

The Racialization of the Student-Athlete

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Ivory Christian didn't feel like a student. The star middle linebacker for the 1988 Permian High School football team of Odessa, Texas, which Buzz Bissinger immortalized in the book *Friday Night Lights*, arrived on the campus of Texas Christian University with an athletic scholarship and plans to major in business. The only member of his high school class to earn a coveted Division I football scholarship, Christian quickly rose up the TCU depth chart in his first year, making big plays off the bench against Texas A&M before earning starts against Southern Mississippi and North Texas rival Southern Methodist. He had proven himself on the field, but when Bissinger checked in on him at the end of his first semester, Christian expressed misgivings about his place on the overwhelmingly white Fort Worth campus, 300 miles east of his West Texas hometown. The first person in his Black working-class family to attend college, he stood out. "When he looked around the campus the only blacks he saw were athletes, and sports seemed to be their only reason for being at the school," Bissinger wrote of his post-book interview with Christian. "And sometimes, it often felt as if he wasn't playing football so much as working at it, getting up every day at six to make study hall, then going to practices and meetings from two in the afternoon to six-thirty in the evening."¹

Bissinger had portrayed Christian as the most "ambivalent" of the Permian High stars. The introspective linebacker didn't buy into the rah-rah atmosphere surrounding the team he co-captained. "Let the

other players dream their foolish dreams about getting recruited by a big-time school," he thought.² Christian didn't fantasize about playing in the NFL. He wanted to be a Baptist pastor, having converted—after dreaming of a "tiny light" at the end of a long, narrow tunnel—early in high school. Christian swore off alcohol. He never cursed. He preached at Rose of Sharon Missionary Baptist, his pastor introducing him as "the reverend Ivory Christian." Bissinger often noticed him reading the Bible at his locker before games and at halftime. Ahead of his senior season at Permian, Christian contemplated quitting football. He worried that it conflicted with his faith and with his desire to one day earn a doctorate in theology. He dreamed of congregants addressing him as "Dr. Christian." He consulted his pastor, who told him to stick with the sport. "If playing football can get you to college, if playing football can get you an education, then play football," the pastor said.³ Christian took his advice, and TCU came calling.

Christian never earned a degree in business or a doctorate in theology. He never became the pastor of the largest Baptist church in California, as he had once imagined his future. He hurt his knee in his sophomore season and dropped to third string. He and his position coach butted heads and, fed up with sitting on the bench, he quit. Two decades earlier, the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) had made athletic scholarships contingent on continuing participation, so Christian, whose father drove a truck for a living, lost his scholarship and had to leave TCU.⁴ (Athletic scholarships had also, since their formal inception in 1956, excluded recipients from need-based aid.)⁵ He eventually earned an associate's degree at Odessa College, but the irony wasn't lost on Christian that college football hadn't facilitated but undermined his education.⁶ The campus culture and the structure of his scholarship—the structure of all athletic scholarships—sent him the message that he didn't belong, that he didn't entirely deserve to be there. His services no longer needed on the football field, the university showed him the door.

Most readers of *Friday Night Lights* or fans of the 2004 film adaptation remember not the ambivalence of Ivory Christian but the tragedy of Boobie Miles, the star running back of the Permian Panthers who, due to a knee injury, never played for one of the premier college programs that had aggressively recruited him as a rising senior. Gregarious and fearless on the field, Miles, who had spent time in a foster home before his uncle took him in, had received interest from, among others, LSU, Nebraska, Notre Dame, Oklahoma, and UCLA. Texas A&M had sent him twenty-three separate letters praising his play and selling him on a future in College Station. When his leg got caught underneath him at a preseason scrimmage and another player fell on it, he came away limping. He had, he would later learn, torn his ACL. Bissinger observed

student managers removing Miles's pads for him, stripping him of "all the accoutrements" that made him "look a little like Robo Cop" on the field until he "looked like what he was—an eighteen-year-old kid who was scared to death."⁷ When the director Peter Berg adapted the book, he elevated that drama further with a scene in which the injured Miles cries on his uncle's shoulder after clearing out his locker: "Now what we gonna do? I can't do nothing else but play football."⁸ The rapper Big K.R.I.T. wrote a song titled "Hometown Hero" about Miles. Numerous professional football players, including current Carolina Panthers running back Miles Sanders, have been nicknamed "Boobie" after him. "Of all the themes raised in the book," Bissinger later acknowledged, "the tragedy of Boobie Miles is the most important, and the most enduring, one."⁹

Christian's experience at TCU raises questions about the "tragedy" of Miles's career. What constitutes the tragedy? That Miles didn't get to join his teammate in a system that would have enticed him with the privileges of a four-year education and yet simultaneously denied him those privileges? If Bissinger had written a college sequel to *Friday Night Lights*, it would have been the tragedy not of Boobie Miles but of Ivory Christian, not the player who didn't make it but the one who did.

College sports have long functioned to mark the difference between being on campus and belonging there. At TCU, Christian could see the difference. He was there, sure. He was enrolled. He was celebrated even. But he also felt like he'd been handed not a membership but a guest pass. For the first fifty years of its history, the NCAA enforced the principle of amateurism, a principle borrowed from the British tradition of the sporting gentleman who competed for moral edification and nothing more. Instituted at the height of Jim Crow, amateurism primarily functioned to police the class composition of the white student body. Any excessively gifted or competitive athlete could not be a gentleman. Any working-class student was suspected of being a recruited athlete—a hired hand, a ringer. In 1956, the NCAA formally established the athletic scholarship under the banner of the "student-athlete." Introduced amid the mass integration of football and basketball, the concept of the student-athlete primarily functioned to police the racial composition of the integrating student body. Any scholarship athlete was suspected of being academically unqualified. Any Black student was assumed to be a scholarship athlete. For a time, southern universities used athletic scholarships to keep their football and basketball squads white by recruiting the best white athletes from the North. Then they, like their northern peers, used them to dictate the terms of a slow, uneven integration.

Looking around TCU's tree-lined, buff-brick campus, Christian wondered whether he felt out of place as a Black student among white classmates or as a student-athlete among nonathletes. In the public

imagination, the two identities had, over the preceding decades, blurred. (White student-athletes at predominantly white universities could, we might say, pass as nonathletes.) College sports offered then, and offer now, a way of talking about class, race, gender, and belonging on campus without disturbing our faith in educational merit and the inequalities it justifies. A broader historical framework than that typically offered in accounts of labor exploitation in college sports is necessary to appreciate the flexible racialization of the student-athlete so that, as conservatives and liberals unite in questioning athlete admissions, we might better understand whose interests, whose educations, are at stake this time and the next. It may be Ivory Christian's, and it may not.

Since the civil rights era, sociologists of sport have sought to temper sports industry propaganda. Sports partisans are fond of citing Martin Luther King's congratulatory remarks to Jackie Robinson on the occasion of his 1962 induction into the Baseball Hall of Fame: "He was a sit-inner before the sit-ins, a freedom rider before the freedom rides."¹⁰ Sports are, for them, always leading the way toward a better, brighter, more just American future. It is perhaps for this reason that sociologists have forcefully argued that sports are not exceptional, that they simply reflect their social contexts. Tired of hearing endlessly repeated stories of racial "breakthroughs," Harry Edwards insisted that sports were not "a rose flourishing in the middle of a wasteland" but "part and parcel of that wasteland."¹¹ In setting out his influential "Program for a Sociology of Sport," Pierre Bourdieu reminded us that "the space of sports is not a self-contained universe."¹² For Billy Hawkins, more recently, the Black college athlete is best understood as living in the shadow of slavery, hoeing the modern equivalent of "cotton and tobacco fields," now in helmet and pads.¹³ Edwards, Bourdieu, Hawkins, and other sociologists want the study of sports to be more, well, sociological. Sports are, for some, a cure; for others, a symptom. But they can also—as the formative, post-civil rights stretch from the late 1960s to the early 1990s demonstrates—play a role in constituting and stabilizing the racial order. They can, as Ben Carrington argues, reproduce race.¹⁴ We ought to, as the historian Brenda Elsey suggests, approach them as "'what really happens' rather than as a byproduct of something else."¹⁵

Athletic racialization can be difficult to see because sports mostly operate at the mediating level of the organization or institution, not the interpersonal level (of the sports partisan) or the state level (of the sociologist of race). It is organizations, constituting and constituted by racial processes, that, the critical race theorist Victor Ray argues, "magnify the power and depth of racial projects and are a primary terrain of racial contestation."¹⁶ They make and fortify racial structure and ideology, binding one to the other. The NCAA, the athletic conference, and the university itself are prime examples of what Ray calls "racialized organizations." Taken

from an organizational perspective, sports are something less than a cure and something more than a symptom. They are a pivotal pathway of racialization. They distribute resources along racial lines (and sometimes move and make those lines) and then justify that distribution. Just ask the student-athlete. Just ask Ivory Christian.

When Bissinger visited Christian in Odessa in 2015, he discovered that the former football star, now in his mid-forties, maintained a small shrine to his playing days at Permian High, including a framed photograph of himself from Bissinger's book, seated on the bench and looking out at the field, his helmet off and sweat running down his face. Nowhere in the house did he find evidence of Christian's brief college career.

"That's it?" Christian asked Bissinger, when the author stood to leave.

"That's it."¹⁷

Amateurs, Student-Athletes, and Dumb Jocks

TCU recruited Ivory Christian as a student-athlete, a variation on the founding ideal of the NCAA: the amateur. Formed in 1906 in response to public alarm over injuries and on-field deaths in college football, the NCAA, then the Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the United States, rapidly reorganized itself around the principle of amateurism and a commitment to the level playing field. At the fourth annual meeting of the association, in 1909, R. Tait McKenzie, a professor of physical education at the University of Pennsylvania, took it upon himself to provide a "Chronicle of the Amateur Spirit" for the assembled university presidents, athletic directors, and coaches. He told the story of the rise of athletics in ancient Greece, which, in his version of events, culminated and collapsed in the Roman era with the arrival of "a class of useless professional athletes hippodroming about the country, an unathletic nation, and a degraded sport." Professionalism had corrupted Roman athletics, and perhaps even brought down the Roman Empire, and the association must not, McKenzie counseled, let the fate of the ancients befall the modern campus. It must "restore the sport to those for whom it was designed, the regular student body."¹⁸ It could not have hired hands hippodroming among the better classes.

The football powerhouses of the time, including Penn, nodded in agreement and then, with the support of deep-pocketed boosters, continued recruiting athletes to campus. Since the first Harvard-Yale boat race in 1852, college athletes have received "financial favors," the sports historian Ronald Smith writes. College athletics have "never been truly amateur."¹⁹ R. Tait McKenzie could preach against the perils of professionalism, but his association had no regulatory power and no budget. It subscribed to the principle of "home rule," calling on universities and colleges to regulate themselves, which meant that

some did and most—the schools that wanted to win games and alumni contributions—did not.

The NCAA didn't attempt to overturn home rule until 1948, when, enjoying its first revenue from the new national collegiate basketball tournament, it adopted "principles for the conduct of intercollegiate athletics" or, as the association branded them, the "sanity codes." The Southeastern Conference had authorized the awarding of full athletic scholarships in 1935, and the Big Ten, which didn't openly allow athletic scholarships, protested, raising concerns not about amateurism but about its member schools' ability to compete against a semiprofessionalized Alabama or LSU. The sanity codes required that universities admit athletes on the same basis as other students, placed restrictions on off-campus recruiting, limited aid to tuition and fees, and prohibited booster clubs and other external agencies from assisting athletes. The sanity codes didn't last. When seven schools (the "sinful seven") refused to comply, the NCAA leadership couldn't muster the votes to ban them, and the sanity codes died.

Into that regulatory vacuum stepped Walter Byers, a thirty-year-old former sportswriter whom the NCAA hired in 1951 as its first full-time executive director. Byers, difficult to miss in toupee and cowboy boots, knew what he was up against. "To say we were the police is a large exaggeration," he later wrote. "Our task more closely resembled that of study hall monitors maintaining some semblance of order within a rambunctious college family."²⁰ But Byers recognized the opportunity in scandal. When the defending national champion University of Kentucky basketball team got caught in a point-shaving scheme, the new NCAA head assembled an ad hoc infractions board and hit Kentucky with a one-year ban. It was, Byers later admitted, a bluff. The NCAA didn't have the authority to penalize the university. But the UK administration accepted the ban, against legendary coach Adolph Rupp's objection, and Byers had his mandate.

Byers served as the executive director of the NCAA until his retirement in 1988, as TCU recruited middle linebacker Ivory Christian out of Odessa, Texas. He made his most lasting contribution to college athletics in 1956, when he subtly shifted the NCAA's philosophy from the ideal of the amateur to the responsibilities of the student-athlete. In 1950, Congress introduced the Unrelated Business Income Tax, targeting tax-exempt organizations (churches, universities) that engaged in side hustles unrelated to their tax-exempt purpose. Did a college football team constitute an educational or a commercial enterprise? Did it deserve tax-exempt status? In 1955, the widow of Ray Dennison, a right guard for the Fort Lewis A&M Aggies of Durango, Colorado, who had died in an on-field collision, filed a claim for death benefits with the Colorado Industrial Commission under the Workmen's Compensation

Act. Had Dennison been an employee of the college? Had he died on the job? Byers had his answers ready. "We crafted the term *student-athlete*, and soon it was embedded in all NCAA rules and interpretations as a mandated substitute for such words as players and athletes," he wrote in his 1995 memoir *Unsportsmanlike Conduct*, a kind of mea culpa for the sins of the NCAA under his leadership.²¹ Byers knew that he had to fend off the "dreaded notion" of the college athlete as an employee; it jeopardized the NCAA's tax-exempt status and emerging profit model.²² But he also couldn't afford to minimize the athlete's participation in intercollegiate sports to a mere extracurricular activity. The college athlete had to be something less than an employee and something more than a student at play. A year after Dennison's death, Byers amended the NCAA constitution, reorganizing it around the concept of the student-athlete, which allowed athletic departments to emphasize the student's responsibilities one day and the athlete's the next.²³ College football teams retained their tax-exempt status. Dennison's widow lost her case. Universities and colleges couldn't offer scholarships to promising football or basketball players, but they could offer them to prospective student-athletes, who, until 1956, hadn't existed.²⁴

Although Byers, with taxes and state industrial commissions on his mind, invented the term *student-athlete* to situate sports within the academic sphere of the university, it formalized the college athlete's status on campus as a not-quite student. Whereas the sanity codes had attempted to minimize the difference between athletes and nonathletes, the reforms of 1956 had the opposite effect, sanctioning the athletic scholarship at a national level and establishing a separate path to admission. Gail Bederman, Ben Carrington, and other historians and sociologists of race and gender trace the idea of the dumb jock to the career of Jack Johnson, whose reign as heavyweight boxing champion from 1908 to 1915 threatened white men's sense of racial superiority and led them to disassociate intellectual from physical ability.²⁵ If a man could fight, as Johnson could, then he couldn't think. If he could think, then he couldn't fight. White men attributed to themselves the "manly" qualities of rationality and sophistication and attributed to white immigrant and Black men, whom they often fetishized, the "masculine" qualities of aggression and virility. The invention of the student-athlete, who arrived on campus through an alternative admissions process that privileged physicality, gave institutional form to the idea of the dumb jock. It set the athlete at the periphery of the university, a celebrated symbol of the school but not quite of it—a strong body, an empty mind.

But the student-athlete was not, at first, Black—quite the opposite. The greatest resistance to the sanity codes and other attempts to rein in athletic scholarships came from the Southern, Southwest, and Southeastern Conferences, which remained segregated at the birth of

the student-athlete in 1956. Unwilling to recruit Black players in their own states, southern teams used athletic scholarships to incentivize the best white players in the North to leave home and suit up for the Alabama Crimson Tide, the Georgia Tech Yellow Jackets, and the TCU Horned Frogs. "The South wanted to use the grant-in-aid to plunder the rich resources of white athletes in other parts of the country," Byers acknowledged.²⁶ The implementation of the sanity codes led the three major southern conferences to consider seceding from the NCAA, a threat that has drawn more than a few comparisons to the Battle of Fort Sumter.²⁷ The southern conferences welcomed the NCAA's decision to allow athletic scholarships in 1956 because it allowed them to remain competitive with a gradually integrating Big Ten without opening their doors to the Black players who had made neighboring HBCU squads some of the best in the nation. The invention of the student-athlete appeased the South and perhaps slowed the integration of college athletics. If TCU professors assumed that Ivory Christian played football because of his race, as Christian suspected they did, their predecessors in the 1950s might have assumed the same thing about a big-shouldered white student from out of state—another mercenary, they might have guessed, brought in from the North to throw, catch, tackle, and uphold Jim Crow.

But not everyone embraced the shift from amateurism to the code of the student-athlete. In 1945, the presidents of eight private East Coast universities and colleges signed an agreement requiring that football players "be truly representative of the student body and not composed of a group of specially recruited and trained athletes."²⁸ In 1952, they signed a second agreement eliminating spring football practice and banning participation in end-of-year bowl games. A third agreement in 1954, which formally established the Ivy League, reaffirmed the presidents' opposition to athletic scholarships and extended the restrictions to all intercollegiate sports. Ivy League institutions "do not award athletic scholarships or subscribe to the concept of the 'student athlete,'" Robert Goheen, the president of Princeton, later wrote in a memo to the NCAA, protesting the implementation of separate admissions standards for recruited athletes.²⁹ Ivy League performance in football and basketball fell off a cliff after the presidents' agreements of the 1940s and 1950s. Although critics pointed out that the league prohibited athletic scholarships in name only, with some member institutions continuing to operate as if they belonged to the Big Ten or SEC, the formation of the Ivy League from a declared opposition to athletic scholarships reinforced the idea that academics and big-time sports did not mix, that to succeed at one meant giving up the other. Princeton did not enroll jocks because jocks by definition lacked the intelligence and scholarly priorities of

the Princeton man. Many have pushed back on this bifurcation. The philosopher Grant Farred situates Muhammad Ali and other athletes within the tradition of what he calls, adapting Antonio Gramsci's concept of the organic intellectual, the "vernacular intellectual."³⁰ But the image of the dumb jock has persisted.

Southern universities used the concept of the student-athlete to keep their athletic departments white. Eastern universities used it to maintain their elite status. The term functioned as a dividing line between the deserving and the undeserving. Who belonged on the football field? In the classroom? Who could wear the crimson of Alabama? Of Harvard? Scouring the country for light-skinned talent, Alabama enrolled white jocks, elevating them to something more than students. Harvard declared them dumb, nonstudents, trespassers on campus. Then Black athletes arrived in Tuscaloosa.

The Revolt against the Black Athlete

If the term *student-athlete* cast the white jock as a not-quite student, it situated the Black football or basketball player as something less. A Black athlete, Harry Edwards wrote in his field-making 1969 study *The Revolt of the Black Athlete*, "finds that his equals are not his white teammates, but the basketballs, baseballs, jockey straps, and other forms of property and equipment—all of which, like him, are important and vital to sports." The recruitment of Black athletes to predominantly white institutions in the 1960s did not constitute justice but, he concluded, "the modern-day equivalent of the slave trade."³¹ Edwards discovered this himself at San Jose State College, where, one of just a few dozen Black students on a campus of more than 24,000, he starred at center for the basketball team and broke the school record in the discus. But sports also, he realized, offered a lever of power. In 1967, Edwards, then a lecturer at his alma mater, led a boycott of the opening football game, which San Jose State had contracted to host under a \$12,000 breach of contract clause.³² The college was forced to cancel the game, and Edwards formed, with San Jose State sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos, the Olympic Project for Human Rights.

What Edwards declared a revolt Walter Byers considered a riot. "Higher education's critical shortcomings of today," he wrote in his 1995 memoir, "took root during the riots of the 1960s, when more than a few college presidents surrendered academic and campus social standards to the lowest common denominator among the faculties and students." The NCAA and athletic departments perceived the radicalization of the Black athlete as an existential threat to college sports. Although he denied that his resistance to athlete demands in the late 1960s had anything to do with the changing racial profile of the top programs ("I

do not believe now, anymore than I did then, that the renewed search in the 1960s for an academic standard was the work of white racists"), Byers couldn't argue with the timeline.³³ The second that predominantly white institutions sought the services of more than one or two Black athletes at a time, the NCAA rewrote the rulebook and redefined the student-athlete. It transformed student-athletes into what the sports historian Michael Oriard calls "athlete-students" and what Harry Edwards described as athletic department property.³⁴

The NCAA launched a revolt against the Black athlete as Edwards challenged the San Jose State administration and then the International Olympic Committee. From 1956 to the mid-1960s, when intercollegiate athletics remained the almost exclusive province of white men, the athletic scholarship held greater value than most academic scholarships. The NCAA barred universities from canceling a recruited athlete's scholarship for failure to participate, and many schools guaranteed four years of comped tuition and housing. The white jock might have carried a stigma in the classroom, but he also didn't have to be a jock. He could quit without penalty. Then, in 1967, the year that the first Black player suited up for an SEC football team, the NCAA decided to devalue the athletic scholarship. At the annual convention at the Sheraton-Lincoln Hotel in Houston, Dick Clausen, the athletic director of the University of Arizona and a former football coach, took the floor to introduce a "new interpretation" of NCAA policy that would allow universities to cancel athletic scholarships when athletes quit the teams that recruited them or "misrepresented" their abilities (meaning hid an injury). Clausen's interpretation, which gave the lie to the fiction of the student-athlete, passed with a vote of 214 to 13.³⁵ Student-athletes thereafter had to continually earn their place at a university on the field. Clausen didn't acknowledge race as a factor in the decision. Neither did Byers, who later admitted that "the stepped-up college recruitment of black athletes was a sensitive issue that we preferred not to discuss in public."³⁶ But, after 1967, many of the vaunted perks of the athletic scholarship belonged to a white past.

The next year, Jack Olsen, a senior editor at *Sports Illustrated* and the author of an authorized biography of Muhammad Ali, punctured the myth of the benevolent athletic department in his five-part series "The Black Athlete." "The cliché that sports has been good to the Negro has been accepted by black and white, liberal and conservative, intellectual and red-neck," Olsen wrote. But his investigation detailed a constrained, isolating college experience almost tyrannically governed by the white coach, who served as the Black athlete's academic adviser, dorm monitor, and stingy benefactor. When he asked one former college football player what his athletic career had given him, the man answered, "Well, let's see

... At the University of New Mexico I got a sweater. At Cameron State College in Oklahoma I got a blanket. At Southwestern State I got a jacket and a blanket."³⁷ Olsen concluded that, far from the leading edge of the struggle to integrate national life, as some athletic directors and coaches described them, intercollegiate sports had conscripted Black athletic labor without altering their white "ethics and folkways."³⁸

Olsen's series set off alarm bells at the NCAA for how it showcased what he called, a year before Edwards's iconic book, "a revolt by the black athlete against the framework and attitudes of American sport" and for the sheer number of Black athletes, current and former, willing to speak with him on the record and criticize administrators and coaches. Football players at the University of Washington told Olsen that what their coaches called "The Husky Way" amounted to "The White Way."³⁹ Black players at the University of Kansas detailed a system of position stacking that ensured that white teammates didn't have to compete for their starting positions. One athlete shared a letter in which his coach had described his behavior as an "animal response" and informed him, "I am giving you a scholarship and that is more than plenty, and you still have to prove your worth."⁴⁰ The athletic directors and coaches who sat for interviews with Olsen, reciting the usual clichés about not seeing color and instilling an ethic of hard work and perseverance in young men, appeared out of touch at best when quoted alongside athletes declaring them bullies and bigots.

The NCAA, alarmed at the open defiance of its authority, took action. At the 1969 convention in downtown Los Angeles, David Swank, legal counsel to the University of Oklahoma, proposed an additional revision to the association's financial aid policy allowing athletic departments to terminate the scholarships of athletes who committed acts of "manifest disobedience."⁴¹ Charles Henry of historically Black Grambling College, first to speak, asked, "Is this legislation the result of articles that appeared in *Sports Illustrated* last summer?" No one answered his question. He then asked whether an athlete's choice to wear an afro could constitute disobedience under the proposed rule change. Could athletes lose their scholarships for a haircut? (They could, it turned out, as subsequent events at Oregon State showed.) Henry continued: "If the coaches told these boys not to be interviewed, is this freedom of speech under the First Amendment or construed to be disruptive action under the interpretation that we are asked to adopt?"⁴² Swank responded by suggesting that an athlete could always go to the NCAA Council (to himself, that is) to report abuse. The chairman of the Athletic Council at the University of Louisville interjected that it disappointed him to see the discussion "degenerate in terms of color and race," and, with Henry outnumbered, Swank's measure passed with a two-thirds majority.⁴³ The

New York Times headline the next day stated plainly what Swank and his allies refused to admit: "College Athletes Who Protest to Face Loss of Financial Aid."⁴⁴

After a sit-in at the University of Texas at El Paso in 1967, an athletic department administrator had suggested limiting the recruitment of Black athletes to one or two "stars like O. J. Simpson," as Olsen recounted—an unrealistic plan if UTEP had any hope of remaining competitive in football, basketball, and track and field.⁴⁵ After 1969, the UTEP athletic department didn't have to forfeit Black talent to curb Black protest. The NCAA had furnished it with the tools to run a counterinsurgency.

Coaches undertook their own media offensive that year. They found a sympathetic ear with Olsen's colleague at *Sports Illustrated* John Underwood, who, in the three-part series "The Desperate Coach," depicted them as besieged defenders of self-sacrifice and order on campuses overrun by hippies and Black radicals. "In the privacy of their offices, over breakfast in strange towns, wherever two or three coaches get together, they talk about The Problem," Underwood wrote.⁴⁶ A basketball coach at a small college in Pittsburgh whose players had demanded his firing explained, "It probably originated as a black problem, but today it's not race. It's all types."⁴⁷ The integration of college sports had caused a wider athlete rebellion—The Problem, as Underwood called it—and now even formerly compliant white football and basketball players considered the rule-setting coach a kind of "neo-fascistic racist."⁴⁸ One coach after another bemoaned how their players diverged from the masculine ideal of their youth, contrasting the clean-shaven white stars of another time with the sideburned Black stars now giving them hell. The new, integrated generation lacked restraint, the coaches said, telling Underwood how their players refused to cut their hair, wear a tie, and listen to them. One thought his indulged in sex and drugs ("half of them have probably tried pot").⁴⁹ Black athletes had, the desperate coach suggested, given their white teammates a lesson in gender and sexual unruliness, an unruliness that needed to be reined in, policed. The future of sports as the great teacher of men depended on it. Most of the coaches who spoke to Underwood didn't want their name used in the story, Underwood reported, for fear of reprisal from their athletes. Something, he thought, had to be done.

Underwood didn't buy the myth of the amateur. He recognized college football and basketball players as semi-professionals and thought they should behave accordingly, respecting the authority of the coach as employees did their employers, albeit without pay. He applauded the NCAA policy revision allowing athletic departments to cut the scholarships of rebellious athletes but also wondered whether it could possibly be enough. Out of fear for their jobs, coaches now bent

to what Underwood called “the Irritational Act, the Superdemander, the Double Standard.”⁵⁰ Could a coach still be a coach? he wondered. Had university administrations that had once backed the uncompromising coach surrendered to the revolt of the Black athlete? Underwood’s series encouraged readers to wax nostalgic for a time when athletes played by the rules, never complained, and put team before self—a nostalgia that, as the critical race studies scholar David Leonard observes, equates leadership, resilience, and self-sacrifice with whiteness, with the all-white teams of leather helmets and Jim Crow.⁵¹ College sports weren’t what they used to be, the coaches said, letting Underwood’s readers fill in the rest.

Yet, for all their color-blind posturing, NCAA leaders, athletic directors, and coaches welcomed a certain version of athletic racial politics. The revolt of the Black athlete had risen alongside and inspired a wider athletic revolution of women, athletes with disabilities, and student antiwar protestors. This gathering storm stirred fears that Black male athletes alone could not. It represented a demand not just for racial justice in sports but for a total remaking of sporting culture. Challenges to the politics of race were less threatening to these men, as the sociologist Douglas Hartmann puts it, than challenges to the politics of sports.⁵² A revolt of the Black athlete they could, with occasional affirmations of equality and inclusion, weather; a revolt of all athletes would be more difficult to contain and absorb. To ward off the latter, the former would have to be tamped down.

The NCAA’s 1969 rule change still required ADs and coaches to accuse athletes of “manifest disobedience” to terminate their scholarships—a move that few, as Underwood noted in his series, wanted to risk making. In 1973, the association made things easier on Underwood’s desperate coach. At the convention at the Palmer House in Chicago’s Loop, Wade Stinson, the athletic director of the University of Kansas, proposed limiting all scholarships to one-year renewable grants. Other ADs had introduced similar proposals as far back as 1965 without success. Allowing athletic departments that kind of discretion, the NCAA knew, exposed the system to accusations of pay-for-play professionalism. But Stinson’s proposal won approval in Chicago without effort—no discussion, no opposition, a quick show of hands.⁵³ “It took less than 90 seconds,” Byers remembered years later, condemning the policy change, a policy change he supported at the time, as a “major extension of NCAA cartel authority.”⁵⁴ It might have lent greater authority to the NCAA, but mostly it empowered member athletic departments to get rid of athletes without having to cut them. They could thereafter just not renew the scholarship of an athlete who had ceased to produce yards or buckets or who had spoken out against racial injustice in the locker

room or on campus. The student-athlete, for a brief time the beneficiary of a full ride, now had to play, couldn't speak, and still faced the threat of dismissal at the end of every year. Byers might have "crafted" the term *student-athlete* in 1956, but the NCAA reinvented it amid the revolt of the Black athlete.

The racialization of the student-athlete as Black wildly misrepresented the demographics of the athletic department, where white athletes continued to predominate in non-revenue-producing sports. Transcripts of the policy debates at the NCAA conventions of the late 1960s and early 1970s make it clear that everyone was talking about a relatively narrow segment of college athletes. ADs were not especially concerned about tennis players quitting their squads or speaking out against university administrations. Some white athletes in non-revenue-producing sports got caught in the web of new restrictive policies, but most benefited from the racial shift, enjoying some of the perks of the money brought in by the football and basketball teams—better training facilities and dining plans, nicer gear, more comfortable travel accommodations—while being held up as the true ideal of the scholar-athlete. Ray, the critical race theorist, describes racialized organizations as structures that limit or amplify the agency of different groups through unequal access to institutional resources.⁵⁵ As the NCAA and the athletic department moved to limit the agency of Black athletes, by limiting the security of their scholarships and their freedom of speech, they amplified the agency of white middle- and upper-class athletes in non-revenue-producing sports by redirecting the resources produced by increasingly Black football and basketball squads to them. The student-athlete had been, for a short time, raced white. With the racialization of the student-athlete as Black, white college athletes were freed to return to an earlier model of campus sporting culture. They became, once again, amateurs—the opposite of the professionalized student-athlete. They received additional privileges without needing them. They competed for moral edification, for the love of the game, for the sport of it. The second racialization of the student-athlete had restored the white amateur.

Reform Talk

The revolt of the Black athlete was one among many. Women, athletes with disabilities, and student antiwar protestors had undertaken their own, related campaigns to transform sports on campus. The Bay Area activist Jack Scott hoped that, collectively, these independent revolts might coalesce into a revolution, into what he called "athletics for athletes." Scott, a friend of Harry Edwards, with whom he founded the Oakland-based Institute for the Study of Sport, discerned two

dominant traditions in college athletics: the Spartan tradition of sports as preparation for military service and the British tradition of sports as a means of developing character. He envisioned another way, a sporting culture defined by the needs of athletes rather than administrators, coaches, and fans. It wasn't entirely clear what this would look like. "A program of athletics for athletes cannot be outlined in specific detail," he wrote in his 1971 book *The Athletic Revolution*, "for the one thing it would not be is a preconceived system established in advance by a single individual."⁵⁶ His program would be democratic and highly malleable so that each new generation of athletes might make of it what they want. The NCAA, athletic conferences, and university administrations didn't want a revolution. They didn't even particularly want reform. What they were willing to offer was a discussion of possible reform.

After the NCAA moved to a one-year renewable scholarship model, George Hanford, the executive vice president of the College Board, secured grants from the Carnegie Corporation and the Ford Foundation to research the possibility of a study of college sports—not a study itself but, as the title of his 1974 report announced, *An Inquiry into the Need for and Feasibility of a National Study of Intercollegiate Athletics*. (He found a study needed and feasible.) Hanford, who had earned all-American honors in lacrosse at Harvard, questioned whom amateurism served. "The erstwhile coal mining sons of Pennsylvania and their modern counterparts from the black ghettos of urban America or the ice rinks of Canada can well ask," he wrote, "whether amateurism, a privilege of the well-to-do, is consistent with the principle of equality of opportunity."⁵⁷ He was not persuaded by the NCAA's magnanimous posture toward Black athletes and enlisted Roscoe Brown, a professor of education at New York University and a former Tuskegee airman, to lead a task force on issues facing Black athletes at predominantly white and historically Black colleges and universities. Brown's task force found "considerable evidence" of anti-Black discrimination in athletic departments, including "inadequate education programs, lack of tutoring, failure of Black athletes to receive degrees in similar proportion to their white counterparts, inequitable treatment concerning financial aid, summer jobs, and jobs for wives, position stacking, playing quotas, social isolation, limitations on dress, political expression, and dating practice"—and more. In the final report, Hanford directed readers to the appendix containing the task force's findings: "Appendix D should be read in its entirety!"⁵⁸ But the American Council on Education, which published the report, circulated it without the appendices, in the interest, it said, of "timeliness and economy."⁵⁹ Few ever read Brown's paper, and neither the Carnegie Corporation nor the ACE agreed to fund the study Hanford proposed.

In his appendix, Brown addressed the imminent expansion of women's athletics and wondered aloud, as few others had, what it might mean in "the special case of Black women." Would the "more general women's campaign," he asked, meet their needs?⁶⁰ In 1972, Congress had enacted Title IX, which prohibited gender-based discrimination in all educational programs and activities receiving federal assistance, including—as much as the NCAA and most university athletic departments didn't want to admit it—sports. The *Washington Post* declared it a "revolution."⁶¹ Walter Byers called it the "possible doom of intercollegiate sports."⁶² Supporters of the law quoted the sociologist David Riesman, who had observed that "the road to the board room leads through the locker room."⁶³ More opportunities for women in sports could, they hoped, lead to more opportunities in the workplace. But Title IX, as the historian Amira Rose Davis and others have documented, served some more than others. The implementation of the law undercut women's athletic programs at historically Black colleges and universities, including the celebrated track and field squads at Tennessee State and the Tuskegee Institute, which had long awarded athletic scholarships to women. Predominantly white institutions recruited the best Black athletes to their campuses while, as Brown had feared, leaving Black administrators and coaches behind.⁶⁴ Once "the torchbearers for women's sports," in Davis's words, HBCUs struggled to compete, and Black women athletes who enrolled at PWIs encountered athletic departments that had, in the wake of integration, hollowed out the athletic scholarship and placed constraints on athletes' speech.⁶⁵ The revolt against the Black athlete had stymied their revolution.

The architects of Title IX borrowed the law's framework from the Civil Rights Act of 1964, using the struggle against racial discrimination as a model for combatting gender discrimination. Some had, in fact, proposed simply amending Title VI of the Civil Rights Act to include "sex" rather than enacting separate legislation.⁶⁶ The analogy to race left an imprint on the law and cropped up everywhere in conversations around it. Of the 1973 tennis match between Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs, one educator remarked, "I think women felt about Billie Jean beating Riggs the way blacks felt after Joe Louis beat Jim Braddock."⁶⁷ The analogy facilitated Title IX, situating the law in a tradition of legible discrimination and redress, but also obscured how gender interacted with race, suggesting that the former was "like" the latter, not entangled with it. If the NCAA policy changes of the time imagined the Black athlete as male, the implementation of Title IX imagined the female athlete as white.

The analogy to the plight of Black male athletes also helped set women's sports on a path in which the commercial success of men's football and basketball programs was the aspiration and the measure of

progress. Whether this was the best path for women's college sports—compelling cases have been made for and against—it had the undoubted effect of pitting men's programs against women's in a seemingly zero-sum struggle for resources and exposure. The NCAA, conferences, universities, and their corporate and media partners built a multi-billion-dollar industry by taking full advantage of the uncompensated labor of football and basketball players, most of them young Black men. Flush with new cash, athletic departments grew to include more non-revenue-producing sports, many of them women's—all increasingly embracing a commercial model that made them more expensive to operate but rarely profitable. The result: major-conference athletic departments made a lot of money but spent even more. Calls to pay men's football and basketball teams ran up against calls to operate women's teams more like them, and all demands faced the reality of athletic department budgets that had, in true university fashion, tipped into the red.

This was (and still is) thorny and complicated terrain, so it isn't surprising that most reformers chose to address big-time men's sports in isolation, arguing that the pursuit of profit in football and basketball contradicted the mission of higher education. But no university administration wanted to forfeit surging athletic department revenue or cross football-obsessed alumni, so most reform efforts got redirected from questions of capital and labor to the punishment of athletes for poor academic performance. After abandoning Hanford's inquiry in 1974, the American Council on Education got back into the reform game in 1982, forming an ad hoc committee on intercollegiate athletics that, under the leadership of the presidents of Harvard and the University of North Carolina, proposed stricter academic requirements for the admission of first-year athletes, including the establishment of minimum SAT and ACT test scores. The NCAA adopted the committee's recommendations as Proposition 48 at the 1983 convention and scheduled it for implementation in 1986.

Representatives from HBCUs, whom the ACE had not consulted in developing the proposal, balked, calling the move "discriminatory and patently racist."⁶⁸ One HBCU president observed that establishing "arbitrary SAT and ACT cutoff scores" targeted "low-income and minority-group families" that already faced high barriers to entry.⁶⁹ The chancellor of North Carolina A&T State put it even more directly: "The bottom line ultimately is apparently one of the color of a majority of the kids who take the floor as a 'final four' or the omnipotency of the combatants in the Cotton Bowl."⁷⁰ Did Prop 48 constitute an effort to reform the structure of college sports, he seemed to ask, or to control the young Black people dominating the most high-profile events?

The NCAA met the criticism with a study. In 1987, it commissioned the American Institutes for Research to compile a series of reports,

including *The Experiences of Black Intercollegiate Athletes at NCAA Division I Institutions*, which found, to no one's surprise, that Black students were underrepresented on DI campuses (4 percent) and in non-revenue-producing sports (8 percent) but vastly overrepresented in football and men's and women's basketball. It found that 82 percent of Black football and basketball players considered earning a college degree "of the greatest importance" but that many arrived less prepared and with fewer resources than their white classmates and that most faced greater demands on their time from coaches than their white teammates.⁷¹ The report also acknowledged, five years too late, "why some have raised concerns about Proposition 48": the new SAT and ACT minimums affected more than half of all Black football and basketball players.⁷² White athletes in non-revenue-producing sports, who were far more likely to come from middle- and upper-class backgrounds, went mostly unaffected by Prop 48, and their superior academic performance seemed to entitle them, in the eyes of administrators and the public, to the spoils of their revenue-producing peers' commercial success. The white rower received kudos and a new boathouse.

The findings of the American Institutes of Research didn't stop the NCAA from further tightening the screws on Black athletes. Prop 48 had allowed "partial qualifiers" (athletes who met either the grade-point average or the test-score minimum but not both) to enter college on athletic scholarship but not compete as first-year students. Prop 42, which the NCAA adopted at the 1989 convention, eliminated scholarships for partial qualifiers. Georgetown basketball coach John Thompson, one of the few major-conference Black head coaches at the time, walked off the floor before a game in protest. "What Proposition 42 did was accept [the] inequality [in the education system] and compound it," he later said. "By imposing a centralized test on kids who did not receive a centralized education, the NCAA judged disadvantaged kids by the results of the privileged."⁷³ Under Prop 42, Boobie Miles, had he not injured his knee before the Permian Panthers 1988 season, wouldn't have been able to accept a scholarship from one of the DI programs recruiting him. Miles was a partial qualifier. After Thompson's protest, the NCAA backed down on Prop 42, but it continued to redirect the blame for one ugly scandal after another from itself and university administrations to academically struggling athletes. Reforming academic standards for working-class and poor athletes saved it from reforming much of anything else.

The NCAA introduced Props 42 and 48 on the heels of the association's 1981 decision to add women's championships. Byers and the NCAA had lobbied Congress to exclude men's football and basketball from the jurisdiction of Title IX and, when it failed to persuade Washington, fought the implementation of the law in court. For years, the executive director had described Title IX in interviews as potentially ruinous to

college athletics. In 1981, he reversed course, calling the association's decision to host women's championships "a historical commitment by the NCAA to enhance opportunities for women."⁷⁴ An authorized history of the organization published that year suggested that the NCAA had been advocating for gender equality in sports ahead of the 1972 law ("the first notable action [by the NCAA toward gender equality] actually takes place *before* passage of Title IX").⁷⁵ Perhaps Byers had read the writing on the wall. Or perhaps he worried about competition from the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women, which had governed women's sports in the NCAA's absence (and which folded in 1984). But the association also found some utility in the law, using it to fend off demands that it invest resources in facilitating the academic success of Black athletes and working-class and poor athletes who, without a full athletic scholarship, had nothing to fall back on. We can't assist Black and brown male athletes, it could claim, because of the cost of women's programs; we can't build women's programs because of the needs of Black and brown male athletes. Byers had discovered, or stumbled upon, the strategy that Scott had warned against in *The Athletic Revolution*: he had isolated one revolt from another, leaving them "fighting among themselves" for supposedly maxed-out resources.⁷⁶ Whatever his motivation, the NCAA executive director found that the language of crisis, of the possible doom of intercollegiate sports, kept costs down.

The Criminalization of the Student-Athlete

Byers had plenty of help identifying crises. In 1986, University of Maryland basketball star Len Bias, the second overall pick in that year's NBA draft, died of a cocaine overdose in his dormitory. Maryland and other universities responded with increased policing on campus, policing that identified Black athletes as an "at-risk" population corrupting university life.⁷⁷ "The offenses committed by athletes against people and property cast a shadow across American campuses," *Sports Illustrated* declared.⁷⁸ "One does not have the civil rights to take drugs," Jesse Jackson said in a news conference in Washington, DC, after Bias's death. Jackson called on universities and colleges to step up their drug enforcement policies, to take "responsibility in this war against drugs."⁷⁹

The media response to Bias's death framed the Black athlete as not just out of place in higher education but a menace to the groves of academe. Occurring at the height of the Reagan administration's war on drugs, his death attracted calls for greater drug enforcement on college campuses. Secretary of Education William Bennett urged college presidents to adopt hardline antidrug policies. Have academics "become so 'sophisticated,'" he asked in a speech to the Heritage Foundation, "that they have forgotten their elementary duties and responsibilities[?]"⁸⁰ Nancy Reagan contributed an op-ed to the *Washington Post* in which

she blamed “naive” university leaders who “deny that students could get any kind of drug they wanted on campus” for Bias’s death. The first lady, maintaining the color-blind posture of her husband’s administration, did not mention Bias’s race, and the paper ran her op-ed under the too-perfect title “The Need for Intolerance.”⁸¹ A University of Maryland task force recommended randomized drug testing for athletes. The response to Bias’s death built support for the passage of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, which enacted new mandatory minimums for possession charges and encouraged the public, as the historian Theresa Runstedtler writes, to imagine the Black college athlete as representing a “racialized threat of contamination,” a vector of illicit substances and behavior, on the white campus.⁸²

Politicians described Bias not as Black but as a young man with all the potential in the world. It wasn’t his race, they seemed to say, but something about the way he embodied his gender that had led him to overdose that night in the UMD dorms. In her op-ed, Reagan offered two cautionary tales: Bias and Don Rogers, a safety for the Cleveland Browns who had also died of a cocaine overdose that summer. Bias and Rogers, two young Black men, had failed to cultivate the “personal, moral responsibility” that might have, the first lady suggested, saved them.⁸³ Another, more constrained form of masculinity—the masculinity of her husband, the movie cowboy—was nowhere to be found on the basketball courts and football fields of 1986. Reagan and her allies in the war on drugs contributed to the gendered racialization of Black athletes that cast Black men and women as excessively masculine, an excess that accounted for and discounted their success and that necessitated bodily policing. When the psychologist Joanna Bunker Rohrbaugh asked in 1979, “How can a woman be feminine and a ‘jock’?,” she observed that female athletes faced greater gender stigma in basketball and track and field than in swimming and gymnastics.⁸⁴ She didn’t acknowledge that the former sports had higher rates of participation among Black women and girls. How can a woman be feminine and a jock? Through a contrast with Black women, who, like Bias and Rogers, found their gender, as an instrument of racialization, constantly on trial in the movement to reform college sports.

If conservatives found in Bias’s death a case for new draconian drug laws, liberals discovered in it a need for educational reform. Bias, it turned out, had failed three courses that spring and withdrawn from two more. Four of his teammates had flunked multiple classes after the end of the basketball season. The *New York Times* declared it “The Scandal behind the Tragedy.” “The present corrupt standards,” the editorial board wrote, “can ruin young lives as quickly as cocaine.”⁸⁵ The *San Francisco Chronicle* described drugs as “the immediate cause of the tragedy” and a failure to educate as the deeper, hidden culprit in the overdose death.⁸⁶

A *Washington Post* reporter called it, more optimistically, a “golden opportunity” for reform.⁸⁷ Conservatives wanted to police Black athletes’ bodies, subjecting them to mandatory drug tests. Liberals wanted to police their academic preparedness and progress, bringing into question whether Black athletes belonged on campus at all. Everyone could agree that Len Bias had died of too much freedom.

Calls for reform got even louder in 1987, when the NCAA hit Southern Methodist with the first-ever “death penalty,” suspending the program for an entire season, after multiple recruiting violations. With the cooperation of university trustees and coaches, including two-time Texas governor Bill Clements, boosters had operated a slush fund of some \$400,000 with which they had incentivized recruits and paid active players. The SMU squad that Ivory Christian faced in his first season, hobbled from a long absence and the loss of every scholarship player from the 1986 team, could barely compete, finishing 0–8 in conference play. News media, while eager to slam a big-name politician like Clements, mostly blamed athletes for prizing wins and pro contracts above classes and degrees. In an article titled “The Stench of College Sports,” the *New York Times* asked, “Why not let the athletes have their fun and glory? Because they are tainting not just amateurism but serious education.”⁸⁸ Reformers—conservatives and liberals, insiders and outsiders—blamed football and basketball players, the most visible representatives of college sports, for the corruption and poor academic performance of athletic departments, which, as Christian discovered at TCU, amounted to blaming athletes for their own exploitation.

Bias’s death coupled with the player payment scandal at SMU and a flood of recruiting violations at other major programs led the Knight Foundation to form its high-profile Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics. The commission included fourteen current and former university presidents and four corporate CEOs. The Knight Foundation almost never failed to describe it in press releases as a “blue-ribbon” panel. After two years and \$3 million, the commission delivered its 1991 report *Keeping Faith with the Student-Athlete*, in which it recommended greater presidential control of intercollegiate athletics to achieve three goals: academic integrity, financial integrity, and independent certification (the “one-plus-three” model).⁸⁹ Although the report directed a few words of criticism at the corporate structure of the contemporary athletic department—suggesting a need for caps on coaches’ salaries, season length, and practice time—it didn’t venture far from the usual reform talk. The commission defined what it, echoing John Underwood, called “the problem” as a growing gulf between big-time football and basketball and the academic life of the university. Football and basketball, the only majority Black sports, had to be brought into line, it suggested, praising the controversial Prop 48 as having “served intercollegiate athletics well.”

"It is time to build on and extend its success," the report concluded.⁹⁰ The Knight Commission earned glowing reviews from the press, which scarcely mentioned the incredible self-interest on display (university presidents advocating for more presidential power) or questioned the binary opposition it assumed between commercial, corrupt sports (raced Black in the public imagination) and noncommercial, pure academe (raced white).

The commission ultimately served the NCAA well by providing another center of gravity, and institutional authority, in the reform debate. The "confederated" structure of the NCAA has always been, as Hartmann observes, one of its strengths, allowing it to avoid taking full responsibility for systemic failures while partially absorbing oppositional forces at the conference and university levels.⁹¹ The commission's report, which the NCAA neither wholly embraced nor rejected, gave the impression that the college sports establishment, understood by most as synonymous with the NCAA, had begun to take action. The association got to be institution and agitator.

Though dominated by university administrators, the Knight Commission did include one man from Washington: second-term congressman Tom McMillen, who had played eleven seasons in the NBA before retiring to run for office in Maryland's 4th District and who, at six-foot-eleven, remains the tallest person to have ever served in Congress. A moderate Democrat, McMillen joined four other ex-professional athletes in Congress: Bill Bradley, Jim Bunning, Jack Kemp, and Mo Udall. *Sports Illustrated* nicknamed them "The Jock Caucus" in a 1987 group profile, which included a photo of the lawmakers standing in a row on the stairs of the Capitol Building, wearing suits and ties, their hands in their pockets.⁹² Five white men, three of them former basketball players, the Jock Caucus didn't look anything like the athletic departments and professional leagues of the day, but that didn't stop them from weighing in on the state of sports on campus.

McMillen, a Rhodes Scholar out of the University of Maryland, where he had played under Len Bias's future coach Lefty Driesell, published a book timed to his 1992 reelection campaign in which he presented his own college career as the good old days and a model for what the Knight Commission recommendations might achieve if implemented. "Unfortunately, not everyone is learning the same beneficial lessons [about teamwork, discipline, and desire] that I did," McMillen wrote in *Out of Bounds*, calling on university leaders to "rescue sports from their corrupting influences and return the games to their proper perspective."⁹³ The book, which did not get McMillen reelected, included an image of him seated on a bench at Oxford with a sweater over his shoulders and a book open in his lap. His point was hard to miss: he had done college right; the basketball stars of 1992, most of them Black, many of them

poor—not that McMillen, the son of a dentist, considered the difference meaningful—were doing it wrong. He blamed Black college athletes for harboring “dangerously delusional” dreams of professional sports careers at higher rates than their white teammates and defenders of “marginal students” who, in fighting test-score minimums, acted as “apologists for failure” and surrendered to “the mediocrity of our present system.”⁹⁴ Where, he and the Knight Foundation asked, had the Tom McMillens, their philosophy books in hand on some pastoral campus, gone?

The NCAA thought it might find them, the ideal amateurs, in women’s sports. In 1992, it appointed a fifteen-member task force to make recommendations for achieving “gender equity” in college athletics. A survey had found that, twenty years after Title IX, men’s teams still received 70 percent of athletic scholarships, 77 percent of athletic department operating budgets, and 83 percent of recruiting funds. The task force defined the goal—gender equity—as a future in which “the participants in both men’s and women’s sports programs would accept as fair and equitable the overall program of the other gender.” The final report of the Gender Equity Task Force recommended that the NCAA invest in what it called “emerging sports.” It advised that member universities and colleges be incentivized to increase programming in and scholarships for archery, badminton, bowling, crew, ice hockey, squash, synchronized swimming, team handball, and water polo.⁹⁵ The report included a bullet-pointed list of criteria that the task force had used in formulating its recommendations. The seventh bullet point read simply, “Consider racial equity.”⁹⁶ If the demographics of the sports for which it advocated are any indication, the task force considered racial equity and then decided against it. When the Women’s Sports Foundation later released the report *Title IX and Race in Intercollegiate Sport*, it reached the uncritical conclusion that, while “there is a pattern of racial inequality in most NCAA sports,” Title IX had raised all boats.⁹⁷ Invest in gender equity, and resources will trickle down from the archery range and the squash court, where the amateur spirit of the upper class was alive and well.

Sportswriters gave little attention to women’s sports, but they investigated the men’s football and basketball scandals of the 1980s with a self-seriousness new to the sports media business. “The whole tenor of sports journalism changed,” broadcaster Verne Lundquist, who reported on SMU for the Dallas ABC affiliate, remembered of the time.⁹⁸ A younger generation of sportswriters decided that they’d rather be Woodward and Bernstein than Grantland Rice, and college sports offered plenty of material for muckraking. Rick Telander, who played college football at Northwestern and joined *Sports Illustrated* in 1973, at the height of the Watergate scandal, epitomized this new investigative

approach. His reporting on the labor exploitation, unfettered spending, and physical abuse of major college football programs culminated in 1989 with *The Hundred Yard Lie*, a “diatribe,” he admitted, against the sport he had once played.⁹⁹ Telander recognized that, while the individual missteps of star athletes might make better headlines, the real story lay in the class distinction inherent in the concept of the student-athlete, which structured the entire enterprise. Telander’s solution: spin off college football and basketball programs into age-group pro leagues. NCAA reformers and the Knight Commission proposed raising academic standards; Telander proposed eliminating academics and simply paying players for their labor. The trouble with the NCAA and the Knight Commission’s proposal was that it entailed excluding some of the most visible Black students from campus. The trouble with Telander’s was that it also entailed removing some of the most visible Black students from campus, even if with a paycheck as compensation. The NCAA, the Knight Commission, and Telander assume that the athletic department can be reformed in isolation from the university, but it can’t. It shapes public perceptions not just about who should profit from athletic labor but also who deserves a spot in the classroom.¹⁰⁰

Far from damaging the NCAA or big-money athletic departments, the reform talk of the 1980s might have saved them from actual reform by giving the wider public the sense that someone must be doing something to change the system. “The NCAA has traveled a long road on gender equity,” the association could claim in an official history a few years later, “and a similar distance on minority issues.”¹⁰¹ What else could have come of so many studies, commissions, and investigations?

At TCU, Ivory Christian encountered twenty years of reform that had transformed the student-athlete from a white northern on a southern campus to a Black student on a white campus. Christian is now in his fifties, and the student-athlete appears ready for another turn. In 2019, federal prosecutors charged fifty people, including Hollywood celebrities and business leaders, in connection with a far-reaching scheme to place the children of wealthy parents at some of the top universities and colleges in the country. The investigation, which the Justice Department called Operation Varsity Blues, revealed that some of the parents, with the help of an unscrupulous college preparatory entrepreneur named Rick Singer, had manipulated the system by which institutions use alternative criteria for the admission of recruited athletes. Singer had, in some cases, photoshopped the faces of applicants onto images of actual prep athletes. The sports tended to be those associated with the wealthy and the white (sailing, tennis, water polo), giving the nation a different image of who inhabits the contemporary athletic department than that encountered on ESPN.

Singer described athlete admissions as a “side door” to an elite education. “There is a front door of getting in where a student just does it on their own, and then there’s a back door where people go to institutional advancement and make large donations,” he explained to prosecutors. Singer sought another option and found one, he said, in sports.¹⁰² Public outrage at first concentrated on Singer and his clients but then gradually shifted to that athletic side door. Why does it exist? And who does it serve? It’s a question we’ve asked before. It’s a question through which higher education has long distinguished between being on campus and belonging there.

We should not be surprised, then, that as the Supreme Court prepared to strike down affirmative action in higher education, public scrutiny settled on Harvard’s admission of ALDC students—recruited athletes, legacies, dean’s interest list (often donors’ children), and children of faculty and staff—with an emphasis on an “A” that now summons the image of a blue-blooded squash player. The college athlete, long raced Black in the public imagination has, for some, turned white again. Perhaps this is a positive development—a move toward recognizing the actual composition and beneficiaries of the athletic department. But the timing of this seeming revelation about the actual racial and class profile of the student-athlete should make us wonder. It arrives packaged with anti-affirmative action lawsuits and at the very moment that some college athletes, many of them young men and women of color, are finally—thanks to name, image, and likeness deals—reaping some of the financial rewards of their labor. The longer history of college sports suggest that we should be wary of whose interests are being expressed in this new and evolving racialization of the student-athlete.

Notes

1. H. G. Bissinger, *Friday Night Lights: A Town, a Team, and a Dream*, 1st ed. (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1990), 349.

2. Bissinger, *Friday Night Lights*, 1st ed., 10.

3. Bissinger, *Friday Night Lights*, 1st ed., 114, 115, 116.

4. See Howard W. Chudacoff, *Changing the Playbook: How Power, Profit, and Politics Transformed College Sports* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 107–10; National Collegiate Athletic Association, *Proceedings of the 61st Annual Convention of the National Collegiate Athletic Association* (Kansas City, MO: National Collegiate Athletic Association, 1967); and Michael Oriard, *Bowled Over: Big-Time College Football from the Sixties to the BCS Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 133–40.

5. The sociologists Allen Sack and Ellen Staurowsky observe that “need-based aid would have allowed athletes to place educational priorities over those of sports without fear of losing financial aid.” It would have allowed Christian to complete his education at TCU after leaving the team. *College Athletes for Hire: The Evolution and Legacy of the NCAA’s Amateur Myth* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), 84.

6. H. G. Bissinger, *Friday Night Lights: A Town, a Team, and a Dream*, 25th anniversary ed. (New York: Hachette, 2015), 403–5.
7. Bissinger, *Friday Night Lights*, 1st ed., 57.
8. *Friday Night Lights*, directed by Peter Berg (Universal Pictures, 2004).
9. Bissinger, *Friday Night Lights*, 25th anniversary ed., 394.
10. Martin Luther King Jr., “Hall of Famer,” *New York Amsterdam News*, August 4, 1962.
11. Harry Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (New York: Free Press, 1969), 34.
12. Pierre Bourdieu, “Program for a Sociology of Sport,” trans. John MacAloon and Alan D. Savage, *Sociology of Sport Journal* 5, no. 2 (1988): 155.
13. Billy Hawkins, *The New Plantation: Black Athletes, College Sports, and Predominantly White NCAA Institutions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 14.
14. See Ben Carrington, *Race, Sport and Politics: The Sporting Black Diaspora* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2010), 3.
15. Brenda Elsey, *Citizens and Sportsmen: Fútbol and Politics in Twentieth-Century Chile* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 1.
16. Victor Ray, “A Theory of Racialized Organizations,” *American Sociological Review* 84, no. 1 (2019): 30.
17. Bissinger, *Friday Night Lights*, 25th anniversary ed., 405.
18. R. Tait McKenzie, “The Chronicle of the Amateur Spirit,” in *Proceedings of the 4th Annual Convention of the Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the United States* (New York: Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the United States, 1909), 50, 54.
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21. Byers, *Unsportsmanlike Conduct*, 69.
22. Byers, *Unsportsmanlike Conduct*, 69.
23. In his widely discussed 2011 *Atlantic* article “The Shame of College Sports,” the journalist Taylor Branch describes *student-athlete* as “deliberately ambiguous” and as the NCAA’s “signature term, repeated constantly in and out of courtrooms.” “The Shame of College Sports,” *Atlantic*, October 2011, 88. See also National Collegiate Athletic Association, Constitution of the National Collegiate Athletic Association, in *1955–1956 Yearbook of the National Collegiate Athletic Association* (Kansas City, MO: National Collegiate Athletic Association), 1956, 3–13.
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25. See Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 8–10, 41–42; and Carrington, *Race, Sport and Politics*, 76–82.
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27. See, for example, Sack and Staurowsky, *College Athletes for Hire*, 45.

28. "Ivy Group Agreement," November 20, 1945, Alfred Whitney Griswold Records, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, box 38, folder 340.
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30. Grant Farred, *What's My Name? Black Vernacular Intellectuals* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 22.
31. Edwards, *Revolt of the Black Athlete*, 16, 13.
32. Edwards, *Revolt of the Black Athlete*, 44.
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44. Gordon S. White Jr., "College Athletes Who Protest to Face Loss of Financial Aid," *New York Times*, January 9, 1969.
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