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Pro Football's College Tuition Bill

By ALLEN BARRA

Last weekend the National Football League drafted 256 players from America's colleges. On May 19, the National Basketball Association will take around 60 more. Then, on June 9 and 10, Major League Baseball will pick another 45 or so. All of these athletes will have one thing in common: The cost of their training wasn't paid for by the professional leagues that drafted them, but by their colleges.

There are many reasons for the rise of the NFL and NBA over the past half-century, but one of the most important is seldom discussed: They don't pay for the development of their players. Though MLB does draw some talent from the nation's top collegiate programs, the major percentage of their players are brought up through an extensive minor-league system.

Who pays for NFL recruits? Many writers who have analyzed the economics of college football believe that between 70% and 75% of athletic departments lose money. Murray Sperber, author of "Beer and Circus: How Big-Time College Sports is Crippling Undergraduate Education," believes the number is higher than that. "Almost all athletic departments lose money if they do their books honestly. The NCAA's latest accounting report, doing the books more honestly than ever before, supports my belief." This means that much of the bill for maintaining football and basketball programs comes from alumni and even taxpayers.

Despite talk of reform in college sports, the system remains pretty much what it has always been: a cost-free minor league for professional football and basketball, and one in which those who produce the revenue get the least from it. The National Collegiate Athletic Association Manual states that the basic purpose of their organization is "to maintain intercollegiate athletics as an integral part of the educational program . . . and by doing so, retain a clear line of demarcation between intercollegiate athletics and professional sports." We can think of at least one very clear line of demarcation between professional and college sports: In college, the athletes don't get paid; and the colleges don't get full benefit from the talent they produce for the pros.

Until someone comes along to establish a union for college athletes as Marvin Miller did for baseball players, there isn't much that can be done for the exploited players, but there is a solution for reimbursing the colleges that could benefit almost everybody.

Professional sports leagues are involved in college scholarship programs on several levels. For instance, the NFL endows \$300,000 worth of scholarship money for the National Football Foundation's Scholar-Athlete Award and both the NFL and NFL Players Association endow USA Football, a nonprofit organization for developing youth, high school and international amateur football. (One source indicates that last year's endowment was "in the neighborhood of \$1 million.")

But this is minor league compared to the actual cost of preparing athletes for the pros. Andrew Zimbalist, author of "Unpaid Professionals: Commercialism and Conflict in Big-Time College Sports," estimated in 1999 that colleges would be justified in charging pro football and basketball as much as \$130.5 million annually -- approximately \$170 million in today's dollars.

According to the College Board, the total estimated cost for a full scholarship at a public school for four years (including tuition, room and board and books) is approximately \$65,000. At a private school, it's around \$140,000.

In other words, based on the approximately 361 athletes who will be drafted by professional leagues in 2009 it can be reasonably estimated that the total cost of putting those students through four years of college at the schools that produce most of the professional athletes is around \$26 million. That's only 53% of last year's combined salaries for Ben Roethlisberger and Jason Kidd, the two highest-paid players in pro football and basketball, respectively, to have played college ball. And it's only 62% of the minimum salary the Detroit Lions are guaranteeing this year's bonus baby -- quarterback Matthew Stafford of the University of Georgia -- over six years.

Here's an idea for a stimulus package for America's colleges: the NFL and the NBA and MLB should provide a full, four-year scholarship to each school for every player they draft from that college.

First of all, this pays a debt, or at least part of it. The cost of providing a scholarship for every player drafted would still be just a fraction of what it costs to train and care for each athlete.

Second, a reimbursement plan could be a stimulus package for national education. The recipients of the scholarships could even be chosen for their aptitude in science and math instead of for spiraling footballs or making 20-foot jump shots. The hundreds of millions in gross revenues produced by college students playing sports would at least benefit other students. Instead of dumping hundreds of uneducated former jocks on society every year, colleges would be sending out hundreds of professionals into our work force. Now that's a stimulus package for everyone.

Mr. Barra writes about sports for the Journal. His latest book, "Yogi Berra: Eternal Yankee," was just released by W. W. Norton.

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