

Let's Return Athletics to the Curriculum

Kenneth C. Petress

In recent years, high school and college athletics have generated negative headlines. Newspapers, magazines, and television reporters have exposed numerous scandals involving athlete recruiting ("34 institutions," 1991; Lederman, 1991a; Taylor, 1991); illegal athlete or family payoffs (Lederman, 1991b; "Status of sports," 1992a, b; "Summaries of rules," 1992); gambling and bribery activities (ABC News, 1985, 1989); illegal alterations or forgeries of academic transcripts ("34 institutions," 1991; "Status of sports," 1992a, b); suspect student athlete academic standards (Lederman, 1991a; "NCAA says," 1991; Newman, 1990); coaches yelling racial epithets at athletes (Lederman, 1991b); free housing being offered to athletes as inducements to come to or stay at a given school ("34 institutions," 1991; "Academic package," 1991; Wolff, 1991); students committing academic fraud by having others take tests for other students ("Athletics notes," 1991b; "Status of sports," 1992b); students and administrators committing admissions fraud (Newman, 1990; "Status of sports," 1992a); illegal complimentary ticket sales by student athletes ("34 institutions," 1991; Reed, 1990); a coach encouraging a potential witness to lie to NCAA investigators ("Athletics notes," 1991a); coaches knowingly allowing ineligible players to participate in inter high school or inter-collegiate sports (Lederman, 1991a 1992b; "Summaries of rules," 1992); athletes taking active part in illegal violent acts unconnected with sports (Alzado, 1991; "Athletics notes," 1991c; Lederman, 1991c; Moore, 1991); and lax or reluctant application, by coaches and administrators, of existing rules and standards ("34 institutions," 1991; "Status of sport," 1992a, b). Poor student athlete academic performance and graduation records prevail at an alarming number of schools (Blum, 1992; "NCAA says," 1991; "U. of Florida," 1991; Wiley, 1991). While these problems have not afflicted all schools or all student athletes, they are sufficiently pervasive to suggest something is amiss on our high school and college campuses relevant to contemporary school athletic competition.

Some changes to long-standing practices have recently been made, such as: Propositions 42 and 48 (Blum, 1992; "Summaries of rules," 1992; Wiley, 1991); new NCAA recruitment guidelines and restrictions (Blum, 1992; "Summaries of rules," 1992); numbers of athletic scholarships that can be offered ("Summaries of rules," 1992); tightening of sports booster rules ("Athletics notes," 1991a; "Summaries of rules," 1992); and more restrictive

seasonal sport practice guidelines ("Athletics notes," 1991c; "Summaries of rules," 1992). These rules help less than they were planned to; they have too often promoted even further cheating and to have invited controversial exceptions, such as the NCAA probation delay afforded UNLV's basketball program in 1990 ("Athletics notes," 1991c; Lederman, 1992b; "NCAA says," 1991; Reed, 1990); diluting what little salvation such changes may have intended. Many "athletes" on campus are different; they frequently perform poorer than their non-athlete peers. Teachers, administrators, and peers often expect and demand less in the classroom from athletes than from non-athlete students. Student athletes are frequently required to devote much more time on their sport(s) than child labor laws, societal norms, or college work-study regulations allow non-athletes to spend on jobs (Newman, 1990; "Summaries of rules," 1992). On too many college campuses, athletes live and eat separately ("Academic package," 1991; Wolff, 1991), being pampered like elite patricians apart from their lowly plebeian classmates. In many cases, both high school and college athletes register for classes separately and preferentially (Based on the author's experience and interviews with athletes at 5 institutions of higher learning.); enroll in classes designed especially for athletes (See previous note); and are offered free tutoring, progress monitoring, and counseling not customarily offered to non-athlete peers (Lederman, 1992a; Newman, 1990; Taylor & Smith, 1991). It's a mixed bag - athletes face obstacles and receive benefits that are not part of other students' lives - a segregated life.

I believe athletics to be a vital and useful facet to a student's education - all students. I deplore the fact that athletic facilities, equipment, and travel that cost millions of dollars are purchased and negotiated for by schools to serve small cadres of athletes. All students should receive an equal sports education. Physical education is valuable to all; it offers a wide spectrum of learning goals. Well structured, quality physical education enhances student cognitive, affective, and motor skills. Among skills acquired and sharpened by sports education are: learning teamwork; recognizing the value of inter-dependence among teammates; attaining self control; developing dependability; reaping the rewards of perseverance; appreciating the value of following rules; becoming skilled in thinking ahead; developing self reliance; confidence building; experiencing individual and collective pride; participating in public presentations; valuing discipline; learning the virtues of practice and repetition; learning how to win and lose gracefully; using sound judgment, developing a sense of strategy, and building and maintaining physical endurance, strength, stamina, grace, and agility.

With all these noble skills available for sports educators to pass on to their students, why have schools allowed, encouraged, and in too many cases insisted that their sports programs assume an elitist posture? High quality, maximum expenditure sports education ought to be available to all students. The best talent, in the form of coaches and trainers; the best equipment and facilities that money can buy, and low teacher-student ratios are devoted to the few star athletes who comprise inter-high school or inter-collegiate athletics. These valuable educational resources need to be devoted to the general student body, not just to the chosen few.

Some defenders of the present system argue that selecting only the best athletically skilled students to comprise teams to competitively represent these schools enhances institutional reputations thus advancing faculty and student recruitment and increasing the soliciting of greater alumni donations. Do we really desire to actively recruit passive students, ones willing and eager to watch others perform and learn or do we strive to invite those students who are eager to actively learn and engage in fitness, participation, competition, and sportsmanship? Do really humane, quality faculty come to or remain at our schools to further elitism or do we hope to attract teachers who can and will strive to benefit all students?

What happens to all the money sports generate? Space-age locker rooms, extra fancy athlete meals, booster club facilities, lavish press boxes, and road trips to Florida, Hawaii, or Japan seem to siphon off untold amounts of money. Only rarely does athletically generated money go to library enhancement, general faculty development, laboratory equipment, general scholarship fund enrichment, or non-athletic campus capital improvements. The claim that sports and sport revenues indelibly enhances a school's reputation seems either hollow or misplaced.

I propose that high schools and colleges rethink and re-establish their missions -- to provide a fully rounded learning environment for all students. Let's abolish these elitist practices, invitations for cheating and dishonesty, and massive expenditures designed primarily for the enrichment of the professional sports industry and substitute a genuine sports education program designed to educate all who comprise the student body. Well organized, required of all students, and well taught intramural programs would do more good for more of our young people than the present system does. Coaches are teachers just like the rest of their colleagues. Why should schools allow and promote select individual sports teachers to earn more in individual salaries than do whole faculties in

some high school or college departments; and then to teach, in many cases, fewer students in their total load than appear in most individual non-sports teachers' classrooms? Let's return athletics to a true, accessible to all, classroom environment, and get away from elitist commercialism in the name of education.

Over-zealous big-sports advocates will loudly proclaim that my proposal will (1) not be able to be implemented due to a lack of funds; (2) not attract students; and (3) deny institutions their ability to promote their campuses and attract substantial endowments. What these status quo advocates imply is sports supporters really have little or no genuine interest in the institution or common student learning, but that their interest is solely vested in athletics as an elitist activity. I do not believe this cynical view to be true; but if it were so, we would be better off without them. An educator's job is to promote and facilitate learning, not to deny or frustrate it. We need to require that students learn from sports, unless my assumptions about it being a genuine learning arena are inaccurate. Academic institutions ought to promote teaching and learning as their primary function not just in brochures and press releases, but in practice as well. Prestigious prizes and honors awarded to our best college faculties and alumni will not diminish due to the dimming of the athletic spotlight. Generous endowment support will continue and highly rated colleges and universities will still attract top high school graduates without intercollegiate athletics' magnetic draw. Vocational and civic responsibility shown by concerned college and high school personnel will not vanish due to the democratization of sports. And proven, regular success by top graduates in their chosen vocations will not be diminished by a shared athletic education. The apocalyptic soothsayers in the corner of the status quo would have us believe that competitive sports actively engaged in by a tiny proportion of the student body is the driving force behind our academic institutions. For heaven's sake, let's pray they are wrong!

Sports are important; they do serve a place in the learning sphere. Let us not lose perspective, though; sports are only one part of an overall education system that enriches the mind, body, and spirit, not its sole purpose or its savior.

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