



Fourth and Long: The Fight for the Soul of College Football

John U. Bacon

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Why we love the game, what is at risk, and the fight to save it.

In search of the sport's old ideals amid the roaring flood of hypocrisy and greed, bestselling author John U. Bacon embedded himself in four programs—Penn State, Ohio State, Michigan, and Northwestern—and captured college football's oldest, biggest, most storied league, the Big Ten, at its tipping point. He sat in as coaches dissected game film, he ate dinner at training tables, and he listened in locker rooms. He talked with tailgating fans and college presidents, and he spent months in the company of the gifted young athletes who play the game.

None of Bacon's discoveries is more poignant than this: the last, true defenders of the student-athlete ideal are the players themselves, who, even as money changes everything around them, are left to carry the future of the league, the game, and more than a century of tradition on their backs every fall Saturday.

Fourth and Long reveals intimate scenes behind closed doors, from a team's angry face-off with their athletic director to a defensive lineman acing his master's exams in theoretical math. It captures the private moment when coach Urban Meyer earned the devotion of Ohio State's Buckeyes on their way to a perfect season. It shows Michigan's athletic department endangering the very traditions that distinguish the college game from all others. And it recreates the euphoria of the Northwestern Wildcats winning their first bowl game in decades, even as they do honor to the student-athlete ideal.

Most unforgettably, *Fourth and Long* finds what the national media missed in the ugly aftermath of Penn State's tragic scandal: the unheralded story of players who joined forces with Coach Bill O'Brien to save the university's treasured program—and with it, a piece of the game's soul.

This is the work of a writer in love with an old game—a game he sees at the precipice. Bacon's deep knowledge of sports history and his sensitivity to the tribal subcultures of the college game power this elegy to a beloved and endangered American institution.

Fourth and Long: The Fight for the Soul of College Football Details

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From Reader Review Fourth and Long: The Fight for the Soul of College Football for online ebook

Joanne says

Four Big Ten college football teams were dealing with unique situations during the 2012 football season and John Bacon shares his behind the scenes observations and personal insight with the reader. Penn State is reeling from the Sandusky scandal. As the NCAA makes decisions that put the entire football program in jeopardy, two seniors make it their mission to keep the program intact, and the new coaching staff wisely listens to them. Ohio State is dealing with a scandal of its own as Urban Meyer takes over as coach. Can Brady Hoke follow up his successful first season at Michigan with a run for the Conference Title? Northwestern is vying for a Bowl bid while remaining true to its student-athlete priority. As the season unfolds, we learn how the Conference and the athletic departments are exchanging tradition and the very heart of college athletics for branding and marketing. It's all about the money!!!

Paul Pessolano says

“Fourth and Long” by John U. Bacon, published by Simon and Schuster.

Category – Sports

If you have been following College Football over the last year you are aware of the many changes in the alignment of the teams and the questions concerning the future of college football.

In “Fourth and Long” John Bacon addresses these problems by embedding himself in several teams making up the Big Ten. He spent time with the players, coaches, and fans of Penn State, Ohio State, Michigan, and Northwestern. In the book Bacon goes into detail about the role the NCAA plays in the college program. He is especially critical of the sanctions imposed on the Penn State program. All Penn Staters should read this book to gain insight into the sanctions, and his conclusions will probably be a soothing balm to the people of Penn State. He follows these teams and the teams they play through last season’s most (not memorable) but important games, important to the players, coaches, fans, and the respective colleges. The crowning achievement goes to the Penn State players, fans, and coaches who stayed with the program and came up with a stellar season under very adverse conditions. The crux of the book though is what is in the future for college football. He questions the amount of money that is involved (none going to the athletes) and what this money is being used for. He questions the bowl games, most of which have fewer and fewer people attending every year, and most of the money going to the organizers of the events.

His most poignant observation is that the players may be the last line of the belief that college athletics are sports being played by “STUDENT- ATHLETES”. An absolute must read for those interested in college football and college sports.

Bill Mackela says

I enjoyed reading this book, but I live in Michigan and went to Michigan State in the late 60s, so I am a fan of college football, classic Big Ten style. If you aren't a Big Ten fan, much of this book will probably annoy you. The main focus is from early 2012 through the end of the regular season 2012. Mr. Bacon follows four Big Ten teams, Michigan, Northwestern, Ohio State, and Penn State. He gets you inside of the troubled Penn State locker room after the NCAA tried to destroy their football program. He also gets you inside information on each of the other programs.

Then Mr. Bacon takes you through the season, with emphasis on the fan experience as he travels around the league and goes to the games as a fan. This run though of the season is a lot of fun and gets you fired up for the 2013 season.

He argues that the major college football programs are being run by CEO type administrators, not for the benefit of the fans, the players, or the students, but instead, he proposes, that they are just trying to maximize income, and therefore profits, to increase their own stature in the community of sports administrators. He questions if fans will keep paying the ever-increasing costs of going to games, if they will put up with all of the demands that TV puts on the live football experience, and if they can stomach the ever-changing college conference lineups. He asks if the rivalries between teams aren't more important than needless proliferation of post season bowl games.

I give this book 4 stars out of 5 and a Thumbs Up. Any diehard college football fan will enjoy this book, and the arguments that Mr. Bacon makes will be a cause for concern for the future. If you hate the Big Ten, don't bother with this, because that is the main emphasis of the book.

I received this Digital Review Copy for free from edelweiss.com.

Sue says

I bought this book on Labor Day and by the following Saturday, it was all I could talk about at our first tailgate. There are so many important things about this book, particularly how colleges, conferences and the NCAA are doing their best to push the average and dedicated college football fan away from the game experience. If these entities keep pushing away fans by making the experience of going to a game too expensive or too annoying, where will the money come from to support these programs? You kill football and you kill college athletics, period. Even though he wrote about Penn State extensively, no where did Bacon mention that football foots the bill for all of the other sports (not sure about hockey, though, but still at least 29 of 31 sports) at Penn State. What he also didn't point out was if the blood-thirsty fans got their wish -- if Mark Emmert would have gotten his passive aggressive wish -- of giving Penn State the death penalty, it would have destroyed 31 sports, not just one. It would have killed an entire town that depends on football weekends. Yeah, maybe there are a lot of people who did wish to see death to Penn State, but I'm not going to get into that argument. I'm just pointing out some important details Bacon forgot to add.

I do like that he wasn't afraid to go after his own alma mater and their CEO AD, Dave Brandon. (Didn't Domino's fail miserably under that guy's watch?) Brandon is exactly what is wrong with college football and college sports, and I wish the fans had the ability to stop these jerks without hurting our student-athletes.

Even though Penn State is one of four teams Bacon covers, it is the school that gets the most attention in the book, most likely because Penn State's coaches and players and community outside of Old Main gave him the greatest access. Guys like Mauti and Zordich (rightly) wanted to get their side of the story out there,

rather than depending on an administration who wouldn't support them and a media ineptitude like Christine Brennan and anybody from ESPN to report the whole story. It is also the story I know best because I live here. Bacon captured the essence of Rod Erickson and Dave Joyner perfectly. I wish he would have added the story of the thousands of fans who went to the practice facility at 6 am or earlier on the first day of practice to show the players that we stood by them and not by the creep who is in jail and the egomaniac who was tossed from Old Main. That was a moment I will never forget, and I would have loved to have known what Mauti, et al were thinking.

So why did I give the book only 3 stars if it has made such an impact on me? One word -- errors. This book is filled with errors. Sloppy errors either missed by a fact checker or a proofreader and most definitely by an editor and perhaps by Bacon himself. I'll ignore that the book repeated itself -- a lot. The errors were just awful. I'll let slide the repeated use of Nittany Mountain. Bacon isn't from here, so maybe he got confused that it is actually called Mt. Nittany. But there was a paragraph where Penn State was called Penn multiple times. Penn is a whole different school. He called Dr. Wayne Sebastianelli by the name Dr. Sebastiani. There is a story of a fight the players had with Jay Paterno that was the wrong game -- it was a situation where the players also remembered some things wrong, but a quick Google search would have shown that what Bacon wrote about was incorrect. And then there is the 60 million dollar question -- did Dave Joyner actually know about the fine from the NCAA at the end of December, six months before it was announced to the public, or was this another error on Bacon's part? This is important because if Bacon got it right, then Old Main has even more explaining to do. If Bacon got it wrong, it shoots all of the credibility of his book to hell. Unfortunately, even though he has been asked about it on Twitter, Bacon will not provide an answer. (He seems to only respond to unconditional 5-star love, which is too bad.)

I really do believe that the book is important for college sports fans to read because the message is clear -- college sports as we know them are being killed and it is the student athletes who will suffer most. But the errors really do detract from the message.

Alan says

A terrific book. If you love the Big Ten or college football generally, you will love Bacon's familiar passion, sense of history, and perspective. If you worry about the future of the game, you will appreciate his sensible, straightforward, and well-placed discussion of certain significant threats. I sped through the excellent narrative, and wish there were more to read.

Owen says

This book depressed me. This was not the author's intent, or his fault, actually. He is a talented writer who writes a story that is meant to be uplifting at its core, about things that unite us as people.

The author's thesis is that Big Ten football, and college football in general, is in jeopardy. This is not news. The continued conceit of 'student-athletes' not being compensated while billions of dollars flow through the sport, and their coaches make 7 and now, incredibly, almost 8 figures would be ridiculous to any impartial observer- and that is before you include the increasingly disturbing news about long term health effects. What I found interesting in this book was the shift in how athletic departments are being run. The change to a profit-making corporate model from the traditional model of keeping the lights on has driven record profits

in large schools. This has some positive effects, the most noticeable of which are bigger and better facilities. Setting aside the arms race this creates, the increased revenue has to be spent somewhere; these are non-profits after all. You can guess where it goes- and I'll give you a hint- it's not to endow academic scholarships. The result is a massive organization, Ponzi-esque in its need to keep growing to not collapse under its own weight. (The specific case in this book is Michigan, but this is obviously happening across the spectrum of large football schools).

But even that did not depress me (on some level I knew it was bad). What depressed me is that thing, this thing we know is bad, that actively harms the young men who produce it, that costs us tremendous amount of money to enrich a select few- this, somehow, infuriatingly, is the particular thing that unites us. And I am a willing, participating, paying part of that 'us.' And that I seem to have no agency over my own connection.

The author makes the point that college football bypasses our intellect and speaks to something tribal in us. He's not wrong, but I don't know why. When compared with professional football, this makes total sense. For those of us who attended a school, we lived and breathed that air, those crisp fall days when football was meant to be played. We woke and watched the polls, the BCS standings, the playoff lists as college football evolved and we lived and died with every down in the stadium. Pro teams, despite their clear advantage in skill and execution, and even with the most die hard fans, just do not have that (or the raw numbers in the stadiums, actually). I wish he was wrong; I wish it wasn't so ingrained. I wish the actions of 19 years olds I never met wouldn't ruin my day. But they do.

I lived on the West Coast for a few years, and I kind of broke myself of what I considered an unhealthy football habit (caring about college football). It's at best a borderline emotionally abusive relationship. There were game watches, and the alumni group there is very tightly knit, but it was an easy decision to make between sitting inside for three plus hours and going outside on a perfect afternoon (or morning, in that time zone). But, as I have been back on the East Coast, this has crept back into my life, and my lack of agency depresses me. I hate being angry that my team will be outcoached every week, watching our QB regress game after game, and knowing that there is nothing I can do about it, that it's a silly sport and a silly thing to spend time and money on, and yet I do.

(As an aside, I hate to be exclusionary, but I'd like to address the people who claim they have 'been fans of school X' all of their lives. I'm convinced that if you did not attend, you simply do not feel the lows. Maybe they feel the highs, but, having known many of these people and watched them, the reaction to on field pain lacks the viscera of those who attended, somehow. It's just not the same. I will not stoop to denigrating you as 'Subway Alums' or 'Wal-Mart Wolverines' the way some schools' alumni do, but I will thank you to not talk to me about my team. You may be rational; I cannot be. Such is the way of things)

This is a well written book that anyone who cares about college football should read. It is a fair and even generous assessment of several programs, including Penn State's recovery from the worst sanctions the NCAA ever levied (and points out for the record that no NCAA violations were ever cited). The author loves college football more than he should. Just like the rest of us saps. (WE ARE...

Owen Gardner Finnegan

David Bjorne says

Damn good book about 4 Big Ten teams and their 2012 seasons, and the struggle for the soul of college football. Penn State's story of keeping their team together was the most affecting. As a Michigan fan, the Ohio State stuff was, well, you know. I wish Michigan had cooperated with this book, but it wasn't meant to be. Instead, we get to see how corporate things have become under the new AD. College football has been changing a lot the last several years. This book is a good document of that.

Peacejanz says

What a great book! The author writes well and presents a thorough picture of college football in the Big Ten. It was exciting to relive some of those games and interesting to see the problems faced by Penn State from the view of the athletes.

The author is a sports reporter and was able to talk to players, athletic directors, coaches and fans -- when they were willing to talk to him. He has harsh words for the commercialization of college sports, the NCAA (with its varying imposition of rules and penalties), and pro football. He has special harsh words for the AD at the University of Michigan. From what he reports, the harsh words are probably deserved BUT the author is a graduate of UM so maybe we will take those words with a grain of salt.

All in all, this book is a treasure for any sports fan.

I received a free review copy of this book from Goodreads.

David V. says

Received as an ARC from the publisher. Started it on 8-17-13. Finished it 8-22-13. Excellent book. The author examines 4 universities(Penn State, Ohio State, Michigan and Northwestern) and the NCAA. The book is about as current as a sports book can get; it ends with the finale of the 2012 football season. As a Penn State grad(1965), I was especially eager to read about its program. When the Sandusky scandal was revealed, I was embarrassed and ashamed to admit I went there or to wear my caps and shirts. Then I thought, "Wait a minute, Sandusky isn't me. I've never met the creep so why should I feel guilty about what he did or what the administrators didn't do." I'm proud of my years there and I loved the experience. The worst part of the sanctions are that they harm the innocent; the players, most of whom never even met Sandusky. The players of last year's season taught the rest of us about dealing with adversity. It's like getting a bad call from the ref. Arguing won't solve a damn thing; so move on , doing the best you can with what you've got. Yeah, for the next few years, it's going to be tough, but Staters are a tough bunch. Mr. Bacon's writing made me almost cheer out loud as he describes a game, even when I knew how it would end, and made me tear up at other moments with agony or pride. Now that's good writing, to get that kind of reaction from a reader. As far as the NCAA is concerned, they need to "grow up." Play our way or we're going to take our ball and go home! Give me a break!!! I'm waiting for the day that some school rebels openly against some ridiculous NCAA ruling, and then the NCAA gets investigated.

Football will still be big part of PSU, as will its 90+% graduation rate for the players, and its thousands of alums will continue to be upstanding citizens and make the world a better place. Will administrators be more vigilant? I certainly hope so. That's enough from my soapbox.

Mr. Bacon provided info that I'd never heard before or read in any news accounts for any of these schools. It was like hearing brand new stories with new insights. The interviews with the players were remarkable.

David says

Fourth and Long was an enjoyable read and my second book read by the author, John U. Bacon. Bacon focuses on four Big Ten teams in the 2012 season, Michigan, Penn St, Ohio St, and Northwestern. However, I found the title to be a little misleading since never did I feel too many hard issues were looked at, it pretty much was just a recap of the 2012 season for these teams. Of all of them, the Penn St story was probably the most intriguing with all of the dust settling on the Sandusky scandal. But the stories for the other three teams weren't quite as compelling. Also, another reviewer mentioned this, but there were several errors in it that some editing could have caught such as referring to Northwestern running back Venric Mark as "Mark Venric". Overall, if you're a fan of Big Ten football, you'll find this book a quick interesting read. But, just don't expect it to be as dramatic as "The Fight for the Soul of College Football."

Brian says

This was an immensely entertaining and thought-provoking read, and I believe it accomplished its main goal, which was to illustrate 1.) what makes college football unique and 2.) what are the chief threats to that very uniqueness, threats that could ultimately cause the sport's demise. In this sense, "Fourth and Long" deserves much praise.

The reason I deducted two stars is because of some imbalanced organization and sloppiness. The book tries to cover the 2012 season of four teams, but it's wildly imbalanced. Rightfully so, half the book focuses on Penn State in the aftermath of the Sandusky scandal. The problem is, the sections on the other three schools feel shoehorned in as afterthoughts. In particular, the narrative reflects the lack of access Bacon got to Michigan's program (a consequence of his last book, "Three and Out" which was not well received in the Michigan Athletic Department). The PSU narrative is riveting and compelling, but every deviation from that, while often interesting, felt like a distraction.

The other critique is general sloppiness. A few brief anecdotes pop up two or three times. Some details are flat-out wrong, such as Northwestern star running back Veneric Mark being referred to as Mark Veneric (which I assume is the fault of overzealous copy editors, not the author), or the omission of song lyrics, or several other little details that while not glaring, are the kinds of things that would not escape proper attention to detail. There are similar small errors throughout the text, which ends up distracting the reader, however briefly. To use a football analogy, it's like the tight end whiffing a block that turns what should have been a 12-yard run into an 8-yard run. Admirable, but with proper execution it could have gone a little further.

I'm glad I read "Fourth and Long" and I encourage anyone who cares about the present and future of college football to pick it up. If Goodreads allowed half-star ratings, this would merit a 3.5/5, but I chose to go with 3. It's a compelling argument and narrative, but the execution undercut it a bit.

Ken Heard says

This is the second best book on college football I've ever read. The first? John Bacon's "Three and Out."

Once again, Bacon gets information the way reporters are supposed to: He's there. He covers the 2012 seasons of Northwestern, Ohio State, Michigan and Penn State and really reveals what goes on behind the scenes. One key element is the Penn State season and how the players continued playing on after the Jerry Sandusky arrest and the subsequent NCAA sanctions against the team.

He also contrasts the different attitudes at the four schools to their team and winning. It's a win or else mentality at Ohio State, while at Northwestern, it's much more lax.

The book has it all At times, though Bacon throws in a lot of his own opinion about the BCS and about whether players should be paid. He is also very defensive of the Big 10 conference vs. the SEC. But even that is not distracting, as Bacon probably has the best insight into college football as anyone. This is a great book for any college football fan. I'd give it a 10 if there were enough stars to do so.

George says

Very enjoyable, and eye-opening, read that was out of my usual favorite genres...historical fiction and high fantasy. Bacon does an excellent job of delivering an indictment of the current press to run big-school athletic departments as corporations and the chasing of the almighty dollar. At the same time, he sets his book against the backdrop of the teams at Michigan, Michigan State, Penn State, Ohio State, and Northwestern. Woven throughout the book is a gripping story of the trials and tribulations of the Penn State TEAM, "left behind" in the wake of the Sandusky scandal, and how the members of that team - the only real innocents in that situation - pulled together to survive despite the NCAA's best efforts to kill the program.

An excellent and insightful read for anyone who loves the pageantry and traditions of college football and yet worries about how it can survive the "modern era".

Christy says

As others have said, there's not much new information here. If you're enough of a college football fan to buy this book, you're probably enough of a fan to know most of what is written. It's 4 mini-stories rolled into one: Behind the scenes at Penn State their first year under NCAA sanctions, Ohio State's first year with Urban Meyer, Northwestern's drive to become a powerhouse football program, and Michigan's new athletic director.

After reading this book, it felt more like an outlet for Bacon to complain about what he dislikes about college football than an informative text. He constantly complains about the Michigan Athletic Director (whom he doesn't like as an alum), complains about the bowl system, complains about college athletes being exploited, etc. However, he often contradicts his own points throughout the book. On one hand he says there are too many bowl games and players don't want to play in the lesser bowls, but on the other hand he discusses how the biggest goal of the Northwestern team is to win a bowl game. ANY bowl game. He complains about the increasing cost of attending a game, yet talks about what a great time he had road tripping with his college friends to the Michigan/Notre Dame game (granted, he didn't pay for tickets, but did pay for the cost of the trip). He points out how athletic departments are supposed to be not-for-profit and they should spend what they make, but criticizes the Michigan AD for hiring new staff and increasing the marketing budget. The

contradictions go on.

As someone who has worked in college athletics for the past 15 years, I found this book to be a one-sided view that turned into an open forum to vent the author's complaints.

Bill says

Overall, I'd recommend most of it.

I often found myself skipping ahead during his play-by-play of the games discussed - these parts of the book I found pedestrian. I even found the rah-rah Penn St. stuff a little 'tame', though this part of the story was compelling.

What I really enjoyed were his points of view on the bigger picture of college football - the role of money quickly turning the game into a business. He was right on here, and has helped me gain some clarity on my own point of view.
