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Neal McCluskey: College football very taxing

And not just in terms of hours spent in front of the TV -- these bowl games literally hit taxpayers where it hurts.

By NEAL MCCLUSKEY

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It's almost New Year's Day, and that's great news if you like college football. If you don't enjoy it, however, turning on your bowl-clogged TV can make you feel as though you're paying a very steep price for college gridders.

But you're not just paying on New Year's -- it's all year round.

For those not fond of college football, the first source of your more-than-January-one pain is that bowls have been on since mid-December. The New Mexico Bowl and the St. Petersburg Bowl kicked off the bowl season on Dec. 19, and eighteen more games will have been played between then and New Year's Day. And the grid glut doesn't end on Jan. 1 any more. The national championship

game won't be played until Jan. 7.

Of course, if the only cost to nonfans was listening to the din of announcers, grunting and whistles for a few weeks, and maybe having to forgo a little "American Idol," it wouldn't be that bad. But college football also costs you where it hurts -- your wallet.

For starters, many bowls receive generous taxpayer subsidies. According to Mark Yost, author of Varsity Green, seven bowls received more than \$21.6 million in government aid between 2001 and 2005. And the majority of bowls are tax-exempt, supposedly because they're good for local tourism. That bowl executives often make big money and corporate sponsors get prominent advertising is apparently irrelevant.

Then, while playing in a bowl comes with a minimum payout of \$750,000 for participating schools, many institutions end up spending much more than that to participate -- losses that taxpayers bear.

Schools must agree to buy several thousand tickets for whichever bowl they're in, with the hope of selling those tickets to thousands of fans. But with more than 30 bowls being played, many schools participate

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in games contested far from campus that aren't exactly must-see football. The result is often big ticket losses.

Bowl participants also incur huge travel and lodging expenses for players, athletic staffs, and bands, and they spend considerable sums wining and dining school and football officials. As a result of all these costs, even big-name institutions playing in elite bowls may be thrown for serious losses. In 2007, West Virginia University lost more than \$1 million on the Tostitos Fiesta Bowl, and national-championship combatants Florida and Ohio State ended a combined \$600,000 in the hole.

So lots of college football teams get financially sacked by bowl games. But how does that hurt taxpayers?

While college-gridiron fans will tell you that many major programs make money, what they won't tell you is that they do so largely with taxpayer help. And when those programs lose money, taxpayers are hit even harder.

Many programs, for instance, require season-ticket holders not only to pay for their expensive tickets but also to furnish pay-to-watch-play "donations." These

contributions can come to thousands of dollars depending on where you sit, but they are also "charitable" and therefore 80 percent tax-deductible, leaving Joe Taxpayer footing the government bill while Joe Fan pays for watching football.

Also, to get the sheer number of fans necessary to fill huge stadiums and put millions of eyes on TVs, schools need to be very large. It's no coincidence that of the 68 schools bowling this year, all but eight are public. For the most part, only public institutions can achieve the huge physical and enrollment scale necessary to support big-time football. And they can only do that by making state taxpayers fund core educational stuff, keeping tuition artificially low and letting donors and students focus their money on sports.

Finally, there are the direct subsidies.

Last year, it was revealed that legislators in New Jersey had sent millions of dollars in special grants to Rutgers for football-related capital improvements and stadium expenses. In Connecticut, state taxpayers bore the full, roughly \$100 million burden for constructing UConn's Rentschler Field, which opened in 2003.

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And this year, the University of Minnesota played its first season in its brand-new TCF Bank Stadium, for which state taxpayers are shelling out about \$137 million.

With the most exciting part of the college football season upon us, you'd better take in all the games. After all, you're paying for them.

Neal McCluskey is associate director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom and author of "Feds in the Classroom: How Big Government Corrupts, Cripples, and Compromises American Education."

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