College Athletes Should Not Be Paid

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As you read, consider the following questions:

1. What claim did Webber make during his college years about how little money he had, as paraphrased by Whitlock?
2. How do many college athletes allow themselves to be exploited, in Whitlock's opinion?

I have no idea how much money Chris Webber and his Fab Five teammates received from old-school numbers man Ed Martin while they led the University of Michigan to back-to-back NCAA [National Collegiate Athletic Association] title games. In the two years I covered the Fab Five for the *Ann Arbor (Michigan) News*, I never met Ed Martin. Never even had a two-minute discussion about him.

I do know only a fool would watch Webber, Jalen Rose and Juwan Howard drive up to practice and games in new SUVs, gaudy jewelry dangling from their necks and expensive leather coats and jackets wrapped around their shoulders and not suspect the Fab Five had a nice source of income.

I do know only a man or woman devoid of his senses couldn't smell the sense of financial entitlement that wafted from the five teenagers as they made college basketball history and, in their minds, made middle-aged white businessmen wealthy.

The Injustice Myth

But somehow many of us missed it. We chose instead to believe the myths. When Webber laughably claimed that he was frustrated because he couldn't afford to buy a Big Mac at McDonald's while local vendors sold his jersey for $50, we lapped the story up and cried about the injustice of the NCAA not paying its athletes.

We're part of the problem. We, the media, can blame Webber and the Fab Five for sticking their hands out and accepting what was given to them, but that's pretty much what we told them to do. For the past 20 years, ever since college football and men's basketball have become big, big business, we've wrongly told college athletes they've been getting ripped off. The NCAA should give them something, at least money to go to the movies and do their laundry.

And the whole time we've been singing the sad song about athletes getting screwed financially, we've been hypocritically complaining about the so-called "street agents" who are lining the pockets of the athletes and allegedly undermining their morals.

This is so silly. By constantly beating the drum that college athletes are getting screwed, we created the market for "street agents" to flourish. And I say this in all seriousness, we've given "street agents" a bad name.
I suspect if Ed Martin is anything like my grandfather who ran "numbers" in an Indianapolis automotive plant in the 1960s and '70s, he's a respected man in his community. He's not some violent, game-fixing, Mafia gambling kingpin. "Numbers" men are prevalent in the black community. They were even more popular before our government moved into their industry with state-sponsored daily lotteries and Pick 3s.

I'm not throwing a pity party for Martin. He evaded paying taxes on large sums of money. He deserves the jail time he's about to receive. It's just that we need to view him in proper context. I'm sure he loaned money to and did favors for more Detroiteres than just the city's top athletes. We, the media, call Martin a "street agent." I bet the people who gambled with Martin on the job viewed him as a dear friend and saw him no differently than the convenience store clerk who punches in their daily lottery numbers.

### College Athletes Are Already Paid in Full

But let me get back to my primary point. The notion that a full scholarship isn't a fair exchange for athletic services provided to a university—regardless of how much money an athletic department generates from those services—is ridiculous. As a former, low-level Division I football player, I can say with a clear conscience that college athletes are not getting ripped off. Now, they might be allowing themselves to get exploited by not taking advantage of their educational opportunity. But that's within their control.

Do you know what people around the world would be willing to endure for a chance to be educated at one of our institutions of higher learning? Hell, people are dying on makeshift boats damn near every day just trying to sneak over here and live in one of our "slums." And I'm supposed to feel sorry because a university is selling a jersey and not kicking back a few of the dollars to Joe Running Back?

I always thought part of the educational process at college was "the struggle." A kid shouldn't eat McDonald's every day. Some days he should be forced to eat macaroni and cheese because he blew all of his money on beer, pizza and weed over the weekend. And trust me on this, you give a bunch of teenage, wannabe professional athletes a stipend and a significant portion of that money will be going directly to the local "pharmacist" for steroids and marijuana, another good chunk will get guzzled down a beer bong and the rest will be a down payment on a platinum necklace, just like the one Lil Wayne wore in his last video.

You can get mad at me if you want to and accuse me of a gross generalization, but I lived it. I've seen it with my own eyes. I've driven athletes to the shopping mall and watched them buy Air Jordans and the Run DMC dookie gold chain with their Pell Grant money. College athletes don't need movie and laundry money. They need to be slapped back into reality. People need to tell them just how good they've got it. We need to stress to them that the educational opportunity they've been afforded is more valuable than the "pocket money" an Ed Martin can provide.

We need to share the uniquely American story about five black boys who carried a bumbling coach, an
entire athletic department, a local community and the NCAA to unprecedented riches and 10 years later found their biggest star indicted for perjury and their biggest booster facing four years in jail. All because they believed the hype that college basketball owed them more than an education.

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