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FEATURES

Tennis No Longer a Scarlet Letter at Rutgers

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Football has become the tail that wags the American university/dog. And, again â€” this time at Rutgers University â€” the dog is shedding menâ€™s tennis.

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The Rutgers University board of governors approved a plan on July 14 that will end funding for the menâ€™s tennis program (along with menâ€™s crew, menâ€™s swimming and menâ€™s and womenâ€™s fencing) by the schoolâ€™s 2006-07 academic year end. The plan was submitted to save money in the \$36 million budget as part of a financial reorganization mandated by New Jerseyâ€™s financial crisis â€” played out in a state â€œshutdownâ€ the first week of July and a \$66 million cut in state funding next year to the university that is also resulting in tuition and fee increases.

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Rutgers Athletic Director Robert Mulcahy was quoted in a July 15 *Newark Star-Ledger* story defending the process: â€œI have said from the beginning of this process there would be no sacred cows and no unit would be spared.â€ But apparently there are sacred cows in New Brunswick.

The Scarlet Knights football team, despite losing about \$2 million a year, will actually see its budget increase. The extra funding is deserved, according to Mulcahy, as the school is scheduled to receive about \$770,000 from six scheduled television appearances. By way of comparison, the entire budget for the menâ€™s tennis team is (or was) \$150,000.

The Intercollegiate Tennis Association (ITA) web site records this as the 88th time since 2003 that a university has dropped a tennis program, while no program has been reinstated. The 87th program slashed was the University of Coloradoâ€™s in April. In that case, menâ€™s tennis was felled in cutbacks required to pay off a \$7 million department debt swelled by a multi-million dollar hit from the scandal-ridden tenure of football head coach Gary Barnett.

In messages to Rutgers President Richard McCormick, sent in support of restoring funding for the tennis team â€” or at least giving it the chance to raise its own funds and stay alive â€” ITA Executive Director David A Benjamin and USTA Collegiate Committee Chair Jon Vegosen cited the athletic and academic record of the team. It has often been the top academic menâ€™s team at the university and received the â€œDirectorâ€™s Awardâ€ for the highest GPA among menâ€™s and womenâ€™s teams four of the last 10 years. The team finished its run in the Atlantic-10 Conference by winning the 1995 championship and has qualified for the Big East Conference championships every year since then, making it to the final in 2005 when it lost to national powerhouse Notre Dame.

McCormick responded to Benjamin that supporters of tennis and the other programs on the chopping block, â€œ...all offer compelling testimony to the tremendous value that these sports play in the lives of our students and the history of Rutgers ... but I respect the decision of the athletic department regarding the cuts....â€ The president

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suggested tennis would continue as a "club sport," but made no mention in his response of where that funding would come from.

The message that the tennis team represents what is held out as the archetype of the "student-athlete" fell on deaf ears. Instead, defense of the cut is being framed as one that is the only response to Trenton's legislators and the governor's handling of state finances and pits the interests of men at the college versus those of women.

McCormick cited the Title IX education amendment of 1972 "legislation mandating proportional (in terms of enrollment) opportunities for men and women and inspiring greater female athletic participation" when explaining to *The Star-Ledger* why it was unlikely that even private money could save the program, saying, "If you raise the money to bring back a men's sport then because of Title IX we would also have to raise the money to bring back another women's sport to keep the scholarships even." This despite NCAA President Myles Brand's 2003 statement regarding Title IX, "[emphasizing] that cutting men's sports to meet [equality in men's and women's participation] is a disfavored practice."

If the goal were really to balance men's and women's participation or even to knock some nickels from the budget, tennis would surely not be the first place an athletic department would look. The men's tennis program has eight to nine teammates a season and uses one to one-and-a-half scholarships. The football team has 105 members, an estimated 80 or more on full rides. (Perhaps, for context, it should be mentioned that pro football teams squeak by with a mere 40-plus padded men.) The Knights "ended their 2005 season with a loss to Arizona State in the Insight Bowl. Critics of the athletic department's priorities point out that the \$1.2 million appearance fee was immediately gobbled up to send 400-plus supporters to Phoenix for the game.

For taking the 7-4 club to that first bowl appearance in 27 years, Greg Schiano, reportedly Rutgers' highest paid "faculty" member, received a contract extension through 2012, explained on the school's web site as "just \$191,000 in salary this season but will see it rise to \$250,000 in 2006 and to \$350,000 by 2012. The new deal also increases his guaranteed income from private sources from \$325,000 in 2005 to \$625,000 next year and to \$750,000 by the end of the contract."

Football shares half of the athletic department budget with basketball, which is said to have the second- and third-highest paid "faculty members" "men's and women's basketball coaches. In his July 16 Q&A with *The Star-Ledger*, Mulcahy said the men's program "basically supports itself," suggesting the high price paid for women's basketball is either a sop to public relations or to the Title IX compliance concerns of the University's lawyers.

Although nobody from the Rutgers athletic department was available to comment for this story, supporters of college football excuse participation in the "arms race" required to compete at the top level in such a high-visibility sport. Reasons given include the suggestion that the team's success is a rallying point for increased alumni donations or state legislative support that doesn't flow from most other sports and that television exposure can lead to an improved applicant pool.

As every tennis fan knows, the current bottom line is that the sport cannot compete with football and basketball in terms of its profile and fan attraction.

Intriguingly, college tennis as a whole is engaged in an internecine philosophical battle over how a team can benefit the university as a whole off the field or court. Numerous

college teams have players from different countries — sometimes even as a majority of the team. (The Knights feature players from France and India.) Foreign students are often helpful to the university at large, as they can be the hub of a network encouraging matriculating countrymen willing to pay full tuition to the school. And alumni returning to their homelands and achieving success often open up opportunities for the school that might not otherwise exist. However, the foreign tennis players often receive scholarships that some argue might otherwise have been provided for native juniors. So the issue is too controversial to serve as a rallying point in defense of threatened programs.

The ITA and USTA are in partnership to stanch the sport's suffering. Among the steps they advise is to improve the team's connection with the community — perhaps by having players volunteer their time on court with local juniors — providing the sport with a local connection university administration will be hesitant to upset in the same way they avoid antagonizing the vocal football and alumni boosters. And the Rutgers team and supporters are reaching out for funding and support and vaguely optimistic about the possibility for the damage to their program being revisited.

But right now, the college tennis scene in the ninth largest American state is not positive. Princeton, which lost to Rutgers 6-4 in America's first intercollegiate football game (held Nov. 6, 1869), may have the state's sole remaining Division 1 men's squad. Not that this is likely to mean much to the folks who control the purse strings for New Jersey's state university: tennis or not and all these years later, the Tigers will probably still lose to the Scarlet Knights on the gridiron. And that is the only net result they will put their money behind.