



**The Education-Athletics Nonsense: A Proposal for Severing the Connection  
between Higher Education and Competitive Sports**

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# *The Education-Athletics Nonsense*

*A Proposal for Severing the Connection between Higher  
Education and Competitive Sports*

SOME school administrations do not agree, but most professors and many administrators believe that competitive intercollegiate athletics is a moderately heavy and entirely unnecessary drag on higher education in the United States. It is frustrating, moreover, that when an administration, or a faculty with some policy voice, does set out to eliminate competitive athletics, it so often finds that it cannot: those who favor athletics have too much influence. Athletic boosters are strong and vocal among student bodies, in faculty groups, in alumni organizations, among citizens living near the school, in governing boards, and in state legislatures. Emotional commitment is intense. (This last point is one reason I choose to remain anonymous—why stir up personal feelings until there is some hope of serious consideration of eliminating athletics from my school? This article will have more chance of starting a genuine discussion of some moderate objectivity if it seems to come from afar, as it were, with the prestige of some kind of general circulation, than if it were, to start with, circulated among those whom I would most like to influence.)

Those who hope to eliminate competitive athletics from their schools, and eventually from American higher education, obviously need to do a great deal more planning, organizing, and educating than they have done so far if they are to succeed. This article is intended simply to state a few premises that seem to the writer to be obviously true but often ignored, and then, in the light of these premises, to suggest a general program that might be flexible enough to try out in various local situations.

(De-emphasis is another problem. It has been significantly accomplished at some schools, but the pressures which have made intercollegiate athletics what it has become in American higher education will remain as long as athletics does, and must be watched: even when a school does move to a less competitive program, all those concerned with the program still want to be winners in the new framework, and they also search for chances to prove that they can still move in faster company.)

The first premise is the one most consistently ignored or denied or minimized by anti-athletic groups. It is the premise that competitive athletics offers stimulations and satisfactions so deep and widespread that they must be considered a normal, valid, even important part of ordinary human nature. For thousands of years, in cultures of all levels, physical

achievement for its own sake, apart from any obvious advantage in war or hunting (though such advantage has often been urged as a justification), has held great appeal for both participants and watchers. Pindar's expressions on the matter, to cite one example, sound very modern.

The failure to acknowledge both the strength and the validity of this appeal has made the academic world underestimate the difficulty of severing the connection between higher education and competitive athletics: it too often thinks that athletics is of no importance. He who does not simply deplore the connection, but who actually believes that physical activity superbly accomplished appeals only to the low or the coarse, will run head on into opposition from persons who, he will find, are surprisingly refined in some other ways. Moreover, all who want to sever the connection are working in a general democratic framework, which means that anything generally favored by the public is bound to be considered. One just doesn't easily abolish, out of hand, activities that have meant a good deal to a good many persons for a considerable time.

The second premise is that there is no necessary connection between competitive athletics and higher education. This premise would seem to be proved by the separate existences of the two. College baseball is one of the minor sports almost everywhere, and professional baseball one of the country's most important areas of competitive athletics. Excellent higher education is available at institutions that have no program of competitive athletics, notably in England and Europe, but even here and there in the United States. Both sides of the education-athletics controversy should see that abolishing athletics from the educational program is not to abolish athletics from our society.

The third premise, closely related, is that competitive athletics and higher education in America today have a significant practical connection, with fairly deep historical roots, and that institutions of higher education that wish to sever this connection therefore have a moral obligation as well as a practical need (if they want the separation accomplished) to help the public make the transition to meeting their valid interests in competitive athletics without teams attached to universities.

The final premise is that since higher education and competitive athletics have different goals, any institution that attempts to have a program in both is bound to have conflicts; and to the extent that the conflicts are resolved in favor of the athletic program, the higher-education program is bound to suffer. Since this article is not written to convince readers that this premise is valid, but only to set forth some ideas for those already convinced, no elaboration will be made.

**I**F THESE premises are sound, then it seems to me that several steps might be taken to work toward a severance.

First, get the financial facts into the open: Just what does the competitive athletics program cost any given institution? For public col-

leges and universities this information ought to be available, in detail. It should include complete costs—coaches' salaries, for example, prorated as necessary to allow for service in the physical-education program. Contributions from student-body funds and alumni funds should be included. It may be true, as claimed, that some athletic programs make money for a particular school. Over a period of a few years, however, most of them undoubtedly cost the school something. Either way, the situation should be known.

Second, get the problems on record. Those who believe that competitive athletics is a drag should prepare their case in detail. Usually, even when the faculty and administration of a school are ready to eliminate or de-emphasize, the board and alumni are not. Sometimes alumni overrule, in effect, board, administration, and faculty. The administration is in an excellent position to educate the board, and alumni publications ought to be open for at least a discussion of the considerations, pro and con.

In any event, all the conflicts should be aired, and the damage competitive athletics is doing to education should be establishable on the basis of specific evidence at the specific institution, if it is indeed a fact: the cost in budget; the amount of student time spent in promotions, stunts, and so on; the scholastic concessions made to athletes, if any, including special tutoring; and the amount of general administrative and faculty time spent on athletic problems.

Then, with all the facts out in the open, it seems to me that the institution which does decide that it should eliminate competitive athletics is in a position to try out the following strategy. That strategy is simply to announce that the school is going to eliminate athletics, working on a definite time schedule, and that it offers to turn over its athletic program and its competitive-athletic, as distinct from its physical-education, plant to any group interested in maintaining the program.

If the alumni, for instance, want to continue the athletic tradition, they could form some kind of separate body that would assume all responsibilities. The bigger the school and its program, the bigger and richer its alumni group is likely to be. To the extent that they wanted to and could, they might run it as a continuing amateur show, all of the players receiving scholarships to, and being required to enroll in, the university with which the team was associated. More realistically perhaps, they could run it so that it would conform more closely to what college football has in several respects widely become—a professional or semi-professional program—except that all financial arrangements could be completely out in the open (financial exploitation of players is now a problem, as well as the more talked-about “overpayments” of various sorts). The player's scholastic standing, then, would not need to be of direct concern, though he could use his athletic ability as a means of furthering his education. If it wished to, the group could offer the student body and the faculty special rates on season tickets to the games,

but it might be hoped that the university would not permit the present widespread immorality of requiring, in effect, that every student buy them. If the program proved profitable, the group could help the school by leasing or purchasing the plant, and even by giving it some of the profits, assuming that the alumni are sincere in their arguments that they wish to see athletics continued because the program aids their alma mater in so many ways.

If citizens in the vicinity of a college think that the team is good for town business, or town morale, let them organize a group to run it, either privately or by convincing local officials that the program justifies tax support.

If a state legislature wants to keep a team going, let it make a separate appropriation, and set up a separate board, to run it, specifying, if it wishes, what the relation shall be between the school and the athletic board, provided that the school is left entirely free to pursue its academic policies without regard to athletics.

**A**NY or all of these suggestions may sound odd because of the relations that have actually been established, but surely there is nothing wrong with them in principle. A community has every right to support what it considers to be important, either by public money, as schools are supported or as many moderate-sized European communities support a symphony orchestra, or by paying to see something run by private enterprise, as many athletic teams are supported now.

Part of the general harmfulness of associating education with competitive athletics, in fact, is that the community fools itself about what it is paying for. Since everyone is in favor of education, and since even some sports devotees feel a little diffidence about paying as much as they do for the support of athletics, it has proved easier to put the whole enterprise under the title of "education."

So let a community or an alumni group sponsor competitive athletics, and let it also sponsor education, including physical education. But let no group fool itself into thinking that if a school has a first-rate competitive team, it follows that the school has a good educational program, even a good physical-education program.

A final note: the problem of athletics is perhaps even more serious, because it is more widespread, at the secondary-school level, but higher education will have to lead the way; and to the extent that it is successful in severing its connection with athletics it will remove a significant source of pressure for competitive athletics at the secondary-school level.