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The Use and Misuse of College Athletics

JOBYANN RENICK

While college athletics are supposedly maintained as an integral part of the educational program for the student-athletes who participate in them, an examination of the practices within the system provides quite a different view. Athletes have no voice in determining policy at any level and must subjugate themselves to the system or be ejected from it. Some institutions use athletics as an indication of institutional prowess and encourage practices which are not in the best academic interests of student-athletes. In reality, the only difference between professional and college athletics is one of degree and both are administered for the benefit of those who control them.

Like other social institutions which become entangled in their own complexities, sport suffers from the bureaucracy of regulatory agencies which control and dictate its policies. While there are many different aspects which could be considered in this regard, a focus on collegiate athletics in the NCAA system may serve to shed some light on the complexity of the system and the dichotomy between stated policy and actual practice.

During the early days of college athletics, the student-athlete contributed actively to all phases of administration and control. Today, this kind of involvement on the part of the athlete is virtually unheard of, with the only remnants of student participation in athletic administration being programs in which student governments have some control over the distribution of fee allocations to athletics. Interestingly enough, the trend of less student in-

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volvement in the administration and control of athletics is being reversed in other phases of academic life.

The old principle of colleges acting *in loco parentis* has been replaced by policies and practices which reflect a more liberal attitude toward a student's ability to direct his own destiny. Coeducational dormitories with extremely liberal visiting privileges and no curfews are available at a student's option in a number of institutions. Even more significant are curricular options which enable a student to pursue an interdisciplinary degree or, literally, to write his own program for a general degree. In addition, students are becoming involved in decision-making processes at various levels. In some institutions there are students on committees to search for a new president, formulate university policy, establish fiscal priorities, and adopt new courses. If athletics are to be "an integral part" of college, and if students are actively involved in the decision-making process of other aspects of college life, would it not be reasonable for the student-athlete to be an active participant in the making of decisions in athletics?

The question of student and student-athlete participation in the control of athletics is an ethical one rather than one of expedient decision-making. Solutions, or possible alternatives to the issues, must be based upon a consideration of the place of athletics in the academic world and upon existing policies which supposedly determine the direction of these practices. The task then is twofold: first, to examine the existing system of policy and practices; and second, to suggest alternate practices which are more ethically consistent with the place of athletics in academic institutions.

The primary purpose of the National Collegiate Athletic Association, as stated in the *NCAA Manual*, is:

To initiate, stimulate and improve intercollegiate athletic programs for *student-athletes* and *develop educational leadership*, physical fitness, sports participation as a *recreational pursuit* and athletic excellence. [2, p. 5. Italics mine.]

The fundamental policy stated by this agency reflects the same concern:

The competitive athletic programs of the colleges are designed to be a vital part of the educational system. A basic purpose of this Association is to maintain intercollegiate athletics as an *integral part of the educational program and the athlete as an integral part of the student body, and, by so doing, retain a clear line of demarcation between college athletics and professional sports*. [2, p. 5. Italics mine.]

The implications of this stated policy are quite clear: (1) collegiate athletics are for the student-athletes who participate in them; (2) through participation in athletics, the student-athlete should develop educational leadership; (3) collegiate athletics are an integral part of the educational program; (4) the

athlete is an integral part of the student body; and (5) there is a clear line of demarcation between college athletics and professional sport.

Before examining some of the actual practices which tend to confirm or belie the validity of the above policy, discussion of the meaning of the term "for student-athletes" is appropriate. While the preposition "for" has several connotations, in the educational sense the one most appropriate is "indicating the end with reference to which anything acts, serves, or is done" [3]. In this sense, student-athletes are the end to which the NCAA acts or serves, and subsequent practices and policies would be designed in the interest of athletes and to benefit them. With this in mind, other practices and policies may be examined.

The Extent of Control. At the national level the NCAA promulgates playing rules, establishes basic policy of eligibility standards, invokes sanctions on both institutions and players, and determines administrative policy for intercollegiate athletics [2]. The legislators in the NCAA, in compliance with the principle of *institutional control*, include faculty members, athletic directors and conference representatives, but no student-athletes. At the regional level, athletic conferences take over where the NCAA leaves off. As in the NCAA, membership is on an institutional basis with voting powers in the hands of faculty members and athletic directors, and the regulations of these conferences conform to basic NCAA policy [1]. These conferences formulate more specific policy concerning student eligibility, entrance requirements, transfer rules, financial aid, scheduling of athletic contests, and enforcement procedures regarding compliance to conference standards [1]. Again there is no opportunity for the student-athlete to develop or exhibit educational leadership within the conference nor does he have any voice in determining the policy which is of vital concern to him as an athlete.

In individual institutions, the athletic department controls the men's intercollegiate programs. With budgets which may exceed \$2 million for up to 14 sports, the size and complexity of athletic staffs and personnel is not surprising. In addition to the head coach and assistants for each sport, there may be an athletic director with a staff of administrative assistants. But even on campus, there is little evidence of student participation in the control of athletics. The athletic department can, and usually does, make all decisions concerning the program — scheduling of practices and contests, determination of player positions and status, and establishment of training tables and curfews.

Throughout the system of athletic control, there is an obvious exclusion of students. The role of the student-athlete is that of a performer who must comply with eligibility standards and other regulations to gain the privilege of playing.

College athletics must be controlled in some way, but the NCAA has extended its domain to the college athlete and even to amateur athletics in general. Although it is within the NCAA's province to prohibit professional participation under the tenets of amateurism, the NCAA also legislates on various amateur issues including participation in AAU events, World University Games (FISU), and the Olympics. The question of jurisdiction over the college athlete is a source of controversy with the AAU and even the United States Olympic Committee.¹ The NCAA is opposed to any federal intervention into amateur athletics and is specifically opposed to "the use of federal funds to support organizations which do not have economic viability." [6, p. 39].

The NCAA is extending its control over individuals in other ways. An example of this is a recent ruling which states that athletes participating in NCAA championships may be required to submit to tests which detect the presence of drugs in the body. While the use of ergogenic aids may provide a participant with an unfair advantage and thus be undesirable, the question of how to deal with this problem should involve a consideration of individual rights as well as legal and moral implications. Perhaps one would feel better about this ruling if the discussions which preceded its adoption had centered more on the effects of drugs on the wellbeing of the athlete and less on performance [4, pp. 59–76].

In light of the above discussion it is difficult to establish the credibility of "athletics for athletes" or "the development of educational leadership." There is simply no provision and very little opportunity for the student-athlete to go beyond the role of a performer. The student-athlete has very few rights and must conform to the existing system if he wishes to participate in intercollegiate athletics.

An Integral Part. While it would be difficult to deny that athletics are an integral part of many colleges and universities, it is interesting to examine the realities of the relationship. Of particular interest to many institutions is the publicity they receive from athletics. The value of such advertisement is quite apparent. An example of this was presented in a recent issue of *Sports Illustrated* following an institution's National Invitational Tournament victory.

Tech's president said thousands of dollars were pledged to the college treasury in the days following the tournament, and he added that because of the victory, alumni corporations and the [state] General Assembly were expected to look more favorably upon the school. [The President] said the funds Tech received would be used for research and instruction as well as for athletics

¹The NCAA withdrew from the USOC last spring because it was felt that it did not have sufficient representation on the committee in comparison with other agencies.

programs, but he noted that the recognition the athletic program had received "will help not only in recruiting the blue chip athletes but in putting before the public the image of a successful university." He added that this would probably open the door for some industrial grants. [7, p. 12].

The monetary bond between athletics and the university is not limited to the winning of national championships. It has been estimated that at least one-half of those who donate funds to a university also contribute to its athletic program.

Although some academic programs have been eliminated at various colleges for several reasons including economic viability, the value of athletics cannot be measured solely on the basis of revenues and expenditures. Even if the athletic department operated "in the red," the subsequent benefits to the university from grants and donations could make athletics a valuable commodity to retain. This is particularly true for those colleges attaining "big-time" status, and very few of these schools have eliminated costly intercollegiate programs.²

While there undoubtedly are many athletes who are also good students and receive a fine education, unfortunately this is not always the case. The pressure to field a successful team sometimes encourages practices which are not in the best academic interest of the students. Finding an easy academic path, sympathetic professors, and alternatives to class attendance and personal study cannot be justified academically.

The real reason for such practices is the desire of athletic personnel (and sometimes athletes themselves) to keep a player academically eligible while concentrating on success in intercollegiate sports. What some students receive is an education in athletic performance, particularly in sports where an opportunity to become a professional may follow the collegiate career. While such an education may reflect the concern of both the athletic department and these students, it is questionable whether vocational training of this nature conforms to the purposes of a university. In this regard it should also be pointed out that there are no known colleges that grant degrees in athletic performance or have academically sanctioned majors in this area. Considering the manner in which athletics actually function in some institutions, realistic alternatives to the present system might include the establishment of the above practice or recognition of the obvious function of intercollegiate sports in some places by allowing young men to professionally represent an institution with no pretense of academic obligation.

The NCAA encourages academic excellence and elects All-American Academic teams. In addition, the NCAA initiated a postgraduate scholarship program in 1964 and from then through 1972 awarded 557 \$1 thousand

²The University of Chicago is one of these exceptions.

scholarships to scholar-athletes [6, p. 81]. These actions are certainly commendable, and one could only wish the NCAA would do more of the same. When one considers the number of young men in NCAA programs and the amount of money the NCAA receives as a direct result of their participation,³ this would certainly seem feasible.

The student-athlete can and does receive college credit for his athletic participation at some institutions: for example, the University of Washington awards academic credit in nine intercollegiate sports [8, pp. 81–82]. Recognizing the desirability of keeping athletes eligible, it is not surprising to learn that during a two-year period—autumn, 1971 to spring, 1973—1,956 out of 2,001 young men enrolled in these one-credit courses received A's [6]. The grade-point average of 3.96 in these courses may be compared to the 2.92 all-male undergraduate grade-point average of spring, 1973⁴ and the 2.75 GPA of the male athletes in that same quarter [9]. There is little chance these courses would be a detriment to an athlete's eligibility, but it is very possible they could help a borderline athlete. While this policy of awarding academic credit for participation in intercollegiate sports may not be universal, it is certainly not uncommon.

Athletics are big business, not just to athletic departments and the professional teams supplied by college sports but to colleges and universities themselves. The intercollegiate sports program is not only a visible part of the university, it is sometimes flaunted as an indication of institutional prowess.

Differences Between College Athletics and Professional Sports. The philosophical difference between a professional and an amateur has been, and continues to be, a lively topic of debate. Unfortunately, debates seldom conform to the realities of issues, and, no matter how finely drawn, definitions make inappropriate categories in which to file individuals.

Is there, in fact, any real distinction between the professional and the college athlete? The services of professional athletes are secured by members of private industry whose primary objective is capital gain. The services of many college athletes are secured through recruiting services established by the athletic departments which include staff members and influential friends of the institution. While financial solvency may not be the primary objective of these institutions, it must be one function if they are to survive in a capitalistic society.

A professional athlete must sign an exclusive contract with one particular organization. Once this has been signed, he can be traded at the discretion of the club, in many cases without his own knowledge or consent. The college

³The NCAA's assessment percentage of the TV contract for football in this past season alone far exceeds the \$577,000 awarded in postgraduate scholarships 1964-1972 [2, p. 42].

⁴Source: University of Washington, Registrar's Office.

athlete normally signs an exclusive contract, too, but at the expense of losing a year's eligibility, he can transfer to another institution of his own choosing.⁵ This practice of transfer, however, is discouraged by the NCAA, and some cases have been investigated for possible violations of policy.

With the exception of basketball, professional sports constitute legally protected monopolies. The reserve clause in baseball has been upheld in the courts, and both football and baseball are exempt from antitrust legislation. The NCAA controls the lion's share of college sports and virtually all of "big-time" athletics. There are other agencies which share the control of amateur athletics but the NCAA does monopolize "big-time" football and basketball and is seeking to extend this influence in other areas.⁶ Thus, while the NCAA does not have exclusive jurisdiction, it does have sufficient jurisdiction to be called a monopoly of "big-time" college athletics.

Professional athletes have some influence in the professional system through their unions and receive monetary benefits from sports participation. College athletes have no voice in the administration of college athletics, and many receive only nominal monetary benefits from their participation while others receive none.

The difference between professional and college athletics seems to be one of degree, with the college athlete coming out at the short end of the measuring stick. College athletics are administered for the benefit of those who control them: individual institutions, regional conferences, and national agencies. The rules and regulations of these agencies are designed to control athletes and athletics, but the athlete himself has no voice in their design. The athlete's behavior is restricted at every level, but he has few compensating rights. In general, he must comply to the system or be ejected from it. He is treated as a commodity to be exploited for the benefit of others and is left with no viable alternatives to conformity if he wishes to participate in intercollegiate sports.

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⁵See [1, p. 2] for example.

⁶See previous discussion, "The Extent of Control."

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