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Sports Notes

by
Wornie L. Reed

The Minimal Pay of College Athletes

The recent conviction of sports agents Norby Walters and Lloyd Bloom on charges of racketeering and fraud may hasten the day when college sports will be seen as the businesses they are, and college athletes will be seen as “subminimum-wage” employees of these businesses. Certainly, Bloom and Walters are unsavory characters; they are guilty of several criminal activities, including extortion. But what should not go unnoticed is the fact that they were found guilty of committing fraud against colleges because they signed athletes to contracts before their college eligibility was up.

These men were convicted of fraud because the athletes on scholarship were deemed to have a “contractual” relationship with the universities, and these “contracts” cannot be broken at the will of the athlete. Under the contract, a college athlete plays a sport and in exchange is provided with a scholarship. Before we examine the inequality of this “contract,” let’s take a look at “breaking” the contract. Contrast this with a student who is on a marching band scholarship. Such a student can stop school anytime he wishes and start a professional career. So can drama students and academic scholarship recipients. Any student except a scholarship athlete in one of the major sports can stop school anytime he chooses and work in any business or profession he wishes. The situation is extremely inconsistent.

College sports in Division 1 of the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) is big business. Some ten years ago a newly-hired athletic director at the University of Missouri stated in his first interview that his main job was to generate funds, and he indicated that this was his strong suit. The business aspect of college sports is clear if one examines the recently completed NCAA Division 1 basketball tournament.

Receipts in the tournament totalled \$66,300,000 from television contracts, ticket sales, and other sources. Some \$35 million was shared among the teams. Duke, Illinois, Michigan, and Seton Hall—the “final four” teams—received \$1,251,000 each. The four teams that lost to these final four teams in the regional finals received over \$1 million. Teams that lost in the regional semifinals received \$750,600 each. Teams that lost in the second round were paid \$500,400; and teams that lost in the first round received \$250,700 each. Consequently, each of the 64 invited teams were guaranteed at least \$250,000.

The big payouts in this year’s basketball tournament followed the big checks to football bowl teams.

The Fiesta Bowl opponents, West Virginia and Notre Dame, each received a guaranteed \$3 million. But these receipts are extras. Basketball and football teams receive the bulk of their income from ticket sales (to home games) and radio and television rights. Income from these sources can be substantial. For example, the University of Michigan’s football stadium has 105,000 seats. At \$20 per ticket this means that the Michigan football team receives over \$2 million six times a year from attendance alone. Another \$500,000 to \$1,000,000 is received from radio and television.

For generating all of this revenue, the college athlete is “paid” about \$6,500 to cover his tuition, room, and board. Most players also receive a small stipend for books, supplies, and laundry. This is a very small wage for such a profitable business.

Big-time college sports is an entertainment business from which large benefits are realized—but not by the players. Basketball coaches are a case in point. Many of the coaches in the top programs earn more than professional basketball coaches. The Kentucky position is reported to be worth \$1,000,000 a year. Believe it or not, college basketball coaches receive up to \$300,000 a year for having their players wear a certain brand of sneakers. In terms of worth and compensation, a case might be made that we’ve got the shoe on the wrong foot!

When confronted with this type of information, university spokespersons say that in exchange for their “work” these athletes receive a college education. There are several problems with that position, not the least of which is the fact that most big-time college sports teams are at state schools. Consequently, the out-of-pocket expenses for an education at these schools seldom exceed \$7,000 per year—which is a minimal wage for the work—30 hours a week—not at all on the scale of revenue these

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athletes generate. Another problem with the “college education” argument is that so few of the players actually get an education. For example, of the 20 black students who played for Memphis State University’s basketball team between 1976 and 1986, only one graduated. Jim Valvano’s North Carolina State basketball team has had only one or two blacks to graduate in the last ten years—and the list goes on.

According to an article in *Sports Illustrated*, former Iowa football player Ronnie Harper took only one course toward his computer science major during his three years of college. His curriculum included watercolor painting, ancient athletics, recreational leisure, advanced slo-pitch softball, and billiards. There are many other publicized examples of

these academic shams. Athletes are enrolled in these types of courses so that they can stay eligible to perform on the field and have plenty of time for practice. After their eligibility is completed, they do not usually remain in school, as they are no longer needed. A small proportion become professional athletes, but most just end up cheated out of an education. An example of the cruel aspect of this business is what happens to a player who suffers a career-ending injury. Several years ago many schools would discontinue the scholarship; and despite the reforms of recent years, many of the athletes suffering such injuries find themselves leaving school. One state legislator has pushed legislation to have athletes in his state covered by workmen's compensation laws. It may very well be time to declare these sports as businesses and to treat the athletes as the underpaid workers they are.

Bowling For Real Dollars

After nine years on the tour, Cheryl Daniels became the first black woman to win a Ladies Professional Bowling Tour (LPBT) title in April of 1989. This personable bowler won two more tournaments in May to establish herself as a top clutch performer. Prior to the creation of the LPBT in 1981 the women's tour was run by the Women's Professional Bowling Association. Within that organization Edith Burroughs became the first black to win a national level title when she won in 1979. Thus, there have been only two black women national tour winners.

The men's tour, the Professional Bowlers Associ-

ation (PBA), has fared no better in terms of black winners. Since the PBA's founding in 1959 no black man won a tournament until George Branham won in 1986. He won again in 1987 to claim the only two national titles won by a black on the men's tour.

These results may appear strange for at least three reasons. First, blacks are competing and winning in most sports, certainly in most if not all sports that are as popular as bowling. Second, there are thousands of black bowlers from which champions could conceivably develop. And third, bowling is generally associated in the public's mind—certainly in the print media—with the working class (unlike, say, golf or tennis). And more blacks are working class than middle class.

On the other hand, there is at least one critical reason why blacks have not won more titles: financial sponsorship. Unlike most professional sports, bowling is unsalaried, and it requires substantial funding for travel and living expenses. Bowlers, like golfers, must pay their own expenses, including tournament entry fees. Black bowlers have had a great deal of difficulty in getting financial sponsors, an essential element for bowlers in their first couple of years on the tour.

In addition, black bowlers have been the victims of subtle harassment by other players, as have black golfers. As recently as the 1970s, black male bowlers were complaining to black bowling fans about unsportsmanlike tactics used by their white competitors to break their concentration during matches. Perhaps these recent victories by young black professionals signal a new era in professional bowling.

Commentary

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Affirmative Action

I am convinced that one of the reasons for the outbreak of racial violence on college campuses is the fact that faculty as well as students—who have no vested interest in civil rights gains, progress, or peace—are reacting to the misuses and abuses of *affirmative action*. Many individuals were quite in favor of the civil rights gains for blacks in the 1960s; others went along because it brought peace—and they preferred peace to strife. Currently we have a new generation—one that has neither of these perspectives of civil rights. And in addition, we have the maligned affirmative action laws. Many majority group faculty as well as students consider affirmative action programs to be racial-preference programs that unfairly discriminate against (white) individuals, which is to misinterpret the meaning of racism.

In 1981, before the Reagan administration's reorganization and redirection of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, the Commission affirmed its "unwavering support for affirmative action plans and the full range of affirmative action measures necessary to make equal opportunity a reality for historically excluded groups." They supported this position by concluding that "a steady flow of data shows unmistakably that most of the historic victims of discrimination are still being victimized..."³

Arguments against affirmative action have been raised under the banner of "reverse discrimination." Obviously there have been incidents of arbitrary action against white males, but the charge of "reverse discrimination," in essence, equates efforts to limit the process of discrimination with that process itself. Such an equation is profoundly and fundamentally incorrect. Affirmative measures should end when the discriminatory process ends. On the other