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The Crucial Issue in American College Athletics

By JESSE FEIRING WILLIAMS

An Analysis of the Social Implications Involved

IN SPITE of enormous crowds at intercollegiate games, the college athletic situation is deplorable and the conditions are chronic. The problems were so serious twenty years ago that the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching studied the field and reported upon the topic, *American College Athletics*, issued in 1929. The National Collegiate Athletic Association and the College Physical Education Association are constantly studying the athletic conditions that confront them, and these conditions are characterized by such words as *commercialism*, *subsidization*, *exploitation*, *bribery*, *gambling*, and *proselytism*. Can the existing conditions be changed? Can the recognized evils be abated? Can the practice of a culture be directed into new channels?

More than thirty years ago it was rather easy to change the type and quality of the then prevailing physical education. Surely nothing was more detrimental to the future welfare of American youth than the stupid posturings of the competing systems of gymnastics. But the movement for a new program of physical education succeeded everywhere in American life for the simple reason that the pattern proposed was in perfect harmony with many of the salient features of the American social scene. The effort

of some Americans who believed in calisthenics and formal gymnastics never really had a chance to succeed because the ideas behind the foreign systems of gymnastics rested on the social and political doctrines of different cultures. On the contrary, the proposals for natural programs were based not only on the biologic needs of youth but also on the social scene in which they lived, a culture that admired functional physique, initiative in action, self-reliance, and the competitive features of games.

This complete shift in the character of physical education in American schools and colleges was a harmonious adjustment to the culture of which it was a part, and through the years physical education prospered. Gymnasiums and athletic fields, pools and playgrounds, are as notable in sports as electric refrigerators, radios, automobiles, and the innumerable gadgets of industry are in the ordinary experiences of life. This improvement in plant, however, is no more a measure of the soundness of our program than the things of our current life reveal the welfare of the social scene around us. There are those who write despairingly about the disillusionments of modern life. Can the soul of contemporary college sport be saved?

It is here contended that sport is an

aspect of the culture of a people and that college athletics in America is an expression of the social scene in which we live. Because it was never set apart from the world of affairs, it reflects the political and economic forces that play upon the human materials of man, and therefore is as surely cultural as our corporations, our labor unions, our skyscrapers, our farm machinery, and other vital aspects of American life. We who have given of our best efforts to develop college athletics are at times dismayed by the gambling, amazed at the legalisms of the amateur code, and all but disillusioned by the crass commercialism that everywhere abounds.

ALL are ready to admit that the college athletic situation is chaotic, but the notion that it is chaotic because of the gambling, commercialism, and subsidization which mark its course, and that it will remain so until individuals acquire a new and finer ethical viewpoint, simply reverses the true state of affairs. The proselyting, the subsidizing, the exploiting, the bribing, the buying and selling are true and exact portrayals of the culture in which we live. The chaotic sports picture is but one frame in the film of our current society. The inner life of man today is in a confused and disordered state without the old and sure standards, the straight pathways, and the unswerving loyalties that produced in our ancestors that peace and calm of mind they knew so well. The very distortions of athletic purpose to ends that lie far outside the bounds of educational outcomes for students reflect the general disintegration in

community life throughout the nation.

Athletic coaches, like all other persons who have a hand in the destiny of the athletic scene, are now, more than ever, effects and not causes. They, too, are the product of the culture in which they live; they, too, reflect the values that dominate the athletic scene.

In the face of the evils that characterize present-day athletics, it is the business of the student of these matters to ask the practical question, What can be done about them? There are and have been numerous proposals for reform. Legislation and police power are old methods of society for combating evils, but our experience with prohibition and food rationing is not such as to make us sanguine about law and enforcement that are against the culture. Indeed our experiences with reform in the athletic arena have left some of us skeptical about the regulations that we solemnly accept in conferences.

There are many phases of our current athletic situation which illustrate, to anyone who will think realistically, the complete irrelevance of legislative and punitive measures. Consider the present state of the movies and the radio, with which sport now shares the amusement business, and ask yourselves how these powerful forces are to be met. Do firm resolutions of the Congress of Parents and Teachers have any effect? Do the investigations of students of social life turn them from their glorification of crime and the exploits of the gangster? Will criticism of radio turn this great educational force from its sentimental soap operas as long as they sell soap? What possible effect can the Carnegie

Report have upon a business that attracts hundreds of thousands to its games, pays salaries to coaches that exceed the stipends of scholars, and warrants headlines in the newspapers that feature reports of the games? The manifestations of athletics complained of by thoughtful persons in the National Collegiate Athletic Association and the College Physical Education Association are those that rest upon the principle of pecuniary gain. To ask individuals who are the product of the forces that produced sixteen "bowl" games last January to put an end to such business by acts of personal decision without reference to the purposes that move them, is merely to profess faith in moral magic. To ask individuals who have adopted the principle of pecuniary gain to give up Madison Square Garden by simply foregoing thousands of dollars is to evince a species of faith that may move mountains but not athletic boards and councils.

And yet regulation and control have been the methods used by the American people in meeting the problems that arise in a free society out of the operation of commercial, industrial, and financial enterprises. The Sherman Antitrust Act, the Interstate Commerce Commission, the Federal Trade Commission, the Fair Employment Practices Act, the Wagner Labor Relations Act, these and similar laws and organizations illustrate the procedure of our society in its attempt to prevent cheating, bribery, exploitation, and other practices that deny freedom of opportunity for all and seek special privileges for a few.

In professional athletics there are czars, and in college athletics for

decades there have been conferences that set standards, established regulations, and enforced rules. Still, the conditions that brought these procedures into being continue and, as the pecuniary resources of games are more fully recognized, the stadia become larger, the press more vociferous in its avuncular devotion to college stars, and the varied trappings of college games blatant and absurd. If all these manifestations were indicative of American devotion to drama, to festival, to play, to physique, to vigor and vitality, all would be well; but when the purposes are pecuniary, the depth and range of the problem are apparent.

ALTHOUGH we are aware of our problems we rarely treat them as such in the intellectual sense of the word. We tend to regard them as defects that need correction and as evils that should be reformed. It is not that we are intellectually dishonest, but rather that we are unprepared to take the scientific attitude that the situation requires.

Many years ago we encountered this same difficulty in caring for disease, and when a man fell sick we invoked the gods to relieve us from the full force of their displeasure. Today, in scientific medicine, diseases of man are diagnosed as to cause and treated accordingly. In diseases, the causes are microorganisms, poisons, accidents, deficiencies in certain chemicals, malformation of parts, new growths, and conflicts in the emotional and mental life. The genius of scientific medicine is differential diagnosis and accurate prescription. The folly of placing all persons in the same kind of hospital and of providing the same

kind of treatment for all would be recognized today even by lay persons.

Man also suffers behavior disturbances and develops social relationships that eventuate in conduct that is called crime. These disturbances are usually diagnosed as due to "evil nature" and are commonly treated by placing the individual in prison. But the disturbances in behavior which characterize the social driftwood in prisons arise from many causes. There is no one poison responsible, no social cancer that explains all. We are beginning to understand that criminality is an expression of interaction between the individual and the social environment in which he lives. In this area, however, we lack the techniques in diagnosis, the competent laboratory findings, and the experience with scientific therapies that mark medical advance. The notion that hospitals are merely places to protect society against the dangers of contagious diseases is untenable today. Likewise untenable is the concept that prisons, jails, and reformatories are merely measures to protect society from the attacks of the maladjusted. In terms of the relationship of behavior to the cultural scene, all these institutions must be seen as a part of the problem of the cultural forces that work upon the human materials of man.

This reference to medicine and to criminology is to state a past attitude that in the former instance has been completely changed by a scientific attack upon the problems that it faced, and in the latter instance by a beginning awareness of the nature of the problem that now confronts the criminologist. The argument proceeds, then, with the statement that

the so-called evils of athletics are, in fact, problems to be solved in a scientific way. What does the situation demand, then, if we are to make a scientific attack upon the problem of college athletics?

WHEN a scientist begins the study of a problem, his first step is to review the literature of the field. From my own partial survey of the American social scene, I believe that our culture portrays a close correspondence between our present conduct of athletic games and our conduct of business and commercial enterprise. In short, the culture is uniform in this respect, and what happens on the campus fits the pattern of our present practices in free enterprise.

That this should be so is indeed amazing, because other college activities are not so conducted. The history of athletics in the American college reveals the origin of some of the factors of the present situation. Although the charters of American colleges declare that their purposes are educational, neither trustees nor faculties have seriously proposed to use athletics for educational outcomes. The failure at this point can be variously explained. Some would wish to observe that college policy reflected the academic mind as it operated within the philosophy that assumed a dichotomy between mind and body. Others would note that college athletics, in the past, looked to the initiative of students for their origin, and that these youths, operating within the pattern of the culture to which they belonged, organized games as business enterprises and not as educational experiences. Whatever

the explanation given for the origin of our present difficulties, it is certain that institutional policies are made in terms of monetary outcomes rather than educational goals when athletic programs are approved. It should also be remembered that the whole physical-education situation has suffered from its obvious but inevitable concern with the physical. We are aware of the corruption of the spirit by the physical and the degradation of the physical by the spirit and, in a true synthesis of the two, we strive to find a formula for the sour prophets of the mind as well as the devotees of force and strength. Little progress in such unifying orientation can be expected until educational leadership gets over the practice of looking down its nose at muscles. As a first step, it will need to remember that it takes muscles to express such disdain. The physical is a part of what we are and what we have; nothing could be meaner than to miscall it. Those who are critical of the worth of the physical fail to see the nature and intensity of the problem that we face in education; it is to make the physical, as Plato suggested, an effective instrument of the life of ideas, human relationships, enriching recreations, and rewarding enthusiasms.

Thus, a scientific attack upon the problems of college athletics must begin with the plans that are in hand for the education of the whole man. So long as trustees, administrative officers, and faculties can plan budgets, make staff appointments, and organize curriculums with the basic purpose of educating minds, then the athletic policy will obviously be concerned in their view with bodies, which from their position is of no great

moment to education, however important it is to college finance. At this point, of course, they fail also to see that the social and personal ideas and ideals learned in sport may be more influential in the determination of final character than all the lectures in philosophy, ethics, and religion given in the classroom. This fact has long been known on the campus, and yet educational institutions charged with the responsibility of developing the character of youth foster policies that lead to proselyting, subsidizing, commercialism, legalistic amateurism, hypocrisy, and exploitation.

A scientific attitude toward the problems of college athletics requires a disposition to think in terms of outcomes. If we foresee that present policies lead inevitably to certain consequences, then with educational outcomes in mind we have no alternative but to initiate and to support other policies with their preferred consequences. The consequences of the present athletic policies are well known and inevitable, but other policies will produce a different set of results. It is naïve for us to go on year by year believing that in some magical fashion the athletic situation will improve without action on our part to create conditions which will produce the consequences we desire. Such a belief is the most sentimental kind of wishful thinking. Let us remember that just a few short weeks ago certain forces in our culture that use college athletics for pecuniary gain were making their "bowl" arrangements, were publishing the odds in the newspapers which abet the business, were placing their bets, and were appraising what steps to take to make their bets safe. And we should

never forget that none of the crowd that uses college athletics for pecuniary gain is at all concerned for the educational objectives that are held by the membership of these college associations.

IT IS apparent, then, that the crucial issue in American college athletics is the principle of pecuniary gain which is also the dominant force in our culture. The situation demands an active and alert intellectual recognition of the realities of the social scene. The behavior of the American college in facing the implications of this principle for athletics will not solve the bitter struggle now going on between management and labor, but a sound solution of its own problems might have tremendous outcomes in influencing the nature of our society in the years ahead.

The implications that we face are very clear. I shall state them without further comment, although I am fully aware that they will need considerable discussion if they are to become a real part of our thinking and emotion. Since pecuniary gain is the basic problem,

First, all monies budgeted for the expenses of athletics shall be appropriated from the general funds of the college, and all monies received as income shall pass into the general fund.

Second, all coaches shall be selected and staffed in the faculty in accordance with the standards of excellence that operate in the appointment of other officers of the institution.

Third, all coaches shall be appointed by the trustees and hold their appointment at the pleasure of the trustees.

Fourth, all coaches shall receive salaries that are consonant with the faculty rank held, and shall be appointed for full-time service.

Fifth, since recruiting and proselyting of athletes violate the purpose for which athletics exist in education, the full-time service of coaches will be restricted to teaching and administrative duties.

Sixth, since athletics are accepted activities in the education of college students, all bona fide students shall be eligible to participate, and neither scholarship nor social status shall render a student ineligible.

Seventh, since athletic games are close to the interests of students, there shall be no fee or a nominal fee for their attendance at games, and the general admission shall be small and not competitive with professional prices.

The times in which we live belong to us, and the present athletic situation is also ours. In any realistic attempt to remove the evils that now plague us, we are faced by innumerable obstacles. A dictator could get quick results, although he is not always in complete control of his materials. In the culture of our society, our only control is enlightenment. Even in a palace, said Marcus Aurelius, it is possible to live well; but, as the ancient sage pointed out, it required special effort under the circumstances. To get intercollegiate athletics into educational channels requires a special effort under the circumstances.

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