

In 1874 student teams from McGill and Harvard met in a series of games which were credited with shaping the modern style of intercollegiate football. In the century since that series, American colleges and universities have accommodated large competitive sports programs; these, in turn, have been celebrated and justified in terms of distinctive American beliefs in connections between sports, education, and social mobility. This essay attempts to break the conspiracy of silence which characterizes the response of American faculty and educators toward intercollegiate athletic policy. And, this is an invitation for scholars and educators in Canada to critically study the not-so-obvious connections between schools and sports.

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Higher Education and Athletics: Probing an American Ethos**

I. American's Peculiar Institution

In 1874 student teams from McGill and Harvard played a series of games which have been hailed as the birth of intercollegiate "football," as distinguished from soccer - a distinction in names which still escapes most of the world.¹ What has happened in the hundred years since the McGill team visited Cambridge? Has American higher education cultivated its own version of the Playing Fields of Eton rhetoric?

Anyone who has spent time on an American campus cannot be but awed by the resources, facilities, and homage which varsity sports command. The danger is that American educators mistake American accommodation of college sports as the global norm, which is not the case at all. It is no accident that one seeks a hearing in a journal edited in Canada. McGill's collusion in 1874 suggests that Canada must bear a measure of praise and blame for subsequent developments in American collegiate football. And, recent controversies involving foreign student-athletes have given rise to rumblings of an American nativism which warrants international comment.² Finally, intercollegiate athletics resists critical, sustained investigation within the borders of the United States. This essay, then, is an attempt to track down some of the distinctive connections which Americans make between collegiate sports, educational opportunity, and social mobility.

Last summer several football coaches from major American universities testified before a United States Senate Subcommittee that enforcement of the Title IX guidelines (prohibiting sex discrimination in educational programs) threatened to "destroy college sports as we know it." The coaches were shocked that President Gerald Ford had betrayed his own college football heritage by having approved the proposed legislation.³ Amidst press coverage and arguments, there was scant comment by college and university faculty. Given present tensions over

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lean budgets and educational priorities, one would expect American faculty to have an interest in athletic programs sponsored by academic institutions. To the contrary, professors seem to be intent on removing themselves from intervention into such matters.

Why the conspiracy of silence? Consider that in the past two years, parents in Philadelphia and San Francisco were indifferent to budget cuts in secondary school music, art, and foreign language programs. The one issue which elicited public outrage and intervention by state legislators was city school board announcement that varsity sports would be eliminated. Clearly, no one concerned with the serious study of American education can deny that significant numbers of Americans *do* consider varsity sports to be an integral part of the *educational* program.

Nor does it follow that the topic is boring or obvious. My contention is that a college's or university's athletic policy can tell us much about that institution's educational ideals. Sports in American higher education has spawned a prodigious legacy of clichés, heroes, and stories. Despite the familiarity of much of this oratory and literature, the American collegiate sports ethos has not been described and understood once and for all. The nostalgia which pervades sports history is selective and obscures important issues, incidents, and characters of earlier decades. This is an area where sound historical research could complicate our social and educational thinking.

II. Looking Backward: Forgotten Heroes

A few years ago the National Collegiate Athletic Association celebrated college football's 100th birthday with numerous posters and television spots which depicted the present-day game as heir to the traditions of the late 19th century. Here was an exasperating abuse of history in that the NCAA "cashed in" on the patina of heritage, legitimacy, and longevity without truly acknowledging the code and ethos of the early collegiate game. A thorough and accurate account of college football of the early 1900s would have conflicted with the NCAA's contemporary glorification of college athletics as a means of social mobility. Amidst all the celebration, the NCAA paid no tribute to the greatest college sportsman of the pre-World War I generation. We all know where Joe DiMaggio has gone (answer: to sell coffee), but our sense of sports history is shallow. Today, mention of the name "Hobey Baker" brings a response of "Hobey *Who*"?

It was not always so. Hobey Baker of Princeton was a versatile athlete, an All-American in football, and the greatest American hockey player of his day. He was the inspiration for collegiate heroism in the stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald, and was popular with both fans and his college classmates. He scrupulously shunned payment and cheap publicity. When he was killed in France after having been a war hero and an "ace" pilot, he was genuinely *mourned* by thousands of collegians.⁴

All this matters little to contemporary football boosters. Hobey Baker has been ignored because he is an embarrassment, a liability to the present American sports ethos. He is an unsound hero for today's youth because he never viewed sports as a way to "get ahead." The Gentleman's Code to which he ascribed is neither understood nor appreciated today. After all, he was a WASP, attended a boarding school, and graduated from Princeton. Instead of rightful historic recognition as an All-American, Hobey Baker is neglected or dismissed as un-American.

The problem is that the bulk of literature about college sports is hageography. Most histories of football dwell on playing field innovations, mingled with tributes

to famous coaches and players. The "Collegiate Hero" has become a staple of popular biography which is crystallized into formula. According to this modern version of Horatio Alger lore, athletic scholarships have been the key to helping poor-but-determined boys to gain a college education and proceed on to adult success - usually measured by such indicators as a professional sports contract or election to political office. Countless variations on this theme have provided the heroic model which attracts poor youth to college for the wrong reasons.

Americans have become so enamoured with college sports as a route to "getting ahead" that they conveniently overlook departures from the formula. First, an athletic scholarship has always been a risky means of achieving a college degree. Second, going to college has never been necessary for a professional sports career. Consider how the Collegiate Hero formula was scrambled by two famous world champion boxers. Heavyweight Gene Tunney was a Yale Man, and flyweight Fidel LaBarba graduated from Stanford. Both were popular athletic heroes, and both were "truly American" in their recognition that a college education could bestow social status, learning, and respectability. But they upset the conventional notion of mobility because they chose to attend college *after* having achieved sports fame and wealth. This alternative route, seldom mentioned in collegiate literature or by college coaches, might be worthy of reconsideration now that a bachelor's degree is no longer mistaken as a guarantee of the proverbial "good job."

III. Difficulties of Research and Reform

Perhaps contemporary faculty and administrators shy away from the past and future of college sports because the topic has eluded those few scholars who have attempted analysis and intervention since the turn of the century. Consider the case of Edwin Slosson, editor of the *The Independent* in the early 1900s, who wrote perceptive accounts of higher education during the formative years of the American university. His numerous campus profiles were laced with frequent commentary on the extraordinary place which sports were acquiring in colleges and universities. Slosson identified an important topic, yet his predictions were sorely off the mark.

After having visited the Pacific Coast in 1909, Slosson argued that California colleges would not imitate the sports programs of the older Eastern institutions. The abundance of hills and sunshine made hiking and outdoor recreation far more enjoyable than the confined drudgery of indoor sports. Slosson was so confident on this point that he claimed there was no need to rebuild the Stanford gymnasium, which had been levelled by an earthquake.⁵ It is well that Slosson did not live to see the popularity of UCLA basketball.

California's geographical isolation was supposed to have minimized football's appeal. At the time of his campus tours, both Stanford and the University of California had dropped football in favor of rugby. The experiment seemed to please students and led Slosson to assume that the change would be permanent. Most important, Slosson was impressed by the open fields, amphitheatres, and warm climate, and predicted that California students would opt for Grecian-style outdoor festivals rather than the passive role of spectators to the grunts-and-grains of combative football.⁶ We know that this has not been so.

Slosson's campus profiles are important because most of his insights on the course of American higher education were correct; and, as indicated by his poor track record in the preceding excerpts, the study and reform of intercollegiate

athletics has not been simple. Nor have other scholars and investigators fared well. In 1929 the Carnegie Foundation published Howard Savage's *American College Athletics*, a study which included hundreds of examples of flagrant commercialism in the supposedly amateur world of college sports.⁷ Again, the scholar's recommendations and findings had negligible reform impact.

The major consequence of this and other commission reports was to increase and consolidate the regulatory power of the National Collegiate Athletic Association. It has *not* meant that expensive sports budgets and dependencies on spectators, box office receipts, and broadcasting have been tapered. "Amateurism" has been redefined and altered so as to bear little resemblance to its original meaning. By the 1970s the NCAA was allowing students who were professional in one sport to be amateur collegiate players in another sport; i.e., NCAA "reform" has followed a pattern of concession to professional and commercial practices. One of the most successful cases of intercollegiate sports reform was carried out by Robert Hutchins at the University of Chicago in the 1930s. Yet even this was of limited consequence; Chicago's low-key athletic program remained an anomolie among large American universities - an object of derision rather than a national model for change.

The upshot is that many educators have concluded that preoccupation with sports was so strong on the American campus that faculty members should transplant the forms and spirit of football to the academic realm. Edwin Slosson provided readers with a futuristic account of intellectual competition between Cornell and Columbia in New York City:

... Park Row is packed with upturned faces watching the bulletin boards. . . A shout from a thousand throats is heard when the street sees that Dr. Haas of Columbia has translated the Dararupa of Dhanmaja until the applause is checked by the announcement of Dr. McKelvey's study of the groups of birational transformations of algebraic curves of Genus.⁸

According to Slosson's 1910 projection, contest results were to be telegraphed all over the country, and newspapers would feature photographs of winning scholars and box score summaries of championship dissertations. This kind of reform proposal was wishful thinking, as academic all-stars and champions of grantsmanship have never been able to match the publicity and color of athletics. The closest approximation of Slosson's reform fantasy came in the early 1960s when General Electric sponsored a weekly, nationally-televised "College Bowl," complete with rival teams, varsity scholars, brain coaches, half-time breaks, and "toss-up" questions. The program's popularity dwindled after a few years; intense academic competition was hopelessly incongruent with the ideals of open door admissions which were gaining favor in the United States.

One additional source of reform initiative comes from the popular press. Sportswriters have kept us well-stocked with exposés of abuses in college sports so that recruiting scandals, point shaving investigations, cheating rings, and exploitive coaches have become hardy perennials of American journalism.⁹ But these predictable prairie fires become boring and constitute an ineffectual "dirty history" which can usually be denied or dismissed because writers rely heavily on anonymous tips, off-the-record quotes, or accusations by disgruntled players and losing coaches. Instead of "dirty linen" exposés, I propose another strategy by which to gauge changes in the collegiate sports ethos.

IV. Changes in the American Collegiate Sports Ethos

Taking a cue from Robert Bellah's discussion of Civil Religion in America, it is in *public* statements that we define and justify our activities in terms of historical and noble purposes. The rhetoric and oratory of testimonial speeches and press conferences are the places where spokesmen for intercollegiate sports reveal that which they consider to be sacred and safe for public consumption. What follows are a number of recent "Americanisms" on college sports which indicate shifting thresholds of public acquiescence and acceptability.

The approach, then, is to consider what coaches and athletic directors themselves have had to say to the public and to government officials about justification for existing university athletic practices. During 1975 government hearings on the Title IX legislation, the athletic director of the University of Maryland complained that the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare did not understand intercollegiate athletics. He generously volunteered to "re-educate" the inquiring officials, and pointed out that implementation of the Title IX equal opportunity for women's sports would destroy established activities. He said, "To me, this is poor business and poor management," and noted that the university was "in competition with professional sports and other entertainment for the consumer's money," and "did not want a lesser product to market."¹⁰ In the same spirit, the football coach at a state university explained to reporters that a losing season and bad publicity hurt his program because "We're in the entertainment business and are susceptible to the whims of fans who may get upset with our performance."¹¹

In late 1974 the University of Pittsburgh athletic officials proudly told *Time* magazine reporters that their football included these expenses:

\$600,000 for operating the program
 \$350,000 for scholarships (140 players at \$2,500 each)
 \$ 30,000 for head coach's salary

Furthermore, the head coach received a weekly television show and a blank check for recruitment budget. In less than a two year period alumni donated \$181,000 for the athletic program, none of which went for general university or educational use. Specifically, the donations paid for enlarging locker rooms, installing carpeting, a lounge, and a stereo system. The coach's comment was, "Carpeting floors doesn't win ball games for you, but it sure makes things more comfortable."¹²

All this is neither new nor startling, unless you are involved with higher education outside the United States. For decades, critics and muckrakers have pointed out the large budgets, slush funds, and expenses of intercollegiate sports. The important difference is the source and tone of recent comments. The figures and statements did not come from clandestine documents, interviews, confessions, or rumors; there was no digging through departmental files. Information which would have once been presented as a scandal is now presented as a matter-of-fact, even proud, description of institutional policy by the advocates of intercollegiate sports programs.

Conspicuously absent are the tired clichés that football is an *educational* activity. Herein lies the seed of a potentially dramatic revision in the American collegiate sports ethos: a departure from celebration of college sports as a means to some other end. Ike Balbus, a political scientist at the City University of New York, recently wrote a perceptive analysis of the sports metaphor in American life. One

of his suggestions was that sports are a prelude, an excuse, an analogy in American politics and institutions.¹³ What we might consider now is that sports are sufficiently important in themselves that they are taking on a new identity.

The most worn-out aspect of the American collegiate sports ethos, then, has been glorification of sports as a training ground for some future reward in income, job, and preparation of national leaders. At one time, colleges and universities claimed that a big-time sports program boosted the over-all *academic* reputation and resources of the university. If this were so today, the University of Oklahoma would be confused with the University of Chicago - an insult to Oklahoma's football program which might bring about a taxpayer's revolt in that state. Traditional wisdom was that a successful coach at a state university was in a good position to cultivate local political ties and build a base for election to the state legislature, the governorship, or United States senate. This is not so today - to go from being a successful coach to a position in politics would probably mean a loss of public acclaim, local and regional influence, and income. Governors and presidents *envy* coaches.

A slim ray of hope for American educators is that the current arrogance and autonomy of intercollegiate athletic programs will eventually degenerate into *hubris*. If coaches and athletic directors continue to describe their programs in such terms as "entertainment," "superior products," "marketing," and "competition for consumer's dollars," they might cut intercollegiate sports from the protective moorings and special exemptions which the government bestows upon *educational* activities - as was the case in the San Francisco and Philadelphia city school systems' debates over the status of interscholastic sports. College and university athletic budgets are large, yet fragile - fickle fans, stingy alumni, and loss of broadcast opportunities make all but a handful of collegiate programs subject to a precarious fiscal fitness.

And, intercollegiate sports will have an increasingly difficult time explaining themselves as educationally and academically legitimate programs. Years ago the stereotype of the dumb athlete who majored in "P.E." was widespread. This is hardly the case today, as Departments of Physical Education at many American universities have acquired a strong, independent identity as areas of research, development, professional training, and graduate education which has little to do with varsity sports programs and personnel. In fact, there is only accidental connection between the training and teaching practices of varsity coaches and the research findings of Physical Education. There is no provision in varsity sports hiring practices which assures that a coach is knowledgeable in such areas as nutrition, health, motor development, physiology, or pedagogy. One obvious example of varsity sports' isolation from rigorous research and development in physical education is the tradition of the pre-game meal - the big, rare beefsteak. For years, researchers in nutrition and diet have pointed out that this is about the worst meal one can eat prior to vigorous physical activity; nonetheless, the tradition has died out slowly at varsity training tables. Above all, Physical Education departments have been making major contributions to development of programs and facilities which promote life-long participation, health, and recreation. Intercollegiate sports have no coordination with, and may be contradictory to these goals.

Reform of the excesses of intercollegiate sports programs will proceed slowly until faculty and members of the college and university community pursue questions of legality and propriety in the concessions made to sports programs. Students, for example, will have to question why part of their registration fees go for intercollegiate athletic facilities which are not accessible to the general student

body. Professors would do well to reclaim the historic faculty rights and responsibilities which had been hammered out by masters and by the faculties in the medieval European universities.

The extent of this erosion of faculty responsibility is illustrated by recent Academic Senate meetings at a large state university. One professor introduced discussion and a resolution that the University's proposed use of a "voluntary" donation fund for "allocating choice seating for University sporting events is in direct conflict with, and reflects unfavourably upon the fundamental academic role of the University."¹⁴ At the next meeting the Senate Council responded with the following recommendations:

The Governing Regulations clearly specify that the functions of the Senate include only matters that are pertinent to academic issues. . . We believe that this policy of restraint should be maintained and we do not believe that the proposed resolution deals with a topic that is within the scope of traditional and proper Senate concerns.¹⁵

The case was closed, victim of a course of logic which needlessly abdicated faculty responsibility to monitor the educational mission of institutional programs and resources. This is unfortunate in that it neglects the ideals of *Paideia* and perpetuates a split between body and mind in American higher education. Meanwhile, American colleges and universities are caught in the embarrassing situation of sponsoring intercollegiate athletics which no longer go through the rituals or formalities of deference to educational purposes. One resolution is to dig into the heritage of American public higher education and resurrect the "A and M" college label. Whereas in the early 1900s this designated "Agriculture and Mining" or "Agriculture and Mechanics," it demands a new wrinkle for American higher education of the 1970s. "A and M" will stand for "Athletics and Money," an appropriate public symbol and nomenclature which will bring university identity into congruence with the modern American collegiate sports ethos.

This is the year that Canada hosts the Olympic Games - a fitting time and place to discuss national differences concerning incorporation of athletics into educational practices. The cases and documents I have cited hardly exhaust the possibilities of inquiry. The intent is to encourage students of educational policy and philosophy to critically analyze the not-so-obvious connections between sports and schools. It would be especially interesting to learn how Canada and other nations have avoided or curbed the excesses which have characterized the American experience.

Notes

¹Allison Danzig, *The History of American Football* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1956), pp. 9-10.

²Larry Van Dyne, "Give Me Your Strong, Your Fleet: Foreign Athletes Recruited by Colleges are Dominating Many U.S. Sports Events," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 29(March 1976): 1, 6-7.

³Nancy Scannell, "NCAA Bemoans Title IX, While Women are Skeptical," *Washington Post* syndicated article, appearing in the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, (June 10, 1975).

⁴John Davies, *The Legend of Hobey Baker* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1966), *passim*.

⁵Edwin Slosson, *Great American Universities* (New York: MacMillan, 1910), pp. 137-138.

⁶Slosson, p. 160

⁷Howard J. Savage, *American College Athletics* (New York: Carnegie Foundation for Advancement of Teaching Bulletin 23, 1929). See also, Abraham Flexner, *Universities: American, English, German* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1930), pp. 65-66. Best examples of academic research in collegiate sports are as follows: David Riesman and Reuel Denney, "Football in America: A Study in Culture Diffusion," *American Quarterly* (Winter 1951): 309-325; and Frederick Rudolph, "The Rise of Football," *The American College and University: A History* (New York: Random House, 1962), ch. 18.

⁸Slosson, pp. 508-509.

⁹E.G., Gary Shaw, *Meat on the Hoof* (1971); Kenneth Denlinger and Leonard Shapiro, *Athletes for Sale: An Investigation into America's Greatest Sports Scandal - Athletic Recruiting* (1975); Joseph Durzo, et al., *The Sports Machine* (1975).

¹⁰Mark Asher, "Play and Not Pay? Maryland's Kehoe Blasts Title IX, Says Women Can't Produce Income," syndicated *Washington Post* article appearing in the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, (June 10, 1975).

¹¹"Curci Concerned Over Recruiting," *Lexington(Kentucky) Leader*, (November 15, 1975).

¹²Figures and quotations from "A Majors Success," *Time*(2 December 1974): 84.

¹³Ike Balbus, "Politics as Sports: The Political Ascendency of the Sports Metaphor in America," *Monthly Review* (March 1975): 27-39.

¹⁴Resolution by Professor James Marsden, *Minutes of the University Senate*, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky, March 2, 1976.

¹⁵Recommendation of the Senate Council, *Minutes of the University Senate*, University of Kentucky, April 12, 1976.