Guest Column: The Cure for college sports

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March Madness is progressing toward the championship fever of April, and these metaphors of illness are apt.

Many of our nation's colleges and universities are sick, and the condition is worsening every year. The malady? The professionalization of big-time, Division I college sports. It breaks my heart.

Division I, with men's football and basketball leading the way, "owns" its players. Being an athlete has become a demanding full-time job. There's no break from a 12-month grind. It is a tragedy in American higher education when such an epidemic seriously undermines the health and well-being of many of America's student-athletes.

We must resolve to find the remedy for an enterprise now wildly out of control, having sacrificed its dignity for the almighty "entertainment dollar" and a kind of "purchased prestige."

But there's always hope of recovery. Here are some ways we start back toward sanity and well-being:

Trim the seasons in every sport. Reduce the number of games by 10 to 20 percent.

Abolish "optional" on-campus practice in the summer and off-season. This should be a time for broadening students' experiences through study abroad, research projects, internships and summer jobs.

Reduce salaries. The salary structure for athletics administrators and coaches at major institutions is an embarrassment to the American academy. The weight on coaches to win and pack the arenas is borne upon the shoulders of the young men and women who compete. If salaries matter so much to coaches, then let them move to the pros.

Strike a dagger through the heart of the idea of "pay for play" on college campuses. If we adopt this practice, then we complete the insanity of turning college athletes into professionals. We should eliminate "full-ride" athletic scholarships. Division I schools can legitimately provide student-athletes with tuition grants, but room, board and books should be covered by demonstrated, need-based financial aid.
This change would help diminish the sense of entitlement displayed by some highly recruited athletes.

If these three remedies - only a start - can get gain traction, we will begin to create a sense of balance in big-time athletics. We might even begin to give these students their lives back and offer them the chance to be students who play sports as opposed to semi-pro athletes who pretend to pursue a higher education.

For some college athletes, the hours in practices and games still enrich their lives. I see this every day at the college where I have been president for the last 12 years - an academically rigorous, top-50 national liberal arts institution with a full array for intercollegiate sports for men and women. Our students cherish athletic participation, but they are focused on preparing for the professions, business, teaching and public service, in the U.S. and abroad.

College sports are personal to me. My father was an outstanding competitor, as was my father-in-law. I was a Division I student-athlete and later a coach, as were our two sons and their wives. There is perhaps a good chance that one or more of our four grandchildren will have the opportunity to play Division I sports. But if current trends continue, I'd just as soon they don't.

My teammates and I loved competition, but we knew that we would set our lives on their proper course in the classroom, not on the playing field.

Who must answer this call and begin the reform? That's easy-college and university presidents. They must take a stand and expect severe, unjustified criticism. They must summon courage to defend the best part of the academy and return athletics to a wholesome place in American higher education. And those of us who love college competition and want to restore it to health must encourage them, support them and take on their critics. While they do the right thing, we must cover their backs!

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