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A Win at What Cost?

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By SKIP ROZIN

It seems long ago that Binghamton University—a jewel of the State University of New York system known for its academic excellence—stood at the pinnacle of its modest basketball history. Actually, it has been just over a year since BU defeated the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, to earn its only bid to the National Collegiate Athletic Association tournament. Joyous students stormed the court on March 14, 2009, to the beating of drums and chants of "Let's Go Bearcats."

Little has gone right since.



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Associated Press

Binghamton vs. Duke, during a first-round NCAA matchup last year.

Even as this school located 180 miles northwest of New York City was losing its opening NCAA game a week later to Duke, 86-62, indications of a program in trouble had surfaced. A Feb. 22, 2009 New York Times article cited the recruiting of players with questionable academic records and instances of players charged with crimes from theft to assault. Confirmation of BU's problems was detailed this February in a report ordered by the university. It found that the athletic department influenced decisions on incoming players and, in the matter of misconduct of players, "contributed to a culture in which damage control was emphasized" over discipline.

The mounting evidence—making news locally and nationwide—has taken a heavy toll on the school. Since BU's one tournament appearance, 10 of the 17 players on that team have been dismissed for academic, criminal or misconduct reasons, or have quit. The coach is on paid leave, and on Friday he sued BU for racial discrimination in suspending him. Two assistant coaches were reassigned, the athletic director stepped down, and the university president has announced her retirement, effective in July.

Last week the SUNY board of trustees recommended forming a three-person committee to oversee athletics not only at Binghamton but at the state's 64 campuses. "I think we're going to become a model system for how athletics and academics achieve balance across multiple institutions," said SUNY's chancellor, Nancy Zimpher, by telephone before the meeting in New York.

The February report—102 pages long and compiled over four months by Judith Kaye, the former chief judge of the New York Court of Appeals, at a cost of more than \$900,000—blamed a "lack of oversight" by BU's president, Lois B. DeFleur, and its then athletic director, Joel Thirer. Based on an analysis of more than 80 interviews and thousands of electronic communications, the report found that the admissions policy toward basketball players "involved risk that was approved by the Athletic Director and at the highest levels of the administration, including the President."

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It also explored motivations that might have led to such perilous behavior. According to the report, Ms. DeFleur and Mr. Thirer shared a vision of athletic success tied to BU's moving from Division III to Division II in 1990, en route to joining Division I in 2001. Key to that vision were the \$33.1 million Events Center that opened in 2004 and upgrading the basketball program by replacing coach Al Walker in 2007 with Kevin Broadus, a former assistant at Georgetown, a program that the report said "takes chances" on students with talent.

Taking chances on talented players can be a formula for disaster. Every time some university that isn't North Carolina or Kansas grabs headlines in the NCAA tournament—like George Mason in 2006 or Northern Iowa this year—fans, boosters and, yes, administrators get starry-eyed and ask the sports gods why their school can't play that well. Just asking is the first step in making a pact with the devil.

"Basketball is the cesspool of college sports," says James Duderstadt, a man too familiar with the game's pitfalls. He was the University of Michigan's president from 1988-96, a period marred by scandal. Federal charges were later brought against a booster, Ed Martin, and two others, for making illicit loans of more than \$600,000 to four players. Mr. Martin pleaded guilty in 2002 to one count of conspiracy to launder money but died while awaiting sentencing; severe sanctions were placed on Michigan by the University and the NCAA. "It only takes a few outstanding players to make a program nationally competitive, which is why basketball is the source of such cheating. Universities don't realize that it's so visible that the blowback can cause enormous damage to the institution, damage that lasts for decades."

Any action against BU depends on the results of an NCAA investigation now under way, but the pillorying on television and in the press has hurt this university protective of its reputation. Many of the nearly 15,000 students feel the criticism is unwarranted.

"Some of the national coverage has done a disservice to our university," said Student Association President Adam Amit, elected by the student body as a liaison to the administration; he refused to name a specific culprit. "Whatever the problems of last year, they were isolated to one sport."

Tarring with a broad brush has not been limited to the press. The scandal prompted some faculty members—18 in one letter two weeks ago and at least 34 last week, according to the BU student newspaper Pipe Dream—to upbraid the administration for not supporting high academic standards and to urge a return to Division III sports.

Binghamton students are quick to defend the school's balance of sports and academics. While the nearly 450 who compete in 21 varsity sports have in recent seasons racked up America East Conference titles in cross country, volleyball, baseball, men's and women's tennis—and with its athletes nationally ranked in pole vaulting, men's soccer, and tennis—their grade point average for spring 2009 was 3.12, highest since the school moved to Division I. (GPA for the student body overall that semester was 3.13.) The men's soccer team ranked first nationally in GPA among all 203 Division I programs.

Focusing on the basketball crises, they say, ignores the university's success in balancing the physical and intellectual aspects of a total education. And returning to Division III would be just as shortsighted, they add. "Competing at the highest level in sports is a learning experience," says Michelle McDonough, volleyball co-captain, who is pursuing a double major in math and education. "You have to play your best at all times; no off-days if you're tired. When I become a teacher, I hope to pass that on to my students."

While many Binghamton students are angry at the players whose actions brought disgrace to their campus, their harshest criticism is for an administration that, according to the report, condoned those players' weak academic performance and then supported them through repeated acts of misconduct. One Pipe Dream editorial charged that "the coaches and our president took advantage of every loophole, breaking rules to keep the players here," all to win basketball games. Not a good trade, they insist.

"When we won the conference championship and everybody flooded the court, I had to resist every impulse to go out there and jump around with them," said Cyril Cheriyan, who as Pipe Dream sports editor was covering the game. "But it wasn't worth what's followed. We were all blindsided; we never thought the administration would try to win a championship by trading in academic integrity."

Mr. Rozin writes about sports for the Journal.

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