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## *Journal of Issues in* **Intercollegiate Athletics**

### **The Rise and Impact of High Profile Spectator Sports on American Higher Education**

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**Kimberly L. Martin**

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As high-profile intercollegiate athletics became more prominent, those who were supposed to be in charge of them, university presidents, were forced out from the anonymity of their ivory towers to deal with scandals and high profile "power" coaches or corrupt athletic departments. These presidents often knew very little about college sports and found themselves in awkward positions as they tried to exert control over the emerging scandals. "Every year it gets worse," said John DiBiaggio, former President of Michigan State University. "These. . . incidents have been incredibly embarrassing. You would think that people would throw up their hands and say, We're not going to tolerate this any longer. But they're not doing it" (Lederman, 2008).

Sports in American culture have been a part of our lexicon since college football caught on in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The college expansion period post-World War II saw returning GIs explode onto college campuses in the thousands, and spawned the industrialization of sport. This expansion of college sports and the subsequent controls and standards on higher education brought sports to new prominence, increased the clout of the NCAA, all while contributing to the “hyper-commercialization” of sport, at both the college and professional levels. Radio broadcasts attracted even more fans to sports, while the massive marketing of professional sports on television in the mid 1960’s continued to expand the reach of sport beyond the local stadium. Athletic events could now be packaged and sold at will. In 1952, the NCAA began to further exert its influence. It placed some colleges on probation; set up rules for postseason bowls; established its national headquarters in Kansas City, Missouri; hired Walter Byers as full-time executive director; and signed its first national football contract with the National Broadcasting Company for \$1.1 million (Estler & Nelson, 2005). Big time college athletics was born.

During the 1980s, big time athletic departments became franchises in College Sports, Inc. A commercial entertainment endeavor for intercollegiate athletics, College Sports, Inc. often had objectives that were frequently at odds with the educational missions of institutions of higher learning. Feeding this growth in particular was the increased revenue from television networks for the rights to broadcast college sporting events, most notably at the time the NCAA Division I men’s basketball tournament. Since then, intercollegiate athletics has become a thoroughly integrated component of America’s commercial entertainment business, prompting an almost unrelenting growth in the commercialization of education and scholarship.

The extent to which intercollegiate athletics have become such a prominent aspect of American colleges and universities, and the public persona and unusual devotion to their sports teams from their constituents is relatively new. Indeed, in the colonial college, participation in competitive athletics was frowned upon, and the first intercollegiate games were often played in quasi-secret locations. The current prominence of athletics is a 20th century phenomenon, coinciding with the gradual metamorphosis of the antebellum college into more secular, expanded institutions that we know today (Shapiro, 2005). Since the 1970s, colleges and universities have gradually expanded their time, effort and financial resources in support of intercollegiate athletics. As an example, one need look no further than coaches salaries: there are currently 50 intercollegiate coaches in the “\$1 million club,” that is, these coaches earn at least one million dollars a year in salary. Four of these have surpassed the \$3 million mark (Wieberg & Upton, 2007). Groups such as the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) have formed to not only regulate competition, but to allocate memberships in particular coalitions (conferences).

Some would argue, as J. Douglas Toma (1999) does, that intercollegiate athletics plays a most important role in the life of the university, often evolving into the key point of reference to the university for important audiences outside of the academic community. If the pursuit of public support for the university through athletics allows one to pursue the primary goals of education and scholarship, perhaps we should be able to, as Shapiro (2005) mused, overlook the inconveniences relating to integrity. However, lamenting this development, Shapiro opined further, citing particular concerns of the impact of this and other joint ventures between non-profit universities and the for-profit world of entertainment and business.

Why use athletics to accomplish this task, instead of say, an increased marketing or a capitol campaign? One reason is that the aspect of the university that often garners significant attention is the on-campus sports program, particularly the marquee football and men’s

basketball teams at large (and sometimes even small) college and university campuses. Spectator sports have often been referred to as the front door to the university; they are what many people on the outside see and eventually what gets them inside (Toma, 1999). Especially at large colleges and universities, these types of sports are what fill enormous stadiums and arenas, entice television networks to broadcast games to national audiences, and attract hundreds of national and local journalists to campus on game day. As an example, despite several less than winning seasons, NBC extended its exclusive contract to broadcast Notre Dame football through 2010. The deal is reportedly worth \$9 million annually (Soukup, 2004).

Another reason athletics is used for public support of university goals is a phenomenon known as the “Flute Effect.” The term was coined after Boston College quarterback Doug Flutie’s “Hail Mary” pass beat the University of Miami in 1984 and applications to the school jumped about 30 percent the following two years (Potter, 2008). Long thought to be anecdotal, recent research has supported the effect: schools that make it to the Sweet 16 in the men’s NCAA Division I basketball tournament see an average of a 3% increase the following year; the champion is likely to see a 7% to 8% increase. Similarly, applications go up 7% to 8% at schools that win the national football title (Potter, 2007).

It is essential for institutions to draw external constituents to campus in both the literal and figurative sense if they are going to continue to garner the resources necessary to survive. High profile sports teams, such as football and men’s basketball, can garner this attention by affording outside audiences the opportunity to become affiliated with the institution. But at what cost? As Pascarella and Ternezini (2005) observed, there is evidence to suggest that participation in revenue-producing intercollegiate sports (that is, football and basketball) has a negative impact on the development of critical thinking of freshman men in college. Despite the extraordinary growth in revenues generated by intercollegiate athletics, almost all colleges and universities must still subsidize their programs. Why are so many resources devoted to this one facet of post-secondary education? One reason remains clear: drawing people to campus by building positive perceptions (images) of the institution. In business, it is called building a brand.

### *Using Athletics to Build Institutional “Brand Equity”*

The concept is simple. In the world of business, building a brand (product or service), building recognition and identification with that brand, and building brand loyalty is crucial to the success of the company marketing that brand. Brand equity is an intangible asset that depends on associations made by the consumer (NetMBA, 2009). Businesses spend millions of dollars every year to carve out their niche in the marketplace, attempting to establish themselves as unique in an arena that is growing increasingly competitive, and the gap of differentiation among products is growing smaller. Toma, Dubrow and Hartley (2005) make the argument in “The Uses of Institutional Culture” that this same concept can and is being applied to higher education with handsome dividends. Indeed, as the authors lay out in the early part of the monograph: “The essence of student affairs, administrative and academic units, and external relations in American higher education is to advance the congruence of institutional goals with the goals of individuals who are associated with the institution.” (p. 2). Building brand equity in the institution, they argue, is the means through which this can be achieved by higher education.

At most large (enrollment of 30,000 plus) universities in the United States, spectator sports are central to institutional life, providing the campus with not only a distinctive identity but popular appeal. Colleges and universities devote substantial resources to the



contemporaneous tasks of building positive institutional identity and raising the external profile of the institution. Differentiating the institution and acquiring the attention of essential external audiences—major donors, legislators, fund contributors and the like—can be difficult, but nonetheless remain crucial to the success of the institution. Creating brand equity in the institution then, becomes vital in achieving these goals. As Toma, et al (2005) defined it, brand equity as applied to higher education includes awareness of an institution; recognition of what the institution is known for; a sense of loyalty toward the institution; an understanding of the institution's worth; and the desire to pay a premium price to be associated with it. Brand equity then, is that value that comes from being associated with the institution, of having that name or symbol that differentiates the service and image of one college or university over another.

Intercollegiate sports, in particular football and men's basketball, contribute to making otherwise indistinguishable large universities distinguishable. Marquee sports have evolved into the key point of reference to the university for many constituent audiences. This is often so because sports is the aspect of the university that is most visible to those outside of the academic community. Marquee sports programs provide a meaningful point of connection for constituents who provide support to universities. It is what they know and can identify with regarding the university; it makes otherwise distant universities accessible. The ability to "brand" themselves fosters effective external relations. Whether these relations realize themselves in the form of alumni support, fund-raising, admissions or in other tangible ways, effective external relations are what enables a university to thrive and raise its profile.

At large public universities, it is the local and other external constituents that provide support in the form of tuition, appropriations, gifts and legislative backing that make up a significant part of the university budget. Despite this, the typical measures of academic success that constitute a great research university are often of little importance and commonly misunderstood to those in the external community that provide the resources needed for institution building. While many constituents do indeed appreciate academic pursuits such as teaching and applied research, many are most passionate about the most salient element of college identity: that full stadium on football Saturday, or the packed basketball arena during the road to March Madness. Indeed, spectator sports of this magnitude make insiders of those who do not reside in the local community, who then become advocates for, and supporters of, "their" teams. It is what many outsiders know and like about an institution; it is what sells. Local communities, alumni and friends often become willing and generous supporters of institutions with which they strongly identify. It is in this way that these supporters are granted "bragging rights" from the institutions they support. The flagship university then, serves as a touchstone for these supporters, a focal point for the expression of pride that is so central to the American psyche. There are many who will only experience these schools through their marquee sports teams; spectator sports provide a bridge between external constituents and the university.

### *The Commercialization of College Sports*

While most would agree that organized competitive athletics benefits many young men and women all across the country, the rise of big time college athletics has come with a cost. Competitive athletics has given birth to some less admirable traits, such as the determination to win at any cost, including the use of banned substances to enhance performance, and often a rejection of a university's core academic values. As Shapiro (2005) outlined, there seems to be unavoidable tensions between the commercial for-profit world of entertainment (which includes

intercollegiate athletics), and the academic world of the university which takes seriously its role to provide students with intellectual and moral leadership. Americans are passionate about sports; they also tend to believe, however, that student athletes ought to be “normal” college students, facing the same standards in admissions and in the classroom as other students. A recent poll by the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics (2006) revealed that Americans are concerned about college sports. Among other findings, the report revealed that 60% of Americans believe that college sports are like professional sports; 61% believe that commercial values often prevail over academic values and traditions; 83% believe that college coaches are overpaid; and 77% believe that companies and TV networks have too much control over college sports (p. 1-3).

In 1994 the University of Michigan, under then-athletic director Joe Roberson, signed the first school-wide contract for athletic equipment and apparel with Nike for all of its 25 athletic teams worth \$7 million. Before the contract, Michigan athletic coaches had individual contracts with apparel companies, often being paid more by these companies than Roberson (Herbert, 2005). Uncomfortable with this practice, Roberson sought to “reel in” who was giving what to whom by pulling all corporate contracts under one roof. He went to then-president James Duderstadt, who agreed. Today, Duderstadt is one of the most outspoken critics of the growing commercialization of college sports, and many agree with his assessment. “There is a disconnect between big time college sports,” said Duderstadt recently. “The University of Michigan is not competing so much with Ohio State commercially. They are competing with the Detroit Lions. We’re competing for broadcast dollars, paying for spectators. I think we are beginning to push the limits of that.” (Duderstadt, as quoted in Herbert, 2005)

Duderstadt now says he thinks the signing of the contract was a mistake, and set Michigan’s priorities in the wrong place—with money and not with education. (Herbert, 2005). Nike pays more money to schools that are more successful, if not more prominent. The same way that Nike executives root for winning teams associated with the “swoosh” so that they too may be associated with winning, corporations everywhere are spending more and more money in order to be associated with successful sports programs. There are many who worry that this is coming at the expense of the students. In 2005, CBS recently signed a \$6 billion, 11 year contract with CBS sports with the NCAA for the rights to broadcast March Madness, averaging out to about \$545 million a year, well above even the \$100 million a year that was paid for the Bowl Champion Series (BCS) broadcast rights. How can a university, he portends, continue the pretense of the student-athlete as amateur when the people running big time college sports amass great fortunes while the actual performers—the players—receive only athletic scholarships, the majority of which top out at \$30,000 per year? (Sperber, 2005).

One would think that with all the money spent on big time college sports and gained by those in control, including the NCAA, this would clearly be classified as a for-profit venture. The NCAA maintains full-time lobbyists in Washington D.C. in order to maintain its non-profit status (Batt, 2001). Still, anti-trust laws prohibit the NCAA or other joint university efforts from regulating the commercial activities of its members. Without this ability, there may never be effective reform of big time college sports. The fact of the matter is that it may be impossible to maintain a large, successful, intercollegiate athletics program while staying true to the mission statements, stated principals, and goals of higher education. A winner-take-all mentality may not only overwhelm the academic and moral integrity of institutions involved but almost certainly involve some exploitation of the athletes involved (Shapiro, 2005). The very success of a

commercial enterprise such as today's big time college sports entities may seriously undermine the capacity of universities to place any limits on the competition involved.

### *The Athletes*

Academic fraud has unfortunately become a staple of big time sports universities. Case after case of NCAA violations are reported each year as faculty, staff and coaches and other interested parties fight to keep their star athletes eligible at any cost. One such recent scandal at Purdue University, for example, found the women's assistant basketball coach had partially researched and composed a sociology paper for a player and then lied about it to university officials (Powers, 2007). Whether or not these cases have become more commonplace in recent years is up for debate. Most would agree, however that the climate in intercollegiate athletics has changed so dramatically that it makes this kind of behavior more prevalent. Interestingly, this has happened since the NCAA recently changed its rules on academic eligibility for athletes. In order to be eligible to play, athletes must complete 40% of their coursework toward a degree in order to be eligible to play in their third year, 60% before their fourth year, and 80% before their fifth year (Regents, 2006). The standards were designed to increase graduation rates for men's basketball and football players, but college and university advisors are worried that this requirement, known as the 40-60-80 rule, will force athletes to choose majors early and make it more difficult for them to change fields. Others are worried that those who do not meet the thresholds might lose scholarships, be banned from tournament play, or be disqualified from NCAA revenue sharing deals. The system could eventually punish institutions that fail to keep their athletes moving toward a degree. But no penalties are attached to this first year's reports, and the NCAA has modified the system in recently in ways that delay or soften the potential blows against sports programs (Lederman, 2005).

One of the more vexing problems in college sports today is that institutions admit young men and women based on their athletic rather than their academic potential, and then expect them to perform as both athletes and students. In high profile, "marquee" sports such as football and men's basketball, this is a particular problem. Players in these sports often have a difficult time performing well in the classroom for any number of reasons, including attending poor high schools, daydreaming about the millions they think they will make in the pros, and dealing with the oppressive demands of practice and competition (Suggs, 2003). Unfortunately, athletic departments often deal with this problem by steering athletes with weak academic backgrounds into areas where they think they will have the least trouble performing. A *Chronicle of Higher Education* review of the academic choices of football players who competed in bowl games that year demonstrated that there are collections of athletes in particular fields of study on virtually every campus (Suggs, 2003). Known as "clustering," this practice often allows specialized courses for athletes that require little or no work. In one case at Auburn University, a sociology professor was accused of offering directed reading classes to athletes that fell into this category (Capriccioso, 2006). Many have expressed concern that the combination of academic expectations for athletes combined with the aforementioned practices would put those in academic support services for athletes in a tough spot, resulting in a growing number of marginal students (Powers, 2007).

Big time college sports have also become somewhat of a melting pot of cultures, and as a result, a source of conflict for issues concerning race and cultural expectations on the college campus. Now disproportionately represented in both football and men's and women's basketball,

African American student-athletes frequently provide some of the only sources of diversity on the predominately White college campus (Estler & Nelson, 2005). A comprehensive study of African American athletes conducted by the American Institute for Research (AIR, 1989) found that representation of African American students participating in athletics programs are far more representative than those same students on the campus at large. The study listed the median enrollment of African American students at NCAA Division I institutions at 4%, while 37% of Division I football players, 56% of Division I men's basketball players, and 33% of women's basketball players were African American.

As a result of their overrepresentation, Black student athletes on the nation's college campuses often feel racially isolated, and because of the demands of their sport, are often uninvolved in other extracurricular activities (AIR, 1989). In addition, the low percentage of Black administrators provides a stark contrast to the number of Black athletes. In a study conducted by the NCAA during the 1997-98 school year, it was revealed that nearly 23% of all NCAA athletes are Black. African Americans accounted for 29% of the male athletes and 14% of female athletes (Greenlee, 2000). Stereotypes regarding African American athletes can often affect both their academic and athletic experience as well. These stereotypes often lead to lower academic expectations, and as discussed earlier, result in them being channeled toward majors and classes that will assist them in continuing their eligibility but do not necessarily ensure career success, or line up with their skills and abilities (Estler & Nelson, 2005).

#### *Faculty*

In a 2007 nationwide survey of faculty attitudes, 62% of the respondents indicated their university's athletic programs were structurally separate from academic programs, and 50% reported that decisions about sports on their campuses were driven by the needs of the entertainment industry with minimal regard for the institutions' academic missions (Sander, 2007). The survey, which was conducted by researchers at the University of Michigan's Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education and sponsored by the Knight Commission, analyzed responses from over 2,000 tenure or tenure track faculty members at 23 institutions in the National Athletic Association's Football Bowl Subdivision I. The report also found that 72% of the respondents thought the salaries paid to head football and basketball coaches were excessive, though half of these also said that their institution's success in athletics spurred alumni giving to campus programs other than athletics. The study also found the following: 50% of faculty members reported decisions about sports on their campuses were driven by the entertainment industry; 53% were satisfied with awarding scholarships based on athletic ability while 28% were not; 46% were satisfied with their university president's oversight of athletics while 28% were not; 50% noted that academic standards did not need to be lowered to achieve success in athletics, although 23% indicated they believed some compromises in academic standards were necessary to succeed in football and basketball (Sander, 2007).

Faculty also struggle with their role on campus at universities with big time athletic programs, with many reporting they feel disconnected from the athletic program. One of the unique features of American higher education is the concept of shared governance, a notion in which the governance of a university is the shared responsibility of vested constituencies and the governing board (Birnbaum, 1988). In high profile intercollegiate athletics, this practice is not adhered to, with most if not all decisions regarding this entity resting in the hands of those who control these activities. In many cases these are the commercial and entertainment enterprises outside of the governance of the school. It is these entities that created the BCS championship

series, and the March Madness concept. Faculty, it seems, will not be allowed to do anything that interferes with the success of these big time programs.

## **Recommendations**

There is no doubt that big time sports at (mostly) NCAA Division I schools can bring much publicity to an institution, garnering support in various areas. As previously discussed, this exposure often comes at a high price to both the student and the institution. Despite the extraordinary growth in revenues generated by intercollegiate athletics, almost all universities and colleges must still subsidize their athletic programs (Shapiro, 2005). How then, can colleges and universities institute reform in order to combat these trends? In order to balance academics and athletics, the following recommendations are put forward:

### *Collaboration and self-regulation*

One of the best strategies for a sound policy in governing athletics involves cooperation among colleges and their presidents toward self-regulation. While the diversity of American higher education would preclude any sort of national policy, individual conferences with memberships of peer institutions could be most effective in forming voluntary regulatory boards designed to monitor such measures as the numbers of scholarships granted to athletes, as well as academic policies and practice regulations. The Knight Commission's "one plus three" model is a good example of this kind of self-regulation. The "one"--presidential control-- directed toward the "three"--academic integrity, financial integrity and accountability--provides the perfect balance of collaboration and accountability in a higher education setting (1999).

### *Governance and Structure*

Currently, national and regional bodies such as the NCAA regulate the practices of intercollegiate athletics across the nation. This results in many athletic directors having two bosses; their institution and a foundation board which are often in conflict, and effectively diluting the power of the institutional president. This could be revised in favor of including institutional administrative and financial control over campus sports programs. Even the NCAA's bylaws suggest that, "It is the responsibility of each member institution to control its intercollegiate athletics program in compliance with the rules and regulations of the Association. The institution's president or chancellor is responsible for the administration of all aspects of the athletics program, including approval of the budget and audit of all expenditures" (NCAA handbook, 2006, p.3). If this is the case, institutions and by association their presidents should take a more proactive role in program oversight. Too, the president should have the backing of their boards of trustees through the reaffirmation of presidential authority in all matters of athletics governance (Knight Commission, 1999).

### *Transparency in the recruiting process*

Academic administrators and faculty members must be directly involved in the recruiting process from beginning to end. Such an approach will move them beyond the stereotypes about college sports, perhaps even toward welcoming--and even taking credit for--competitive successes by athletes who are also bona fide students. Meanwhile, this would require those in



athletics to work transparently within the university. They must internalize academic values, embracing them even when inconvenient, if they are to retain the mantle of education that distinguishes college sports from purely professional endeavors. One potential model to consider is currently used by the University of Oklahoma. For the past four years, the athletics department has invited an academic review committee to consider the application of every marginal, or at-risk, recruited athlete. The committee consists of the senior associate athletics director, who also reports to the provost, as well as the faculty athletics representative and several other faculty members named through the faculty senate. This approach compels coaches to consider whether each athlete he or she recruits is a good fit for the institution, highlighting potential conflicts early and avoiding certain challenging decisions as coaches drop the most marginal cases from consideration (Roundtable on Intercollegiate Athletics, 2006).

### *Increased interface between athletics and academics*

Few academic leaders understand college sports, and athletic leaders commonly do not appreciate academia. Both sides criticize the other without really knowing the contexts in which the other operates, and neither recognizes that trends and issues in both academia and athletics are often more alike than they are different. This is compounded by the fact that these two departments rarely work together on issues of shared interest; this fundamental misunderstanding is a lost opportunity and a source of serious problems. By working jointly on shared issues, those in academia can gain a more fundamental understanding of the dynamics of athletics programs and the realities of contemporary intercollegiate athletics. Similarly, colleagues in athletics can come to understand issues that prove burdensome to university administrators which they often attribute to a failure by athletics to comprehend the values and mores of academic life.

### *Abandon the need for a national champion*

Shapiro (2005) had some radical ideas when it came to intercollegiate athletic reform, and this one bears mentioning here. Dr Shapiro maintains that if intercollegiate sports restricted its aspirations to regional and/or conference based championships there might be more happy fans, since six or eight teams would think of themselves as national champions. At the very least, he suggested the NCAA receive exemption from anti-trust regulation, giving it more power to act on the commercial activities of this governing body, but even he himself admitted this seems unlikely.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that the impact of high-profile intercollegiate athletics has extended way beyond the fields and arenas on which they are played. A far cry from its humble beginnings as an extra-curricular physical activity, competitive sports and higher education have become virtually intertwined. Intercollegiate athletics has at once opened the door to higher education for hundreds of student athletes, while at the same time changing the relationship and impact it has on institutions of higher education. Much needed reforms are going to be essential if we truly want to serve the best interest of our students while remaining true to the goals of higher education. As Shapiro (2005) opined, it may be impossible to be competitive in the

athletic/entertainment business and also stay true to the stated rules and principles of intercollegiate athletics.

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