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Intercollegiate Sports: Putting First Things Second

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There is hardly a senior advancement officer in education, whether in alumni relations, communications, or fund raising, who has not had to deal with significant issues about intercollegiate athletics. Whether related to admissions policies, booster clubs, financial aid, athletic facilities, gender participation, and the most fundamental questions about educational values, the advancement professional inevitably will be called upon to address issues of this kind to members of the immediate academic community and its external publics. The following chapter is presented here as a balanced perspective about the state of intercollegiate athletics today, together with a rich source of references for further inquiry. —PMB

I'm finishing this essay as I sit watching college bowl games on the first day of the new century. The afternoon's contests have been particularly good, and there have been many outstanding plays and extraordinary efforts by the young men competing. Some would argue that this is college football at its best. If you didn't know better, you could conclude that all's well with intercollegiate sport. Sadly, most of us closely associated with the pursuit know this isn't the case.

It's been seven years since the Knight Foundation released the last of its three seminal reports on the state of intercollegiate athletics. While the Knight report focused much of its attention on "about 100 schools in football and about 200 in basketball," most college presidents and others involved in the enterprise, knew then and know now there's much to be done at all levels of competition if we're to make intercollegiate athletics a more constructive component of America's colleges and universities.

It's clear even to the casual observer that many of the problems detailed in the Foundation's report—most of which boil down to putting the athlete first and the student second—persist and may have worsened. Bailey and Littleton (Athletics and Academe) go all the way back to the 1929 study of the Carnegie Foundation, which specified many of the same issues as the Knight report, in their assessment of the current situation: "Sixty years later the same problems, greatly magnified, persist and are exerting more deleterious effects on higher education than ever before." Given the long-term persistence of these conflicts, those among us who wish the nation's preoccupation with sport, or at least big-time college athletics, would somehow spontaneously recede to more
reasonable levels need to get past this false hope.

A GROWTH INDUSTRY

A quick look at the data shows that intercollegiate competition has grown dramatically both in participation and revenues over the past few years. For example, NCAA records indicate that from 1983 to 1998, total participation increased by over 30 percent. Andrew Zimbalist, in *Unpaid Professionals*, points out that NCAA “corporate sponsorships have increased roughly sevenfold in the nineties…” and that “the NCAA’s total budget, which surpassed $270 million in 1997-98, has grown at an annual rate of 15 percent since 1982.”

The implementation of Title IX has generated a significant portion of the participation increase, but the simple truth, reflected by the upward-trending NCAA numbers, is that the nation’s colleges and universities are increasing their commitment to intercollegiate sport. Today’s young athletes want to compete at their colleges, and America’s institutions of higher education have elected to accommodate this desire. And while some will argue that the current intense emphasis on competitive athletics for women and men is an anomaly of sorts in higher education, it’s obvious that the decades-long growth in participation, expenditures, and revenues is not the exception but the rule.

A LIFETIME OF ATHLETICS

That said, I should say this: I’m an unabashed supporter of intercollegiate athletics. I believe involvement in competitive sport can provide an invaluable addition to a young person’s educational experience. Competitive sport can be an exciting, community-building, educational element in the college environment.

I grew up caring deeply (probably too deeply for a time) about athletics of all types. And while academics, music, and theater also shaped me, it was through sport that I learned many of life’s most important lessons. It was my good fortune to play and then coach football at the Division I level. I’ve had the chance to be involved administratively at two places—the University of Richmond (Division I) and now Centre College (Division III)—that, quite simply, “do it right” by putting academics first. My wife and I have watched our two sons be influenced positively by sport, and as a family we’ve had the privilege of seeing our sons be recruited and signed to grants-in-aid at two of the country’s outstanding institutions—Duke and Northwestern. So I’ll be among the last to make a blanket indictment of intercollegiate athletics. Rather, I’ll attempt to offer a balanced, challenging commentary about several issues that are timely and, in my opinion, are crucial to the future of collegiate sports at all levels.

BACK TO ORIGINAL REASONS

We need to recommit ourselves to the purposes for which intercollegiate athletics were established. The NCAA, the governing body affecting the great majority of colleges and universities, acted in its original constitution in 1906 that its purpose was to regulate and supervise U.S. college athletics “…in order that the athletic activities in the colleges and universities may be maintained on an ethical plane in keeping with the dignity and high moral purpose of education.” (Goff, Tollison, and Freisher: *The National Collegiate Athletic Association*) Today’s NCAA Web site and literature include in the organization’s first purpose, “to promote and develop educational leadership.” While I’m confident intercollegiate sport is about education and leadership for the vast majority of men and women, some contemporary suggestions for “reform” would move the association even further away from its original and currently stated purpose.

THE FALSE PROMISE OF PROFESSIONALISM

I continue to marvel at those—shirt-knowledgeable folks who should know better—who believe that college athletics, Division I programs in particular, need to become “more professional” in their operation. These men and women, who sincerely believe that athletes should share in the economic success of the higher-profile programs across the country, are seriously misguided, in my opinion.

Their contention is that student-athletes (young men who play college football and basketball in particular) should be paid to play, and be provided other amenities, even beyond the pampering many receive at America’s colleges.
In another instance of being lured to emulate professional athletics, we need to stop some of the competitive madness in the area of facilities (Zimbalist calls this a “sports facility construction boom!”) Programs in all the NCAA divisions have launched a keeping-up-the-Joneses approach that’s created expectations for customized locker rooms, lavish state-of-the-art weight-training areas with cable TV, and palatial playing facilities—gymsnasiums, football stadiums, track and field and tennis complexes, baseball and softball diamonds, and swimming pavilions—most, extraordinarily expensive and beautiful beyond description.

Let me be clear: I’m in favor of safe and good equipment for athletes. I’m in favor of providing our student-athletes with well-designed, high-quality practice and game facilities. I’m absolutely in favor of first-rate training and medical services for these young men and women. But we’ve allowed our interest in “being competitive” to take us beyond reason, and we need to challenge each other to put an end to this nonsense. Under the guise of giving customers what they want (in this case the student-athletes and their families), we’ve allowed our institutions to chase after physical plant additions and renovations that have little to do with the academic mission.

**YOUNG LIVES OUT OF BALANCE**

America’s preoccupation with determining who or what is No. 1 in almost everything has had a negative effect on intercollegiate athletics, especially as it pertains to the overall experience of student-athletes. The result of this preoccupation in collegiate sports at all levels has been to make postseason play the measure by which one claims success. This development has diminished the importance of winning one’s conference or league championship. It’s also been a factor in allowing the competitive seasons of athletic teams to lengthen at a troubling rate. Zimbalist notes this season creep in “the number of football and basketball games per year that has found a way to keep growing,” as well as common methods for circumventing the 20-hour-per-week practice limit that allow athletes...
to “spend 50 or 60 hours a week on their sport in season.” (As this limit is by wide agreement ineffective, the rule should be rewritten to close all the loopholes and backed up by sanctions stringent enough to persuade coaches to comply.)

How has this affected the lives of our students? I would argue that it’s narrowed their experience at all levels. And while the Division I and II programs might contend they have “the right” to demand this level of commitment given the investment they’re making in these student-athletes (an arguable contention), this is clearly not true for Division III programs.

Here, too, we see a never-ending interest in extending the regular competitive seasons and expanding the non-traditional seasons. Because of the overlap of schedules in different forms of competition, the two- or three-sport athlete is a thing of the past. Worse yet, students choosing to compete in athletics are less and less able to engage in other aspects of the college that are of intellectual and social value. Their chances to do service-learning, study and travel abroad, participate in meaningful internships, compete for summer fellowships and work experiences, or just hang out in the residence hall are compromised by what’s become an year-round commitment to athletic competition. This commitment is either “encouraged” by their coaches or by pressure from their teammates.

The argument that this is what the students want, and I believe they do in most cases, should be respectfully set aside. In this instance, more isn’t better, and those who are in a position to keep some measure of moderation in the time student-athletes are allowed to compete and practice need to step forward and give back these young people a sense of balance in their lives. We must temper a system that, in the words of an anonymous college president quoted by Bailey and Littleton, “send[s] youngsters out who can no longer do the only thing that’s been important in their life since middle school and they have no skill to do anything else.”

### STEPS TOWARD REFORM

Two, albeit simple, ways to bring some reason back into the athletic experience are to:

1) re-emphasize the importance of conference play in order to counterbalance the view that post-season play is the only thing that counts, and

2) begin to limit, not expand, the number of teams that qualify for post-season play.

The ideas are not new, but we need to return to them. Campus presidents and the NCAA should give these reforms some attention, and they should expect little encouragement or cooperation from coaches, student-athletes, parents, or fans. As Bailey and Littleton pointed out: “In view of the place college sports occupy in American culture” [if not between motherhood and apple pie, certainly in the vicinity] reform that seems to limit any aspect of competition will be widely viewed as negative. That notwithstanding, we should do it because it’s the right thing to do.

### THE SUCCESS OF HIGHER EXPECTATIONS

There’s already evidence that movement away from the athletics-before-everything approach can produce positive results. The increase of success by student athletes in the college classroom is due in large part to the standards imposed by Proposition 48 (which for freshman eligibility requires a 2.0 high school GPA in 11 core courses and a combined math/English SAT score of at least 700 or an ACT score of at least 15) beginning in 1986. This should be a point of pride for all who care about intercollegiate athletics.

The record of Prop 48 is, of course, far from perfect. As Murray Sperber points out in College Sports, Inc., a number of institutions have cheated outright and found other ways to qualify academically weak athletes. Still, Prop 48 has been useful. Since 1986, NCAA records show that graduation rates of intercollegiate have trended upward.

Some contend that with this positive movement, we should claim victory and mute our emphasis on educational achievement. I think this is just a modest beginning and we need to look for other ways to emphasize academic preparation. Colleges and universities need to re-double their
efforts to be sure the student-athletes they admit are, in fact, ready to achieve in the classroom as well as in the athletic arena. The importance of academic rigor across the American academy, which I view as the bedrock strength of our system, needs to be affirmed; all campuses should be focused on raising the academic standards of the student-athletes it chooses to admit and, even more importantly, be prepared to help these men and women be successful as college learners.

THE ACADEMY’S NEW ICONS

As focal figures of the ever-growing appetite in America for sports, Division I-A football coaches and Division I basketball coaches for men, and, in a few cases, women, are the academy’s new superstars. The compensation these individuals command is extraordinary. The attention they garner for their institutions—both positive and negative—is enormous. The old example of the public knowing the name and a lot more about an institution’s head coach than its president or the quality of its academic program is true now than ever before. And while I’m not saying this is calamitous in and of itself, we should at least recognize the situation and ask whether it’s ideal and if we’re doing what we should to be sure these men and women understand and are committed to the academic mission of their institutions.

I should be clear that the media (combined with the willingness of most of these coaches to take advantage of media attention and its resultant rewards) has played a significant role in creating this situation. When it comes to intercollegiate sports, the media often reports out of both sides of its mouth. As Bailey and Littleton comment:

There is perhaps no more conspicuous example of the conflict between serving as the conscience of intercollegiate athletics and using the publicity about sports to promote its own vested interest than in the [media’s] voluminous reporting about recruiting of football and basketball players. It is the responsibility of the media to inform the public about the excesses of college sports. However, to do so while at the same time contributing to that excess is to be guilty of the same hypocrisy for which higher education is...[often] criticized.

While college presidents and others in responsible positions may not have caused this obsessive focus on sports and the men and women who coach, they’ve done little to exercise control over the situation. In truth, the coach-as-star train left the station a long time ago, and I'm not suggesting we can or should try to alter this part of the situation in a fundamental way. I do, however, believe presidents and others who care about the core purpose of educational institutions should redouble their efforts to be certain the coaches they hire understand and are committed to the academic purposes of the institution they serve. This isn’t too much to ask. The men and women who coach our teams shouldn’t be permitted to stand apart from the institutions they represent. Those who care most about college sports—administrators and faculty alike—need to look for substantive, creative ways to welcome coaches back into the life of the academy.

TIME TO TILT

Halting and reversing movement toward the athlete-student will be difficult and often unpopular. Big-time sports provides a kind of gratification-on-demand that’s seductive to fans as well as the players who strive for the spotlight. Some argue convincingly that any effort at change is tilting at windmills. But this is a windmill at which we should tilt.

If we drift away from the ideal of the student-athlete and shuck toward the reality of the athlete-student, educational institutions run the risk of parodying rather than exemplifying their most deeply held values. Our actions will echo the plea attributed to a university president when he asked the state legislature for a substantial budget increase “to build a university of which our football team will be proud.” (Zimbaltz)

This short piece only begins the conversation, a small but essential step in putting first things first. If enough of us tell our truth with regularity, conviction, and respect, perhaps we can inspire further movement toward an intercollegiate athletic enterprise that’s worthy of the young people it attempts to serve. College sport as a means of enriching the experience of students is an educational opportunity that shouldn’t be missed. Today’s and certainly
tomorrow's student-athlete deserves our clearest thinking and our most courageous effort to do the right thing.

REFERENCES AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES


