

Sports Holdings in the Southeastern Conference  
University Libraries: Football as a Case Study

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# SPORTS HOLDINGS IN THE SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES: FOOTBALL AS A CASE STUDY

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## Introduction

Of the twelve National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) Division I Football Bowl Subdivision conferences, the Southeastern Conference (SEC) has attained prominence. But how do the SEC's university libraries fare when evaluated for their football holdings? While university libraries develop their collections mainly to support research and teaching functions, according to accepted collection development practice, the extent to which sports of local importance are represented in their collections is a subject given little attention in the professional literature.

In order to help close the gap, this study evaluates the football holdings of the 12 SEC university library systems using the checklist method of each library's Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC) system from a remote location. The evaluation is meant to serve as a case study of sports holdings in the SEC libraries by using an authoritative checklist consisting of the best fiction and nonfiction football books. The checklist method, which compares a library's holdings to an authoritative list, is an effective means of identifying collection strengths and weaknesses.

## The Southeastern Conference

Formed in 1933, more than six decades after intercollegiate football officially kicked off in 1869, the SEC numbers 12 member institutions divided into two groups. In the East Division are University of Florida (Gainesville), University of Georgia (Athens), University of Kentucky (Lexington), University of South Carolina

(Columbia), University of Tennessee (Knoxville), and Vanderbilt University (Nashville). In the West Division are Auburn University (Auburn), University of Alabama (Tuscaloosa), University of Arkansas (Fayetteville), Louisiana State University (Baton Rouge), Mississippi State University (Starkville), and University of Mississippi (Oxford). The conference traces its beginnings to the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Association (SIOC), established in 1894 and renamed the Southern Conference in 1920, while a restructuring in the early 1930s gave rise to the SEC (Dunlap, 2009, p. 2-3).

The SEC calls itself "the nation's premier conference" (Dunlap, 2009, p. 4) and makes clear its standing: "The Southeastern Conference, with its storied 76-year history of athletic achievements and academic excellence, has built perhaps the greatest tradition of intercollegiate competition of any league in the country since its inception in 1933" (Dunlap, p. 4). The SEC takes four of the top ten spots in the rankings of "America's best sports colleges" (Taylor, 2002) and three places in the "ten best college sports towns" (Ballard, 2003).

## Football in the Southeastern Conference

Football's history and traditions are valued like in no other sport (Weiberg, 2009), and the SEC's are highly respected. The October 19, 2009, cover of *Sports Illustrated* names the SEC "The Nation's Toughest Conference," while Karp (2009) calls it "the most prestigious [conference] in college football" (p. W5). According to Bradley (2009), "[No]body does it quite like the SEC, where ... football is played in front of packed houses and is

rivalled only by the high-spirited traditions surrounding the games” (p. 37). Moreover, ESPN’s *SportsCenter* believes the conference is “SEC-ond to none” (Drake, 2010) and, when it comes to financial worth, the SEC is the most valuable of all major college football leagues (Schwartz, 2010, p. 51).

The SEC’s position in college football record books is well-established. One statistic that displays the importance of football in the SEC is game attendance. The SEC in 2009 recorded its 27th straight year as the nation’s leader in the largest total and average football attendance categories (NCAA Accumulated Attendance Report, 2009). National recognition for a player or coach underlines not only the team but also the conference in the record books. SEC first-team consensus football All America selections total 631 (Dunlap, 2009, p. 176-179; Inabinett, 2009) and inductees into the College Football Hall of Fame 91 (Dunlap, p. 174), while eight SEC players have won the Heisman Trophy, the oldest and most celebrated of the individual honors in the sport (“Winners,” n.d.). SEC coaches, additionally, have received the College Football National Coach of the Year Award 14 times (Dunlap, p. 194).

Bowl game berths and national championships are primary goals of the major college football programs. Bowl games, which are played after regular season competition, have been central to college football since 1902, when the Rose Bowl, known as the “Granddaddy of all bowl games,” was inaugurated (Chipman, Sadler, Krebs, Laninga, & McCall, 2009, p. 27). The SEC’s total bowl game appearances since 1933 number 335 (Dunlap, p. 191-192). Winning the national championship, to be sure, is the most important gauge of success for any university with a top-tier football program, and SEC teams have been crowned national champion 20 times (Dunlap, p. 203-208). The SEC is the first conference to win four straight national titles, repeating in 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2009 (Drake, 2010).

College football traditions on and off the field are linked to game records, and the SEC’s are well-regarded. The Georgia-Florida and

Alabama-Auburn games are 2 of the 10 greatest rivalries in college football, according to Bradley (2006). Three of the dozens of college football games known as “trophy games,” which award the winner an artifact symbolizing the long-standing significance and spirit of the rivalry, are SEC contests (Walsh, 2006). Of the 25 “best college football weekends,” the SEC accounts for 6 spots, including 4 in the top 10 (Waxman, 2004). The Georgia-Florida game, a contest played at a neutral stadium in Jacksonville, is considered “the world’s largest outdoor cocktail party” (Walsh, 2006, p. 67), and Tennessee fans known as the Volunteer Navy join a “floating tailgate party” on the Tennessee River by arriving at games by boat (Walsh, p. 16). Since 1990, tailgaters at South Carolina have gathered before home games near Williams-Brice Stadium at the Cockaboose Railroad, nearly two dozen posh cabooses called “the ultimate in decadent tailgating” (Walsh, p. 102). The best location for social gathering at football games across the country, however, belongs to Mississippi’s The Grove (Walsh, 202; Hamilton, 2006).

Football in the SEC differs from football in any other part of the country, according to Ernsberger (2000), because in the South nearly everybody “cares deeply and truly about college football” (p. 2). Ernsberger explains:

In the SEC, the football traditions are old and deeply cherished. In fact, college football is one of the few things which, in a sense, divides the South. When the time comes to tee up the pigskin, the South stops being a region and reverts to earlier times: it becomes a collection of hugely competitive states, each with an overweening pride in its major-college football team. Autumn Saturdays are reserved for feuding—for trash-talking and a settling of grievances as twenty-two young men throw themselves at one another on verdant fields—in Oxford and Knoxville, Gainesville and Tuscaloosa, Auburn and Athens, Baton Rouge, Lexington, and Starksville. (p. 3)

The SEC’s place in college football records and legend is well-established.

## **Southeastern Conference Universities and Libraries**

SEC literature refers to the league as “A pioneer in the integration of higher education and athletic competition” (Peevey, 2008, p. 10), and its mission statement mirrors this belief: “The purpose of the Southeastern Conference is to assist its member institutions in the maintenance [sic] of programs of intercollegiate athletics which are compatible with the highest standards of education and competitive sports” (Dunlap, 2009, p. 9). Notably, the SEC’s performance in the classroom leads the nation: In 2008-2009 the SEC’s 41 athletes named to the *ESPN The Magazine* CoSIDA Academic All-America Team outnumbered all Division I conferences (Dunlap, p. 6).

The conference’s member institutions, in 2005, formed the SEC Academic Consortium, in order “to provide a collaborative structure in which the 12 universities can promote learning, scholarship and academic achievement,” including the sharing of library resources (Dunlap, 2009, p. 5). The SEC’s undergraduate enrollment totals 227,000 students and its graduate student enrollment 60,000; its faculty numbers 22,000 and its staff 92,000; its funded research amounts to \$2.6 billion annually; and its doctoral degrees awarded in 2006 came to 3,302 (Dunlap, p. 6). The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching classifies Alabama, Auburn, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Mississippi State as research universities with high research activity, while Florida, Georgia (Athens), Kentucky, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Vanderbilt are research universities with very high research activity (n.d.). Eleven SEC universities are public, while Vanderbilt is private. Louisiana State (Baton Rouge) is not included in the classifications.

Nine SEC university libraries, except for Arkansas, Mississippi, and Mississippi State, belong to the 113-member Association of Research Libraries (Association of Research Libraries [ARL], n.d.). According to the most recent *ARL Statistics*, SEC libraries hold 33,033,112 volumes and 595,957 serials, while employing full-time 708 professional and 1,077

support staff members (Kyrillidou & Bland, 2009). The current ARL’s *Library Investment Index at University Research Libraries, 2007-08* ranks the SEC’s Florida in 37th place, with total library expenditures of \$28,573,302; Vanderbilt in 51st with \$24,727,583; Georgia in 53rd with \$24,451,142; Tennessee in 55th with \$23,556,230; Kentucky in 66th with \$21,414,484; South Carolina in 77th with \$19,742,585; Alabama in 92nd with \$16,623,179; and Louisiana State in 102nd with \$14,576,026 (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Almanac 2008-2009).

## **Football in LIS Literature and the Online Market**

Sports have received comparatively sparse attention in the library and information science literature. Several factors alone or in combination might explain this lack of research. Because some sports books pertain to mechanics and technique, reading them might be thought limited to an audience with in-depth knowledge gained by participation as a player or coach. Many sports books are written by journalists, and negative portrayals of sportswriters is common (Boyle, 2006; Deford, 2010). Sportswriting itself is thought “an essentially banal, trivial and ephemeral pursuit” (Boyle, 2006, para. 16), and the rise of multimedia, around the clock coverage of sports might have rendered the sportswriter redundant (Deford, 2010, p. 58). Sports books also might be associated with “escapist summer reading” (“Aethlon,” n.d., para. 1), while undergraduates enrolled in sports literature courses usually are “drawn to the sports aspect of the course rather than the literature one” (“Syllabus,” n.d., Introduction section, para. 2). The alliance between sports and academics on a campus, in addition, has been an uneasy one due to the detrimental influence of money (Yost, 2010). What is more, since collection development work is considered subjective and biased (Evans & Saponaro, 2005, p. 16), the personal interests of LIS researchers might fail to see sports as a suitable subject.

Only a small number of items address the application of traditional library functions to sports materials. None of the principal collection

evaluation bibliographies published in the last thirty years (Ottersen, 1971; Nisonger, 1982; Gabriel, 1995; Nisonger, 1982; Kaag with Cann and others, 1991; Strohl, 1999, and Nisonger, 2003) identifies a study devoted to the evaluation of a sports collection in a library. As of September 2009, the Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts with Full Text (LISTA) and Library and Information Science Full Text database contains two items pertaining to evaluation of rowing collections in major American libraries (Meehan & Nisonger, 2007; Nisonger & Meehan, 2007). Searches on January 8, 2010, for the term *football* in WorldCat produced 36,089 printed books in English, while at amazon.com the results numbered 10,896; a search in LISTA and Library Literature & Information Science databases for the title term *football* resulted in 386 items, although the word appears as a metaphor in the phrase “political footballs” and in titles pertaining to European football, known in the United States as soccer; and a search for *football* as a subject term produced 620 items.

### The Checklist Method

The checklist method is one of the oldest collection-centered tools available. The first reported collection evaluation in North America, conducted in the late 1840s by the Smithsonian Institute’s Assistant Secretary Charles Coffin Jewett, used the checklist method. Applying a checklist evaluation is “a common way” to assess holdings (Baker & Lancaster, 1991, p. 40) and “one of the most frequently used” (Dennison, 2000, p. 24). It is a practical approach undertaken “to gather data *useful* in problem-solving or decision-making activities” (Lancaster, 1993, p. 1). The checklist method also reflects local needs of patrons and identifies strengths and weaknesses of a collection (Crawley-Low, 2002), provides reasons to rethink collection development policy and make improvements (Halliday, 2001), and establishes a “framework for future collection assessment projects” (Bergen & Nemeč, 1999, p. 37). According to Lundin (1989)

Lists are a connection between the ages, the

voice of one bibliophile to another, the hand passing a book over the generations. Lists are such a basic form of communication among libraries and among scholars that their viability remains constant. (p. 111)

The major advantages of the checklist method, according to Lockett (1989), are the following: the variety of lists from which to choose; it is extensive and provides the investigator many options that can meet the objectives of the evaluation; if no list suits the purpose of a library evaluation, then one easily can be compiled; checking a list is fairly routine work and yields objective data that can be analyzed and interpreted subjectively; examining the collection against a list also is an excellent way not only to expand the evaluator’s knowledge of the items but also to sharpen understanding of publishing patterns in the subject (p. 6). From the numerous “best-of” lists published annually to the most-recent list of acquisitions of a specialized library, the checklist remains “an old standby for evaluators,” a basic and reliable method of objective quality evaluation (Evans & Saponaro, 2005, p. 319).

The disadvantages of the checklist method counter what at first glance appears an easy, quick method of evaluation. List checking is in no way as clear cut as it seems. The method is time-consuming and requires patience and precision. Among the disadvantages are difficulties locating or compiling an appropriate list that is current, is suited to the library’s needs, and has not been consulted previously as a buying guide; accessing titles through interlibrary loan or other means; and interpreting the results (Lockett, 1989, p. 6). Because interpretation of results is subjective and the acceptability of percentages usually not addressed, the checklist evaluation leaves unanswered a significant question: “What percentage of a list is adequate?” (Dennison, 2000, p. 26). List checking through the OPAC also increases the probability of hitting “potholes along the information highway,” notably the certain variances in local cataloging practices and the temporary technological glitches in the database system (Meehan & Nisonger, 2005).

Meola (2004), furthermore, criticizes the checklist method on several points, arguing for example that it overestimates a librarian's expertise to judge the worth of the information generated and that it is overly mechanistic and lacks critical thinking ability.

### The Checklist for this Evaluation

The checklist used in the study consists of the 12 football books contained in the "*Sports Illustrated* Top 100 Sports Books of All Time," a list of materials for an opening day collection, or a core collection of the most important materials on the topic. It is considered a "specialized" list—one of 15 possible checklist sources outlined in the American Library Association's *Guide to the Evaluation of Library Collections* (Lockett, 1989, p. 5). The list possesses a broad range of literary talent and significance and is an authoritative instrument for evaluating sports collections.

The "*Sports Illustrated* 100 Top Sports Books of All Time" appeared in the December 16, 2002, issue of the magazine. The list was compiled by the publication's staff and the article authored by four staff writers. According to the authors,

Many of the country's best writers have long been fascinated with sports, and that passion shows up in their prose. After all, when done right, sportswriting transcends bats and balls to display all the traits of great literature; incision, wit, force, and vision, suffused with style and substance." (McEntegart et al., 2002, p. 128)

The 100 books include the following 12 football titles, presented by place on the list and identified as fiction or nonfiction:

- 4. Friday Night Lights, by H. G. Bissinger (nonfiction)
- 7. Semi-Tough, by Dan Jenkins (fiction)
- 8. Paper Lion, by George Plimpton (nonfiction)
- 20. Instant Replay, by Jerry Kramer (nonfiction)
- 21. Everybody's All-American, by Frank Deford (fiction)
- 25. North Dallas Forty, by Peter Gent (fiction)
- 26. When Pride Still Mattered, by David Maraniss (nonfiction)
- 29. About Three Bricks Shy of a Load, by Roy Blount Jr. (nonfiction)
- 30. A Fan's Notes, by Frederick Exley (fiction)
- 45. End Zone, by Don DeLillo (fiction)
- 63. Out of Their League, by Dave Meggyesy (nonfiction)
- 87. Only a Game, by Robert Daley (fiction)

Football books rank high on the *Sports Illustrated* list. Three of the top 10 titles, and 9 of the top 30, pertain to football, while 10 football titles appear in the top 45 books on the list. The 12 football books are evenly divided into 6 fiction and 6 nonfiction titles.

*Sports Illustrated*, which published its inaugural issue August 16, 1954, ("Sports Illustrated," 2009) and currently reports a weekly circulation of more than 3 million readers (Laguardia & Katz, 2008, p. 882) is "the most popular and influential of general sports magazines" (Laguardia & Katz, p. 882). It is suitable for elementary and middle school readers or university students, and it is indexed in the following databases: Book Review Index, Canadian Business & Current Affairs Complete, Children's Book Review Index, Film Literature Index, Magazine Articles Summaries Ultra School Edition, Physical Education Index, Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, and SPORTDiscus (Laguardia & Katz, p. 882).

### Methods

The checklist method is identified as an effective way of evaluating the football holdings in the SEC libraries. In the checklist technique, a list of items is checked against the holdings of the library or library system under evaluation, as

specified by its OPAC. Each item is recorded as a “match” (between the list and catalog), meaning it is held by the library, and a “non-match,” meaning it is not held. (When identifying variants of a title is critical, evaluators will apply a “near match,” meaning it is held in another edition.) The percentage of listed items held by the library or library system then is calculated and used as an indicator of collection strength.

In the current study, performed from Valdosta, Georgia, the 12 football books on the *Sports Illustrated* list were checked first by title and, if not identified, second by author in the OPAC systems of the 12 SEC university libraries. An item was recorded a “match” if any edition of the title was identified in system as owned by the library or “no-match” if no edition was located. For purposes of this study, both exact and near matches have been combined into a single category. Classic football books often are issued in multiple editions, so holding any edition met this evaluation’s requirements. While it is a time-tested approach to the evaluation of library collections, the checklist method is rarely employed from a remote location via a library’s OPAC.

## Results

The checklist results are summarized by SEC East and SEC West in Tables 1 and 2, respectively. As discussed previously, an acknowledged criticism of the checklist method is determining what constitutes a strong, weak, or mediocre collection, a difficulty complicated by the lack of comparative data for sports collections and specifically for football books. Given the demonstrated role and importance of football in the SEC, however, these results (which are current as of November 12, 2009) point to the quality of football holdings in the conference’s university library systems.

In the East Division, as Table 1 shows, Georgia holds all 12 football books (100%), South Carolina 10 (83.3%), Florida 9 (75%), Kentucky and Tennessee 8 (66.6%), and Vanderbilt 4 (33.3%). In the West Division, as Table 2 illustrates, Auburn holds 11 books (91.6%), Mississippi 8 (66.6%), Louisiana State 7

(58.3%), Alabama 6 (50%), Mississippi State 5 (41.6%), and Arkansas 4 (33.3%). The SEC East owns 70.8% of the books on the checklist and the SEC West 56.9%, while the SEC overall owns 63.8% of the books. Nine of the SEC university libraries (Alabama, Auburn, Georgia, Louisiana State, Mississippi, South Carolina, Florida, Kentucky, and Tennessee) own at least half (50%) of the books, while 3 (Georgia, Auburn, South Carolina) own at least 10 (83.3%) books on the list. Only one library in the SEC East (Vanderbilt) owns less than half (50%) of the books and 2 in the SEC West (Mississippi State and Arkansas), although none holds less than one-third (33.3%).

Because the checklist method assumes that the library has identified a need for the collection being evaluated, these results suggest how each SEC university library is meeting the information needs of its community. The study thus indicates that large academic libraries do have substantial holdings pertinent to a local sports interest.

## Conclusions

The study leads to the following conclusions:

- Football books are among the best in the sports literature genre
- Football has received little attention in the library and information science literature, but, given its importance in the SEC, the 12 university libraries of the SEC own important titles in the subject
- The SEC East football holdings are stronger than the SEC West’s
- Football serves as a useful case study for sports holdings in the SEC.

This research is significant because it helps fill a void in the literature by applying the traditional library function of collection evaluation to sports materials. Challenging collection development assumptions, it demonstrates that major American research university libraries have noteworthy holdings related to a sport of local interest, thereby corroborating the results of an earlier investigation (Nisonger & Meehan, 2007). Although not the first study to use an OPAC for checklist evaluation (see Smith, 2003), it is only

the third to be conducted from a remote location via OPACs and focus on a particular sport (see Meehan & Nisonger, 2005; Nisonger & Meehan, 2007).

The study contains limitations that should be acknowledged. If a title were owned, it still might not be available: it could be checked out or shelved incorrectly. Because the findings represent a snapshot of a moment in time, the holdings could be different if checked at a later date. The results could suggest a difference in library mission, level of treatment, financial or space limitations, or selector bias, but these are beyond the scope of the study. A larger sample size usually is preferable, but the select list of the most important, high-quality titles compiled by the *Sports Illustrated* staff meets the requirement of this case study.

Further research might include using the checklist to evaluate football holdings in additional academic libraries across the Southeastern United States. Evaluating the football collections at major research universities grouped by an athletic conference (e.g., The Big Ten, PAC Ten, or Big 12) also is a suggestion for further study. In order to test the conventional collection development wisdom that presupposes public libraries are more likely than academic libraries to collect sports materials, the authors of the current study are evaluating football collections at the main public libraries in each SEC university town.

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Table 1.

*Matches and No Matches with Percentage in Southeastern Conference University Library OPACs: East Division (M=match; NM=no-match)*

Book	Florida	Georgia	Kentucky	South Carolina	Tennessee	Vanderbilt
Friday Night Lights	M	M	NM	M	M	M
Semi-Tough	M	M	M	M	M	NM
Paper Lion	M	M	M	M	M	M
Instant Replay	M	M	M	M	M	NM
Everybody's All American	NM	M	NM	NM	NM	NM
North Dallas Forty	M	M	M	M	M	NM
When Pride Still Mattered	M	M	M	M	M	NM
About Three Bricks Shy of a Load	NM	M	NM	M	NM	M
A Fan's Notes	M	M	M	M	M	M
End Zone	M	M	M	M	M	NM
Out of Their League	M	M	M	M	NM	NM
Only a Game	NM	M	NM	NM	NM	NM
Total	9 (75%)	12 (100%)	8 (66.6%)	10 (83.3%)	8 (66.6%)	4 (33.3%)

Table 2.

*Matches and No Matches with Percentages in Southeastern Conference University Library OPACs: West Division (M=match; NM=no-match)*

Book	Alabama	Arkansas	Auburn	Louisiana State	Mississippi State	Mississippi
Friday Night Lights	M	M	M	M	M	M
Semi-Tough	NM	NM	M	NM	NM	M
Paper Lion	NM	NM	M	M	M	M
Instant Replay	M	NM	M	M	NM	M
Everybody's All American	NM	NM	NM	M	NM	NM
North Dallas Forty	M	M	M	NM	M	M
When Pride Still Mattered	M	NM	M	M	NM	NM
About Three Bricks Shy of a Load	NM	NM	M	NM	NM	M
A Fan's Notes	M	M	M	M	M	M
End Zone	M	M	M	NM	M	NM
Out of Their League	NM	NM	M	M	NM	M
Only a Game	NM	NM	M	NM	NM	NM
Total	6 (50%)	4 (33.3%)	11 (91.6%)	7 (58.3%)	5 (41.6%)	8 (66.6%)