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The Amateur Challenge of College Sports

By John V. Lombardi August 10, 2008 5:15 am

Nothing is more central to the enterprise of intercollegiate athletics than the commitment to amateurism. Everyone, whether bitter critic of NCAA sports or

ardent defender, acknowledges this requirement. College sports depends on the definition and defense of amateurism for its survival, but the tremendous popularity and financial requirements of the college sports enterprise threatens and has threatened this quality since the early 20th century. The core feature of amateurism is the concept of the student-athlete (a compound noun invented to recognize that we could not just have students who played sports but must have regulated students who played a special type of sports). The student-athlete is an individual who, while maintaining a bureaucratically defined status as student also maintains an equally bureaucratically defined condition of amateur sports performer. The line we draw to separate amateur from non-amateur is exceedingly thin and often follows a rather convoluted path that reflects the creativity of those who seek to provide commercial benefit to themselves and to the student-athletes.

Because college sports are hugely popular, everyone wants to buy a piece of the action. The universities and their agency, the NCAA, sells pieces of the action, but in ways that struggle to distinguish between the sports programs and the students who play the sports. In simple terms, we think it OK to sell the program, the team, the game, and the season, but not OK to sell the individual student-athlete in any forum outside the context of the university, NCAA, or conference sponsored context. Our game-day programs feature individual student-athletes without challenging their amateur status, but we consider a student-athlete who sells her own athletic accomplishments to promote an outside commercial as having given up amateur status. The rules that clarify the differences in these circumstances are numbingly complex, but the principle is easy. If we sell student performances as part of the university based and sanctioned package of college sports, it is OK. If the student sells her athletic abilities outside of university based and sanctioned packages, it is not OK.

Our rules create an elegant rococo disputation among those who believe we should pay students to be athletes and those who think we have already over commercialized students who are athletes within the NCAA context. Both positions have merit, but actually, they are beside the point. The point of the exercise is somewhat different.

College sports MUST be conducted with the talent of amateurs who do not receive direct individual payment for their services beyond what is appropriate for school expenses. If they receive more, then they become employees of the university, playing not for the team but for the money. Even if the money is, at the beginning, relatively minor in character, it is the principle that matters. We succeed with intercollegiate sports because we work hard to put only amateur

students on the field, we construct restrictions to keep our student-athletes as continuing members of our university, and we rigorously exclude those who step over the line into the professional world or fail to maintain some minimum standard of student status.

This is the product, the amateur, enrolled, student-athlete competing on behalf of the team for the college. Are the Division I and IA basketball and football enterprises all but professional in every other way? They certainly are. Production values, quality of facilities, quality of coaching, quality of support, all of these are at professional levels and beyond, but the key talent, the athletes themselves, are a special breed. They must be very good at their sport, they must follow exceptional structured training regimes, they must follow complex rules and regulations, but they must also remain students and play for only the canonical college career (four years of play).

Throughout the history of intercollegiate sports in America, nothing has caused college sports more trouble than maintaining this construct of the amateur student-athlete. Payments under the table, bribes for recruiting, gambling schemes, secret professional contracts, payments from agents, and an endless litany of other abuses have nibbled at the edges of the amateur student-athlete, each effort captured in some form of NCAA legislation or definition to hold off the contamination of professionalism. Why not, we might ask, just give up this nonsense and let students who are athletes sell their talents outside the university to the highest bidder? We could do it, of course, it would be easy, but in losing control of the student-athlete, the university loses control of the uniform context of the games we play.

We want college athletics to be a seamless web of competition between teams of athletically talented students who compete against each other on a common basis, the legendary level playing field. We want the games to be fair, uniformly conducted, a competition that demonstrates the best college team. We structure our competitions in conferences and tournaments and bowl games and playoffs all to complete an endlessly renewing cycle that creates the illusion and some of the reality of an ideal type of commitment to institution, team, colleagues, and alumni. We take money to create the facilities, the circumstances, and the quality of the enterprise, but we place a barrier around those who make all this possible, the student-athlete, and hold them, for a short time, isolated from direct involvement with professional choices.

The latest flurry around the expansion of fantasy sports to feature individual student names as well as statistics provides an illustrative example of the tremendous pressure to professionalize the college game. Although the CBS version does not appear to buy or sell individual students, it does create a corporate enterprise that exploits an individual student's athletic performance as it promotes its own profit-making image and activities. The NCAA will find it difficult to resist the use of student names, which exist in the public domain anyway since newspapers, magazines, and news shows on television or the Internet routinely use student names and images to sell the content of their programs that exists to sell the products advertised. The NCAA's current rules do not easily accommodate the fantasy football enterprise, and even though student-athletes do not receive a financial benefit directly from the use of their names in this context, the pressure to connect a prize or benefit to the student-athlete whose name is most valuable in the fantasy league will surely be strong.

And so, the cycle of commercial threat to intercollegiate amateurism will take another turn, and the NCAA and its universities will struggle for yet another definitional determination that allows what must be permitted under the law but sustains the essential non-professional nature of its essential amateur student-athletes.

This battle in its many forms has been in process a long time, about a century perhaps, and it will surely continue. We will learn how to accommodate this latest threat, but our line separating the amateur college student and the professional athlete will grow thinner still, and surely acquire another convoluted twist in our rulebook.