CENTER VALLEY (January 14, 2007) – College students return to campus this week for a new semester. The Bowl Championship Series has finally ended, and March Madness is just around the corner.

But the learning for life that goes along with, and is supposedly the purpose of, university athletics has taken another loss. Notwithstanding persistent promises to the contrary, Coach Nick Saban left his position as head coach of the Miami Dolphins to take the top football job at the University of Alabama.

According to the Dolphins’ owner, finances were not the reason for his departure. Still, the big bucks had to hold some sway, as Saban reportedly received an eight-year deal worth $30 million. This puts his pay at nearly eight times that of the university’s president, “in a state that funds education at one of the lowest per-pupil rates of any state in the country,” according to an Alabama legislator.

In a New York Times essay prior to the Saban about-face, John Branch presciently opined about how a coach’s word is rarely as good as the next job. To support his claim, he recounted stories about Tommy Tuberville, Tom O’Brien, and Dennis Eckerson, all of whom fled from one wealthy contract to another after emphatically denying they would abandon their team.

In other words, they lied. It doesn’t take a college degree to see that their press conference posturing is blatantly deceptive.

But more is at stake here than an employment tactic; nor is subterfuge endemic to the turf of coaches. But if this is how the game is played, especially at a level involving student-athletes and coach-teachers, then society is more at risk than sports. When loyalty is defeated by dissembling, we lose the very bond that cements human relationships.
When introduced in Alabama, Coach Saban remarked, “I like to affect people, and that’s why I’m here.” But the effect of his decision extends far beyond Tuscaloosa.

Consider the Dolphins’ organization. Left behind are big and burly football players, whose toughness enables them to endure game-day pain. But hits to loyalty hurt in ways that are deeper and often remain unmasked. Whether for professionals or amateurs, the locker room exhortation about being a “team player” now rings hollow.

Consider the University of Alabama. The chairman of their board congratulated the president on keeping “the very best interests of the University as [a] top priority.” The president, in turn, praised the athletic director for acting “with appropriate patience, integrity, and respect for the organizations and individuals involved.” Apparently, the end result of stealing someone away from a contractual obligation passes for what the athletic director calls “our commitment to excellence across the board.” Only time will tell if their jubilation turns sour when another organization acts out of similar self-interest and causes Alabama to search anew.

Let’s not forget the student-athletes. At Alabama they are excited at the prospect of adding to Saban’s championship resume. But what will new recruits think when a coach like this, whose public attestation of loyalty didn’t pan out, comes calling at their home? The sales pitch will hardly be credible if the youngster senses only being used to advance the coach’s career or if the coach’s assurance lasts only a few seasons.

What about the rest of us? PR professionals might dismiss public denials of an impending job change as an accepted practice for personal or corporate self-defense. But society hears a different message, however subconscious: truth-telling is no longer valued or necessary.

Therein looms a crisis for our culture. If prominent educational leaders cannot be believed, then the lessons they teach will lead to an impoverishment worse than any losses on a playing field.

Beyond our sporting identity, human beings are defined as seekers of truth. Credibility becomes a key to personal fulfillment and social interaction at every level. In this pursuit, as an athlete-turned-pope (John Paul II) once wrote, “belief is often humanly richer than mere evidence, because it involves an interpersonal relationship and brings into play not only a person’s capacity to know but also the deeper capacity to entrust oneself to others, to enter into a relationship with them which is intimate and enduring.”

To believe, to trust, to relate to one another honestly – only this game plan allows society to succeed in the long run.

In a recent announcement that he and his wife had contributed $100,000 to the University of Alabama’s scholarship fund, Coach Saban stated, “Getting a college education impacts the quality of your life forever.” However ironic, at least these words are true.