Ethics, Intercollegiate Sports, and the Mission of the University

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Introduction

Sports ethics might encompass a wide variety of issues ranging from concerns about violence and aggression on and off the playing field to the use of performance enhancing drugs. Although such issues are common to both professional and amateur sports, when we try to address ethical issues in intercollegiate athletics a very basic issue generally makes an early appearance and tends to dominate the discussion. It is the matter of justifying the very existence of intercollegiate athletics in the academy, especially the high-profile or “big-time” sports of football and men’s basketball. What has what Murray Sperber (2000) calls the “Beer and Circuses” way those sports are conducted on university and college campuses across the country to do with higher education, the purported raison d’être of the academy? The range of justifications for universities to expend large sums of money to support their intercollegiate sports programs, especially the big-time sports, encompasses everything from what appears to be a moral education justification—they are about the business of molding good characters in the participating athletes—to the purported fiscal justification that regularly putting on a good show on the playing field improves the potential for raising the level of donations to the institution from alumni and community supporters.

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I can say very little about the latter claim except that I can find no credible evidence that unambiguously supports it. On the other side, it is notable that many of the best-endowed institutions of higher education in America are not intercollegiate football or basketball powerhouses, if they even field competitive teams. More to the point, there appears to be little evidence that supporters of a university’s sports teams, including donors with the deepest pockets, make substantial gifts to the university to benefit or endow academic programs. Their financial contributions tend to stay in the Athletics Department. It could, of course, be argued that because funds from sports supporters are available to the athletics departments and programs, more money from the university’s coffers can be used to support faculty and research programs in the Humanities, Social Sciences, and Physical Sciences. But, again, there is little evidence that such fund transfers occur. More importantly, it can be persuasively maintained that if the university was not already expending huge sums of money on intercollegiate sports, it could be better funding its academic departments and programs. And universities with some of the largest external funding bases for their intercollegiate athletics programs still spend substantial sums of their operating budgets to support those sports programs (Duderstadt, 2000, pp. 127-131 and 133-140).

Funding arguments about intercollegiate sports seem to constantly blaze in the academy and are especially hot when academic and research programs are terminated due to funding shortfalls while football players are outfitted with new equipment, stadiums are enlarged, and basketball teams fly on chartered flights to Hawaii for preseason tournaments. There may well be ethical issues embedded within the financial aspects of a university’s involvement in intercollegiate athletics, perhaps ones of distributive justice, but other concerns seem to me to run to the core of the question of whether there are good moral reasons for a university to field intercollegiate athletic teams at the level that most major universities in America now do.

Grant Teaff (2001) tells us how his participation in sports solidified values and traits of character that have stood him in good stead throughout his life. He tells us that he learned to value a work ethic, loyalty, respect for authority, etc., and those appear to be good things. But they all are also instrumental values and traits that can be put to widely different uses, not all of which would pass moral muster. It is, I suppose, generally a good thing to work hard and persevere at what one sets out to do, but it is not a
good thing to do so if what one does, for example, is rob banks. The traits that Teaff identifies with sports participation do not seem to add up necessarily to a moral lifestyle, even if they are well learned or ingrained during one’s experiences on the team. This is, of course, a point made in more general terms by Immanuel Kant.

It is not at all clear to me that what might be called the physical-training-by-repetition model of character trait inculcation, in fact produces people who dependably make morally justifiable choices for morally good reasons. Even if participation in intercollegiate sports were dependably to instill admirable traits in players—something that at least the anecdotal evidence does not seem to support despite its prominent role in the mythology of sports—surely it is not the only type of activity that is capable of doing so. If the instilling of those traits in students is an important part of a collegiate education, there is no reason why athletics should be privileged over other character-forming activities that might be practiced on the campus. Intercollegiate athletics is certainly not a very efficient or cost-effective delivery system for character education. The millions of dollars required to support intercollegiate sports, particularly the big-time sports, at a university can hardly be justified on character education grounds, especially when so small a percentage of the student body could be expected to receive the benefits, assuming that there are benefits of the morally relevant type to be had.

I do not mean to claim that some, perhaps a fairly large percentage, of the participants in intercollegiate sports do not pick up admirable traits of character due to their athletic activities. Any activity, and especially a collective activity, might inculcate a desirable trait or two or three. There seems, however, to be very little research to support success in this regard for one sort of activity over any other. And worse yet, there is virtually no reason to believe that traits learned in one activity, say football, predictably translate to life beyond the playing field. In the absence of empirical data all we have are anecdotes (such as those provided by Teaff) that can be stacked up against volumes of reports about college athletes whose off-field behavior anything but exemplifies morally desirable character traits. In short, I think we shall have to look elsewhere than at character education if we are to find convincing moral reasons to support the existence of intercollegiate athletics in the academy.
A second attempt to justify the inclusion of intercollegiate athletics on the university campus, the one mentioned above, claims that intercollegiate athletics are a significant source of revenue for the institution. Unfortunately, as a number of studies have shown, the foundational premise of such an argument is simply false. Even the elite sports are not dependable sources of significant revenues that support the other academic units of the university. James Duderstadt, the former president of the University of Michigan, in his book *Intercollegiate Athletics and the American University* (2000) scotches that myth, once and for all. One can hope. He notes from experience as the head of a university with one of the most successful intercollegiate athletics programs in the nation, one that often generates enough revenue from athletics to support the annual operational costs of the programs, that the capital costs are not covered and that in even the most successful years on the playing field, the athletic department ran very significant deficits. Furthermore, the university subsidized the instructional costs of the athletes and their room and board to the tune that Duderstadt estimates at between $120,000 to $150,000 per student-athlete over a four year stay at the institution. His reports on college sports financing are sobering for anyone who thinks the revenues from intercollegiate athletics constitute significant enhancements to university funds.

If there are ethical issues in the financing of the big-time programs, and I am convinced that there are, they will turn on the distributive questions regarding the student body as a whole and on issues regarding the compensation of coaches of what purport to be amateur programs. The belief that seems to underlie many of the justifications of big-time intercollegiate athletics in the university is that participation in competitive sports has intrinsic value, indeed intrinsic moral value. Even the liberal arts faculty who rant against the salaries and perks of the big-time team coaches typically frame their complaints around the issue that the money expended is utterly incommensurate with the intrinsic value of the activity being coached. Oddly, the same rant is not often directed at the money spent to pay the salaries of finance professors, to name just one of many possible examples. Actually, whether or not there is any intrinsic value to sports (Teaff (2001) and Dempsey (2001) certainly think there is), the value of sport (and successful coaches) to a university is largely extrinsic, instrumental. It has to do with market concerns such as name recognition, ranking, and—even more difficult to quantify—a focal point for the campus community.
The community-focus justification is worth a note. Students, faculty, alumni, and community members join in the festivities that are the "big game." A sense of *espirit de corp* prevails and the university as a whole benefits from the good feeling and camaraderie that occurs. This, at many schools, is an undeniable benefit from the athletic programs, but does it have any moral value, let alone is its value sufficient to justify the high costs of fielding the team? Some may argue that community feeling and a sense of identity with the institution are important elements in becoming a "complete person." We are not fully ourselves until we realize ourselves as situated within an institution, a tradition, a community.

I do not have expertise in social psychology and have no way of evaluating such a claim. I am more or less convinced that having a sense of belonging is probably an important part of a flourishing life, and that activities that foster it are worthy of encouragement. What I am not at all certain of is whether belonging to *any* group or associating with *any* tradition or institution is equally worthy.

The collegiate subculture that is supposedly fostered by involvement in the athletic programs of a university, even as an observer, a fan, may be a worthwhile element in the development of a healthy moral psychology. But other collegiate activities, such as theatrical and musical performances, conferences and convocations on topics of wide interest, political debates, etc., may serve equally as well or better to achieve that end. Also, one might worry that the vast majority of the student body will only be passively engaged in the activity that is supposedly fostering community feeling, and those who are centrally involved in the activity are, usually, the most atypical members of the student body: jocks. Again, it would seem that such a justification, if it has any ethical basis, is not going to be very convincing.

John Gerdy (2001) correctly identifies a tension in major universities between athletic programs and the traditional academic disciplines. Scandals in athletics regularly erupt, grab the headlines, and the anti-athletics forces demand reform or elimination of the big-time programs. Gerdy, however, attacks big-time intercollegiate sports programs in much more general and sweeping ways than to point out how this or that or another example of corruption was ineffectually handled. He wants to convince us that the total reform of college athletic programs is crucial to the future economic prosperity of our nation. He tells us that the traditionally praised values of sport have been distorted in the major university
programs, that collegiate sport is now governed by bottom-line thinking of the "getting mine and getting it now" variety, and that this stands in raw contrast to the notion that in a civil society, according to Gerdy, "the individual has an obligation to the larger community."

It is, I suspect, one thing to talk of obligations to the larger community and rather another to specify what those obligations are and when one must meet them. In any event, I wonder if the criterion that Gerdy is therein applying to intercollegiate sports would also find many, if not most, of the other programs in the typical university wanting as well. The vast majority of those programs are professional or vocational in orientation. They do not teach students about their obligations to the broader society. They provide them with skills and knowledge (know-how and know-what) to earn a living in a chosen field. The bold fact that most of us in academia, especially those of us in the humanities, steadfastly refuse to face, is that many years ago universities in America ceased to care about educating the so-called "whole person" and preparing that person to take up the obligations of membership in the community. They abandoned the liberal arts ideal of centuries past and they did it for economic, social, political and service reasons. Gerdy worries that sports does not teach humility, empathy, conflict resolution and compassion for others. But are these virtues taught in finance, engineering, marketing, and pre-law programs? Are they taught in chemistry, physics, or criminology?

Gerdy has actually called into question the role of the university in the modern world. That is a very broad topic and would require a book-length essay to begin to address it properly. I would suggest, however, that at least the citizen-preparation conception has long since failed to capture what universities are about. More to our point, however, is to try to address the question of whether universities should be about the sort of thing that big-time intercollegiate sports are about. Gerdy and I would most likely agree on a negative answer to that question. Such a response, however, depends on agreement about the best way to characterize big-time intercollegiate sports.

All myths aside, it seems to me undeniable that football and men's basketball (at least) can best be described as entertainment. Even in the more pristine and benign conceptions of them as focal points for the collegiate community to form around, indeed, with respect to which a sense
of community and belonging may congeal for widely disparate members of
the student body and faculty, they are forms of entertainment. The fact that
they are commodities that are marketed to the television and cable networks
for phenomenal sums of money and broadcast nationwide with sponsorship
from every sort of product imaginable (except tobacco and hard liquor),
confirms their entertainment value in contemporary America.

That football and men’s basketball teams are dominated by athletes of
color in percentages that do not remotely mirror the percentage of men of
color in the university population as a whole is an issue that can be left for
another time. Suffice it to say that the games are entertainments in which,
in large measure, minority males provide the entertainment for the general
public. That said, the real question seems to me to be whether our
institutions of higher learning should be in the entertainment business.
Those that are supported primarily with tax funds—state universities—
might have a difficult time fitting entertainment for the masses into their
mission statements.

Though Duderstadt emphatically denounced the commercialization of
collegiate sports while president of the University of Michigan, he made
no noticeable dent in its athletic programs. Although he claims to be
committed to the learning opportunities that may be available to partici­
pants in intercollegiate sports and would not like to see them eliminated,
he admits that the programs were and are firmly in the grip of the
entertainment and broadcast industries and that as show business they have
very little in common with what goes on in the rest of the university.

A number of ethical concerns arise from the capture of intercollegiate
big-time sports by the entertainment conglomerates. In the first place, this
was no kidnapping. The universities and colleges and the conferences to
which they belong have been fully cooperative in the commercialization
of their athletic programs. Should universities provide this sort of enter­
tainment, and, of course, the attendant opportunities for big-time gambling
that are involved in the media hype of the sporting events? Here again,
the answer will have to emerge from a serious examination of the mission
of universities in our society. Who would deny that entertainment is a
good and that a healthy community is one that can find time to enjoy a
variety of entertainments. In fact, during the aftermath of the recent
terrorist attacks in New York City and the Pentagon the spectacular seven­
game World Series was praised as providing a needed entertainment
diversion from the somber events that dominated the media. But is it the mission of our institutions of higher learning to provide such entertainments? I think the answer has to be that it is not. On the other hand, this is not to say that sports programs are utterly and irredeemably inconsistent with the educational values and priorities for which those universities exist. Reform rather than extinction may be the morally appropriate response to the problem of a peripheral program wagging the core mission and integrity of our universities.

I can think of only two good reasons for a university to continue to support intercollegiate athletic programs. The first is that the university should offer to its students opportunities to engage in extracurricular activities that foster their special talents ranging from acting on stage to shooting a twenty foot jump shot. The second is that the university should provide events that allow the disparate elements of its campus to unify as a community. Again, these could range from a music recital to a football game. The university, and in this I heartily agree with Duderstadt, has absolutely no responsibility to provide entertainment for the general public and programming for the commercial radio and television networks.

A further clarification, however, seems important. There is a significant, perhaps fundamental, difference between the entertainment that the public may garner from attendance at a play put on by the university's theatre department or a recital or concert sponsored by the music department and an intercollegiate football game or men's basketball game. In the case of the former, the activities that are providing the entertainment are directly related to academic programs within the university. They are performances, exhibitions, etc., that emerge from the teaching of the subjects that are a part of the curriculum. Intercollegiate athletics are entertainments for the general public without a direct link to the academic programs that make universities institutions of higher learning. When we try to address the role of intercollegiate athletics within the mission of the university, that fact cannot be ignored. We must confront it and it makes claims about the ethical value of intercollegiate athletics very difficult to justify. We might be tempted to say that even if one could make persuasive arguments that participation in sports such as football and basketball is morally desirable or at least morally permissible, those arguments would not be sufficient to justify inclusion of those sports within the
Gerdy (2001) calls for “a fundamental shift in the purpose of our educational system in regards to the cultural subject matter of athletics.” He wants to shut down the high-profile athletic programs in favor of encouraging broad-based participation of students in lifetime sports activities. I fail to see how the two are incompatible. He also thinks that as a collateral benefit, abandoning the athletic programs will rid the universities of “a highly visible source of scandal.” Need we be reminded
that cheating at all levels of education and in the traditional academic subjects at the most prestigious institutions is rampant? I am also concerned that Gerdy would broad-base sports but apparently not other exclusionist programs. Perhaps universities ought to abandon fine arts programs and encourage only campus sing-a-longs, communal wall-painting, etc.

Gerdy (2001) also tells us that “we must regain perspective regarding the role, purpose, and importance of sport in our culture” (p. 77). He tells us that we cannot afford sport’s win-at-all-costs mentality in a civil society. But that mentality is hardly the exclusive property of sports, even (maybe especially) professional sports. It is the mantra of business. It is a part and parcel of most defense lawyers’ briefs. It is the touchstone of patriotism, especially in time of war. The vocabulary of sport has certainly been used to express it, but bottom-line reasoning drives the American economy and culture. The intercollegiate athletic programs of our major universities are hardly responsible for this dominant mentality. The Harvard Business School is located at an institution that does not have a reputation for producing elite athletes.

The examination of ethics in intercollegiate sports must begin with an attempt to clarify the mission of institutions of higher education in our country. If we decide that universities and colleges should be primarily about the business of preparing students to earn a living in some profession or occupation, then there is plenty of room within that mission for high-powered, semi-professional, intercollegiate athletics. And should we decide that is the university’s appropriate mission, we should stop whining when high school seniors with extraordinary athletic skills decide to forego honing those skills at a university and opt to turn professional. If we think that universities exist for other purposes and that those purposes are important to the society and the culture, then intercollegiate athletics will join a fairly extensive list of programs currently emphasized in our universities as requiring scrutiny and possible elimination.

At the very least, we need to demythologize intercollegiate athletics, burst the bubble of amateurism in which university athletic programs and organizations like the NCAA pretend they exist. If we accomplish that, we should provide ourselves a more solid ground for the ethical evaluation of the programs. One thing seems clear: even intercollegiate athletics’ staunchest supporters seem compelled to try to identify what might be
moral grounds, no matter how unstable, to justify its existence and cost to
the rest of the university, the community, and themselves. I would suggest
that indicates that they are aware at some level that despite its popularity,
the moral value of intercollegiate sports is not self-evident.

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