I don't know Bobby DiGeronimo or his company, Independence Excavating. But I do know that Bobby DiGeronimo is now in the crosshairs of both The Ohio State University and the NCAA and for all the wrong reasons.

According to a story in Thursday's Plain Dealer, splashed as it was on the front page above a story on something far more significant, the re-drawing of Ohio's congressional districts, DiGeronimo takes the blame for getting three Ohio State Buckeyes football players suspended for the first two games of the season. The positioning of the story isn't an accident. Far more people care about whether Jordan Hall can play Saturday then whether the Republicans in Ohio's state house rigged the districts to strengthen their own hand.

DiGeronimo claims that he facilitated payments of $200 to three different players to cover their expenses for participating in a charity event last winter. He essentially claims he knew better but violated NCAA and Ohio State rules for two fundamental reasons, one philosophical the other practical. He said that he thinks it's shameful that these kids can't even get their expenses covered for going out of their way to help a charity. That's not entirely true but that's beside the point. He also said that this would never have come up if not for all the other problems that followed the Buckeyes this winter related to the free tattoo hubbub. It's kind of a "everybody's doing it" sort of rationale that is probably true.

There was a time that it would be very easy to take DiGeronimo to task for his activities but that time, if indeed it ever did exist, has long since passed. Let's quit acting surprised by the near daily revelations, be they about Ohio State, Miami, Auburn, Alabama, ad nauseum in finitum.

DiGeronimo may have known he was doing something wrong but that only measures his actions by a rather arbitrary set of rules that aren't just antiquated but have a far different purpose then most believe.

The NCAA would like everyone to think that DiGeronimo and the three athletes deserve punishment as the byproduct of running afoul of rules meant to preserve the athletes' amateur status. It's a false premise. The rules aren't meant to preserve anything more than the total submission of the athletes to the unbending and unrelenting thumb of an increasingly obvious illegal cartel called the NCAA.

If the NCAA really cared about its athletes, the biggest favor it could do for them and the common good is to go out of business, now. As a institution and as a concept, the NCAA is so irretrievably broken, there isn't enough glue in the universe to fix it.

In an absolutely brilliant piece of reporting that should be read by anyone and everyone with even a glancing interest in the subject of college and athletics, Taylor Branch, writing for The Atlantic, shatters any last thought about the supposedly quaint objectives of the NCAA. (see the full article here . Warning. It's long) In convincing fashion, Branch dispels the notion that the NCAA exists to help athletes. Instead, the NCAA exists merely to exploit their labors for the benefit of the NCAA itself and its member universities.

How does it do this? Let's start with the concept of "student-athlete." The NCAA uses this moniker to further the myth that all college athletes are students first and foremost. It's hogwash. Simply, as Branch details, it's a designation the NCAA invented as a way to fend off lawsuits filed by athletes and their survivors who wanted workers' compensation benefits for the often debilitating or deadly injuries suffered while playing. It's a creature of a nefarious fiction not as a shield to protect the athletes but as a sword to ward off any inroads by interlopers like the athletes or their survivors who might want to otherwise rightfully claim a piece of the financial pie.

Now calling them student-athletes and denying them simple workers' compensation benefits that might seem like a reasonable position for the NCAA to take except when you consider, for example, how colleges must provide workers compensation benefits for the student working part time in the union who happens to slip and fall while working. The benefits are provided because the college can't deny the existence of an employer/employee relationship. It's clear cut. But when an athlete like Tyler Gentry became forever paralyzed from a hit while catching a football during a Buckeyes practice in 2006, the NCAA is quick to deny any such employer-employee relationship under the guise of "student-athlete." It's a sad and disgusting distinction that more than anything else exposes the NCAA as the heartless, shameless, depraved entity it has grown to become.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg. The NCAA is a creation of and supposedly serves at the direction of its member colleges. But in its early days it had very little funding or power to do much of anything. Eventually, under Walter Byers, it seized control of virtually every aspect of college athletics through the implementation of almost Gestapo-like tactics financed by the riches generated off those athletics.

It started first with football. The NCAA was initially suspicious of the medium and took great pains to control all television access and contracts. When a few colleges balked, the NCAA sought to throw them out of the system completely and essentially succeeded. Over time, as networks paid more and more for the rights to televise football, the NCAA grew richer and dribbled out the money to the institutions at will and very unevenly. Eventually enough colleges rebelled and actually sued the NCAA to gain control over those riches and won. When that happened, the NCAA's very existence was threatened.

But undeterred, the NCAA then brokered the massive March Madness basketball tournament and has turned it into a moneymaker beyond all bounds of reason. That tournament, not coincidentally, is completely controlled by the NCAA and serves now as its major source of funding.

Now it's fair to ask why colleges took on the NCAA over televising football but then have left the NCAA to broker March Madness. Simple. The NCAA learned its lesson and like a drug dealer, doled out enough riches to enough schools to keep them from complaining. College presidents, hooked on the cash like a junkie hooked on coke, have lost the will power to get themselves clean. So they live with the Draconian measures and inherent unfairness within which the NCAA operates in order to preserve their next fix.

I'm like Don Corleone when it comes to most of this. It really doesn't matter much to me how someone wants to go about making money. But the line gets drawn once you recognize that what the NCAA really does is prey on the weak and vulnerable, many of whom are African-American athletes from impoverished backgrounds, to create its wealth. It cares little for the blood, sweat and bones that are shed or broken in order to enhance that wealth. Indeed the NCAA puts these athletes in almost untenable positions on a daily basis, exploits their accomplishments, their images and their very welfare, and doesn't have even the common courtesy to give them a decent reach around.

In short, the NCAA treats the athletes not so much as pieces of meat but serfs who must work the lands and survive on whatever crumbs the feudal lord deigns to throw their way. It's not good enough to say, "well at least they aren't starving," as an excuse for ignoring the reality, especially when you consider how fat everyone above them really is getting.

The NCAA plays the role of a supposedly benevolent dictator who better knows what these athletes want and need because they have no minds of their own. It's an acceptable parental point of view, assuming your comfortable with parents named Hitler and Mussolini. The NCAA works in secret, denies athletes even a modicum of due process during any investigation, and punishes them harshly if they don't walk whatever straight and narrow line the NCAA decides to draw this day.

Amazingly, it's not just the athletes that are treated shabbily but the member schools upon whom the NCAA's very existence relies. There are numerous examples of proscriptive rules that force these schools to bow to the NCAA's will and forces them to knuckle under at the slightest hint of dissent. And finally there are those individuals who have run afoul of the NCAA, whether it's Bruce Pearl or the dozens of lesser knowns that have had their livelihoods indiscriminately ripped away from them, that the NCAA makes examples of in order to force compliance.

In any other context, these kinds of actions would cause rioting in the streets. In this context, too many just shrug their shoulders, grab another beer and hope their team doesn't drop in the rankings.

The NCAA is a scandal of untold proportions that are just now coming to light. If there's any real justice then Branch's article will be the catalyst that finally brings down the NCAA. But I won't count on it. Far more likely to bring about the rightful end to an increasingly illegal

enterprise will be the myriad of lawsuits the NCAA is facing at the moment, any one of which can and should destroy its very underpinnings.

One of the key lawsuits is a class action brought by Ed O'Bannon, a former UCLA basketball player. He's wondering, correctly, why the NCAA continues to make money off his likeness and his accomplishments through video games and the like long after O'Bannon left college. He's not alone. Oscar Robertson is another.

The NCAA's defense is as contradictory as its very existence. It claims on the one hand that permission to use what otherwise belongs to these players, the rights to their own likeness for example, was surrendered as a condition of playing in NCAA-sanctioned events. It's an acknowledgement by the NCAA that the players have a valuable property right and a statement that those rights were relinquished in service of the master. On the other hand, the NCAA justifies denying these same athletes any of the basic protections anyone else with similar property rights might have, such as compensation for when those rights are violated, because their pursuit of athletics was not the exercise of any right but merely a by-product of the student experience. It's a Through-the-Looking-Glass defense that will one day be torn to shreds by a federal judge. But that outcome awaits another day.

Besides, the NCAA may fall by the wayside, as Branch points out, long before then under the crushing weight of all the instability in college football. One thing college presidents have shown in the past is that no amount is too small to fight over when it's theirs. If that means taking on the NCAA as a means of unlocking all the riches that a super football conference with only powerhouse programs can bring, then that's what they'll do. The constant shuffling of the conferences, the destruction of old rivalries, the re-positioning of various schools are not merely a sign but the brightest of red flags. It's coming. It's just a matter of time.

All this gets us eventually back to a small timer like DeGeronimo and his lousy $200 payments to three Buckeyes. There was a time when I would have excoriated DeGeronimo for putting the Buckeyes program in jeopardy but not anymore. All he was trying to do was right an inherent wrong, clumsily perhaps, but certainly well intentioned. And even if it wasn't, so what? There is literally nothing DeGeronimo could do that would make him or his actions play within the same solar system as the kind of corruption the NCAA doesn't just sanction but participates in on a daily basis.

The high-minded numbskulls that still cling to an era of athletics that never really existed (you

want proof? Read the Branch story) will decry any effort to properly compensate college athletes. Paying athletes didn't destroy the Olympics and it won't destroy college athletics. By bringing the payments above board, think of all the time and money saved by not having to hunt down wannabes like DeGeronimo.

The enemy of college athletics is not the DeGeronimos of the world that get some sort of vicarious thrill by acting like a big fish in a small pond, but the NCAA itself. Through rules that run counter to the very liberties that every day folk wouldn't tolerate in any other setting, the NCAA has created a corrupt, unmanageable mess that preys on the vulnerable at the expense of the rich.

DeGeronimo invoked the name of charity to explain his actions. It was all for such a worthy cause. Maybe so, but if it turns out that this incident and the thousands upon thousands just like it end up exposing the fraud that is the NCAA and bringing about its death, then a far worthier cause will have been served.