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Help Wanted: Building Coalitions Between African-American Student Athletes, High Schools, and the NCAA

by Patiste M. Gilmore

This essay focusses on a topic of intense debate emerging over the last several years: strategies to improve the academic preparedness of collegiate student athletes. The issue should have been resolved with the passage of Proposition 48 in 1986. This measure stipulated that first-year students who wanted to compete in intercollegiate athletics Division I institutions must meet three requirements:

- Completion of high school core curriculum.
- Achieve a minimum grade point average of 2.0 (on a 4.0 scale).
- Earn a combined score of 700 on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), or score 15 or better on the American College Test (ACT).

Proposition 48, which was passed by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), proved to be a divisive measure, which has led to a flurry of debates in the world of education and athletics. The opponents of Proposition 48 were primarily Black coaches and prominent civil rights leaders, such as Jesse Jackson, and former National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) president, Benjamin Hooks. These individuals and others believed that Proposition 48 was racist in its intentions because of the stipulation that required student athletes to score a minimum score of 700 on the SAT. Their argument was that African-Americans have had a long history of scoring poorly on standardized tests, such as the SAT primarily due to cultural bias. Many young African-American athletes were seen as not having the opportunity to strengthen their academic career, after years of special treatment and benign neglect by teachers throughout their educational career prior to college entrance.

Supporters of Proposition 48 were primarily college presidents and educators, such as noted sport sociologist Dr. Harry Edwards and former president of both the Athletic Congress and United States Olympic Committee, Dr. Leroy Walker. Edwards stated that Proposition 48 “communicates to young athletes, beginning with those who are sophomores in high school, that we expect them to

develop academically as well as athletically.”¹ When Walker was asked if African-American student athletes should be exempted from Proposition 48, his response was, “You’re asking me to tell all Black high school [students], you’re too dumb to get a C average. Too dumb to get a 700 on the boards. I don’t feel inclined to do that.”²

The debate between the two sides raised three fundamental questions. First, why has the responsibility of educating the student athlete fallen upon the shoulders of colleges and universities rather than high schools? Secondly, what partnership should colleges and universities share, if any, in preparing student athletes for higher education? Lastly, what schooling factors are responsible for the academic achievement of high school student athletes?

Life Before Proposition 48

Prior to 1986 the only NCAA rule on an athlete’s college admission and eligibility for an athletic scholarship was C or a 2.0 (on a 4.0 scale) overall average in high school. Depending on the player’s secondary education, the C average could be meaningful or not. Since, as former major league pitcher Jim Bouton says, “your outstanding jock has been on athletic scholarship since the third grade,” and has received special treatment from teachers along the way, most often the athlete’s C average means zero in regards to academic qualifications or aptitude.³ However, the role of a student athlete takes on a significantly different dynamic when the issue of race is involved. “By the time many Black student athletes finish their junior high sports eligibility and move on to high school, so little has been demanded of them academically that no one any longer expects anything of them intellectually.”⁴ The end result is a group of educationally dysfunctional African-American student athletes who are poorly prepared to handle the rigor of a college education.

The embarrassment on the part of numerous universities whose acceptance of student athletes with less than glowing academic credentials was a motivation to raise standards. A notable example is the case of a student athlete at Creighton University who was found to have a third grade reading level when he completed his athletic eligibility. These kinds of situations forced many university presidents to consider lobbying the NCAA to increase its academic standards. The outcome was the passage of Proposition 48.

Why Universities Must Bear the Burden

Universities have been slow to help secondary school students prepare for higher education. The responsibility for gaining admittance to a college or university has been that of the school and family. The NCAA acted as if the standards created by the passage of Proposition 48 would make their way to all schools and families. This however has not been the case. Some schools have done a better job of informing African-American student athletes about classes and test scores needed to avoid being designated a “Proposition 48 casualty.” However, a majority of the student athletes affected by Proposition 48 attended high

schools with inadequate teaching resources and come from families who may not have enough information about attending college. Marcus Mabry notes along this line that:

Often promising athletes, a large proportion of them African-Americans, arrive on campus with one thing in mind: playing their sport and playing it well. They are often from disadvantaged backgrounds. Many...are the first people in their families to go to college. The students and their parents are unfamiliar with college and often at the mercy of the coaches who direct them.⁵

But athletics are important for the academic achievement of some students as noted by several studies.⁶ These studies found that participation in athletics had a positive effect on groups that are “underprivileged,” a label commonly attached to African-Americans who have a low socioeconomic status. These studies suggest that the association must take a more proactive role in assuring that African-American student athletes are not continually exploited by NCAA member universities for their athletic labor. It is not appropriate to bring players to their campuses without giving them a fair chance at completing a college education. This position must be the focus of the NCAA’s call for higher standards.

Partnerships Between Universities and High Schools

NCAA member universities can play a more effective role in developing the educational abilities of African-American athletes. There are at least two suggestions offered here that can be instituted to help raise the academic preparedness of African-American student athletes.

College students can be employed and/or given class credit for helping African-American high school athletes improve their academic skills. Involving college students also represents important mentoring for the high school students. It provides a linkage between high school and college. An effort like this should also be funded by the NCAA.

Secondly, universities and school districts need to educate current and future middle and secondary school teachers on how to educate African-American student athletes. In-service teaching sessions provide excellent opportunities to pass this information on to high school teachers. Here too, the NCAA can play a positive role by providing literature and workshops to college students who are enrolled in teacher education programs. Teachers need to become more aware of the problems that befall African-American student athletes.

High Schools Cannot Do the Job Alone

The current academic assistance programs instituted by NCAA member universities are misguided though well-intentioned because they confront the problem after it occurs. Proposition 48 punishes students who attend schools that do not have the resources or commitment to

educate their African-American athletes. But the NCAA does have the resources to make a substantial impact on African-American athletes. Reaching out to secondary schools and developing programs to help African-American athletes at that level will give student athletes a better chance to be successful academically when they enter the university. Secondary schools desperately need help from outside sources, such as universities and the NCAA. The NCAA must realize that, unfortunately for African-American student athletes, many high schools are deficient in the education process. Many of the students recruited to participate in “big-time” college athletics are from schools that are not only ill-equipped to handle the needs of its student athletes but those of other students as well. The implementation of the suggestions outlined above could position the NCAA to help high schools improve for all students.

The NCAA should no longer be able to exploit students from poor high schools without developing opportunities for their athletes to become competent and competitive college students. The NCAA operates as a non-profit organization; however, the organization is not using its enormous resources and profits to support and sustain the foundation of their riches. Pressure must be placed on the association to provide the support needed by African-American student athletes and all others who need assistance to be successful. If the NCAA and its member universities are to hold true to its standards set by Proposition 48, they must take a more proactive role in helping to educate student athletes, especially when they have the economic resources to do so. David L. Smith, president of SET Communications Inc., and a former college and professional athlete stated that “the decline of academic achievement among many of America’s talented and gifted athletes has accelerated. This in the midst of the NCAA being in the early stages of a television broadcast contract that will pay them \$1 billion over seven years.” Furthermore, he mentions that “the multi-billion dollar sports industry has grown at the expense of the intellectual, emotional, social, and economic needs of its participants. The sports industry has merged into the entertainment industry on the backs of free athletic talent.”⁷

The population that is most affected by Proposition 48 is the same one that is participating in and dominating the two sports that creates enormous profit for the NCAA—football and basketball. Many would call the relationship between the NCAA and the African-American community exploitive; however, the NCAA would rather believe that it is providing access to higher education for those who typically could not afford it. Somewhere in the middle lies the truth. The NCAA remains in an unequal partnership with the African-American community; the organization takes the community’s most precious resource without returning that investment. This essay offers a few thoughts about how this situation can change for the benefit of student athletes and other students and in ways that enhance the quality of secondary schooling in many places.

Notes

¹E. M. Swift, "Propping up Student Athletes" *Sports Illustrated* 81. 23 (November 5, 1994), 88.

²Murry Sperber, *College Sports Inc.* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1990), 217.

³Harry Edwards, "The Black 'Dumb Jock': an American Sports Tragedy," *The College Board Review* 131 (Spring 1984), 9.

⁴Marcus Mabry, "When the Game Is Over: Exploitation of Black Athletes in College," *Black Collegian* 23.4 (1993), 81.

⁵Jomills Henry Braddock, "Race, Sports and Social Mobility: a Critical Review," *Sociological Symposium* 30 (1980).

⁶See Steven J. Picou and Sean Hwang, "Educational Aspirations of 'Academically-disadvantaged' Athletes," *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 5.2 (1981); Braddock, "Race, Sports and Social Mobility," 1980.

⁷Mabry, 81.

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