Bradburd, Rus. *Big Time*. Wilkes Barre, PA: Etruscan Press, 2024. 301 pp. Paperback $17.00.

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Likely Mark Twain did not have football in mind when he wrote “truth is stranger than fiction,” but it certainly represents both Rus Bradburd’s *Big Time* and the playing of “The Game,” one of the oldest rivalries in college football: the Michigan Wolverines versus the Ohio State Buckeyes. I am not a huge football fan, but as a Michigan State University graduate (“Go Spartans”), I have never understood why the rivalry is between Michigan’s flagship university, founded in 1817, and Ohio’s “cow college” established in 1870 as a land grant university based on the 1862 Morrill Act. The teams first met in 1897 and over the next 127 years they have played 119 games, with Michigan winning 62, OSU 51 and 6 ending in a tie. Michigan won the last four games, meaning the Buckeye seniors never defeated the Wolverines. At the conclusion of the 2024 contest, played in Columbus, Ohio, a band member handed someone on the Michigan team their flag to carry around the field. That individual attempted to plant the flag in the “O” in the center of the field, which resulted in a mini riot during which several people were injured. One Wolverine interviewed following the melee thoughtfully told the interviewer that the sixty minutes of the contest was the time for struggle and competition, not after the game had concluded when tensions ran high.

Collegiate sports, most notably football followed by basketball, equal big business, bringing in huge sums of money for high profile schools like Michigan and Ohio State, as well as much smaller institutions such as The Defiance College, my undergraduate alma mater, or Ashland University where I’ve spent most of the academic career. Academic programs generally do not attract either the publicity or the funding of sports. Smaller schools with successful athletic and academic programs garner smaller financial rewards from sports, not rising to the level of the Big Ten. Rus Bradburd has first-hand experience with both the athletic and academic worlds; following a fourteen-year career coaching college basketball at the University of Texas, El Paso and New Mexico State, he shifted to teaching English for sixteen years.

*Big Time* is a satirical examination of college sports. The diminutive president of a financially strapped midwestern university negotiated a billion-dollar deal with Coors to keep the doors open. Beyond naming rights, the money would benefit only football and men’s basketball. Academics lost all funding. “Other than minimum-wage salaries, nobody on the academic side would get another dollar from the administration. All staff and most of the secretaries would get dumped. There would be no money for research, travel grants or test tubes” (67). The bookstore, in many ways the academic heart of a college, was bulldozed and replaced with a Coors pub. Most academic departments were torched and those that remained found themselves under the thumb of football. History was left with only a few professors, among them Eugene Mooney and Peter Braverman, two of the central figures in the novel, who at the behest of football ran the concession stand where they sold fans popcorn alongside their books. Elevated to this lofty position from cleaning the stadiums’ toilets they were among the few faculty who might be able to make a decent living. Accounting took care of the team’s finances while Criminal Justice took care of security. Engineering is expanding the university’s 100,000 seat stadium.

Most academic programs had been decimated—for being uncooperative English is left with one poet until a woman, Layla Silliman is hired to join the nearly defunct department. Known to Mooney and Braverman as “Rosa Parks,” she engages with the historians to retake control of the university and restore its academic integrity. Many of the released faculty refused to leave campus, creating a tent city on its edge known as The Hamlet. Here the three organize a poetry reading with the leaders in The Hamlet.

There are all sorts of twists and turns in the plot, but for me the most hilarious is an academic, jargon filled, dialogue between a few of The Hamlet leaders who invite Layla to lead the poetry reading. “How might poetry work within our paradigm? For instance, can you assess performance-based articulation and unpack hands-on scaffolding?” Afraid to admit she was lost, someone told Layla ”to unleash thematic lifelong learning through critical-driven pedagogy.” The poetry reading was “to repurpose skills-based infrastructures and integrate competency-based manipulatives all in a safe space.” To be successful she would need “to mesh interdisciplinary dialogue even without tracking project-based decision-making.” (103-104).

Following a riot during a bowl game which Coors State loses, the three faculty plot a coup to take back the university. The novel is hilariously funny, with well-developed characters representing coaches, football players, faculty and the administration. While fiction, *Big Time* offers an exaggerated portrayal of the power and influence that collegiate sports have on the academy. A great way to begin the spring semester!