

# Clean Up or Pay Up

Here's the solution to the college sports mess

by Louis Barbash

Tom Scates is one of the lucky ones. He has a bachelor's degree from Georgetown University, where he played basketball under the fabled John Thompson, one of the best college basketball coaches in the country, and one of the few who insist that their players go to class. Ninety percent of Thompson's players at Georgetown receive degrees, about three times the national average.

More than a decade after Tom Scates received his diploma, he has managed to parlay his Georgetown degree and education, his athletic skills, and the character he developed during his career in intercollegiate athletics, into a job as a doorman at a downtown Washington hotel.

Still, Scates *is* one of the lucky ones. He played for a good team at a good school, under a moral coach, and under a president, Father Timothy Healy, who believed that Georgetown was a school with a basketball team, not a basketball team with a school. He was not implicated in drug deals, shoplifting, violence, grade altering, point shaving, or under-the-table money scandals. He didn't have his scholarship yanked. He didn't emerge from school functionally illiterate. He got a job.

Many of the men Scates played against when he

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was at Georgetown, and their basketball and football counterparts at major colleges and universities, have not been so fortunate. Less than half the football and basketball scholarship athletes will graduate from college. And what education athletes do get is often so poor that it may be irrelevant whether they graduate or not.

In addition to corrupting the university's basic academic mission, big-time sports have been a lightning rod for financial corruption. College athletes are cash-poor celebrities. Although their performance on the field or court produces millions in revenue for the university, they receive in return only their scholarships—tuition, room, and board—and no spending money. They are forbidden from working part-time during the season. Athletes have been caught trying to make money by getting loans from coaches and advisers, selling the shoes and other gear they get as team members, taking allowances from agents, and getting paid for no-show summer jobs provided by jock-sniffing alumni—all violations of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) rules.

Things might be different if the NCAA would show some real inclination to clean up the college sports mess. But that organization has a well-developed instinct for the capillaries: instead of attacking the large-scale academic, financial, and criminal cor-

ruption in college sports, too often the investigators from Mission, Kansas, put their energies into busting athletes for selling their complimentary tickets and coaches for starting their practices a few weeks ahead of schedule. Meanwhile, the real problems of college athletics continue to fester.

Will the NCAA change? And if so, would that matter? Earlier this year, NCAA Executive Director Dick Schultz proposed new rules to stem college sports corruption. Schultz's reforms included "quality academic advising and career-counseling programs," restriction of recruiting, long-term contracts for coaches, reduced pressure and time demands on athletes, and the elimination of athletic dormitories to "make the athlete as indistinguishable from the rest of the student body as is humanly possible."

It's illegal to bet on sports except in Nevada, so bet on this instead: Schultz's proposals will not pass an NCAA dominated by college sports officials whose careers rest on winning games. Recall what has happened to much weaker suggestions. Even Georgetown's Coach Thompson boycotted his own team's games to protest as too severe the timid requirements of the NCAA's Proposition 48, which would have barred entering freshmen from athletic scholarships and competition if they did not have a 2.0 high school GPA and SAT scores totaling 700 points. Interested in even better odds? Take this to the bank: Even if Schultz gets every one of his proposals put in exactly as he outlined them, they—like everything else the NCAA has tried—will not work.

Well then, is there any way out of this mess? Yes. Actually, there are *two* ways out. Because the NCAA has so utterly failed, because in the present system the big-money pressures to cheat are so enormous, and because, like it or not, sports have such a widespread impact on the country's moral climate, there should be a federal law that requires schools *either* to return to the Ivy League ideal in which players are legitimate members of the student body, judged by the same standards as everybody else, *or* to let players on their teams be non-student professionals. All the trouble comes from trying to mix these two alternatives—from trying to achieve big revenues while retaining the veneer of purity.

The pure alternative doesn't have to ignore athletic ability among prospective students—there were plenty of good football teams before today's double-standard disaster got firmly entrenched. You want to consider the athletic ability of college applicants for the same reason you want to consider musical or theatrical ability; a university should be a wonderfully diverse collection of talents that together stimulate people to develop in all sorts of positive ways. Athletic skill is one such talent—one that even academic

purists ought to look at. But the key is that universities must consider athletic ability as only *part* of what they take into account when they accept a student. The fundamental mistake of today's college sports system is that it supposes a student could be at a university *solely* because of his athletic skill.

While the purely amateur option is probably the more desirable of the two, the professional one isn't nearly as horrible as it might seem at first. After all, coaches were originally volunteers, and now they're paid. (Army's first head coach, Dennis Michie, received no pay. Jess Hawley coached for free at Dartmouth from 1923-28. His 1925 team went undefeated and was the national champion.) So why not players?

## Sweat equity

How much would a salaried college athlete make? If the example of minor league baseball is anything to go on—and such authorities as Roger Meiners, a Clemson University economist who specializes in the economics of college sports, and Ed Garvey, the former head of the NFL Players Association, think that it is—college salaries would be enough for a young athlete to live on, but not so much as to bust college budgets. Minor league baseball players start at around \$11,000 for their first full professional season and range upward to the neighborhood of \$26,000 for players on AAA teams under major league option. So it seems fair to estimate a salary of about \$15,000 for an average player on an average team.

The professional option's chief virtue is honesty. The current student-athlete system requires both students and universities to pretend that the young athletes are not full-time professionals, but rather full-time students who play sports in their spare time. But does anyone suppose that high school athletes reading four and five years below grade level would be considered for college admission, much less recruited and given full scholarships, if they were not football or basketball stars? Can the abuses of NCAA rules that have been uncovered at almost half of its biggest schools have any other meaning than that giving these athletes a real education is not what universities are trying to do?

The hypocrisy begins with the fundamental relationship between the players and the university: 18- to 20-year-olds, many of them poorly educated, inner-city blacks, coerced and deceived into playing four years of football or basketball without pay so that the university can sell tickets and television rights.

The coercion comes from the colleges' control of access to professional football or basketball: It is virtually impossible to go to the pros without playing college ball first. Colleges open that opportunity only to

athletes who will agree to perform for the college for four years without getting a salary or even holding an outside part-time job. The athlete does receive a four-year scholarship and room and board while he is enrolled, a package the NCAA values at about \$40,000. The deception lies in the fact that the inducements held out to athletes by colleges—the chance to play pro ball and getting a college education—are essentially worthless, and the schools know it.

The athlete's first priority is to play pro ball.

Forty-four percent of all black scholarship athletes, and 22 percent of white athletes, entertain hopes of playing in the pros. That's why they will play four years for nothing. But in fact, the lure of sports that keeps kids in school is a false hope and a cruel hoax. "The dream in the head of so many youngsters that they will achieve fame and riches in professional sports is touching, but it is also overwhelmingly unrealistic," says Robert Atwell, president of the American Council on Education. The would-be pro faces odds as high as 400-1: of the 20,000 "students" who play college basketball, for example, only 50 will make it to the NBA. The other 19,950 won't. Many of them will wind up like Tom Scates, in minimum wage jobs, or like Reggie Ford, who lost his football scholarship to Northwest Oklahoma State after he injured his knee, and now collects unemployment compensation in South Carolina.

The scholarships and promises of education are also worthless currency. Of every 10 young men who accept scholarships to play football at major schools, according to NCAA statistics, just 4 will graduate. Only 3 of every 10 basketball players receive degrees.

Not only are these athletes being cheated out of a promised education, but they and their universities are forced to erect elaborate, meretricious curricula to satisfy the student-athlete requirement, so of those who *do* get degrees, many receive diplomas that are barely worth the parchment they're printed on. Running back Ronnie Harmon majored in computer science at the University of Iowa, but took only one computer course in his three years of college. Another

Iowa football player also majored in computer science, but in his senior year took only courses in billiards, bowling, and football; he followed up by getting a D in a summer school watercolor class. Transcripts of the members of the basketball team at Ohio University list credit for something called "International Studies 69B"—a course composed of a 14-day/10-game trip to Europe.

As things stand now, athletically gifted students who genuinely want an education are often steered

away by eligibility-conscious advisers. Jan Kemp, the University of Georgia academic adviser for athletes who won a lawsuit after the university fired her for insisting on the athletes' right to be educated, recalls how a Georgia athlete was always placed in "dummy" classes despite his efforts to take "real" ones. "There's nothing wrong with his mind," says Kemp. "But the situation is magnified for athletes because there is so much money involved. There is too much control over who gets in and who takes what courses."

No case illustrates the cynicism that poisons big-

time college sports better than that of former Washington Redskins star defensive end Dexter Manley. Manley spent four years as a "student-athlete" at Oklahoma State University only to emerge, as he admitted years later, functionally illiterate. But OSU President John Campbell was not embarrassed: "There would be those who would argue that Dexter Manley got exactly what he wanted out of OSU. He was able to develop his athletic skills and ability, he was noticed by the pros, he got a pro contract. So maybe we did him a favor by letting him go through the program."

One scarcely knows where to start in on a statement like that. It's appalling that an accredited state university would admit a functional illiterate, even recruit him, and leave him illiterate after four years as a student. It's shocking that it would do all this in order to make money from his unpaid performance as an athlete. And it is little short of grotesque that an educator, entrusted with the education of 20,000 young men and women, would argue that the cynical arrangement between an institution of higher learning

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and an uneducated high school boy was, after all, a fair bargain.

The infection of hypocrisy spreads from the president's office to the athletic department and coaching staff. This may be the saddest betrayal in the system. These are 17-year-olds, dreaming of a lucrative career in sports. They have placed their faith in the coaches who have visited their homes, solicited their trust, and gotten to know their parents. But those coaches, as Robert Atwell points out, "may have a vested interest in perpetuating the myth rather than pointing out its inherent fallacy." That vested interest, of course, is that if they do not produce winning teams, at whatever cost, they will lose their jobs.

So instead, to recruit highly sought-after high-school athletes, coaches promise playing time, education, and exposure to national TV audiences and professional scouts. But once the player arrives on campus, coaches are under strong pressure to treat him like what he is: an employee, whose needs must be subordinated to the needs of the enterprise, i.e., winning.

## Sports without strings

Gary Ruble, a former scholarship football player at the University of North Carolina, told a House subcommittee investigating college athletics that North Carolina "came to me and offered me, basically, the world. They came to me and said come to our school. Be a student athlete. We will guarantee that you graduate. We will promise you to be a star, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera." But once in Chapel Hill, Ruble found himself riding the bench. "You go in as an offensive lineman, which I was, at 240 pounds, and you go into a system where you have offensive linemen who are 285 and they are telling you that you are going to play. That's an impossibility," Ruble told the subcommittee. After three years, "my position coach called me to his office and stated that I should consider either transferring to another school or dropping out gracefully. I was no longer to be considered in their plans for our team," Ruble says. When he reported back to school anyway, he was told "I had no option of whether to stay or go. They were not allowing me to retain my scholarship."

A system of sports without strings—releasing college athletes and their universities from the pretense that they are students, and instead paying them for their services—would cure the student-athlete system's chief vices: its duplicity and its exploitiveness.

Athletes who want to get started on careers in sports, including those whose only way out of the ghetto may be the slam dunk and the 4.4-40, would find paying jobs in their chosen field. Overnight,

thousands of new jobs as professional football and basketball players would be created. Players with the ability to get to the NFL and NBA would get paid during their years of apprenticeship. For those of lesser abilities, playing for college teams would be a career in itself, a career they could start right out of high school and continue as long as skills and bodies allowed. And as they matured and their playing careers drew to a close, the prospect of a real college education might seem more inviting than it did at 17.

Releasing athletes from having to be students would, ironically, make it easier for those who want an education to get it. Even with the best intentions, today's college athletes have little hope of being serious students. Basketball practice, for instance, begins October 15, and the season does not end for the most successful teams until after the NCAA championships in early April; in other words the season starts one month after school begins and ends one month before school is out. During the season, athletes spend six or more hours a day, 30 to 40 hours a week, on practice, viewing game-films, at chalk talks, weight lifting, conditioning, and attending team meetings. The best-prepared students would have difficulty attending to their studies while working 34 hours a week—and these are not the best-prepared students.

But under no-strings sports, athletes who want educations will fare better than they do now, because the pace of their education need not be governed by their eligibility for athletic competition. A football player could play the fall semester and study in the spring. Basketball players, whose season spans the two semesters, might enroll at schools with quarter or trimester systems, or study summers and after their sports careers are over. Instead of being corralled into courses rigged to provide high grades like "Theory of Volleyball," "Recreation and Leisure," "Jogging," and "Leisure Alternatives," athletes would be in a position to take only the courses they want and need. This would be even more likely if, as part of the proposition, universities were still required to offer full scholarships to athletes, to be redeemed whenever the athletes wanted to use them.

Under these changes, those athletes who end up going to college would be doing so because they were pursuing their own educational goals. This reform would replace today's phony jock curriculum with the kind of mature academic choices that made the G.I. Bill such a success.

Such considerations make it clear that it's time for schools to choose between real amateurism and real professionalism. They can't have a little of both. From now on, in college sports, it's got to be either poetry or pros. □

