

Athletes' Rights and Justice Issues: It's Not Business, It's Personal

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When asked to react to Allen Sack's keynote address, I immediately responded positively due to the honor bestowed upon me. I don't know Allen personally, but I am somewhat familiar with his work. Therein lies the dilemma as I realized that Allen and I are essentially on the same side of the issues regarding college athletics. As this conference drew closer I became more and more nervous about my "reaction" to Allen's presentation. How do you react in an interesting way to something that you agree with? After reading Allen's manuscript (and listening to his presentation) all my fears were multiplied. As a good Baptist, my reaction to his manuscript was simply "Amen!" But after reflecting on Allen's presentation, I would like to take a slightly different approach, a personal approach.

Thank you Allen for your critical analysis of the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) mission statement and the important issues you have brought forth (Sack, 2011). I agree that the NCAA should provide valid and reliable measures to demonstrate that they are accomplishing their educational mission. This is particularly important to their "Core Purpose." The NCAA website claims, "*Our purpose is to govern competition in a fair, safe, equitable and sportsmanlike manner, and to integrate intercollegiate athletics into higher education so that the educational experience of the student-athlete is paramount*" (NCAA, 2011).

I also agree that we should pay close attention to graduation rates, understanding exactly what these numbers mean and the ramifications of institutional retention and student-athlete persistence (Sack, 2011). Student-athletes should be given every opportunity to persist, that is complete their education to maximize their potential for productive lives. There should also be ample opportunity for student-athletes to become integrated with the student body. The academic preparation of student-athletes and protection of the freedom to choose a major is crucial in this domain. Unfortunately, in an effort to improve the academic viability, many academic support centers have further secluded student-athletes from the general student body. I think efforts should be made to use academic support centers in a manner that minimizes the segregation of student-athletes from the rest of the student body.

As Allen has clearly stated, and I concur, the most important improvement the NCAA can make is to clarify, clearly define, and forcefully enforce the demarcation between collegiate and professional sport (Sack, 2011). I personally am not

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overly concerned about skyboxes, luxury seating or licensing deals, though I am not naive enough to think these things have no influence. I am not even overly concerned about network contracts and coaches' salaries, even though I realize these are fuels for the college sport engine. Though I am not supportive of these aspects of college sport, I do recognize that they indirectly provide opportunities for young men and women, who probably would not otherwise, get the opportunity to secure a college education. But if the NCAA and other enterprises are going to profit handsomely off of the efforts of these young people, they ought to at least do everything humanly possible to develop them not only as athletes, but as potentially productive individuals. Somewhere, someone should be protecting the rights of the athletes in very specific ways.

For the last 15 years I have worked in two Division I universities considered football and basketball powerhouses. At each of these schools I have had the opportunity to interact in classes and often on a personal level with many high profile student-athletes. Several of these young men who that have entered the professional ranks have indicated that the time they devoted to their sport as professionals, was less than or equal to the time they put in during their college days. To think that professional athletes practice and prepare for equal or less time than collegiate athletes do brings their athletic status into question. In fact one athlete said it felt like a vacation because he no longer had to worry about classes. Several have indicated that the practice sessions are actually easier and less strenuous than collegiate practice sessions. How can we justify calling student-athletes amateurs under such conditions? They are simply as Andrew Zimbalist (1999) says, "Unpaid Professionals."

Every time I talk about this subject to people familiar with college athletics, I (sarcastically) mention the fact that student-athletes are only required to spend twenty hours engaged in athletic activities. I do this because I love to watch the ensuing snickers that acknowledge absurdity of this rule. Why do those who fervently seek to enforce NCAA rules rarely enforce the 20 hr rule? Why are there so many loopholes to this rule? Ask any athlete if "voluntary workouts" are really voluntary. From my vantage point it appears that the rules that protect the student-athlete's status as an amateur are more ardently enforced, while the rules that protect their rights are seldom at issue. Case in point: almost everyone is aware of the case of the Ohio State players who were sanctioned for selling their own property. This story made national news, but there was apparently little concern about the following story. According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*,

For four days last June, the Orange Bowl Committee hosted a gathering of several dozen athletic directors, conference commissioners, and their spouses aboard a Caribbean cruise ship, with a weekend agenda that appeared to offer nothing more strenuous than cocktail parties and a day of frolicking on a private island in the Bahamas.

The committee, a tax-exempt charitable organization responsible for the annual Orange Bowl, which took place ...in Florida, called the trip "a complimentary getaway" for key individuals in college sports. A former high-ranking official with the Internal Revenue Service, who has filed a complaint with the federal agency alleging various misuses of charitable funds by some bowl committees, calls it "a junket" for insiders (Sander, 2011).

I believe that if the compliance officials spent as much time enhancing the educational opportunities for student-athletes as they do on investigating and enforcing amateur status compliance rules and curtailing excessive celebration, student-athletes can become true beneficiaries of college athletics.

My research focuses on identity issues in student athletes. While I realize that the development of athletic identity begins and is solidified long before student-athletes enter universities, I believe the NCAA should take actions to alleviate the negative consequences of over-developed athletic identities. Research confirms and commonsense dictates that if a student-athlete is overly focused on athletic pursuits, other areas of life, including academics will suffer (Adler & Adler, 1991). If the student-athlete is allowed to develop other aspects of their identity, they tend to fare better when the athletic experience has concluded (Bimper & Harrison, 2011). Unfortunately, so many have very little opportunity to develop themselves in other areas because they feel that sport is the only thing they are good at (Harrison, Sailes, Rotich, & Bimper, 2011).

Year after year in my African American in Sport class I ask athletes, who are you when you're no longer an athlete? Most times all I get is blank stares and shrugged shoulders. I often show the clip from "Friday Night Lights" (Berg & Pate, 2004) where Booby Miles cleans out his locker acting hard, then cries like a baby when he's alone with his uncle saying "What we gonna do now...I can't do nothing else but play football!" I know this was just a movie, but I've seen similar scenes play out all too often.

I support what Allen has presented, but I believe policy must be developed with the personal impact on student-athletes in mind. We must find ways to nurture and create climates that motivate student-athletes to develop alternate identities, most importantly academic identities, so that when the athletic phase is over, they don't have to go on a quest to figure out who they are. I believe development of alternate identities will not degrade the student-athlete's athletic performance, but actually enhance it. With well developed alternate identities the student-athlete will be able to relax and focus on the game on game-day, and not on their draft status!

My graduate student, who is a former collegiate and professional athlete, just completed a qualitative study of "academically successful" football student athletes that indicates that they often attribute their success to having alternate identities (Bimper & Harrison, 2011). That is, they are not one-dimensional individuals; they are more than just athletes, but complex human beings who do not deserve to be objectified. We must explore ways to encourage student-athletes to develop and nurture alternate identities that are functional off the court or playing field.

I once heard an assistant coach humorously say "I'm in the dream selling business." We must stop the sale of hoop dreams and football fantasies that fuel academic nightmares. We must find ways to develop the academic identities of student-athletes so that they all, including revenue producing student-athletes, have more opportunities and aspirations to "go pro" in something other than sport. If this takes place I sincerely believe that student-athletes would begin to boast about their institutions and NCAA initiatives long after their playing days. This would serve as free advertising for the NCAA and member institutions.

A great way to accomplish this is to encourage and provide support for young aspiring ex-athletes to engage in research in this domain. They can provide an insider's perspective to improve the academic lives and improve the post sport

opportunities for student-athletes. I pray that policy makers will consider these issues in their deliberations.

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