Creating the Big Ten: Courage, Corruption, and Commercialization

By Winton U. Solberg. Published in 2018 by University of Illinois Press (302 pp., paperback)

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Winton U. Solberg is a professor emeritus of history at the University of Illinois and the preeminent authority on the early formational history of the university. His newest manuscript, Creating the Big Ten: Courage, Corruption, and Commercialization, adds to his impressive scholarship by providing a history of the Big Ten athletic conference during its formative years. Within, Solberg focuses on the interaction between higher education and intercollegiate football.

There are, of course, other manuscripts developed on the history of individual schools participating in the Big Ten (e.g., Stagg’s University, by Robin Lester) but little to no serious scholarly books have been developed on the conference. Creating the Big Ten is a well-researched work that should satisfy scholars interested in intercollegiate athletics, higher education, and the Big Ten specifically. Furthermore, the book has good potential for classroom activities. In particular, I believe this book would be useful for courses focused on higher education and athletics and/or sport governance.

The book itself is organized into two separate parts through fourteen chapters, which cover various internal conference crises (e.g., Chapter 1—The Beginning of the Big Ten; Chapter 3—The Crisis over Amateurism), national issues (e.g., Chapter 4—The Conference and the War; Chapter 11—The Carnegie Report), and special individuals (e.g., Chapter 6—The Commissioner of the Conference [John L. Griffith]; Chapter 8—Red Grange and the Lure of Professional Football). There are also many interesting stories provided for college football fans and those interested in conference expansion. As an example, Solberg offers interesting anecdotes on the University of Pittsburgh, Notre Dame, and Nebraska. Overall, these stories are well-integrated in various chapters throughout the book bringing to light important contextual information like regional bias, social prejudices, and overall institutional fit.

In the first section of the book (From Disorder to Order) readers will notice Solberg presented information about how Big Ten universities cooperated to regulate football without abolishing it. Within this point, Solberg does a good job of comparing activities of the Big Ten to other athletic groups, primarily in the Northeast and relaying that the conference initially committed to maintaining an amateur athletic code and to faculty governance because of the burgeoning commercial influences of football and the games inherent brutality. Like other notable works on the history of intercollegiate athletics, Solberg recognizes early Big Ten football was almost professional immediately because college administrators...
“had neither the time or inclination” to organize and supervise the sport. Further, the “increasing professional demands on faculty did not encourage their devotion to intercollegiate athletics.”

The second section of the manuscript (From Order to Disorder) provides information about the evolving conference from the 1920s through the end of World War II. Chapter 5 (The Big Ten in the Golden Age of Big Ten Sports) importantly talks about the continued growth of football interests, increased media attention, and the specialization of college sport curricula and coaching. Such information sets up Chapter 6 and the well-developed information about Big Ten Commissioner John L. Griffith. Griffith is a truly remarkable figure as the Big Ten’s great reputational defender.

Chapter 7 (The Big Ten Stadiums) offers a unique look at Big Ten stadia. It is clear from this section and information provided in other chapters that the motivation for large stadia focused on the generation of gate receipts but it is also clear that these stadia were meant to communicate messages to alumni, potential students, and the media that Big Ten schools were major and legitimate institutions. In Chapter 8, Solberg focused on Red Grange and the lure of professional football. It is my opinion that the threat of professional football information offered in Chapter 5 would have been better placed in Chapter 8 to enhance it contextually. Chapters 9 (The Conference at Work) and 10 (The True Spirit of the University) setup Chapter 11 (The Carnegie Report) well through their focus on committees, trustees, recruiting, and revenues, among other topics suggesting the professionalization of college athletics was becoming more difficult to manage. The Carnegie Foundation Report authored by Howard J. Savage was an important event because it identified specific practices by Big Ten schools.

Chapter 12 (The Big Ten Censures Iowa) is a well-organized section that was solidly researched. Sport history scholars will particularly enjoy the eye for detail Solberg offers along with the profound story about the possible formation of a new conference. Chapters 13 (Cross Currents) and 14 (Closing out Half a Century) were also interesting as they both highlight continuing internal conflict, the fall of Chicago out of the Big Ten, and potential expansion prior to and through World War II. Still, despite the compelling information provided in these last sections, the conclusion feels a bit incomplete. For instance, talk about the potential addition of the University of Pittsburgh is featured. However, nothing about the addition of Michigan State, who joined in 1950 surfaced, which would have been a better ending point.

Finally, regarding the evidence provided, Solberg offers an impressive bibliography. Primary sources necessarily included archival research conducted at the Big Ten offices and with several member universities. Those documents included memorandums, letters of correspondence, meeting minutes, and multiple president’s papers. Other primary sources involved conference proceedings and a review of newspapers of which Solberg makes good use of the Chicago Tribune. The list of expected secondary sources is also strong. For example, Solberg recognizes various works produced by Ronald A. Smith, Raymond Schmidt, Robin Lester, and Brian Ingrassia among others that focused on intercollegiate athletics and college football. However, despite this praise, I do have one major concern. Specifically, the primary resources rely heavily on the University of Illinois and Chicago.