
GUEST VIEWPOINT

New arena is all about business

By Jim Earl

Published: Sunday, July 15, 2007

I

just read Pat Kilkenny's June 11 guest viewpoint, "UO athletics serious about academics and financial self-sufficiency." As a teacher, I'm glad the University of Oregon's director of athletics sees his athletes as students first, but he shouldn't try to tell us that the business of intercollegiate athletics is for them.

Kilkenny is a businessman. He knows that football and basketball, where expenses now run in the hundreds of millions of dollars at the UO, aren't justified by the benefits they bring to the tiny percentage of our students who play ball. We're not plowing a quarter of a billion dollars into a new basketball arena for the players. No, sports is a business - and what's a business without profit and growth?

Kilkenny writes, "A new basketball arena would serve an important function in supporting the department's financial responsibilities. Fiscal sustainability would make us better prepared to serve the university by allowing us to further emphasize academics and to continue to pump money back into the university's budget."

I'm not sure what that means, but I do know the premise is wrong, because the athletic department pumps *no money at all* back into the university's budget. "Fiscal sustainability" here just means profit, every penny of which feeds the growth of the athletic department, not the university.

Now, suddenly, Kilkenny wants to add baseball, which means adding at least one women's sport, too. That'll take some money. Where will it come from?

Ah, that's where the arena comes in. I'm no businessman, but I have my doubts about this arena. By Kilkenny's own account, financial self-sufficiency "makes us vulnerable to severe financial consequences should the Ducks' gridiron successes falter. The athletic department must prepare itself for a financial rainy day."

In my world, when you're worried about money you don't go shopping for an even bigger mansion. How big a mortgage does Kilkenny expect the UO to sign for, anyway, to build this arena? I'm guessing at least \$50 million in the end. That's a lot of money to borrow. We're already issuing bonds to buy the property, and for all Kilkenny's talk of "financial self-sufficiency," it's the university going into debt to buy it, not the athletic department.

And what a business it will be! Such schools as Ohio State have learned that a big arena can't break even on college sports. You have to book all kinds of entertainment in there: monster trucks, mud wrestling, you name it, whoever will pay - at least 40 events a year, Kilkenny told the City Club on June 6. There's nothing wrong with all this stuff as entertainment, of course, but how much sense does it make for higher education to get into that business?

And don't tell me we're doing it for the fans. They seem simply to adore Mac Court. I don't hear the fans clamoring for the most expensive college arena in the nation.

What I hear, rather, is the clamor of Big Money. Someone's going to make a lot of money off this project, but not the university. If the arena makes any business sense, the business it makes sense to is Nike, and the rest of the athletics industry. Education means nothing to them. They're in it for the money, and they'll be happy to see the UO and other universities go into debt so they can get rich off us. We're being played for suckers, and not for the first time. As a rule, everyone gets rich off college sports except the colleges that own the teams. Somehow, education always gets the short end of the stick.

Oh, and the football and basketball players? They're just the workers in this shell game. They're the ones who lose the most in the long run. They work so hard at being good athletes that very few of them get to be good students as well. We give them their 15 minutes of fame, and maybe a degree, and send them on their way. A tiny fraction (1 percent nationally) move on to professional sports.

I welcome Kilkenny to the university and its many paradoxes. Intercollegiate athletics may be a business, but I hope he remembers that the university isn't. It's a nonprofit, and a state agency. The mission statement Kilkenny praised in his column stresses critical thinking, clear communication, creativity and lifelong learning. It makes no mention of sports or entertainment.

It takes some creativity to see any relation at all between the university's educational mission and Kilkenny's extraordinary new athletic arena.

Jim Earl, a professor of English at the University of Oregon, is a founder of the Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics.

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