what has been called an "athletic arms race" to see who can build the most lavish facilities to attract the highest-quality players. Dollars are directed from general funds and wrestled from donors, and what does not go into cherry-wood lockers, plush carpets and million-dollar weight rooms ends up in the pockets of coaches, the most exalted of whom now make upward of \$2 million a year.

The current college sports landscape is meaner than ever, more overtly commercial, more winner-take-all. And just as in the rest of the economy, the gap between rich and poor is widening. College sports now consists of a class of super-behemoths -- perhaps a dozen or so athletic departments with budgets of \$40 million and up -- and a much larger group of schools that face the choice of spending themselves into oblivion or being embarrassed on the field. (Which may happen in any case.) It is common for lesser college football teams to play at places like Tennessee or Michigan, where average attendance exceeds 100,000, in return for "guarantees" from the host school of as much as \$500,000. They are paid, in other words, to take a beating.

Any thought of becoming one of the giants and sharing in the real money is in most cases a fantasy. Universities new to Division I-A football (in addition to U.S.F., the University of Connecticut and the University of Buffalo have just stepped up to the big time) know that the first level of competition is financial. It is a dangerous game. "The mantra of the need to 'spend money to make money' can be used to justify a great deal of spending, without leading an institution to any destination other than a deeper financial hole," write James Shulman and William Bowen in "The Game of Life: College Sports and Educational Values," their 2001 examination of the finances of college athletics.

The current college bowl season began last week and ends Jan. 3 with the national championship game, the Fiesta Bowl. This year, the cartel of teams belonging to the Bowl Championship Series -- members of the six most prominent conferences plus independent Notre Dame, a total of 63 teams -- will split a guaranteed payoff of at least \$120 million from the Fiesta, Orange, Sugar and Rose Bowls. Teams outside the B.C.S. are eligible to play in such low-wattage affairs as the Humanitarian Bowl, the Motor City Bowl and the Continental Tire Bowl. For the privilege, they will almost certainly lose money, because the bowl payouts will not even cover travel and other expenses.

"We are receiving letters and calls from conferences that want in," Mike Tranghese, coordinator of the five-year-old B.C.S., told me. "And we have formed a presidential oversight panel to form an answer." But letting more members in would mean splitting up the money more ways. I asked Tranghese if I was missing something in assuming the B.C.S. had no incentive to cut more schools in. "If you were missing something, I would let you know," he said. "The B.C.S. consists of the major teams as determined by the marketplace. Any other system is socialism. And if we're going to have socialism, then why don't we share our endowments?"

One reason B.C.S. members do not want to share is that college sports have become so immensely expensive that even some of the biggest of the big lose money. The University of Michigan, which averages more than 110,000 fans for home football games, lost an estimated \$7 million on athletics over the course of two seasons, between 1998 and 2000. Ohio State had athletic revenues of \$73 million in 1999-2000 and "barely managed to break even," according to the book "Unpaid Professionals: Commercialism and Conflict in Big-Time College Sports," by Andrew Zimbalist, a Smith College economics professor. A state audit revealed that the University of Wisconsin lost \$286,700 on its Rose Bowl appearance in 1998 because it took a small army, a traveling party of 832, to Pasadena.

The endemic criminal and ethical scandals of college sports are connected by a straight line to the money. Teams that do not win do not excite their boosters, fill up stadiums, appear on national TV or get into postseason play, thereby endangering the revenue stream that supports the immense infrastructure. It is the desperation for cash, every bit as much as the pursuit of victory, that causes university athletic departments to overlook all kinds of rule-breaking until it splatters out into the open.

One day this fall I opened my morning sports page and, in glancing at the college football briefs, took note that it was a particularly bad day for the Big Ten. The headlines were: "Spartan Tailback Dismissed"; "Iowa Player Arrested"; "Wisconsin Back Stabbed." The Michigan State Spartans dismissed two co-captains within 10 days: the starting quarterback, who checked into rehab for a substance-abuse problem, as well as the tailback, who was accused of drunken driving and eluding arrest by dragging a police officer with his car. The next day, the head coach, Bobby Williams, with

his team's record at 3-6, was fired -- and sent off with a \$550,000 buyout.

At tiny Gardner-Webb University in Boiling Springs, N.C. -- a Baptist institution in its first season of Division I basketball -- the university president resigned in the fall after acknowledging that he ordered a change in the calculation of a star basketball player's grade-point average. At Florida State University, quarterback Adrian McPherson was suspended days before his arrest for supposedly stealing a blank check, then expressed shock at the discipline meted out by the normally lenient head coach, Bobby Bowden. (When a star player was accused of theft a few years back, Bowden said, "I'm praying for a misdemeanor.") The University of Alabama at Birmingham, which started football just over a decade ago, is playing this season under a cloud. The trustees of the Alabama higher-education system have given the university two years to reverse a \$7.6 million budget deficit or face being shut down. In addition, pending civil suits charge that a 15-year-old girl who enrolled at U.A.B. was sexually assaulted, repeatedly, by a large number of football and basketball players, as well as by the person who performed as the school's mascot, a dragon.

The list goes on. Ohio State's thrilling 14-9 victory over Michigan on Nov. 23 occasioned a full-scale riot by inebriated Buckeye fans who burned cars, looted businesses and caused tens of thousands of dollars in damage before 250 police officers finally restored order at 5 a.m. These sorts of things have become the background music of college sports.

Being a striving team trying to keep up in a big-time conference can be a particular kind of debacle. Rutgers University, in this regard, is Exhibit A. It belongs to the Big East, a B.C.S. football conference that also boasts powerful basketball programs. Rutgers can't compete in either sport. Its cellar-dwelling teams draw poor crowds, and the athletic department ran a deficit of about \$13 million last year.

A dissident group, the Rutgers 1,000, has waged a passionate campaign to get Rutgers to leave the Big East and to de-emphasize athletics. This has led, indirectly, to yet an entirely new way of throwing money away on sports. The administration tried to block publication of a Rutgers 1,000 advertisement in an alumni magazine. Not only did Rutgers lose the ensuing court battle, but it also spent \$375,000 fighting it, including court-ordered reimbursement of legal fees to the A.C.L.U., which took up the case of the Rutgers 1,000 as a free-speech issue.

"Schools get on a treadmill, and there's no getting off," says James Shulman, an author of "The Game of Life." "They have to stay on; they have too much invested." The former Princeton basketball coach Pete Carill once said of the big-time programs: "If you want to get into the rat race, you've got to be a rat."

Another way to look at big-time college sports is as a sucker's game, one with many more losers than winners. Notre Dame, a great football team before it was a great university, is the prototype for all schools hoping to hitch a ride on the back of a popular sports team. Duke certainly has become more celebrated and academically selective in the years its basketball team has been a perennial Final Four participant. But Notre Dame and Duke are exceptions. For every Notre Dame and Duke, there are many more like Rutgers and U.A.B., schools that spend millions in a hopeless mission to reach the top.

The University of South Florida, nonetheless, wants in on the gamble and in on the perceived spoils. The new gospel there is that football is "the tip of the marketing sword." I heard the phrase from several administrators at U.S.F. Vicki Mitchell explained the concept to me. She had directed a highly successful university-wide fund-raising campaign, but in May, not long after the team jumped to Division I-A, she moved to the athletic department to raise money specifically for sports. Under Mitchell, the office devoted to sports fund-raising was ramped up from three staff members to eight, and in the first three months of this fiscal year she and her team brought in \$1.6 million, just \$200,000 less than the total raised in the previous 12 months. "The easiest way to build a U.S.F. brand is to build an athletic program that is known, and that means football," Mitchell said. "Maybe that's not what the university wants to be known for, but it's reality."

Nearly two decades ago, the exploits of the Boston College quarterback Doug Flutie and the success of the team were credited with increasing applications by 25 percent and transforming B.C. from a regional to a national university. The syndrome was even given a name: the Flutie effect. That's the kind of magic U.S.F. is trying to catch.

U.S.F. didn't play football at any level until 1997. Its founding president, John Allen, who presided over the university from 1957 to 1970, was that rare thing in football-crazed Florida -- a staunch opponent of the sport. In the 1980's, U.S.F. alumni and Tampa businessmen began pushing for football, and the U.S.F. administration began lobbying a reluctant state Board of Regents for a team. In 1993, the outgoing president, Frank Borkowski, in his final weeks at U.S.F. and with the Regents' decision on football pending, hired Lee Roy Selmon -- a former N.F.L. star and one of the most admired men in Tampa -- to lead football fund-raising. That was the pivotal moment. "I was in a pretty tight box," recalls Borkowski, now chancellor at Appalachian State University. "The Regents did not want us to have a team." But to deny football would have been a slap to Selmon.

Jim Leavitt was hired in 1995, two years before the University of South Florida Bulls played their first game. From the start, the university intended to move quickly to the N.C.A.A.'s highest level and eventually challenge football factories like Florida State, the University of Florida and the University of Miami. By the time the current U.S.F. president, Judy Genshaft, arrived in 2000, the program was in full bloom. Genshaft's term has so far been marked by a thorny dispute spawned by her suspension of Sami Al-Arian, a tenured professor of computer science, over charges that he had ties to terrorism. Compared to the fallout from that, football has been pure pleasure.

Genshaft, who attends the team's games and keeps a jersey in her office with her name on the back, was an undergraduate at Wisconsin and a longtime administrator at Ohio State. "I know big sports," she says, "and I love big sports. It brings more visibility, more spirit, more community engagement. Even researchers coming to us from other big universities, they are expecting sports to be part of campus life."

The rationales put forth for big-time sports are not easily proved or disproved. One example is the assumption that successful teams spur giving to the general funds of universities. "The logic is reasonable enough," Zimbalist wrote in "Unpaid Professionals." "A school goes to the Rose Bowl or to the Final Four. Alumni feel proud and open up their pocketbooks." But Zimbalist looked at the available evidence and concluded that winning teams, at best, shake loose dollars given specifically for sports. And only for a time; when on-field fortunes reverse, or a scandal occurs, the money often dries up.

Genshaft says that U.S.F. can play football at the highest level without financial or ethical ruin. "It's a risk and it is expensive," she says. "But we've decided that football is part of who we are and where we're going."

But others see disaster as the only possible result. At Rutgers, the sports program has split the campus community and spawned an angry and unusually organized opposition. "The reality of sports at this level is it can't be done right," says William C. Dowling, an English professor and one of the leaders of the Rutgers 1,000. "It's not possible, anywhere, even at the so-called best places. Look at the differences in SAT levels."

One study showed the SAT scores of football players at Division I-A schools to be 271 points lower than incoming nonathletes. "You have kids brought to campus and maybe, maybe they could be real students if they studied 60 hours a week and did nothing else," Dowling says. "But everyone knows that's not happening. It's not their fault. They've been lied to in high school, all these African-American kids who get told that playing ball is their way up in society, even though it's never been that for any other ethnic group in America. It's dishonest. It's filthy."

When Vicki Mitchell pitches U.S.F. donors, however, she sells the program as if it were in a state of grace -- unsullied by scandal, at least so far, and still operating with a degree of fiscal sanity. She begins by painting a picture of what life is like at the really big football powers. To secure a season ticket at one of those schools in a desirable part of the stadium, if that's even possible, can set a donor back tens of thousands of dollars. "I'll say to someone: 'You're a sports fan. You need to get on board, because everyone knows what it costs at those other places. Our aspirations are no less, but we're not there yet. We're young. We're fun. We're a growth stock. Get in now while it's still affordable.'"

I met head coach Jim Leavitt for the first time just a few days before the biggest home game in the history of University of South Florida football. The opponent, Southern Mississippi, was the strongest team ever to visit U.S.F. and a favorite to break its 15-game home winning streak. U.S.F. had lost an early-season road game at Oklahoma, then the second-ranked team in the nation, but outplayed the powerful Sooners for long stretches. Leavitt's team was surging in the national polls; the New York

Times computer rankings would place it as high as 18th in the nation, ahead of such tradition-rich football powers as Tennessee, Florida State, Auburn, Clemson and Nebraska. These accomplishments, for a program playing just its sixth season, were nothing short of astounding.

As the showdown against Southern Mississippi loomed, two things obsessed Leavitt: winning the game, and money. "The kind of money we need is big, big money," he said to me not long after saying hello. He kept returning to the same point. "We have what we need for a beginning program, but we're not a beginning program anymore." Then: "I don't know what this program will look like in the future. It can be big. But you've got to have money. You've got to have facilities. If you don't, it ain't gonna happen."

Leavitt, 46, grew up in nearby St. Petersburg. He was a high-school sports star, a defensive back at the University of Missouri, then an assistant coach at several universities before he came home to be the first coach of U.S.F. football.

Leavitt has won praise not just for winning, but also for doing so on the cheap. He and his nine assistant coaches work out of a complex of four trailers, in front of which Leavitt erected a split-rail fence "to make it look like the Ponderosa." Leavitt proudly told me that the couch in his office, on which he sometimes lies down for the night, is a \$700 vinyl number rather than one of those \$5,000 leather cruise ships to be found in the offices of so many other coaches.

This era of frugality, though, has just ended. In early November, the university unveiled drawings for a long-hoped-for training and office complex that will be as big as a football field -- 104,000 square feet over two floors that will serve most of the university's men's and women's teams but will be dominated by football.

Leavitt views this as natural and right. He tells me about Oklahoma, coached by his close friend Bob Stoops, which already has "an outrageous setup, everything you can imagine," and has just raised yet another \$100million. "I imagine they'll tell you it's not for football only, and I would assume it's not," Leavitt says. "But I'm pretty sure football will get what it needs first. As it should, in my opinion."

Like many football coaches, Leavitt is no fan of Title IX regulations that mandate equal opportunity for female athletes. "Don't get me wrong," he says, "I am a big proponent of women's sports. I want us to be great at women's sports. But football should be separate from the Title IX thing, because nobody else operates like we do. We're revenue-producing."

To build the U.S.F. athletic complex will cost as much as \$15 million. To furnish it -- starting with \$425,000 in weight-training equipment, a \$65,000 hydrotherapy tub, portable X-ray machines, satellite uplinks and downlinks, trophy cases for a U.S.F. sports hall of fame in the atrium entrance -- will cost up to \$5 million more.

Despite aggressive fund-raising, private pledges for this facility have reached only \$5 million, so it will be built on borrowed money. The construction bond will be backed partly by the "athletic fee" charged to students, which for those who attend full time has reached \$224 a year -- a fairly substantial add-on to a tuition of only \$2,159.

Mitchell says the university considers students "its biggest donor," and student leaders are, in fact, courted like boosters. In October, the student government president and vice president flew on a private jet with President Genshaft to the big game at Oklahoma.

U.S.F. calculates that the football team brings in, roughly, \$4 million in revenue and spends about the same amount. But as in most athletic departments, the accounting makes no attempt to measure the true resources used.

One day, I stood in a humid basement room and watched the laundry -- muddy Bulls jerseys and pants, T-shirts, sweat socks, wrist- and headbands, jockstraps -- from 105 football players being cleaned. Several colossal washers and dryers were fed by three athletic-department employees. They perform this task early August through late November, six days a week, 10 hours a day.

None of this -- the salaries, the utility costs, the \$8,000 a year just in laundry detergent -- is charged against football. Nor is there any attempt to break out football's share of such costs as sports medicine, academic tutoring, strength and conditioning, insurance, field upkeep or the rest of its share of the more than \$5 million in general expenses of the athletic department not assigned to a specific sport.

In the papers I was shown, I also could find no evidence that a \$2 million fee to join Conference USA (which is not a B.C.S. conference) as a football-playing member in 2003 was accounted for in football's expense ledger. The money was borrowed from the university's general endowment, and the athletic department is paying the interest.

So when Jim Leavitt says that his football team is revenue-producing, that should not be understood as profit-generating. I would not pretend to know what football really costs at U.S.F., but it's clearly a lot more than \$4 million, maybe even twice that. And another big bill is about to come due: Leavitt's next contract.

Just in case Judy Genshaft didn't know she had a hot coach on her hands who needed a big raise, she could have learned it from reading the local press. The articles began after the end of the 2001 season, when Leavitt entertained some job feelers. "U.S.F. Needs to Make Commitment to Leavitt," read a headline in The Tampa Tribune. "U.S.F. said it wanted to play in the big leagues and built an impressive foundation," the columnist Joe Henderson wrote. "Now it has to finish the job, or risk that Leavitt will listen the next time someone calls."

Columns like these are the essential component of setting the market for a coach and driving up his price. An echo chamber of sports journalists, boosters, alumni, fans and national sports pundits anoints the coach a civic treasure and then campaigns that this indispensable figure must be properly rewarded lest the community risk having him stolen away. This is how it happens everywhere.

As Leavitt's Bulls piled up victory after victory this season, it got ever noisier in the echo chamber. A story by The Tampa Tribune's U.S.F. beat man noted that Leavitt's \$180,000 salary was way out of whack, that the average for Conference USA coaches was \$410,000, that the coach at Houston -- whose team Leavitt's slaughtered, 45-6! -- could approach \$1 million and that Leavitt was in fact one of the lowest-paid coaches in all of Division I-A.

A St. Petersburg Times columnist, Gary Shelton, celebrated Leavitt's single-mindedness -- he has never purchased a CD, doesn't go to the movies, was barely aware of the Florida governor's race -- and implied that the coach was too dedicated to the next game and next victory to properly focus on his own self-interest.

The drumbeat on Leavitt's behalf overlooked two things. One is that Leavitt's original contract runs through 2005, although that probably doesn't matter since college coaches are rarely held to the deals they sign. The other unaddressed question was more significant: how would U.S.F. square its big-time ambitions with its still small-time revenues?

For all the fevered energy and earnest expectations behind U.S.F. football, attendance at home games has long been stuck between 20,000 and 30,000. The team plays way across town, at the 65,000-seat Raymond James Stadium, home of the N.F.L.'s Tampa Bay Buccaneers. "We've flatlined," says Tom Veit, associate athletic director. "We had tire-kickers in the beginning, something like 50,000 at the first game in '97, and we need to bring them back in."

Students have not been dependable fans. About 3,500 live on campus; nearly 10,000 more live in off-campus garden apartments, most of which have swimming pools and frequent keg parties. Fifty-nine percent of U.S.F. students are female, so young men, the natural college football audience, may have a particular incentive not to stray too far from home. "If you want it to be," says the student government vice president, Dave Minberg, "it's like spring break 24/7 around here."

One function that U.S.F. football does serve is as content, cheap programming in the 500-channel universe. Under a contract with ESPN Plus, U.S.F. football (and basketball) games are constantly up on the satellite -- along with dozens of other games to be pulled down by viewers with a dish and a college sports package. The ubiquity of these televised college games makes the dream of a marketing bonanza -- Jim Leavitt's fightin' Bulls as the tip of the sword -- all the more difficult to achieve. Instead of becoming a "brand" like the well-known sports schools, U.S.F. is more likely to blend in with its anonymous brethren in Sports Satellite World, the Northern Arizonas, Coastal Carolinas and Boise States.

But U.S.F. has set its course. It's on the treadmill. It plays Alabama next season, Penn State in 2005 and the University of Florida in 2008. It didn't schedule these games to be embarrassed. Rebuilding with a new coach would be difficult competitively and, even more so, commercially. "If we lose Jim

Leavitt, from a marketing point of view, that's not a place I want to be," Veit says. "I don't want to be me at that point. He's a hometown guy. He wins. People like him."

When the local sportswriters ask Leavitt about his contract, he gives carefully bland responses. He doesn't have an agent, and it could be argued that with his fawning press, he hardly needs one. The articles clearly please him. One day he says to me: "The Tampa paper is going to have another piece coming up on my salary. But you know, I don't pay too much attention. I don't deserve anything. I'm just glad I have a job. I'm blessed.

"And I mean that. I have zero interest in leaving here. But then people say to me, 'What if you were offered \$1 million to go somewhere else?' Well, then I'd probably leave. Let's be realistic."

I asked him what he thought his market value was, and he did not hesitate. "About \$500,000 or \$600,000," he said. "At least."

The biggest of the big-time college sporting events are intoxicating. The swirl of colors, the marching bands, the deafening roars, the over-the-top political incorrectness -- Florida State's Seminole mascot riding in on horseback; a Mississippi State coach some years back, on the eve of a game against the Texas Longhorns, castrating a bull. The whole thing is a little reminiscent of what I've heard some Catholic friends of mine say: even if you're a little ambivalent about the message, the pageantry will get you every time.

In college sports, the heady mix of anticipation, adrenaline, camaraderie and school pride is the gloss over the grubby reality. Pro sports operates within some financial parameters, governed by a profit motive. College sport, by contrast, is a mad cash scramble with squishy rules. Universities run from conference to conference, chasing richer TV deals; coaches from school to school, chasing cash. It's a game of mergers and acquisitions -- of running out on your partners before they run out on you.

It's understandable why universities with hundreds of millions already invested in sports can't find a way out. Far less understandable is why a school like U.S.F. would, with eyes wide open, walk in. "I felt then and still feel that U.S.F. could be a model football program," says Frank Borkowski, the former president. "One with clear policies and rules, attractive to bright students, that would not go the way of so many programs -- a corrupt way."

But the whole framework of college sports, with its out-of-control spending and lax academic and ethical standards, is rotten; it's difficult to be clean within it. The "student athletes," as the N.C.A.A. insists on calling them, feel the hypocrisy. When one is caught taking the wrong thing from the wrong person -- not the usual perks but actual money -- what ensues is a "Casablanca"-like overabundance of shock, then a bizarre penalty phase that almost always punishes everyone but the guilty parties. Thus, when the University of Michigan finally acknowledged this fall that some members of its famed "Fab Five" basketball teams of the early 1990's may have accepted payments from a booster, the university tried to get out in front of N.C.A.A. sanctions by disqualifying this year's team -- whose players were about 8 years old in the Fab Five years -- from participating in the 2003 N.C.A.A. tournament.

With the greater opportunities being afforded female athletes, it should be no surprise that an outsize sense of entitlement now extends to the women. Deborah Yow, the athletic director at the University of Maryland (and one of the few women leading a big athletic department), told me about a conversation she had with an athlete who had rejected Maryland.

"We just lost a great recruit in the sport of women's lacrosse, in which we have won seven national championships," Yow said. "And one of the comments that the recruit made was that the school she had chosen over us had a beautiful new lacrosse stadium with a lovely locker room, and she even described the lockers in some detail. They were wood; that was the word she kept using. And, as she said, they all had that Nike gear hanging everywhere. And I've been to that facility. And I know that what she said was true."

In theory, Yow could have been pleased to be rejected by such a spoiled child. But she does not have that luxury. Instead, she felt relieved that a planned complex to be used by the Maryland's women's lacrosse team would be the equal of this other palace. "We, as athletic directors, are interested in having the best possible facilities because we have noticed along the way that recruits are interested in this, that it does matter," she says.

College sport could not survive if it were viewed only as mass entertainment. On another level, it serves as a salvation story. The enterprise rests mostly on a narrative of young men pulled from hopeless situations, installed at universities, schooled in values by coaches and sent off into the world as productive citizens.

No one is better suited to tell the story than Lee Roy Selmon. The youngest of nine children in Eufala, Okla., he excelled in athletics and earned a football scholarship, as did two of his brothers, to the University of Oklahoma. Lee Roy Selmon became the first-ever draft pick of the new Tampa Bay Buccaneers, an N.F.L. Hall of Famer, then a Tampa banker. The Lee Roy Selmon Expressway is one of the city's major thoroughfares.

To Selmon, who became U.S.F.'s athletic director a year and a half ago, college sports is a giant scholarship program for needy children. Of football's 100-player rosters, he says, "The more people here, the more people getting an education, the better. It's about generations -- about student athletes developing abilities, being citizens, having families and being able to nurture their children."

One evening, I visited with some U.S.F. football players at their mandatory study hall, which takes place inside a wide-open rectangular room as big as a good-size banquet hall. Their monitor, Vik Bhide, a trim engineering student, sat just inside the front door, paging through a book called "The Dimensions of Parking." The players clustered at round tables, reading textbooks or writing. Most had started their day very early and had already attended classes, lifted weights, endured a three-hour practice and gone to meetings in which they watched game film with coaches.

I took a walk through the room and peeked at the players' coursework. John Miller, a freshman offensive lineman, was studying vocabulary words from a textbook. On his list were "burgeoning," "inflection," "emanate," "insidious" and "obscenity." "It's a lot of hard words," he said. "But they're good for you."

Vince Brewer, a junior running back, was about to start an informative speech, which he thought he'd write on the subject of what causes a player to pass out during practice. "We get told a lot about dehydration, and the professor said to pick something you know a lot about." Chris Carothers, a massive offensive lineman, told me bluntly that he does not much like school, "but as a football player, it's something you've got to do."

In all of my interactions with U.S.F. football players, I was struck at how mannerly they were. Nearly all are from Florida, many from small towns, and in a classically Southern way, they are yes-sir, no-sir types. Maybe because U.S.F. has not yet reached its ambitions and neither the team nor its players are widely famous -- not even on their own campus -- there wasn't a lot of swagger.

"My mom and dad had me when they were in 11th grade," Marquel Blackwell, the Bulls' star quarterback, said. "I was raised, basically, by my two grandmothers. The main thing they taught me was how to respect other people."

Not a whole lot of trouble has attached to Jim Leavitt's boys in the six years of U.S.F. football, nothing of the sort that occurs at some places and serves to indict a whole program. There have been some scuffles, as well as a gunplay accident in which a player was wounded.

"We encourage the players to be as much a part of normal campus life as possible," said Phyllis LaBaw, the associate athletic director for academic support. But no one pretends that they really are much like the typical U.S.F. student.

Nearly 70 percent of the U.S.F. football team is black on a campus that is otherwise 70 percent white. (Only 11 percent of U.S.F. students are black; the rest of the minority population is Hispanic and Asian and Native American.) The football players tend to be poorer than other students and more in need of academic help.

To be a football player at U.S.F., or an athlete of any kind, is like taking your mother to school with you -- or several mothers. Academic counselors meet with athletes at least weekly. They sometimes follow them right to the door of a classroom, which in the trade is known as "eyeballing" a player to class. Where a lot of players are grouped in one class, tutors sometimes sit in and take notes. Counselors communicate directly with professors. "We don't ever ask for favors," LaBaw said. "But professors do provide us with information, which is vital."

Football players who miss a class or a mandatory study session get "run" by coaches -- meaning they

must show up on the practice field at 6 a.m. to be put through a series of sprints by a coach who is not happy to be there at that hour. "It is very punitive," LaBaw said.

LaBaw's department employs four full-time counselors and about 40 tutors and has an annual budget of \$400,000. The staff serves all 450 intercollegiate athletes at U.S.F., so the 105 football players are less than a quarter of the clients -- but as is the case with so much else, football sucks up more resources than its raw numbers would indicate. "They need more help," LaBaw said of the footballers, "but what we're doing works. Last year our football players had a mean G.P.A. of 2.52, which if we were already in Conference USA would have been the best in the conference -- including Army."

LaBaw is part den mother, part drill sergeant -- loving and supportive or confrontational and blunt, depending on the needs of the moment. Under her desk, she keeps a big box; when the season began, it had 5,000 condoms in it, all different colors. She hands them out like lollipops along with however much sex education she can blurt out.

Her effort, while well intentioned, is a version of closing the barn door after the horses have run out. Of the 105 players on U.S.F.'s football team -- most of them between 18 and 23 years old -- about 30 are fathers and many have produced multiple children. "I would say there's a total of 60 children from this team, and that's a conservative estimate," said LaBaw. "It's amazing how quickly it occurs, usually in the first year. Or they come to school already fathers."

What this means is that the recipients of Lee Roy Selmon's scholarship program for needy young men are recreating the need that many of them came from -- children living in poverty, without fathers at home. With their five hours per day of football-related activity on top of class and studying, the fathers have no time even to change a diaper, let alone work to financially support their children. Most of the children live with their mothers or aunts or grandmothers. Some who are nearby spend the day at the university's day-care center, yet another cost of college football since the service is offered virtually free to U.S.F. students.

In DeAndrew Rubin's portrait in the U.S.F. football media guide, it says that his father drowned when he was 11 months old. It adds, "Father had given him a teddy bear for his first Christmas in 1978, and he places it in his locker during every game."

Rubin, 24, has two children, 3 years old and 10 months, and is engaged to their mother, his girlfriend since high school. They live just 30 minutes away in St. Petersburg. "I see them as often as I can, so if I would pass, they would remember me," he said. "I can't help that much financially, but emotionally I want to be there for them."

Unlike several other U.S.F. fathers who said they planned to make the N.F.L., Rubin is considered a prospect, although no sure thing. "It would be good for our situation," he said. "I don't want to have to work a 9-to-5; I guess nobody really does."

LaBaw spends a lot of time talking to the players. "Those who are fathers, there's a comfort aspect -- having children is an opportunity to be surrounded by more love. Which is what they've always had, from grandmothers and aunts and cousins. But there is also this trophy aspect. It's let me show you the pictures, or the multiple pictures."

Football is at the center of Jim Leavitt's world, so he is not one to question the time or money devoted to it. He does not seem to have a great deal of interest in the nonfootball world. Leavitt makes appearances on campus and in the community, often related to fund-raising, but several people told me he can be brusque. If he says he has 20 minutes to give, then he's normally out the door in 20 minutes. There is always a practice to conduct or a football tape to be watched. He watches game tapes, and tapes of practices. "I sit and watch film all day long," he says. "I'm a recluse."

Because football is so central to him, he assumes his team's success is widely known and that it translates into other realms -- he believes, without a doubt, in the concept of football as tip of the marketing sword. "We've had guys drafted into the N.F.L.," he says. "We have two guys with Super Bowl rings. How much does the university spend for that? What's it worth? That's worldwide publicity for the University of South Florida, right?"

I asked Leavitt if his long football hours left him much time with his 7-year-old daughter. "Quality time," he said, then repeated it as if trying to convince himself. "Quality time. It's got to be quality time."

There is one slice of humanity that Leavitt connects with -- his players. "That's why I'm in this," he says. "The players. The relationships I have with those young men and the ability to make a difference in their lives. My mission is to help young people in every aspect of life. If I lose sight of that, I'll get out of coaching. The other reason I coach is for that moment when you are victorious. That's hard to create in any other part of life. You feel such contentment. That moment is so powerful." At halftime of U.S.F.'s season finale against Houston, Leavitt grew so agitated that he excitedly head-butted several of his helmeted players and came away bloody.

Beyond the field, Leavitt had reason to believe he had made a difference. His players respond to him as an authority figure and as a friend. They have absorbed his laser focus. They play football. They go to class and mandatory study hall. When the season is over, they lift weights and run. Marquel Blackwell, the quarterback, told me that more established programs like Florida and Nebraska showed interest in him but wanted to switch his position. Of Leavitt, he says: "He believed in me, and I believe in him back. I've given my heart to that man."

On the night of the big game, with U.S.F.'s home winning streak on the line against Southern Mississippi, President Genshaft played host to a couple of dozen guests in a luxury box at Raymond James Stadium -- a crowd that included Florida's lieutenant governor and an assortment of local business types and politicians. Mike Griffin, the student government president, was in the box, too, wearing a "Bulls for Jeb" campaign button.

Because of Selmon's icon status, his box is the more coveted invitation, and Vicki Mitchell and her staff put together his list for maximum impact. They had targeted a wealthy U.S.F. graduate and Los Angeles lawyer as a potential big donor, but he had become critical of the athletic program on chat rooms devoted to U.S.F. sports. (Fund-raisers monitor such things.) Selmon called the lawyer during a trip to Los Angeles, just to warm him up, then invited him to fly in and sit in his box for the game. The lawyer accepted and showed up at the game with a friend who wore a muscle shirt. But both men fidgeted and looked impatient, then bolted at halftime.

The large-framed woman sitting in a corner of the box paid much more interest and stayed to the end. Selmon spent time visiting with her, at one point positioning himself on one knee in the aisle next to her. She was another potentially deep-pocketed donor: Lucille Harrison, a Florida resident and Shaquille O'Neal's mother.

U.S.F. beat the odds. It preserved its home winning streak in a stirring game decided on the last play, a missed Southern Mississippi field-goal attempt. By season's end, Leavitt's long hours had paid off beyond what any football prognosticator could have predicted. The Bulls finished the season with a record of 9-2, including a dismantling of Bowling Green, then ranked 25th in the nation. A bid to a minor bowl, the money-losing kind, looked possible, but the bowls snubbed U.S.F. in favor of teams with lesser records but bigger names. Leavitt immediately surfaced as a possibility to fill open coaching jobs at marquee schools, including Alabama and Michigan State. The new program was at a crossroads. Was it going to ante up for its coach, and his assistants too, which could easily add an instant \$500,000 or more to the annual football budget? Or would it start all over with someone new?

As the field goal flew wide in the Southern Miss game, one of Selmon's guests, an alum and successful stockbroker, jumped out of his seat, threw his arms around the U.S.F. athletic director and got right to the point. "We've got to keep this man!" he shouted, referring to Leavitt. "Let's raise this man some money and keep him here!"

On Dec. 12, the University of South Florida ripped up Jim Leavitt's contract and signed him to a new five-year deal that more than doubled his salary. If he keeps winning, he probably won't make it to the final year of this contract, either, when he's scheduled to make nearly \$700,000. U.S.F. will have to pay more to keep him, or other programs will come looking to steal him away. That's how it is when you decide to play with the big boys. The bills just keep on getting bigger.