
Ars Gratia . . .

By ROGER EBERT

In the rapidly developing controversy over Larry Hansen's attack on "free rides" for Big Ten athletes, one big possibility has been overlooked by both sides:

The NCAA could make things a lot easier for all universities by putting a stiffer ceiling on what can be offered to top prospects.

Most people realize that the Big Ten, by dropping the "need" requirement in its Grant-in-Aid program, was only facing up to the unpleasant facts of life in modern college recruiting. For several years, the Big Ten's noble approach to athletic scholarships had been a severe handicap in recruiting top players — and since the NCAA has no national requirement that "need" be shown, the Big Ten has to conform or sink to sports mediocrity.

Hard Sell

But just because other schools offer scholarships so freely and use "hard sell" tactics does not justify the practice, as the Big Ten indicated by courageously adopting the "need proviso" to begin with.

One alternative to the mushrooming cost of recruiting would be national legislation binding all NCAA members. This, in fact, might help take the glorified high school "stars" out of the recruitment bargaining seat, and put the coaches back in it where they belong. The spectacle of a stream of top coaches playing handmaiden to the inflated egos of sought-after prospects grows more disgusting year by year.

Instead of arguing that the Big Ten "has" to offer an equal deal to compete with other athletic powers, the Western Conference should use its tremendous prestige to convince other NCAA members that a nation-wide ceiling on recruiting offers is long overdue.

If no school were offering the "free ride without need" paycheck, the high school stars would still come to college, still play football, and still defend the egos of the alums. For those high schools who do have need of help, of course, funds should be available — as they should be available for everyone.

Like a Salary

It is only the concept of a free ride without need that is so distasteful. It's too much like a salary for an amateur sport. Perhaps an NCAA ruling might help put all colleges back on an equal and reasonable footing — and help curtail the runaway recruiting mess.

* * *

Just when it seems that the American public will at last choke on the unholy glut of popular journalism, something like A. J. Liebling's "The Press" comes out.

Liebling, of course, conducts "The Wayward Press" section of The New Yorker, and the book is a collection of some of his better pieces — including analysis of press coverage on the U-2 incident, hilarious studies of Col. Robert R. McCormick's "journalism," and the famous Press-against-Alger Hiss episode.

Perhaps, however, Liebling should not rest now that the book is behind him. No sooner does he deflate one journalistic miscarriage when another replaces it.

His next target, perhaps, should be the semi-idiotic popular gossip columns which disfigure many of the metropolitan newspapers.

In evidence we offer this "typical" tidbit from the life of 29-year-old-teenager Debbie Reynolds, as lifted from the Earl Wilson column:

Typical Tidbit

"Debbie Reynolds' millionaire husband, Harry Karl, strode into their penthouse suite at the Warwick — holding out his left shirt cuff for his bride to observe. It had a safety pin in it.

"Homemaker!" he said, pretending to be angry. 'I've worn this safety pin all day. I couldn't find the other cufflink you packed.'"

"Oh, darling!" laughed the bride guiltily. Debbie clung to him in the airy dressing gown she'd worn while giving me an interview . . ."

Safety Pin

Let's disregard for the moment what great dramatic talent it must take to laugh "Oh, Darling!" guiltily.

It would seem, however, that whatever airy secrets Debbie revealed to Wilson during the interview must have been nebulous indeed if they were surpassed in importance by a single safety pin.

* * *

Perhaps old Col. McCormick was right in defending the World's Greatest Newspaper against magazines. "A good Sunday paper is vastly superior to any magazine," he is supposed to have said.

"The Saturday Evening Post only weighs five ounces — the Chicago Sunday Tribune weighs at least 32 ounces."

We had always considered this a rather arbitrary method of judging literary worth. But after reading the Debbie incident we can't think of a better way of evaluating it — or, indeed, of discerning its literary worth at all.

Clipped from the Chicago Daily News, the Wilson column weighs about as much as a gnat.