

C OLLEGE ATHLETIC SCHOLARSHIPS – PRO OR CON

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With this paper I have decided to adopt a different format, different from the usual Athenaeum paper and one that follows that which was used by an organization of which I was once a member – the NFL – (i.e., the National Forensic League, not the National Football League) and in which I participated as a member of my college debate team many years ago. The format was as follows: each year the league established a proposition which served as the debate topic used in college matches and debate tournaments all over the country and throughout that school year.

These topics were always based on national issues of the day. I recall, for example, that the topic one year was: The Federal Government Should Establish a National Program to Provide Medical Services for All U.S. Citizens. The younger members of the society may be surprised to learn that government involvement in health care was an issue as early as 1952. Another topic was to the effect that the government should establish a Fair Employment Practices Commission to insure equal access to jobs by all citizens, regardless of race, creed, or national origin. (You may note that in those days even the advocates of diversity left out not only sexual orientation but even gender, when considering job discrimination). No one expected non –discrimination to go that far. But those were the days before the United States' chief export to other countries was jobs.

College debate teams throughout the country studied the annual chosen topic and prepared two set of arguments – one for the affirmative and one for the negative. The schools divided their squads into two-person teams, each of which would debate a team from another school. The teams did not know until they walked into the debate room whether they were to take the affirmative or the negative in that particular debate, so all had to be prepared to take either position. One of the challenges of this format was that the debater usually held a private opinion on the proposition but had to argue for the other position about half the time—the kind of position in which defense lawyers and prosecutors often find themselves but have to forge ahead.

Tonight I plan to state a proposition that I hope will be of interest to all – and I'm sure will be of interest to some – and to proceed to take first the affirmative position, and then to argue the negative position. The time limit

for each will be five minutes. In debates the presentations were followed by a period of rebuttal by the opposing side, but tonight I will leave the rebuttal to those who are in attendance, so you are free to take notes (or at least listen to the presentations) only if you want to rebut.

The proposition which I will debate is as follows: *The Association of Deans and Directors of University Colleges and Undergraduate Studies should adopt a rule banning the awarding of athletic scholarships for undergraduate students.* Yes, I said *banning athletic scholarships for undergraduate students.* In accordance with NFL rules I will present first the affirmative position as to why such a ban should be enacted, i.e. why such scholarships should be discontinued. And then I will change sides and present the negative position, of why such scholarships should be continued. At this point I wish to affirm that I started this paper long before the news of a massive academic fraud in athletics had been discovered at the University of North Carolina, though I think that development does make my paper more timely.

Argument # 1: The practice of awarding athletic scholarships often brings to colleges students who are not otherwise qualified to do college work. There have been published instances of students who had spent as many as five years in college but who could show little evidence of a college education. Some coaches work hard to ensure that athletes attend class and work to make grades that will lead to a college degree, but many do not.

Argument #2: Some schools have been known to help athletes by establishing courses such as basket weaving and others not appropriate for a college curriculum. I found one reference to the University of North Carolina offering a course in Swahili that had no instructors, never met, and awarded A's to all who took the course. (Perhaps the NCAA should have had some suspicion of what was going on at North Carolina then.) But UNC was not the only school where such was going on.

Recent attention has been focused on the practice of "clustering," which refers to the practice of channeling athletes into less

academically demanding courses to protect their eligibility and avoid scheduling conflicts for the coaches. Such practices undermine the traditional purpose of a university.

Argument # 3: Colleges should not be in the entertainment business, regardless of ESPN's desire to push them in that direction. The purpose of a university is to educate and to provide an environment in which arts and sciences can be developed and made available to society.

Robert Maynard Hutchins, then president of the University of Chicago, realized this in 1939, and withdrew the University of Chicago from intercollegiate football, even though Chicago had fielded the national champion in the year 1905. Though Chicago does now have a Division III team, many people never forgave Hutchins, but the University of Chicago has continued to be a great university and has been free of some problems faced by other schools, such as recruitment violations, questions about the graduation rates of athletes, and how to deal with alumni when they demand that coaches be fired.

Argument #4: Awarding athletic scholarships has led to corruption in college sports, not the least of which is under-the-table monetary payments to football and basketball players, the sports that attract the largest amounts of money to the sponsoring institutions.

The alleged fraud at the University of North Carolina is possibly the most egregious violation of NCAA rules ever reported, and one that may yet have a sweeping effect on college athletics and on the reputations of former basketball and football coaches at UNC. None of the coaches have admitted that they knew what was going on.

There are many stories like that of Arian Foster, a University of Tennessee running back, now with Houston in the NFL, who said that he received money frequently while playing college football. He said that "People offer you money all the time, just random people usually. It happens all the time when you are in college and your family does

not make a lot of money, and it's hard to make ends meet." Coach Phillip Fulmer said that he knew nothing about any players at Tennessee receiving money.

Granted, some of these offenses are perpetrated by alumni and other fans, who are not employees of the colleges but are willing to put up money to insure winning records for those schools. And many coaches, who are by far the highest paid employees of those schools, have been known to ignore and sometimes to participate in those corrupt practices.

The current system, as it has developed among Division I schools, has become one that raises serious questions about the moral and ethical fairness of a business that reaps huge profits for management and a degree of exploitation of labor that has not been seen since the days before Teddy Roosevelt gained fame as a trust buster.

But so much for the affirmative position. I will now proceed on the assumption that I am on the opposing team and will present the negative arguments as to why such a ban on athletic scholarships should not be passed.

Negative position # 1: Tuition and other expenses for students who represent their school in varsity athletic events provide the financial support for many students, who would otherwise not be able to pay for the cost of college. Many athletes can be good students in college classes but not be able to compete for academic scholarships. Such students should be able to use their natural abilities – which are athletic rather than academic – to further their desire for education. Don't forget that at least two former U.S. presidents – Gerald Ford and George H.W. Bush – were college athletes.

Negative position #2: High level college athletics provide an enriching experience for other college students, and alumni as well. Cheer leading, taking part in pep rallies, and fraternity parties that follow a big football or basketball victory are fond memories for many college graduates, including several of you, I am sure. The great contests between the Wildcats and the Cardinals or the Crimson Tide and the Volunteers are cherished memories which both students and

alumni from those schools hold dear.

Negative position #3: Big time college athletics are a source of financial support for many of the Division I colleges that offer scholarships. The budgets for other sports that do not produce revenue usually depend on the receipts from football and basketball games. Alabama chancellor Robert Witt once stated that coach Nick Saban is “the best financial investment this university has ever made.” He could say that even though Saban draws a salary of over seven million dollars per year, currently the highest in college football.

Many believe that college choices by students are enhanced by high level sports activities, which, of course, ensures more tuition money, which includes larger grants for state supported schools, and better incomes for college staff members, particularly those in athletics.

That concludes the debate. I will now close with a few thoughts of my own, after which, I will welcome your rebuttal, either to one of the positions set forth or to the paper itself.

When Auburn University won the national collegiate football championship in the year 2010, it reported a net monetary profit of 37 million dollars. Granted, that was somewhat less than the 43 million dollars reported by the NFL champion Green Bay Packers – but the Packers are a business, while Auburn University is supposed to be an educational institution.

The University of Kentucky announced last June that it had signed a 210 million dollar contract with JMI Sports, which apparently makes JMI a partner with the university in managing intercollegiate sports activity.

A book on college sports, called The System, published in 2013, stated that (College football) “propels a billion dollar revenue machine that turns out a few stars, throws away 97% of the players when it is done with them, and converts institutions of learning into centers of entertainment.”

Kansas State football coach Bill Snyder stated last summer that television has too much control of college sports and that education has become a second thought. Snyder said that “College athletics, football in particular...has sold out. We are all about dollars and cents.”

Recently, however, some Northwestern University football players formed a labor union and sought to be recognized as employees of the university. Most of the 85 Northwestern football scholarship players are said to support the formation of a union. The team's quarterback, Kain Colter, an all-conference player, stated that he was discouraged from taking chemistry and other courses required for premedical students, in order to concentrate on football, his primary occupation. Northwestern is a university with the highest academic ranking of any school in the Big 10 conference. In March of 2014 a regional director of the National Labor Relations Board agreed that football players at Northwestern qualify as employees, under federal law. Northwestern University filed an appeal, and it is likely that the matter may eventually reach the supreme court.

Apparently realizing the possibility that student athletes may have to be paid in the near future, the NCAA Board of Directors, at its meeting last August, voted to change its policy so that the five biggest Division I conferences, including the ACC, Big 10, Big 12, Pac 12, and SEC (the 65 top college teams) could unilaterally change rules so as to provide more monetary benefits to athletes. It is expected that this will lead to more generous stipends to football and basketball players to cover costs beyond tuition, room, board, books, and supplies. One might wonder what other expenses a college student has, but I doubt that this will be a permanent way of preventing their receiving a direct payment for their services, when you consider all the problems of devising salary schedules for starters vs. substitutes, quarterbacks vs. second string defensive linemen, and so on.

Basketball and football, as played in the United States, are American sports. The current games are modern versions of ancient games played by children and young people for centuries – games in which a ball or some other object was carried, kicked, or bounced from one end of a field to another and then either carried across a line, kicked over some type of goal or thrown through a basket – games played for fun, with players from one school, village, or neighborhood matching themselves against those from another locale. The reward for playing was the joy of competition and displaying one's physical strength or speed.

Gone are the days, such as those described in Owen Johnson's great novel, Stover at Yale, when a college student could enter a school, join a fraternity,

and then go out for a varsity sport, such as football, with the hope of some day becoming the team's captain, as did Dink Stover, the novel's hero, who did not weigh over 160 lbs. (Of course Stover played for Yale, not Alabama or Ohio State).

In those days, the players also attended the same classes as other students, without professional tutors, and most of them were studying something that they thought might help them make a living later, as the schools contained no cadre of semi-pro athletes destined to sign million dollar contracts after one or two years on a college team. Of course the performance by athletes on the field or gymnasium is the product which those universities have to sell, and current ticket prices show that the schools are not reluctant to cash in on that product. The players, of course, currently receive no share of the profits that a team may generate, unless you count under the table payments, which are said to be quite widespread. Workers in other businesses formed unions many years ago to avoid exploitation of labor by the captains of industry. Not so in college athletics.

It was generally believed in the days when football and basketball first became part of the college scene that the athletic team experience some how contributed to the building of character that made them better men and better citizens, giving rise to such maxims as "Many of the great battles of Great Britain were won on the playing fields of Eton." Today many of the great battles of college football in America are fought out in off campus court rooms where either scholarship players are facing various misbehavior charges brought by the local constabulary, or overzealous alumni are being charged with under the table contributions to the financial welfare of supposedly amateur student athletes. I heard recently of one fan's prediction of the record of his school's football team next year. It was eight and four, by which he meant eight indictments and four convictions.

I leave it to you to decide what the role of sports should be in our colleges and universities.