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## Two teams facing charges of academic fraud meet in NCAA basketball tournament

Submitted by Jake New on April 1, 2016 - 3:30am

When the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Syracuse University face off in the Final Four of the National Collegiate Athletic Association men's basketball tournament this weekend, the game will be a clash between two storied institutions with equally revered coaches. It will also be a battle between two athletic programs plagued by [cases of academic fraud](#) <sup>[1]</sup>.

Syracuse entered this year's tournament following a season in which its head coach [sat out nine conference games](#) <sup>[2]</sup> for NCAA violations. The University of North Carolina remains under investigation for one of the most egregious cases of academic fraud in NCAA history.

While UNC is likely to receive some form of punishment and Syracuse already has been sanctioned, critics of big-time college athletics say they worry few lessons have been learned from the two scandals -- and that the meeting of two such troubled programs on the NCAA's biggest stage is evidence that winning games will always trump academic impropriety.

"I think it's an affirmation of what really matters," said David Ridpath, a professor of sports administration at Ohio University and an advocate for reforming the academic side of college sports. "It's a facade that we want to believe that this is all about students, and about them getting an education. We're not watching students play college sports. We're watching professional athletes in a disguise. We just want to watch the games. And that's OK, but I think we need to be honest about it."

For Syracuse, the trouble began in 2005. Following a season of poor academic performance from his players, the university's head basketball coach, Jim Boeheim, hired a new director of basketball operations and gave him an imperative: "fix" the academic problems of his athletes.

The new director's solution, [according to the NCAA](#) <sup>[3]</sup>, was for athletics staff members to

access and monitor the email accounts of several players, communicate directly with faculty members as if the staff members were the athletes and then complete course work for them. In one case, an athlete had his eligibility restored by turning in a paper to raise a grade he had earned the previous year. The paper was written by the director and a basketball facility receptionist.

The fraud lasted more than half a decade, finally coming to light last year after a lengthy series of investigations by the university and the NCAA. Syracuse self-imposed a postseason ban last year, and then the NCAA announced a number of sanctions [4] against the university, including vacating more than 100 of Boeheim's wins and suspending him for nine conference games this past season.

Syracuse accepted the majority of the NCAA's findings but appealed the association's punishment and offered its full support to the head coach. During a news conference Thursday, Boeheim doubled down on his innocence, arguing that "rules being broken is a lot different" than cheating.

"Schools will fight tooth and nail to protect their winning coaches from punishment," Ridpath said. "Institutions rarely say, 'Yes, this happened, we screwed up and we'll take this punishment.' They go down swinging, and that makes the system look even worse."

The scandal at Syracuse, many would argue, pales in comparison to what took place for nearly two decades [5] at the University of North Carolina. For 18 years, some employees at UNC Chapel Hill knowingly steered about 3,000 students -- 1,500 of them athletes -- toward no-show "paper courses" that never met [5], were not taught by any faculty members and in which the only work required was a single research paper that received a high grade no matter the content.

Roy Williams, the men's basketball coach, maintains he was not aware of the fraud. "We had a problem," Williams said last weekend. "We're embarrassed, we're mad, we're ticked off about what happened. We know men's basketball had nothing to do with it and we're very proud about that."

Yet, the majority of those in the know were academic advisers to men's basketball and football players, the latter group of which comprised more than half of the athletes taking the courses, according to a report [6] the university released in 2014. In television interviews that year, former players under Williams -- including members of his 2005 championship team -- said they enrolled in the paper courses [7] and that the head coach was aware of the fraud.

That team accounted for 35 enrollments in the phony courses, according to the university, and men's basketball players accounted for more than 12 percent of all athletes taking the courses.

The NCAA currently is conducting its second investigation into the fake classes. The association's first attempt, which concluded the fraud was not related to athletics, was widely criticized as inadequate following UNC's own finding that nearly half of the students who took the courses were athletes. Just 4 percent of the student body are athletes. In a notice of allegations the NCAA sent to the university last year, the men's basketball program was not specifically mentioned.

Bob Malekoff, a lecturer and adviser in UNC's Department of Exercise and Sport Science

and the former director of research for the Center for the Study of Sport in Society at Northeastern University, said when a university's basketball program is as well-known and beloved as those at UNC and Syracuse, a team can "easily bounce back" from scandal. There may be short-term ramifications that affect a certain roster of players, such as missing a postseason tournament, Malekoff said, but any long-term effects for "brand-name" programs and their coaches are rare.

"The brand of the top teams and their coaches is so great that it is easier to come back," he said. "What we have is a system where, on one hand, says we want students to do well academically, and to have time to do the work and to be regular students, but on the other hand rewards coaches really only for winning. Unless we balance that scorecard so that these other areas -- like academics and adherence to rules -- are really judged, why should we expect anything different?"

Coaches do have some incentive to care about the academic performance of a team. The NCAA requires its teams to meet a minimum Academic Progress Rate, a controversial metric the NCAA uses to gauge how many players on a team remain on track to graduate. Teams that don't maintain an APR of 930, out of a possible 1000 points, are banned from the postseason.

A working paper published this week [8] by the National Bureau of Economic Research concluded that while coaches of teams with lower academic scores are more likely to be fired than a coach of a team with a higher academic score, salary increases, external promotions and contract renegotiation are all positively related to a coach's winning percentage. There was no evidence of a similar relationship between APR and those outcomes. A 50-point increase in a team's APR, the researchers found, had the same effect on a basketball coach's job retention as two wins during a season.

Though the NCAA strictly enforces its APR rules, the association maintains that it's ultimately up to each institution to ensure the academic integrity of their teams. "It's our commitment -- and our responsibility -- to give young people opportunities to learn, play and succeed," the NCAA states on its website [9]. In a response to a lawsuit filed last year by two former UNC athletes, the NCAA's lawyers clarified the association's role, writing that the NCAA "did not assume a duty to ensure the quality of the education of student-athletes."

During the Thursday news conference, Mark Emmert, the NCAA's president, said he had no reservations about UNC and Syracuse appearing in the Final Four. Since discovering the fraud at UNC, the university has fired many of those connected to the scandal and introduced clearer policies on how athletic officials should interact with faculty and tutors. Syracuse, too, has fired those directly implicated in its fraud case and served the related sanctions, including those it self imposed.

"I understand optically why people have questions around all that," Emmert said. "It makes perfect sense that they might. But the reality is that the Committee on Infractions handed down their sanctions on Syracuse University, the university dealt with those sanctions and this group of young men had nothing to do with these violations. It shouldn't impact these young men."

It can be difficult finding a balance between sanctions that act as "an effective deterrent," Emmert said, and those that are "not too punitive." Many of the NCAA's

sanctions, especially postseason bans, are largely confined to one season. In 2013, the University of Connecticut was banned from participating in the postseason after its men's basketball team failed to meet the required APR, a decision the university aggressively -- though unsuccessfully -- tried to appeal. The next season, UConn won the NCAA men's basketball tournament.

"The system is not failing," said Eddie Comeaux, an associate professor of higher education at the University of California at Riverside. "The well-being of the system's most vulnerable actors, the athletes, is not being protected, but that's because the benefits of other stakeholders -- coaches and sponsors -- supersede any academic obligation. It is not ironic. It is not surprising that UNC and Syracuse are in the Final Four because the system is set up to benefit these kinds of programs. The system is not failing. It is doing exactly what it is intended to do."

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**Links:**

- [1] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/03/27/changes-syracuse-u-do-little-hold-officials-accountable-academic-fraud-critics-say>
- [2] <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/03/09/ncaa-suspends-syracuse-u-basketball-coach-vacates-108-wins>
- [3] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/03/09/ncaa-suspends-syracuse-u-basketball-coach-vacates-108-wins>
- [4] <http://www.ncaa.org/about/resources/media-center/news/syracuse-did-not-control-athletics-basketball-coach-failed-monitor>
- [5] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/10/23/report-finds-academic-fraud-u-north-carolina-lived-nearly-20-years>
- [6] <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/10/23/report-finds-academic-fraud-u-north-carolina-lived-nearly-20-years>
- [7] [http://espn.go.com/espn/otl/story/\\_/id/11036924/former-north-carolina-basketball-star-rashad-mccants-says-took-sham-classes](http://espn.go.com/espn/otl/story/_/id/11036924/former-north-carolina-basketball-star-rashad-mccants-says-took-sham-classes)
- [8] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/03/29/teams-academic-success-not-likely-advance-coachs-career-study-finds>
- [9] <http://www.ncaa.org/about/what-we-do/academics>

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