

INTRODUCTION: THE HUGGINS FACTOR

In March 2006, Kansas State University, which is known more for academics than athletics, shocked the college basketball world by hiring coach Bob Huggins. It was, arguably, the oddest marriage in the history of college sports.

Huggins, fifty-two, had compiled a record of 567-199 (.740) over twenty-four seasons. He'd spent the past eighteen years at the University of Cincinnati, where he built a nationally ranked college basketball program that distinguished itself both on the court and as one of Nike's best-selling collegiate brands. He was ranked eighth in winning percentage and total victories among active Division I head coaches. Huggins's teams had gone on to postseason play in twenty-one of his twenty-four seasons, including fifteen NCAA Tournament appearances. His string of fourteen consecutive trips to the NCAA Tournament ranked as the third-longest streak among active coaches. Under Huggins, Cincinnati had won twenty or more games in all but four seasons; in two seasons they won thirty games, bringing his average to 23.5 victories per season.

In addition to one of the most impressive winning records in college basketball, Bob Huggins also brought a lot of baggage to tiny Manhattan, Kansas. He had been run out of town by University of Cincinnati president Nancy Zimpher, who finally had the guts to say "enough" to the popular but controversial coach. In her mind, Huggins's winning percentage and national stature no longer outweighed his outlandish personal behavior and his penchant for recruiting street thugs who had no place at a respectable university. In fact, in his last few years at the helm, his players had an

appalling 0 percent graduation rate. Huggins could often be as brutish as his players, and an off-campus DWI conviction didn't help his image with the Cincinnati beat writers, who had found him increasingly difficult to cover.

It's these last few facts that make this whole story so bizarre. Yes, disgraced coaches such as Huggins have been fired before, only to be rehired by another school claiming that the coach in question had "changed" or "learned his lesson." But these disgraced coaches had never resurrected their careers at places like Kansas State, where President Jon Wefald had a well-known—and well-deserved—reputation as someone who not only understood the importance of balancing athletics and academics but had made it the hallmark of his thirty-year career. In fact, there is a book, *A University Renaissance*, about how he had done just that at Kansas State.

Before Bob Huggins showed up on campus, Kansas State was more often associated with *Fortune* and *Forbes* than the Final Four. It consistently ranked near the top of the Big 12 Conference in Graduation Success Rate, the NCAA's six-year rolling average of student-athlete academic success. It also did well in the NCAA's new Academic Progress Rate, a more real-time measure of an athletic department's success at getting students to hit the books as well as the blocking dummies and their jump shots. Historically, K-State has been one of the leading public institutions in producing Marshall, Truman, and Rhodes scholars. In short, Kansas State was no Kentucky or Memphis, where basketball ranks first ahead of everything else, and bio lab is a distant third or fourth on the college president's list of top priorities. Picking Bob Huggins as its new basketball coach seemed to go completely against everything for which K-State stood.

But on November 22, 2007, Kansas State proved the skeptics wrong. They showed that coaches such as Bob Huggins were sometimes a gamble worth taking. That's the day that the K-State men's basketball team played in the Old Spice Classic in Orlando, Florida, its first nationally televised, elite, preseason tournament appearance in decades. A few weeks later, the team made its first-ever appearance in the Jimmy V Basketball Classic at Madison Square Garden in New York City. Going into the 2007–8 season, K-State had what was arguably one of the best recruiting classes in the country, and

for the first time in decades the basketball team was ranked in the Top 25 in the preseason college basketball polls. And it was all because they'd hired Bob Huggins.

But by the time the 2007 season rolled around, Huggins was long gone. Like many of the players he'd recruited, he left Kansas State after just one year. Yet it's fair to say that in that one season, Bob Huggins had a huge impact on Kansas State. And whether you see him as a pariah or a prodigy, there's no arguing that Bob Huggins resurrected a program that had long been dormant.

K-State hadn't won a conference title since 1977, hadn't been to the NCAA tourney since 1996, and had missed the postseason entirely since 1999. The year before Huggins showed up, K-State's basketball team posted a record of 15-13. In just one year under the controversial coach they improved to 22-11, vied for the Big 12 championship against archrival Kansas, and, many argue, should have received an invitation to the first round of the NCAA Tournament.

Huggins wasn't gone because he fell back into his old ways. He hadn't been caught on camera hitting a player, he hadn't recruited players with felony records, or racked up another DWI. No, on April 7, 2007, Bob Huggins's rehabilitation—at least in the eyes of the college sports world—was complete. That's the day he accepted the head-coaching job at West Virginia University, his alma mater and a perennial college basketball powerhouse. He was back on top, a little more than a year after having been sent packing in disgrace from Cincinnati. Huggins signed a five-year contract with West Virginia that paid him \$800,000 in his first year, the same salary he was making at Kansas State.

Huggins didn't leave K-State in the lurch. He left his former assistant, Frank Martin, with an outstanding recruiting class, including Michael Beasley, the McDonald's All-American forward from Gaithersburg, Maryland. Not coincidentally, Beasley, like Huggins, spent just one year at K-State. In 2008, he was selected second overall in the NBA draft.

Beasley is a story in and of himself. Moreover, he's indicative of the culture—and conflict—in today's high-profile world of college basketball. His high school career spanned six different schools in five states. His last stop

was Notre Dame Prep in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, one of the controversial “prep schools” where highly recruited athletes go to make sure that their grades are good enough to get them into whichever school offers them the best deal. By most evidence, such schools are nothing more than diploma mills, where players are guaranteed A’s and B’s for spending more time on the practice court than in the classroom.

The irony of this ongoing subterfuge in which players and schools play cat-and-mouse with NCAA academic eligibility rules is that most players of Beasley’s caliber stay in college only for the NBA-mandatory one-year minimum. For the Michael Beasleys of the world, college is just a way station on the way to their final destination: the NBA. College is like the bogus high schools they attended, the elite summer basketball camps where they were scouted, and the all-star high school tournaments where they show off their skills. In short, college for most of these elite players is a means to an end. Nothing more.

So in some ways, Michael Beasley was as big a threat to Kansas State’s reputation for academic excellence as Bob Huggins. He was in Manhattan, Kansas, for one thing and one thing only: to play basketball.

Frank Martin, Huggins’s long-time assistant who took over the program, came with his own baggage. One of the outstanding coaches in the history of Florida high school basketball, he was later stripped of his titles—including an unprecedented undefeated season—when it was learned that his school had doctored transcripts to recruit players from outside the school district, a violation of state high school athletic association rules. Miami High was fined \$2,500 and forced to reimburse the Florida High School Athletic Association more than \$5,000 in expenses related to the investigation. Five of Martin’s players, including Udonis Haslem, were barred from ever playing for Miami High again. Martin’s explanation to me when I asked him about the scandal was an incredulous “That had nothing to do with me. That was all done in the transfer office.”

Others saw it differently. Florida High School Athletic Association commissioner Ron Davis said in a statement: “This is one of the most, if not *the* most, blatant violations of FHSAA rules against recruiting that I have encountered in my seven years as commissioner of this association.”

Of course, none of this stopped Kansas State from hiring Martin. Neither did it stop the University of Florida from recruiting Haslem, who, as a “leisure service management” major, became one of the key players who helped a young Billy Donovan put Gainesville on the college basketball map. Having helped cement the school’s reputation as an up-and-coming college basketball powerhouse, Haslem did what most every other marquee college player does: he left school without a degree. And, like many other athletes who have outlasted their usefulness, he left without much of a future.

When Haslem left the University of Florida in 2002, he weighed more than three hundred pounds and had no prospects for an NBA career. This is how most college athletes end up. Interestingly, ESPN, *Sports Illustrated*, and the daily beat writers who cover these kids don’t spend much time on these stories. Instead, they fuel the frenzy of college athletics by profiling the superstars, the less than 2 percent of college athletes who make it to the pros. In doing so, they’re as complicit in the creation of today’s corrupt college sports culture as the scouts, coaches, and academic advisers who lie to the hundreds of thousands of kids who will never make it to the pros.

Over time, Haslem slimmed down. He lost seventy pounds and played basketball in France for *ES Chalons-sur-Saone* in 2002–3, averaging 16.1 points and 9.4 rebounds per game. That was enough to get him a spot in the NBA Summer League and attract the attention of Miami Heat coach Pat Riley. On April 22, 2006, in a first-round playoff game against the Chicago Bulls, Haslem was ejected for throwing his mouthpiece at the referee.

All of this, of course, raises the question, Why in the world would Kansas State president Jon Wefald risk his school’s academic reputation and hire Bob Huggins and Frank Martin? The short answer, as with everything in college athletics today, is “money.” And it’s not chump change.

Kansas State signed Bob Huggins to a five-year deal that would have paid him more than \$1 million a year in base salary, shoe contracts, radio and TV money, and incentives. And they were more than willing to do it because coaches such as Huggins do more than resurrect athletic programs. They breathe life into a school’s brand and marketing power. Huggins certainly did that for K-State.

“Bob Huggins gave us a national presence, both as a basketball team and as a university,” said Bob Cavello, K-State’s athletic director for business development. “It was something we’d never experienced.”

“We wanted to find somebody that was going to take our program to the level all of us expect it to be,” said Athletic Director Tim Weiser. “He started to feel like this was a place he could resume his career and do so in a successful way.”

It paid off. To this day, K-State is still counting the cash that was generated from Huggins’s brief tenure as the school’s head basketball coach. Along with Huggins came a \$10 million, all-school shoe and apparel contract with Nike to outfit all of K-State’s varsity sports athletes. K-State, which has an annual athletic budget of \$38 million, had been wooing Nike for a dozen years with no success. Weeks after Huggins showed up, Nike was the one that came calling.

With the arrival of Huggins, K-State also saw its school apparel go from a small regional brand to national prominence. Huggins’s presence increased sales more than 30 percent and moved K-State into the top thirty-five in sales for College Licensing Corp., the company that handles apparel sales and merchandising for many colleges and universities.

“Before, we didn’t sell much outside of our core Midwest market,” Cavello said. “Now, you go to New York and California and see kids wearing K-State apparel. That’s because Bob Huggins is, himself, a national brand. And in many ways he made us a national brand, too.”

Huggins had similar success during his sixteen winning seasons at Cincinnati. He helped develop the now-familiar school logo that features a Bearcat claw and the letter C. Thanks to his success on the court and the prominence of the Cincinnati basketball program, Bearcat apparel eventually became the number-two-selling national collegiate brand for Nike. When Bob Huggins left, all that went away.

The immediate benefactor was K-State. In previous seasons, K-State basketball had drawn on average about 5,800 season ticket holders to the 12,528-seat Bramlage Coliseum. Shortly after Huggins arrived, the team sold 11,000 season tickets, a sellout when you factor in allotments for student tickets. And even though he left after just one season, K-State sold out again

in 2007–8. Before Huggins arrived in Manhattan, the last time K-State basketball had had a sellout was 1982.

What was the economic impact of all this? Season ticket sales increased from \$1.2 million to \$2.7 million. Many of these season tickets were purchased by K-State's most avid—and wealthiest—boosters. In addition to buying basketball tickets, alumni donations to the basketball program increased a whopping \$3 million under Huggins. That's nearly 8 percent of the school's total athletic budget.

Huggins also got K-State on national television for the first time in decades. That's important because the Big 12 Conference shares revenue proportionally. The more television time you have, the bigger your share of the Big 12's television revenue pie. Under Huggins, K-State made its first national television appearance in a game against Xavier. That one game alone earned K-State \$135,000 in television money.

Before Huggins, most of K-State's games had only been broadcast regionally on Fox Sports Midwest. In 2006–7, the team appeared on ESPN more than a dozen times and on ABC twice. In 2007–8, more than half of K-State's regular-season games were seen on ESPN. And although the Old Spice and Jimmy V tournaments only pay expenses, both gave K-State basketball more national television exposure and prestige than the program had had in decades.

In short, Huggins and K-State are a microcosm of the big business of college athletics. They're a prime example of what a winning program can do not only for a school's won-loss record but also for its finances. And that's what this book is all about: a sober look at the pluses and minuses of big-time college sports and what it has become as it has evolved from a million-dollar to a multibillion-dollar enterprise.

Money in college sports is nothing new, of course. Money has tainted college athletics since the day it began (although now, thanks to the U.S. Congress, donations to college athletics are tax-free). And although the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1984 that the NCAA's monopoly control of television rights amounted to an antitrust violation, it was a minor hiccup for the NCAA. What is new is the depth and breadth of influence, both financial and otherwise, that college sports has within our culture. Furthermore,

the corrupting influence of the big money that drives college athletics today reaches well beyond the college campus. It has infected every aspect of youth sports, from Little League to Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) basketball to Mighty Mites youth hockey leagues. The lure of big money—in the NCAA, as well as the NBA, NFL, and NHL—has corrupted youth sports to its very roots.

It is, I will argue over the following pages, this culture of superstardom above all else that has not only grown to historic proportions on our college campuses but also infected high school and prep sports. It's a cultural degradation that, frankly, tells parents that it's OK to criticize—and sometimes assault—youth coaches. It's a culture that drives parents to join Little League and Pop Warner organizing committees so that they can manipulate the rosters to make sure that the right seven-year-olds are on the right team. It's a culture that tells parents it's OK to encourage their child to have reconstructive elbow surgery when he's fourteen so that he can be a better pitcher and maybe—just maybe—get a college scholarship. It's a culture that can dominate a family's entire life. It drives them to put everything else in their lives—other family matters, jobs, vacations—on hold. The sole focus of the family becomes supporting that “special kid” who they believe has a chance of making it.

What does “making it” mean today? Mostly it's about winning. Forget fundamentals. That's something the pasty-faced fat kids work on. For today's athletic superstars, be they eight or eighteen, it's about the culture of self. The culture of me. Or, viewed more broadly, the culture of self-promotion. It's about winning ball games, in hopes of getting noticed by the right coach, who will get you into the right camp, in front of the right scouts, and get you the right scholarship to the right school.

Again, forget the odds. The odds are for the other parents to worry about. Forget that just 3 percent of high school basketball players will get a Division I scholarship. And forget that less than 2 percent of those kids will have any kind of meaningful NBA career. These parents and their kids live in a culture of disbelief. Or, maybe I should say, a culture of belief. The parents each believe, with all their hearts and souls, that their kid is *the one*. The one who will defy the odds and become a superstar, with a multimillion-dollar

contract, a multimillion-dollar house, a multimillion-dollar wife, his picture on a box of cereal, and a line of sporting goods with his name on it.

And what about the kids who don't make it? The kids who spend three, four, or five hours a day, from the time they're eight until they're eighteen, with one singular focus? The kids who play one sport and no others? The kids who get to 11th grade and don't want to go out for the team anymore because that's all they've been doing for the past ten years? We don't talk about them.

What could create such a sick and dysfunctional sports culture? Money. More money than college sports has ever seen before. And while money seems to be the singular focus of this subculture on our high school and college campuses, what about the kids? After all, they're what make all this possible. They have the talent that fills the seats, secures the television rights, and increases the alumni donations. What about them? They don't see a dime of this multibillion-dollar business (or at least they're not supposed to). In many ways, they're almost an afterthought. Why? Because they're an expendable commodity. A raw material that's in endless supply. And when they've outlived their usefulness, what happens to them? Most just go away, without a degree, never to be heard from again. They're expendable. Worse, they're disposable.

What does all this have to do with this book, and why should anyone read it? The short answer is that *Varsity Green* will cut through the clichés and common misconceptions and take a very clear-eyed look at the current state of college athletics. For instance, instead of ranting against (or defending) the ever-increasing budgets for college athletics, I'll explain what they mean. I'll explain that, yes, Ohio State has a \$100 million athletic budget, and its teams play before sold-out stadiums every week. But I'll also tell you that Ohio State athletics spends nearly every cent that it brings in. In fact, the modest profit it earns is an anomaly, not the norm. Most college athletic programs—even many that are perceived to be successful and self-funding—are not self-sufficient. They rely on student activity fees, boosters, and other sources of off-field revenue to keep them in the black.

There is an increasing body of evidence that suggests that the basketball team is being funded at the expense of the biology department. According

to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, for decades academic donations far outpaced those to athletics. That is starting to change. Athletic donations continue to rise, while academic giving has remained flat. That's important because it's a sign—one sign—that in some instances athletics is starting to eclipse academics.

Equally as important as the economics of college athletics are the human factors. College sports, like any human endeavor, are made up of people. Some of their stories are tragic. Some are heroic, almost mythical. But in the end, what this book will explain is that for all the billion-dollar business decisions that are made in college sports today, they ultimately affect people: players, coaches, parents, boosters, administrators, officials, and fans.

Throughout this book, I will look at the major issues of the day that are affecting college athletics. I will talk about how these issues have an impact on the economics of a business—and that's what it is, a business—that seems to know no bounds. More important, I will look at how these decisions affect the people who toil in this business every day.

I'll start with a brief history of college sports. You may be surprised to learn that there never was an age of innocence. College athletics has been driven by money from the day it started.

I'll look at the so-called "facilities arms race." Much of the national focus has been on the intense contest between Michigan, Ohio State, and Penn State to see who can build the biggest football stadium and pack it with the most avid fans every autumn weekend. But you may be surprised to learn that this mine-is-bigger-than-yours battle goes much deeper into the NCAA landscape than the schools that get national television coverage every week.

The debate over coaches' salaries is renewed every time a new record is set. Critics often argue that there must be something wrong when the coach makes more than the chemistry professor, the college president, or the governor. But what may surprise you is how those salaries are paid. Today, only about 25 percent of a coach's salary is paid by the university. The biggest chunk comes from sponsors, especially broadcasters, who seem to have an unlimited budget when it comes to paying for sports broadcasting rights.

I'll look at graduation rates, which are in the spotlight again with the

NCAA's new Academic Progress Rate measurement. Contrary to popular belief, most athletic departments have graduation rates that are about on par with the rest of the student body. The idea that they don't is a common misperception unwittingly facilitated by a lazy media culture that doesn't have the time, the energy, or the curiosity to look past the clichés.

When Kansas State basketball standout Michael Beasley threw his hat in the ring for the NBA draft, it was breaking news. What the media doesn't report about are the thousands of kids who aren't Division I athletes who leave school every year, for a variety of reasons. Like star athletes, some of these students never return to finish. And you'll meet the academic advisers and athletic directors who work hard to get the kids into school, and then try to keep them there.

I'll take a look at the AAU system, which is a wholly owned subsidiary of the shoe companies and, many argue, irreparably broken. It ranks kids as young as nine, encourages a cult of personality instead of teamwork and fundamentals, and sets unrealistic—and unhealthy—goals and expectations for athletes who are too young, too focused, and too self-absorbed. The NCAA and the NBA have vowed to fix youth basketball, but they are the two entities that have gained the most from the commercialization of youth basketball. Therefore, are they the right partners to fix this dysfunctional system?

And, of course, with athletic success comes pressure. Pressure to recruit. Pressure to sell tickets. And pressure to always win.

Sometimes the pressure gets to be too much. Coaches direct academically unprepared athletes to the “cake courses,” where they're guaranteed the C that will maintain their NCAA eligibility. Sometimes coaches look the other way and ignore a player's abhorrent—sometimes criminal—off-court behavior. And, sometimes, players are paid under the table.

You'll also meet the reformers. The people, such as University of Oregon professor Nathan Tublitz, who argue that college athletics is broken beyond repair and is doing grave harm to the academic integrity of today's colleges and universities.

Which brings us back to our original question: Why did Kansas State president Jon Wefald take the risk of hiring Bob Huggins? To sell some tick-

ets, please some alumni, and see his team on television. That should tell you something about the current state of college athletics and the sway it can hold over coaches, college presidents, students, athletes, and alumni.

“With big bucks dangling before their eyes, many NCAA schools find the temptations of success too alluring to worry about the rules,” said noted sports economist Andrew Zimbalist. “Schools cheat. They cheat by arranging to help their prospective athletes pass standardized tests. They cheat by providing illegal payments to their recruits. They cheat by setting up special rinky-dink curricula so their athletes can stay qualified. And when one school cheats, others feel compelled to do the same.”

The NCAA, always racing to catch up, keeps passing more rules, hoping to curtail it all.

“Sometimes these rules are enforced, sometimes not,” Zimbalist said. “But rarely is the penalty harsh enough to be a serious deterrent. The solution, it turns out, is more rules.”