College Athletes Should Be Paid

Sports and Athletes, 2005

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. How many college football coaches were paid more than $1 million in 2000, according to Eitzen?
2. How much profit did Georgetown University make as a result of Patrick Ewing's four years of basketball play at the school in the early 1980s, in Eitzen's view?

The governing body of big-time college sports, the NCAA [National Collegiate Athletic Association], is caught in a huge contradiction—trying to reconcile a multibillion-dollar industry while claiming it is really an amateur activity. That it is a huge moneymaking industry is beyond dispute.

- The major conferences have an eight-year package (ending in 2006) worth $930,000,000 with ABC to televise the Bowl Championship Series (BCS) at the conclusion of the regular football season. Each team playing in a BCS game currently receives about $13,000,000 and, under the terms of the new contract, will receive around $17,000,000 in the final years of the agreement. Since the teams share these monies with their conference members, the 62 schools involved will divide approximately $116,000,000 in payouts annually.
- The NCAA has signed a $6,200,000,000, 11-year deal giving CBS the rights to televise its men's basketball championship. (That's $545,000,000 a year, up from the $216,000,000 annually with the current arrangement that expires after the 2002 tournament.) The NCAA also makes money from advertising and gate receipts for this tournament. To enhance gate receipts, the finals are always scheduled in huge arenas with seating capacities of at least 30,000, rather than normal basketball-sized venues.
- Universities sell sponsorships to various enterprises for advertising. The athletic department of the University of Colorado, for example, has 50 corporate sponsors. The major one is Coors Brewing Co., which has a $300,000 advertising package for scoreboard, radio, and TV advertising, plus a sign on the mascot's trailer. The school also named its basketball arena the Coors Event Center in return for a $5,000,000 donation.
- Nine football coaches will be paid at least $1,000,000 in overall compensation in 2000....

Obviously, big-time athletic programs are commercial enterprises. The irony is that, while sports events generate millions for each school, the workers are not paid. Economist Andrew Zimbalist has written that "Big-time intercollegiate athletics is a unique industry. No other industry in the United States manages not to pay its principal producers a wage or a salary." The universities and the NCAA claim their athletes in big-time sports programs are amateurs and, despite the money generated, the NCAA and its member schools are amateur organizations promoting an educational mission. This amateur status is vitally important to the plantation owners in two regards. First, by not paying the athletes what they are worth, the schools' expenses are minimized, thus making the enterprises more profitable. Second, since athletic departments and the NCAA are considered part of the educational mission, they do not pay taxes on their millions from television, sponsorships, licensing, the sale of sky boxes and season tickets, and gate receipts. Moreover, contributions by individuals and corporations to athletic departments are tax-deductible.

The Injustice of Amateurism

To keep big-time college sports "amateur," the NCAA has devised a number of roles that eliminate all economic benefits to the athletes: They may receive only educational benefits (i.e., room, board, tuition, fees, and books); cannot sign with an agent and retain eligibility; cannot do commercials; cannot receive meals, clothing, transportation, or other gifts by individuals other than family members; and their relatives cannot receive gifts of travel to attend games or other forms of remuneration.

These rules reek with injustice. Athletes can make money for others, but not for themselves. Their coaches have agents, as may students engaged in other extracurricular activities, but the athletes cannot. Athletes are forbidden to engage in advertising, but their coaches are permitted to endorse products for generous compensation. Corporate advertisements are displayed in the arenas where they play, but with no payoff to the athletes. The shoes and equipment worn by the athletes bear very visible corporate logos, for which the schools are compensated handsomely. The athletes make public appearances for their schools and their photographs are used to publicize the athletic department and sell tickets, but they cannot benefit. The schools sell memorabilia and paraphernalia that incorporate the athletes' likenesses, yet only the schools pocket the royalties. The athletes cannot receive gifts, but coaches and other athletic department personnel receive the free use of automobiles, country club memberships, housing subsidies, etc.

Most significantly, coaches receive huge deals from shoe companies (e.g., Duke University basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski has a 15-year shoe endorsement deal with Adidas, including a $1,000,000 bonus plus $375,000 annually), while the players are limited to wearing that corporation's shoes and apparel. An open market operates when it comes to revenue for coaches, resulting in huge pay packages for the top names, but not so for star players. When a coach is fired or resigns, he often receives a "golden parachute," which sometimes is in the multimillion-dollar category, while players who leave a program early receive nothing but vilification for being disloyal. When a team is invited to a bowl game, it means an extra month of practice for the athletes, while head coaches, depending on the bowl venue, receive generous bonuses. A university entourage of administrators and their spouses accompany the team to the bowl game with all expenses paid, while the parents and spouses of the athletes have to pay their own way.

As an extreme example, an analysis of the economic impact of basketball star Patrick Ewing to Georgetown University during his four years there in the early 1980s shows that he brought more than $12,000,000 to the school (a tripling of attendance, increased television revenues, and qualifying for the NCAA tournament each year). Meanwhile, the cost to Georgetown for Ewing's services totaled $48,600—providing a tidy profit of $11,951,400 for the university. A study by an economist almost a decade ago found that top-level college football players at that time generated a net gain (subtracting room, board, tuition, and books) of more than $2,000,000 over a four-year period.

What exactly are the wages of average college athletes in the major sports? The answer is a bit complicated since those who do not graduate have not taken advantage of their tuition, so they have played only for their room and board. Moreover, there is a significant difference in tuition costs between state and private universities. Economist Richard G. Sheehan has calculated the hourly wage of big-time college players taking these considerations into account and assuming a workload of 1,000 hours per year. The best pay received, he found, occurred at private schools with high graduation rates for the athletes; the lowest, at state schools with low graduation rates. Duke, for instance, paid an equivalent of $20.37 an hour for its football players, compared to the University of Texas-El Paso's $3.51. The median wage at all big-time schools was $6.82 an hour for basketball players and $7.69 an hour for football players....

Dismal Graduation Rates

Since most college athletes never play at the professional level, the attainment of a college degree is a crucial determinant for their upward mobility, and thus a rationale for tolerating the unjust plantation system. Yet, graduation from college, while not the long shot of becoming a professional athlete, is also a bad bet.

A 1999 report compiled by the NCAA examined Division I athletes who enrolled in 1992-93 to determine how many had graduated after six years. (Athletes who left school in good academic standing were not counted in the results.) The data show that, while the overall graduation rate for all male students was 54%, for football players it was 50% (60% for whites and 42% for blacks) and 41% for male basketball players (53% for whites and 33% for blacks). While some programs are exemplary (Duke graduated 92% of its football players and Stanford University graduated 100% of its men's basketball players over the six-year period), others are not. According to *Emerge* magazine, 38 Division I basketball teams did not graduate a single black player in 1998. From 1995 to 1999, Ohio State graduated 100% of its female basketball players, but just 31% of its male basketball players. The 1999 men's basketball NCAA Division I champion, the University of Connecticut, managed to graduate a mere 29% of its team members between 1994 and 1997.

There are several reasons for the relatively low graduation rates for big-time college athletes. Compared to nonathletes, they are less prepared for college. On average, they enter in the bottom quarter of the freshman class (based on SAT scores). Football and men's basketball players in big-time sports programs are more than six times as likely as other students to receive special treatment in the admissions process—that is, they are admitted below the standard requirements for their universities. Second, athletes spend 30-40 hours a week on their sport, which is demanding, as well as physically and mentally fatiguing. Third, an anti-intellectual atmosphere is common within the jock subculture. Finally, some athletes attend college not for the education, but because they believe it will lead to a professional career. In this regard, former Iowa State University football coach Jim Walden has said, "Not more than 20% of the football players go to college for an education."

Not only do typical athletes in big-time sports enter at an academic disadvantage, they often encounter a diluted educational experience while attending their schools. Coaches, under the intense pressure to win, tend to diminish the student side of their athletes by counseling them to take easy courses, choose easy majors, and enroll in courses given by faculty members friendly to the athletic department. Some of the more unscrupulous have altered transcripts, given athletes answers to exams, staged phantom courses, and hired surrogate test takers. In one well-publicized case of academic fraud, a tutor for the University of Minnesota athletic department wrote more than 400 papers for basketball players over five years. Even with that help, just 23% of the players recruited since 1986 to play basketball at that university have graduated, the worst rate of any Big Ten basketball team during that period....

Changing the System

The obvious starting point for changing the system is to pay athletes in the revenue-producing sports fair compensation for the revenues they generate. Athletes should receive a monthly stipend for living expenses, insurance coverage, and paid trips home during holidays and for family emergencies. Media basketball commentator Dick Vitale suggests a modest plan to make the system somewhat fairer. He says that the NCAA should invest $1,000,000,000 of the $6,200,000,000 it will receive to broadcast the NCAA men's basketball tournament and pay the athletes $250 a month. *Sports Illustrated* writer E.M. Swift responded: "Is Vitale right on the money? You make the call. For now, as the NCAA continues to treat its athletes with supercilious contempt while reaping GNP-sized windfalls from their labor, you can at least say this for scholarship athletes: They're getting a free education in no-holds-barred capitalism."

The time has come to end the pretense that players in big-time college sports are amateurs. They are paid through a scholarship, far from a just or living wage in this world of big-time sports megabucks.

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Source Citation

Eitzen, D. Stanley. "College Athletes Should Be Paid." *Sports and Athletes*. Ed. James D. Torr. San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2005. Opposing Viewpoints. Rpt. from "Slaves of Big-Time College Sports." *USA Today Magazine* Sept. 2000: 26. *Opposing Viewpoints in Context*. Web. 3 Nov. 2015.

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Gale Document Number: GALE|EJ3010233247