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Can the Ivy League Get Its Game Back?

Lackluster teams prompt calls for change; a new chief's listening tour

By [DARREN EVERSON](#)

The schools of the Ivy League are among the nation's finest and richest, with billions in endowments under their command. From law to business to medicine, they're No. 1 in practically every department but one: sports.

Why are the Ancient Eight increasingly irrelevant in the most competitive arena of all? The short answer, the long-accepted one, is that they choose to be: that they won't sacrifice their academic ideals by giving athletic scholarships to athletes. But other factors—like a long-standing ban on postseason football games and the schools' academic standards for athletes—appear to be dragging the league down.

As college sports' most austere conference nears its first leadership change since 1984—executive director Jeff Orleans is retiring at the end of next month, to be replaced by Robin Harris, a lawyer and former NCAA official—the Ivy League is at a crossroads. With the league becoming weaker in sports like basketball, football and hockey, some argue it needs to make major changes, like creating a basketball tournament, ending the postseason football ban, or even adjusting admissions standards. “I still believe the Ivy can compete for national championships,” says Lane MacDonald, star of Harvard's 1989 national champion ice-hockey team. “I'd love to see that happen.”

The Ivies vehemently dispute the notion that they don't win and don't care. “We take sports very seriously,” says Columbia athletic director M. Dianne Murphy, ticking off a series of strong showings this season: Cornell in lacrosse (the Big Red reached the men's national-title game, losing to Syracuse Monday), Columbia in fencing, several league schools in soccer and wrestling. The more visible sports, she says, “have been a challenge for us the last few years.”

In men's and women's basketball, the Ivies have not won a NCAA tournament game since 1998. The league that spawned the Princeton offense, a thinking-man's attack that once brought death by deft passing, has lost by double digits in nine of its last 11 men's tournament appearances. In men's ice hockey—long a point of pride for the six participating Ivies, especially Cornell—just one Ivy member has reached the Frozen Four national semifinals since 1995. The ban on postseason football, which exists because the Ivies don't want to take up players' time, prevents players from competing for titles and gaining exposure.

The Ivy is never going to be the Southeastern Conference—and nobody is suggesting it should be. The schools don't need the exposure of sports to attract students and alumni donations. But

some of the league's alumni complain that the schools offer their students the best of everything, except in this one area. "Why not give them the same opportunities and the same platform in athletics that you do in academics?" says Marcellus Wiley, a former NFL defensive end who played at Columbia in the 1990s. "I think they should revisit everything."

The incoming executive director, Ms. Harris, says she's reserving judgment on these issues and planning to go on a listening tour among the schools after she comes aboard in July. Mr. Orleans, the outgoing director, declined to be interviewed for this article.

The Ivy League is home to some of the country's oldest colleges, which once played the best football. Led by pioneering Yale coach Walter Camp, who helped devise the sport's rules near the turn of the 20th century, the colleges created examples that others followed. Harvard was so good in the early days that when it defeated Oregon, 7-6, in 1920 in what is now known as the Rose Bowl game, the Los Angeles Times called the outcome a "triumph" for the underdog loser.

Two forks in the road caused the Ivies and major college football to diverge. The first was the formation in the 1940s and '50s of the Ivy League, whose founding principles—that student-athletes must be representative of the student body academically and that they not receive athletic scholarships—mean its members have a shallower pool of available talent than other colleges. Still, Ivy teams didn't immediately become irrelevant. Yale appeared in the Associated Press top 20 as late as 1981. "We played the military academies and Boston College and Miami of Ohio, and we won some," says Carm Cozza, Yale's football coach from 1965 to 1996.

The second shift was the Ivy's 1981 expulsion from Division I-A, college football's premier classification, which occurred because larger-conference schools desired greater control over TV-contract negotiations. They voted to restrict I-A membership to schools that had 30,000-seat stadiums or averaged 17,000 in attendance over the previous four years, which not all of the Ivy League schools did. The Ivies didn't contest the decision.

"It was clear that's not where the Ivy should be," says Derek Bok, Harvard's president at the time who scoffs at the idea that the Ivies must excel in all endeavors, athletics included. "If we have a bit of humility, we have to understand that nobody can be excellent at everything. There's no reason why, because you're good at teaching and research, that you have to be good at football. That's a historical accident, not a necessity."

While Ivy football was officially relegated to a lower level decades ago, the decline of the Ivies in basketball and hockey has been more recent and gradual. As late as 1998, Princeton earned a No. 5 seed in the men's basketball tournament—a designation that indicated the Tigers were one of the 20 best teams in the nation—and Harvard shocked Stanford in that year's women's tournament, still the only No. 16 seed of either gender to defeat a No. 1. Three of the six hockey-playing Ivies (who compete in the Eastern College Athletic Conference) reached the men's NCAA tournament this season.

But 20 years have now passed since Harvard's men's hockey title, the Ivy's last, and it's been more than a decade since Ivy basketball teams made noise during March Madness. One theory why is that the Ivy League's Academic Index, which all the schools abide by, is increasingly hurting its teams. The index is a mathematical measuring stick for admission that combines test scores and high school performance; a school's athletes must average out to within one standard

deviation of the student body. “There don’t seem to be as many great student [athletes] anymore,” says Mr. MacDonald, who won the Hobey Baker Award as the nation’s top player for Harvard’s championship hockey team. “If the Index went back the other way a little bit, that would be interesting. But I’d be surprised if the league would do that.”

Indeed, last year, after Harvard men’s basketball coach Tommy Amaker, a former Duke guard and Michigan coach who was hired to revive the Crimson’s long-dormant program, landed a highly touted recruiting class, controversy erupted. Yale coach James Jones said there appeared to be a shift in Harvard’s admissions standards. Mr. Amaker’s program was also investigated by the league for overly aggressive recruiting tactics—and cleared. But Frank Ben-Eze, considered the best of his recruits, later decided to go to Davidson. Harvard tied for sixth place last season in the Ivy. A Harvard spokesman said Mr. Amaker and Harvard athletic director Bob Scalise were unavailable to comment and he had no further comment.

The Ivy still holds its own in many respects. The league still compares favorably with the Patriot League, another group of Eastern colleges that mandates its athletes be reflective of the student body academically. Most of the Ivies rank ahead of the Patriot members, which include Lehigh and Holy Cross, in the latest Directors’ Cup standings (which rank the nation’s college-sports programs), and the Ivy went 9-9 against the Patriot in football this season. Harvard finished 14th in the final Football Championship Subdivision coaches poll last season, and might have been a factor in the tournament were it allowed to participate. “I’d personally like to see our programs in the Ivy compete after the regular season,” says Cornell athletic director Andy Noel. “I don’t think it’s an investment in time that’s detrimental to those athletes.”

But the league remains ambivalent about taking steps that would appeal to fans and players alike. The Ivy is starting a lacrosse tournament next season, which Mr. Noel says will provide some insight about the viability of a basketball tournament. For now, though, the Ivy remains the only Division I conference that doesn’t hold a basketball tournament. The athletic directors are split down the middle on the matter, says Ms. Murphy of Columbia—who counts herself on the against side. “It’s another week of being out of class,” she says. “In our league that matters.”

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