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## The Wal-Mart of College Sports

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In Bentonville, Ark., secret agents inside the world of Wal-Mart have gone so far as to press an ear on a hotel room door to snoop on employees suspected of canoodling against the company code of prim culture.

In Fayetteville, Ark., a self-appointed sleuth inside the Razorbacks' fan base recently sifted through the cellphone records of Houston Nutt, the married Arkansas football coach, noting how he sent more than 1,000 text messages to a female news anchor.

In Bentonville, amid the Wal-Mart cast of store greeters and boardroom stars, employees have filed lawsuits against the alleged work-place oppression of the homespun institution with its "always low prices" slogan.

In Fayetteville, amid a Razorback ethos of rubber hog noses and "Woo, Pig Sooie" battle cries, a lawsuit was filed against university officials by a fan who believed they ignored any role Nutt played in disseminating a booster's e-mail message that insulted the team's homegrown celebrity quarterback.

"Hello, Mr. Interception King," the e-mail message began. Hello, trouble.

It began in December with a send button. And in Dear Diary-like accounts from the local and national news media, this hog saga included the transfer of the wonder-armed Mitch Mustain to Southern California and innuendo about Nutt's private life in the spring. It may not end even after a hearing scheduled for tomorrow on the fan John Terry's legal action against the university chancellor John White & Company.

This is the down and dirty world of Corporate College Athletics. This is Bentonville meets Fayetteville. But that's just Ozark geography. The mayhem unfolding at Arkansas is only symptomatic of the industrialized amateur spirit knifing through the college game.

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Simply put: Boosters and alumni now act as shareholders, whipped into go-team frenzy to form a new breed of extreme fans as they seek a return on their increased emotional and financial investments in the Program.

Their tax-exempt donations and ticket packages and merchandise purchases pay more and more of the freight for needy athletic departments plunged into the college arms race.

The seven-figure coach is now an easy target for a takeover or a takedown. The Internet is both boardroom and back alley for angry fans and vindictive rivals to start whisper campaigns, demand firings and disclose [N.C.A.A.](#) violations.

A national title doesn't grant immunity from turncoat fans, as Kentucky's Tubby Smith discovered upon his

recent hoops departure for the land of Minnesota Nice (well, nice until any sub-.500 season). A fabled program doesn't act as a buffer from Web spies, as Oklahoma's Bob Stoops found out when details of his football players' no-show jobs at a local car dealer were splashed on a message board for [Texas A&M](#) fans last year.

The Web has legs. And indiscretions travel with a mouse click.

With the corporatization of college athletics, why would any insider with integrity put up with the charade of the student-athlete motto?

Why wouldn't a coach just go pro? Billy Donovan did on Friday. He was adored in every Waffle House in Gainesville, Fla., after emerging from March Madness with back-to-back national titles as the Gators' head coach. He had a \$3-million-a-year contract awaiting his signature in a deal that could have made him the honorary big cheese at the Macaroni Grill in the Oaks Mall.

He walked away from all that. Instead, Donovan said, I'm going to Disney World, and meant it when he signed a five-year, \$27.5 million deal to coach the [Orlando Magic](#).

He will regret it, say those who have seen a Broadway kick line of college coaches struggle to inspire the pros who have outgrown pompoms, face paint and pep bands.

He had no choice, common sense says. Donovan did not complain about the intense grind of recruiting in the information age of second-guessers. He did not whine about the pressure from donors who essentially supplement coaching salaries through Gator Boosters Inc. He didn't rant against chat-room power mongers who try to manipulate athletic directors.

Donovan exited before the Florida climate went Nutt-y on him. Donovan was clairvoyant enough to know the feel-good vibe of the moment has little tolerance for rebuilding tomorrow. Maybe he could have established a Dean Smith empire. Or maybe the era of permanence ended with the rise of the college coach as turnaround artist.

What does a chief executive's salary buy at Florida? Unsustainable expectations.

"I really thought about that, and that really entered into the equation for me, just thinking about what can happen," Donovan said Friday, when asked if he longed to create his own fief. "One thing that I realized was that, yes, that can happen, but the other thing that could happen is it could just level itself out."

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These days, a coach who levels off is a coach who is fireable no matter how much confetti still sticks to his résumé.

"I think in this day and age, with so much of the publicity and so much attention on college and professional basketball," Donovan added, "it is really hard to stay at a place for a long, long period of time."

Nutt is an Arkansas lifer now under siege. He certainly isn't blameless in the Razorbacks' dysfunction. He botched the Mustain relationship. He fumbled a few communication lines. But he led Arkansas to a

successful 10-4 season last year — a profit margin apparently not good enough for some rigid investors in Fayetteville. Or is Bentonville?

Easy to confuse the Wal-Mart way with the college way.

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