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BUILDER'S REMORSE; As his tenure as LSU athletic director comes, to a close, Joe Dean is concerned about the direction of college athletics, a course which he helped set
By Aaron Kuriloff; Staff writer

In his last days as athletic director at LSU, Joe Dean looks out of his office window and sees the infrastructure of one of the largest, richest, most successful athletic programs in the nation -- a football stadium with more seats than any NFL venue and a multiacre sprawl of facilities worth hundreds of millions.

He helped build it. But at 70, looking back, sometimes he regrets it.

From his window, Dean doesn't always see student-athletes jogging practice laps on sunny fields. Sometimes he sees a juggernaut, sweeping players and university before a wave of profits and misplaced priorities.

Like Dwight Eisenhower, who used his farewell address to warn against a military-industrial complex he had helped create, Dean looks at a system to which he dedicated his life -- as a player, business executive, broadcaster and administrator -- and fears he has helped create a monster.

"I'm very concerned that we're spending ourselves into oblivion," he said. "We're in an arms race with facilities. I worry, because where do we stop? Are we taking away from where we're supposed to be? This is an academic institution."

Like anyone nearing the end of a career, he says, Dean is pausing to take stock of a life, in this case, 52 years in college sports. He's wondering what his legacy will be.

He knows there were successes on the playing field -- packed stadiums and national championships. He knows he's leaving behind a program ranked among the most profitable in the nation. But he knows he leaves other things as well.

Like a nationally prominent system that demands winning regardless of cost. Coaches recruiting non-students for their value as players. Schools facing constant investigation from federal agents and NCAA compliance officers. Athletes getting arrested for gambling, petty crimes and not-so-petty crimes. Rampant cheating and lost educational priorities.

The problems are rooted in money, he says. And nobody helped bring money into college sports like Joe Dean. At every stage of his career.

So as he leaves, Dean fears.

"I'm starting to read things by academic people concerned about where we're heading," Dean said. "I love college athletics. I love watching young people compete. But I'm worried about where we're headed, too."

The formative years

Things seemed simple, at first.

About 60 years ago, when evening fell, a group of neighborhood boys would gather on a lighted basketball court in New Albany, Ind. -- a blue-collar town sitting on the Ohio River directly across from Louisville, Ky. Known for manufacturing plywood, molding tools and basketball players, it's the kind of town where children practice jump shots before multiplication tables; a neighborhood pickup game can include 50 players.

Dean played on that lighted court. He learned how to use strength and size, skill and guile. He learned the value of practice and how to beat older players. He learned common sense.

He also learned the language of Indiana basketball.

"In the blue for two!" someone might shout as the ball swung through the net, Dean recalled. "Tickling the twine! String music!"

By most accounts, Dean was a pretty good guard. Good enough to get recruited by LSU, under Coach Harry Rabenhurst. Good enough to make honorable mention All-America and the college All-Star game as a senior in 1952. Good enough to make a living in the sport -- to play for the Phillips 66 Oilers (1955-1959), to found his own summer camp, to broadcast games on television and to land a job promoting shoes for Converse in 1959.

In business, Dean used his court sense. He was ambitious, driven and direct, says Martin Newton, son of former Kentucky athletic director C.M. Newton, who attended Dean's camp and worked for him at Converse.

Dean traveled relentlessly, shaking hands, meeting players and signing both coaches and teams for Converse. He believed that personalities would sell shoes. So he landed the personalities.

"I signed them all," Dean said. "Dr. J. Chris Evert. Jimmy Connors. Larry Bird. I called the schools, too. At one time or another, I probably knew every coach in the country of any consequence."

In 1977 Dean used his idea to gain market share in the college game. Converse offered then-UNLV coach Jerry Tarkanian a two-for-one deal on his personal footwear -- the first collegiate shoe sponsorship contract ever, according to Economist Andrew Zimbalist's "Unpaid Professionals." The next year, Nike trumped the offer, by throwing in warmups for the team and \$2,500 for the coach.

It was a small step, Newton said, but also the seminal event that would allow massive sponsorship dollars to flow into college sports. When other shoe companies realized Dean's methods sold shoes, they began competing, dramatically raising the stakes.

Today, top coaches, such as Duke's Mike Krzyzewski or Kentucky's Tubby Smith, commonly earn hundreds of thousand of dollars from a shoe contract.

"At the time when the shoe thing got crazy, when Nike got involved, when adidas got involved, Converse was forced to keep up and pay," said Newton. "I don't think that was ever Joe's dream or intention."

Dean was also part of another force that would pour more money into college games. His easy personality and quick wit as an analyst helped establish the popularity of NCAA basketball on television.

He had his own catch phrase -- a remnant from his childhood games in Indiana.

"String music!"

"They started bringing me in just to say it," Dean said.

Televised basketball boomed. Broadcast rights fees for the NCAA Tournament increased from \$140,000 in 1966 to \$28.3 million in 1985 to an \$11 billion, six-year deal in 2000, according to Zimbalist. The incentive for universities to field winning teams grew.

"This year, even if we didn't play in the tournament, our check would have been a little over \$900,000," Dean said. "That's big bucks."

He rode the boom along with everyone else. And the shoe business didn't slow down either. But Dean retired from Converse after he and fellow executives purchased, then sold, the company.

LSU was also facing changing circumstances: Athletic Director Paul Dietzel had left for West Point. His successor, Bob Brodhead was convicted of conspiracy to illegally wiretap NCAA officers. And the 1986 fiscal year ended with the formerly profitable athletic department in the red.

Dean, who had lived in Baton Rouge with wife Doris since shortly after his graduation from college, found himself under pressure from friends and neighbors to take over the director's job. He turned it down once, worried about the pressures of running a scandal-shrouded department in a football-mad state.

Then, in the fall of 1987, he relented.

Difficult times at LSU

He inherited a program that was winning on the playing fields but not at the bank. Dean's predecessor had built strong programs by spending liberally. The department had revenues exceeding \$16 million but an operating deficit of \$90,000.

Still, over the next 13 years, LSU's teams would remain among the best in the country, capturing 39 SEC and 25 national titles. There were unprecedented successes: Baseball coach Skip Bertman's teams won five NCAA championships; the women's track team, under Pat Henry, won 18.

But similar success largely eluded Dean on the most important field -- the gridiron. And that hurt.

"When the football teams wins, I'm a good athletic director," Dean said. "When it loses, I'm not very good."

By that standard, his career at LSU never really blossomed. Two of the men he hired as coaches, Curley Hallman and Gerry DiNardo, were widely criticized and ignobly dismissed. The team, which had won SEC championships in 1986 (under Bill Arnsparger) and 1988 (under Mike Archer), never won another. Dean was part of a group of five LSU officials that voted to hire Nick Saban last year.

In contrast, conference rivals thrived. Florida won the SEC championship six times in the 1990s, and a national championship in 1996. Alabama won the 1999 SEC and 1992 national titles. Tennessee earned three SEC championship victories in the 1990s, and the 1998 national title.

Dean's years mark the first time LSU has gone a decade without an SEC championship since the 1940s. In the 1990s, the team ended the season ranked in the Top 25 in the Associated Press poll only twice.

There was also controversy. In 1994 and 1995, a small group of female soccer and softball players won a lawsuit against LSU, claiming that the university had denied them equal opportunity to participate in athletics, equal access to the benefits of sport and equal chances to compete for scholarships.

Dean's opposition to aspects of Title IX, the section of the Educational Amendment Act that guarantees women equal access to interscholastic sports, was well-documented by then. He served on the NCAA's Gender Equity Task Force and signed a minority report warning the law would hurt schools with big football programs -- schools just like LSU, which depends on football for up to 85 percent of its athletic department revenue.

"It's why we can win a dozen national championships in women's track," he said. "It funds track and basketball and softball and all the other women's sports."

But the court's decision still stung. Federal appellate judges ruled that LSU was "motivated by chauvinist notions" and that it "perpetuated antiquated stereotypes and fashioned a grossly discriminatory athletics system."

Worse, Dean received national scorn after witnesses at the trial quoted him calling female plaintiffs "honey," "sweetie" and "cutie" in various official meetings, and saying soccer deserved consideration as a varsity sport because players "would look cute running around in their soccer shorts."

The university, now subject to compliance inspection, added soccer and softball. Dean remains unrepentant.

"I don't think I would have done anything differently," he said. "They were trying to force us to do something we were not ready to do."

"The truth is, we ended up doing it exactly the way we wanted to anyway. And we've been pretty darn successful."

Nancy Rafuse, an Atlanta-based attorney for the plaintiffs, says Dean "was not the most enlightened chief of an institution I've come across.

"If the only thing he takes from this is that he had to create teams he was going to create anyway, then he's missed the point," she said. "It's been like pulling teeth. You'd be amazed how long an institution can drag out building a soccer field."

Watching the bottom line

But throughout the controversies and losing football seasons, Dean kept a firm grip on his job by watching the funding. His arrival at LSU brought tight budgetary constraints on coaches, forcing them to reduce expenses.

Many coaches, such as Dale Brown, who led the LSU men's basketball team to 10 consecutive NCAA Tournament appearances and two Final Fours between 1984 and 1993, chafed at the restrictions. But everyone knew Dean's motivation.

"When he was hired at LSU, there was no question he was hired as a businessman," Brown said. "He's tough. He gets right to the point, and he's the guardian of the funds. You don't just get things. I had to battle for everything. Nothing came easy."

But Dean's efforts worked. From a \$90,000 deficit, the program grew to the 12th largest in the nation, according to a December 1999 study by Fortune Magazine, which placed its annual revenues at \$32 million, just behind conference rivals Auburn (\$33.2 million), Alabama (\$33.4 million), Florida (\$39.4 million) and Tennessee (\$45 million). LSU disputes those numbers, saying it now leads both Auburn and Alabama.

While the profits haven't grown faster than inflation -- LSU athletics earned \$1.6 million in 1988 and \$1.7 million in 2000 -- almost everything else has. Revenues have doubled, from \$16 million to between \$32 and \$35 million.

The facilities have also seen tremendous growth. Under Dean, the university completed a \$55 million expansion of Tiger Stadium, from 80,000 to 91,600 seats. Paid for by the Tiger Athletic Foundation, a boosters organization, the expansion also added 70 "Tiger Den" luxury suites, priced at between \$34,000 and \$95,000 per year.

Alex Box Baseball Stadium and Bernie Moore Track Stadium were remodeled. Women's soccer and softball players got practice facilities.

Lingering doubts

Dean holds an office on the top floor of that complex, looking out over the fields and practice facilities built with the booster money, sponsorship dollars and profits he helped create. But, as he stared out of the floor-to-ceiling windows on a recent morning, he wondered if his legacy was good or bad for LSU and college sports.

"All of my colleagues worry about the impact big-time college athletics have on the priorities and decision-making of the institution," said LSU chancellor Mark Emmert.

But Dean feels more responsible than most. Despite his efforts at building educational structures for athletes, efforts he now worries have been wasted, LSU's graduation rate, for both athletes and non-athletes, lags far behind that of other schools. While most Division I programs typically graduate about half of their students, LSU graduates about one-third, according to data provided by the NCAA. For athletes, that number falls about 5 percentage points.

At the same time, public disgust over cheating, gambling and other forms of chicanery has continued to grow.

Dean knows why. Between 1997 and 1998, football coaches suspended seven players for various violations, eventually reinstating two. In 1998, an NCAA compliance committee sanctioned LSU after finding that basketball

player Lester Earl accepted \$5,000 from a booster. In June of that year Cecil Collins, a rising football star, was arrested and kicked off the team on charges of sexual battery. And in September 1999, a year in which four football players faced criminal charges, Larry Foster, a junior wide receiver, was arrested for purse-snatching.

The university lured Saban away from Michigan State with a contract worth \$1.2 million a year. For the same money, the school could have hired 17 full professors.

Dean sees waste in that discrepancy.

"In men's basketball, all I have are 13 scholarships," he said. "But I have one head coach, three assistants and an administrative assistant. That's five people taking care of 13 students.

"The teacher-to-pupil ratio is unbelievable. We don't have any academic classes like that, I can tell you."

Like Eisenhower, Dean finds himself wondering if his greatest successes ultimately brought harm to the institution he loves.

"We've let ourselves get excessive with some of the things we do," he said. "We're building an academic center for athletes right now. Is that going to attract more players? Is that going to help? I don't think so. Maybe we should spend that money on other things."

Even the cost of a single football ticket has grown. Seats at Tiger Stadium cost non-students \$30, and students, who once got in for free, now pay \$6.

"We continue to raise prices," Dean said. "We plead for donor assistance to pay the bills. Are we going to price ourselves out of business?"

He looked around the office, at the game balls, the signed blueprints and other relics of 13 years of growth and athletic accomplishment. He talked of planning his own consulting firm, about jogging and spending more time with his wife, about missing the staff he has assembled in the athletic department. Then he turned back to the window, sun shining through his white hair.

"I've made mistakes, but when you're running full speed, you're going to," he said. "And that's the way I like to do things."