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Eliminating the Commercial Factor in Athletics

By L. L. JARVIE

Viewing Athletics as a Part of the Educational Program

YEAR after year, one is conscious of a debate on the proper relationship of inter-school athletics to the balance of the educational program of an institution. The intensity of the debate follows a somewhat seasonal trend, but at no time is discussion completely dormant. Protagonists of various points of view continually bring pressure upon harassed administrative officers to do something about the whole thing. When teams win too many games there is a tendency to "de-emphasize" in order to recapture academic respectability. When the win column is a bit short for several years, the hue and cry is raised for a winner capable of returning the public to the fold of paying customers. Too seldom, however, has the problem of de-emphasis been attacked at its source in the sense of decommercializing athletics by separating financial support of this fundamental school activity from paid admissions. So long as this factor is ignored, action will be cyclical in terms of periodic purges of de-emphasis through which schools will be purified and revived before returning to the wars of gaining the favors of the contemporary phenom-

enon of American education, the "sidewalk alumnus."

Conviction that the nucleus of the problem of what to do about athletics, in order to bring them into closer harmony with the balance of school activities, must be sought in the commercialized aspects of the activity is derived from the experience of the Rochester Athenaeum and Mechanics Institute. Some years ago students and faculty of the Institute found themselves involved in the perennial debate. Numerous informal discussions developed the belief that the first problem to be faced in achieving greater integration of the total program of the Institute was to find some means whereby public support of the several varsity teams would be secondary to the educational values of interschool games for participants and the rest of the student body. Here, indeed, was a hard nut to crack, even though football was not a part of the program; but students and faculty abandoned debate for action.

Various solutions were suggested and discussed, the most common of which was that of establishing a student-activities fee and then abolishing admission charges to all games.

Although this method pointed in the direction of eliminating the commercial motive, it did not wholly solve the problem of catering to public attendance. Was the public as an audience to be eliminated overnight, or were they to have a windfall in the sense of being granted free the same entertainment for which they had been paying over a stretch of years? Neither of these possibilities seemed feasible in the light of local conditions. Acceptance of complete elimination would have meant exclusion of friends of both students and the Institute. On the other hand, free admission to all would have meant inclusion of certain undesirable elements whose actions in the past had been partly responsible for the original discussions on the subject of the school and sports. Slowly it became apparent that some technique would have to be developed which would control public participation in athletic events without deserting faith in the need for decommercialization. After many false starts and much effort a successful method seems to have been evolved.

SINCE the regular budget of the Institute could not possibly absorb the total cost of the interschool athletic program, it was decided to establish an activities fee payable by the student at the time of registration. The amount of the fee corresponded closely to the cost of admissions to all games under the old system, so there was no increase in the budget of the student except in the case of those few who in the past had not attended games. Upon pay-

ment of the fee the student was given a season ticket and a book of tickets carrying corresponding serial numbers, the season ticket being for his own use and the book for his guests. The corresponding serial numbers on student and guest book made it possible to check the source of any ticket.

Of the early problems faced under the plan two were outstanding: first, there was the difficulty of providing for alumni; and, second, there were always those students who for certain events needed more than the single guest ticket given to them with the activity book. The first problem was solved by the simple expedient of mailing to each alumnus a registered activity book along with his receipt for payment of dues in the alumni association. In addition, each paid-up member of the alumni association was granted the privilege of purchasing a guest ticket for each event. With respect to the second problem, it was found that not all students used their guest tickets for each game and so it was arranged that students not planning to use their guest tickets could turn them in to a designated member of the Student Council. This person registered all such tickets, and they were then made available without charge to students needing additional tickets.

Basically, the procedure outlined eliminated general admission of the public to athletic events. The guest tickets, however, made possible the attendance of selected persons outside the school. Such control of attendance tended to exclude that portion of the sporting public which so often caused trouble when an educational

institution attempted to put into practice a concept of education viewing athletics as an integral part of the total educational program rather than the tail that wagged the educational dog. Substitution of the non-paying guest for the paying spectator decreased the probability of developing on the part of the spectator a proprietary right in determining athletic policies—a right that so many individuals claim the moment they buy a ticket of admission, be the admission fee a few pennies or several dollars.

As the plan for decommercializing sport became stable and successful in its operation, its management was continued under the supervision of the Student Council, and concurrently other school activities were absorbed, so that today all the major extra-curricular activities of the Institute are financed by a single activity fee and the income from this source is allocated to the Student Council. The Council has the responsibility of approving the budget of each activity, including athletics, awarding funds to each enterprise, and supervising the expenditures outlined in each budget.

After seven years of decommercialized athletics, it is the conclusion of students, alumni, and faculty that it is possible to bring athletics back to the school without injury to the sports involved or the educational values derived by both participants and nonparticipants. The plan has been successful in improving the caliber of the audience attending the games. This is because each game is an event at which students and

alumni are hosts to the balance of the group, or the "public." No attempt has been made to establish the degree to which athletics have become a greater part of the total school program, but it is apparent that students are more prone to consider athletics as just another aspect of the extra-curriculum rather than the yardstick upon which their school is to be evaluated.

WE DESIRE to stress the fact that our efforts have not been unaccompanied by obstacles of all sorts. Decision to change a custom of many years' standing carries with it acceptance of the pains of change. There are those who withhold support in the belief that to abandon the *status quo* is to desert all that is good. Others are conscious of the relationship of athletics to publicity and contend that indiscriminate public admission is essential to this respect. Incidentally, our experience leads to a definite questioning of the latter contention. Periodically, outside interests bring pressure on the Institute to return to the fold of professional amateurism common to many inter-school athletic programs. Currently this type of pressure has come from a local group which has been promoting weekly double-header basketball games featuring colleges and universities geographically located miles from Rochester and educationally even further removed. Fortunately, each year the task of resisting such pressures is eased, so that in the most recent instance of pressure the Student Council was able to refuse participation without

anyone in the school being upset. Rather, acceptance would have caused a roar of protest that no move should be made in the direction of abandoning the present basic policy.

The plan as outlined is not presented as a panacea for all ills which may beset the relationship of athletics to American education; neither is it

intended to be by innuendo a carping criticism of interschool sports as they now exist. Rather, it is an attempt to point out what one group did at the conclusion of that so common weakness of educational theory—talk brimming over with dynamic content but unfortunately static in terms of action. [Vol. X, No. 1]

