A new SEC power?

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In most seasons, SEC football teams trounce Vanderbilt's team. In conference play, Vanderbilt has only had one winning record since 1983. This season is different. Vanderbilt is 6-1 overall, has a winning record against SEC teams, and is ranked 10th nationally.

Many college football fans are shocked that Vanderbilt is doing so well this year. But Vanderbilt always had the potential to have a successful football team. Why? Because it has so much money. In the SEC, the University of Texas system has the largest endowment at $47 billion. The Texas A&M system is second with $20 billion, and Vanderbilt is third at $10 billion. After that there is a huge drop off. The University of Florida has the fourth largest endowment at $2.29 billion dollars. The University of Alabama has an endowment of only $820 million and LSU only has $696 million. If endowments measure the financial resources universities have to attain their goals, Vanderbilt is among the schools with the most resources.

If Vanderbilt decides to prioritize its football success, it has enough financial resources to be successful. It will be able to outbid perennial football powerhouses for talent. For example, Vanderbilt will be able to offer players more money than Alabama will. And if players go to the team that pays them the most, Vanderbilt will get more talented players than Alabama will.

The image and likeness rules have made it easier for teams to overtly pay players. Wealthy universities that may not have been willing to find creative or dubious ways to pay players under the old system, do not have to worry about breaking rules with the new more lenient system. Now, they may be willing to make lucrative bids for players.

The recruiting advantage that Vanderbilt has over the University of Alabama may be similar to an advantage Major League Baseball (MLB) teams had in the late 1940s. Once Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier, many Major League Baseball teams began attempting to sign the best Black players. Since MLB teams had a lot more money than the Negro League teams, the MLB teams could pay the Black players more than the Negro League teams could. The MLB teams had such a financial advantage that they could pay higher salaries and still have enough money to pay the Negro League teams to release the Black players from the contracts those payers had signed with the Negro League teams.

After 1947, MLB and Negro League teams both wanted the best Black players. But because MLB teams were so much more profitable, the MLB teams could use their financial advantage to get the best Black players.

It will be interesting to see if Vanderbilt strings together several winning seasons. On the one hand, it might be because the current image and likeness rules allow Vanderbilt to more easily bid for players in a way that allows it to take advantage of its relatively large financial resources. On the other hand, this season could be an aberration. Vanderbilt may have gotten lucky by attracting very good players in the transfer portal. Only time will tell if Vanderbilt's current success is due to a lucky recruiting year or to a change in its willingness to use its vast resources to obtain the best players. Such a change in preference, if it occurred, would lead to good Vanderbilt football teams for years to come.

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