

Corrupting College Sports: We All Lose

By
John Gerdy, Ph.D.

It was ironic that in the coverage of the University of Georgia basketball scandal, more than one reporter suggested there was a "winner" in all of this: the University of Tennessee's basketball program. By virtue of Georgia's discontinuing its season, Tennessee received a first-round bye in the SEC tournament. Tennessee fans may be celebrating, but when athletic scandal taints a university, there are no winners. We all lose.

If universities can't run their athletic programs with integrity, can the public trust them to accomplish their core mission — the training of minds that will help make the world a better place? Further, if our colleges tacitly endorse activities that undermine educational achievement in the name of athletic glory, they provide an example for all to emulate. In short, higher education is leading society in the wrong direction when it comes to athletics.

This is so because it is no longer in doubt that Division I sports, particularly football and basketball but with other sports marching down the same road, have become professional teams in college uniforms. We all know it.

The essence of professional athletics is "pay for play." Despite the idealist rhetoric of the athletic establishment, the reality is that the contract between athlete and institution no longer represents "pay (scholarship) for education." It is not pay for education when it is plain to everyone — coaches, fans, faculty, media, and especially, the athletes — that they are on campus, first and foremost, to play ball. That, by any definition, is "pay for play."

Pro sports is also about paying whatever you have to for coaches, staff, facilities, scouting, travel and anything else — regardless of how outrageous — that coaches believe might make the difference between winning and losing. This culture of spending to win has escalated to such an absurd level that it threatens the fiscal integrity of a growing number of institutions.

Professional sports is also about playing anywhere at anytime to reap television revenues. And professional athletics is about the expectation that athletes train year round and sacrifice their bodies for "the program." All this is fine for professional football players. But it's a grotesque distortion of the mission of higher education.

Educational Interests Subverted

The influence of athletic programs has become more negative than positive on many fronts. The worst of these can be summed up simply: We have come to glorify athletic accomplishment far more than academic achievement.

The extent to which organized sport subverts our nation's educational interests are well-documented. At the high school level, it is the passing of athletes who have not mastered the required work. The prevailing notion is that it is acceptable if Johnny can't read as long as he can play.

This academic fraud is perpetuated when our institutions of higher learning spend significant resources recruiting and later admitting Johnny, despite the fact that he is unqualified to perform college work and unlikely to graduate. All this in the name of "educational opportunity." All at the expense of academic integrity.

Further, the "in your face" mentality of today's athletes hardly suggests that sport is teaching humility, empathy, conflict resolution and respect for others. Cheating is expected, a lack of civility to competitors is considered a positive attribute and violence is glorified. In sport, there are no rules of civility. There is no trust. There are no standards of acceptable behavior, or, if there are, they can easily be bent, broken or amended if the player is good enough. In the athletic culture, there is no order and but one rule; win at any cost.

Higher education has played a significant role in the development of a sports system that is badly out of step with our nation's health needs. Our "elitist" system weeds out, at earlier and earlier ages, all but the most talented athletes. Our organized sports enterprise, with colleges and universities leading the way, has failed to promote the idea that sport for pure exercise is positive, fun and healthy. Rather, athletics must be about winning and developing future superstars. The result is that the elite play, while everyone else watches. Meanwhile, our nation becomes more obese.

Is the Mission of Higher Education Being Served?

Predictably, the recent scandals will rekindle the athletic reform debate. But it is clear that athletic reform is no longer about the traditional fare of student-athlete welfare, academic integrity and presidential control. Today, reform is about the cultural values we will pass on to our children and grandchildren. It is about ensuring that we prize and reinforce values such as honesty, intelligence and civility over athletic prowess. And it is about how our educational system should use sports to promote fitness and public health.

For these reasons, we must consider seriously the most fundamental issue relating to the role of athletics in higher education: whether the mission of higher education is best served by the game as it's played today?

It is critical that we have this conversation. It must be made clear that simply because 100,000 people may attend a football game does not mean that athletics is indispensable. American higher education was around for more than 200 years before the first intercollegiate athletic contest and will continue to provide quality education, produce important research and contribute to society with or without the current professional model of college athletics.

For more than 100 years, we have embraced the notion that professional athletics are a positive influence within our educational institutions. We live in an age, however, whose currency is intellectual muscle, not gladiatorial feats. It is against this backdrop that we must reconsider whether higher education's tremendous investment in athletics continues to be a sound one. And the fundamental question is this. By embracing the principles and practices of the professional athletics, has higher education become less able to meet the intellectual and public-health challenges of the new millennium?

The issue is balance. Somewhere along the line, our cultural consensus regarding athletics and education has become wildly distorted. Society looks to higher education to provide leadership on a broad array of issues, including the proper role of athletics in our culture.

Perhaps this recent string of scandals presents higher education with an opportunity to send a clear and important message to our sports-crazed populace: as much as we love college sports, we must love and value education and public health more.

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John Gerdy is one of the most enlightened sports educators in the country. He is a former professional basketball player. He was a legislative assistant at the NCAA and the Associate Commissioner of the Southeastern Conference. He is currently visiting Profession in Sports Administration at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio.

John has become a good friend of Kids FIRST In Sports. He lives with his wife Follin and their two children in Conestoga, PA.

John can be reached at: johngerdy@aol.com

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