



(<http://www.insidehighered.com>)

Universities should create a sports performance degree for athletes (essay)

Submitted by John V. Lombardi on April 3, 2014 - 3:00am

Colleges and universities prepare students for almost all professions of note -- except sports. To be sure, we have students pursuing degrees in sports management, kinesiology, and other related fields, but unlike students who come to study music performance, acting, creative writing and other talent- and performance-based professions, our students who come with athletic talent and seek opportunities to perform are left out of the academic curriculum.

This is a significant omission, for as we all know, sports is big business. It is one of America's major entertainment industries, and surely rivals orchestras, theaters, operas and movies as professional post-college employment venues. We provide degrees in music performance, we have superb academic programs in opera focused on the production of major entertainment products by the university, and we have countless theatrical productions produced on campus by students majoring in acting.

When we teach our students the profession of sports performance, however, whether in football, basketball, tennis, or track, we deny them the structure and benefit of a focused curriculum and degree.

It's time for the sports performance degree. As anyone who watches the college sports enterprise knows, the profession of sports performance (that is, being a professional athlete, whether on the golf tour or in professional baseball) is demanding, highly technical, and requires a combination of talent, skill, training, preparation, and dedication.

One only needs to observe the increasingly sophisticated methods and techniques required of baseball and football players, or the careful analysis that goes into learning golf techniques or tennis strategy, to understand that we should provide our students interested in sports performance with similar opportunities to those we provide students seeking a career as a violinist or operatic tenor.

To be sure, academic programs in music, or theater, or dance with courses in theory and

history, as well as performance, have been with us for a long time, and have well-established traditions and curriculums. Sports performance, with its tradition of amateur participation and a longstanding existence outside of the academic program as an extracurricular activity, does not have the benefit of an academic tradition.

Yet today, we know that sports performance is a rigorous, demanding, and highly professionalized career for many people. Some participate as performers; others with a performance background in college athletics move into management, coaching, and other professional roles related to sports. The skills of sports performance are nontrivial and currently have highly specialized training and study required to perform them well, and most professional athletes acquire sophisticated training and understanding of their games to ensure a successful career.

It's now time to reexamine the nature of sports performance and see if we can construct an academically viable course of study analogous to what we have done for music or dance.

How can we make the transition from sports as extracurricular activity to sports as an academic discipline? The first step is to recognize that sports as an extracurricular activity already exists in the university through elaborate systems of intramural and recreational sports, and as well through club sports that play competitions in nonprofessional contexts with other universities. But for those students seeking a career in sports performance, the requirements for a degree would need to be carefully structured and clearly specified.

The best model would follow closely on the academic requirements expected of music performance majors at many of our premier universities: Indiana, Florida State, Michigan, the University of Southern California, to take a few examples. In these programs, the students spend countless hours honing their performance skills and abilities through individual practice and have many performance requirements where they must display their skills before highly critical and expert audiences.

While an opera season at Indiana University may not draw quite the audience of an Indiana University basketball season, it surely would draw an audience that exceeds that of the IU golf or tennis team. It is not the size of the audience in any event that matters; what matters is the rigor of the preparation required of a student pursuing a performance major.

If a student wants to receive a performance degree, they not only must perform at the highest skill level (and be recruited and selected based on auditions that demonstrate the talent and commitment required to succeed), but they must also take a range of academic courses related to their profession. Music theory, composition, music history for the musician, for example. In addition, of course, they must fulfill the university's general education requirements.

In constructing our sports major, most universities already have the academic subjects that would be required through departments of kinesiology, sports management, etc. They have courses in sports history, sports law, sports finance. What they need is a structured curriculum for a student majoring in sports performance with a specialty in individual sports performance or a specialty in team sports performance.

That major would surely require participation on an intercollegiate sports team, and like those who audition and are chosen for music performance majors, they would need to have the requisite skills and abilities to compete at the highest levels. All current intercollegiate athletes already are required to participate in the general education curriculum and be on track to major. The only difference here is to have the opportunity to seek a sports performance degree.

To gain the confidence of our colleagues, we would need to ensure that the sports major achieves academic integrity. This would require an accrediting association for degrees in sports performance composed of representatives from the strong academic fields of sports management, kinesiology, business, and music performance; participation by representatives of regional accreditation agencies; and most likely engagement with the NCAA, especially using faculty athletic representatives and perhaps a designated presidential member. Periodic reviews of sports performance programs with accreditation upheld or denied, the establishment of models and norms for the organization and structure of the sports performance degree, and continuing engagement with the professional world of sports would all be part of the sports degree accreditation system.

Along with the establishment of the rigorous program for an academic degree, universities would need to create opportunities for students to move easily from college to professional performance whenever it appears appropriate. If a student in opera performance tried out for the Metropolitan Opera and was selected to become part of that organization, they would surely leave the university degree program and begin their professional career immediately, and we would celebrate that departure as a recognition of our ability to identify talent, train professionals, and launch a career, even if with an incomplete degree. Similarly, students in a sports degree program in, say golf, might well drop out and join the tour with the expectation of an early start on their professional life. Indeed, we already do this for college baseball players.

Many, but not all students in the sports performance major would receive scholarships based on their talent and performance ability, just as students in other performance related majors receive scholarships based on auditions and assessments of talent and promise. Within this context, the athletic director, coaches, and other personnel who teach the skills, strategy, and operations of athletic programs would carry faculty status, not necessarily tenure-track depending on the nature of their work. The athletic department in collaboration with the university's academic affairs office and in compliance with accreditation expectations, would develop standards for performance instruction.

The university faculty, through its normal process, would determine the appropriate credit to be granted for particular instructional and performance activity. This, too, would draw on the experience of music performance programs. Indeed, in those programs, the faculty are often superstars drawn from the professional world who teach performance in their fields on a temporary or guest faculty basis.

Will it take some effort to construct this sports performance major? To be sure. But the consequence of continuing to operate intercollegiate sports as an auxiliary entertainment enterprise are significantly damaging to the success of the college sports activity and detrimental to the success of students participating in these displays of

talent and skill to require colleges and universities to take on this challenge.

What we need now is a courageous university president with a strong athletic program to launch this process and mobilize the support and enthusiasm of like-minded innovators.

John Lombardi is former president of Louisiana State University and the University of Florida and author of [How Universities Work](#) ^[1] (Johns Hopkins University Press).

Editorial Tags:

[Athletics](#) ^[2]

Source URL: <http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2014/04/03/universities-should-create-sports-performance-degree-athletes-essay?width=775&height=500&iframe=true>

Links:

[1] <https://jhupbooks.press.jhu.edu/content/how-universities-work>

[2] <http://www.insidehighered.com/taxonomy/term/174>