

Strong Back/Strong Mind, Mutually Exclusive?

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Abstract

Those who object to the NCAA's Proposition 48, which was passed for the purpose of making sure that athletes do not participate in athletics the first year unless they are properly prepared for college work, appear to be doing a disservice to the athletes. They seem to imply that athletes are unable to demonstrate ability, especially the black athletes. Though some black athletes do tend to score lower on admissions tests than some white athletes, the facts do not prove that athletes, black or white, as a group, are any less able, potentially, than any other group.

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For many years the term "dumb jock" has had meaning for a lot of people. The adage strong back, weak mind, was considered a truism. Though these phrases were not proven by fact, they had all too wide acceptance. Unfortunately, the complaints surrounding the adoption of the NCAA's Proposition 48 have implied new credence to these old phrases.

Forty or fifty years ago, the football powers recruited from the steel mill towns of the East and the farms of the Midwest. They sought out unsophisticated young men who would not ordinarily have considered attending college. The payoff was a college education and the access to a new world of opportunity that education granted. Little was thought of professional basketball or football at that time.

Gradually, the recruiting area shifted to the big cities of the country, and to the black population. With television came a new level of exposure for professional sports. Millions of people had an opportunity to see these activities for the first time. Professional sports became a multi-million dollar business and its participants became heroes to many young boys. Young black boys and their families seem especially affected by this. Melvin Oliver (cited in Edwards, 1984) reports that black families are four times more likely than white families to view their children's performance in athletics as the "stepping stone" to a professional career, and the key to success.

Where, forty to fifty years ago, the way up in the world was signified by the college diploma, now it is viewed as the professional sports contract. Edwards (1983, 1984) states that too few black families appreciate the small

chance there is for the student-athlete to actually graduate to the pros. He states that a black student's chance of becoming a doctor is better than becoming a professional athlete. Unfortunately, high school students who see their future in professional sports, see college only as a tryout or training ground for their chosen career in professional sports. It is no surprise that large numbers of athletes in revenue-producing sports don't do well academically, considering the students' low regard for education and their perceptions about the money to be made in professional sports. To some institutions, intercollegiate athletics are an integral part of the makeup of the institution.

Clark and Trow (1966) developed four typology models to classify and explain characteristics found on different campuses. The "Collegiate" model, which is characteristically middle and upper-middle class, is found on most large state university campuses with large resident populations. It also describes most of the Division I football powers, and tends to favor the likelihood of a football and/or basketball program being important to the everyday functioning of the institution. The stereotype of college life is of the collegiate type: "a world of football, fraternities, sororities, dates, cars, drinking, and campus fun" (Peterson as cited in Sandeen, 1976 p. 51). This lifestyle is not hostile to education—it actually produces intense loyalties—but it is often indifferent to appeals to scholarly activities.

In addition to tradition, intercollegiate sports, especially football and basketball, have become important to the institutions because of the money and fame they bring. A number of studies have been done that are intended to make us think that athletic excellence and giving to the university are unrelated (Frey, 1985; Gaski, 1984). Frey's article analyzes 12 other articles, most of which say that there is no positive correlation between donations to the institution and the success of their athletic teams. One has to analyze each individual institution to really determine how much financial gain comes from a stellar program. Simple statistics involving won/lost records and alumni contributions don't necessarily tell the whole story.

In an AP story published December 27, 1985, reference is made to a story in the Washington business magazine, "Regardie's," indicating that Georgetown made an extra \$12 million during the time Patrick Ewing was playing basketball for the school. Obviously, this sum is a little speculative, but the individual figures quoted do not seem unreasonable, and the athletic department was not the only beneficiary. One area where Georgetown's revenue increased was in the number of applications for admission: that is money in the general fund, not in the coffers of the athletic department. People like to be associated with a winner, even if it is just as an alumnus or fan.

Once the stadiums or arenas are filled frequently enough that demand for tickets regularly exceeds supply, a number of options are opened. One sometimes used is to require a large contribution to the university, often the general fund, in order to purchase tickets.

For a variety of reasons, many employees and supporters of the "collegiate" type of school believe that the "old alma mater" must have the best athletes that are to be found. When athletes are looked at under the lens of the researcher's microscope, they are divided into two groups, those from revenue-producing sports (football and basketball) and those from non-revenue-producing sports (gymnastics, fencing, etc.) One further assumption is made by the media, fans, and/or coaching personnel, if a "kid" can play "BALL," nothing else matters. It doesn't matter if he can read or write or do anything academically. The "reasoning" is that since revenue-producing sports bring large amounts of money into the institution, no expense, financial, moral, or ethical, should be spared in finding the best, most exciting athletes for their school.

This type of attitude has contributed monumentally to what is perceived to be a large problem in college sports. The NCAA passed Proposition 48 to make sure that freshmen cannot play if they do not meet minimum preparations standards. The members of the NCAA's Presidents Commission and the Committee of Presidents formed by the American Council on Education have both announced determination to bring athletics back under the control of academics (Witosky, 1986).

Not everyone has agreed with the manner in which the NCAA, through the passage of Proposition 48, has attempted to deal with the aspect of unpreparedness among varsity athletes. Unfortunately, those objecting to Proposition 48 and its requirements have focused new attention on the "dumb jock" image. The opponents have not objected to the requirement for students to have a 2.0 grade point average in a core of 11 courses, but that has received little attention.

The bulk of the publicity has centered around the objections to the requirement for ACT scores of 15 or combined SAT scores of 700. It is true that blacks score lower on the ACT and SAT than whites and it is also true that poor whites and blacks score lower than middle- and upper-class blacks and whites (Baird, 1984; Barry, as cited in Edwards, 1983; Jenson, 1982). The problem is that all the objections have brought a lot of negative publicity to the student-athlete. Coaches and black leaders have been quoted with grim statistics as to how many of yesterday's great athletes would have been ineligible had Proposition 48 been in effect when they had been freshmen. This does more harm than good to the cause that Proposition 48 was intended to address: improvement of poor academic preparation by student athletes; in addition, it does not present the complete picture.

As the beginning of the 1986 season has come and gone, only a handful of athletes were actually declared ineligible for freshmen competition under the provisions of Proposition 48. Interestingly enough, in examining records from previous years, some individuals have been identified that would have been able to participate under Proposition 48, with its sliding scale, who were not able to participate as freshmen under the old rules. There were some

students, some black, who had high enough ACT scores to offset their below-2.0 GPA's.

It is ironic that both sides of the argument surrounding Proposition 48 use the term "slavery" when discussing its effect on black youth. Joseph Johnson, President of Grambling University, is quoted (Rabun, 1985) as saying, "Misguided and misdirected members of (the NCAA), embarrassed by revelations of academic problems, are reverting to slave days." Harry Edwards (1984) says, "...if black student athletes fail to take an active role in establishing and legitimizing a priority upon academic achievement, nothing done by any other party to this...tragedy will matter—if for no other reason than the fact that *a slave cannot be freed against his will.*"

In consideration of the controversy over GPA and SAT or ACT scores, Ervin, Saunders, Gillis & Hogrebe (1985) reported on a developmental program for underprepared freshmen, enrolling about 300 students per year, 15 to 20 percent of whom are involved in intercollegiate athletics. Male scholarship athletes from football and basketball in the study were observed in regard to how they would be affected by Proposition 48. The findings showed that those with higher SAT scores resolved their deficiencies more rapidly, while HSGPA was negatively correlated to the length of time taken to remediate their deficiencies. Findings such as these are one of the reasons that evaluators of high school programs are unwilling to take high school grade-points at face value, and ask for ACT or SAT. Some of the higher high school grade point averages are high because the students have taken only the easiest courses. The need to have a 2.0 GPA for 11 specific types of courses will go a long way toward solving the problem of non-comparable HSGPA's. However, this will still not obviate the need for ACT or SAT scores or some standard measuring stick, since courses, such as 10th grade English at one school, might not be comparable in regard to skills required in the corresponding course at another school.

Another study (Stuart, 1985), conducted at a large midwestern university, showed some slightly different results. This study dealt with football players enrolled at the institution from 1977-1980. The players were matched in qualities to a list of like males, except for the fact that they were not participating in any sport, on scholarship or as a walk-on. As other studies found, the athletes were less well prepared than the non-athletes, especially in math. The high school ranks were higher, for the athletes, but GPA and ACT scores were lower. The performance after two years was very similar: there were actually more of the athletes still in school than the non-athletes. The success was credited to the extensive support system for athletes on the campus.

Little has really been done to try to defend the position of the student-athlete. There are some special stresses put on student-athletes. If anyone doubts this, he need only think how it would feel to be on the football field in front of 50,000+ fans, and be booed. The athletes' experience and

expectations imposed upon them, by virtue of their position as athletes, need to be examined. The first expectation has to do with the number of hours athletes are expected to give in return for their scholarships. Most athletes at Division I schools put in considerably more hours per week in practice and playing time than do other students working for the school for room and board, or room, board and tuition. Chancellor Charles Young of UCLA stated (as cited in Witosky, 1986):

Students should not be required to spend 40 hours a week practicing and competing without any real break. That simply has resulted in having only the very most qualified students who are also athletes being able to graduate on time.

To quote James Rhatigan (1984) in speaking about Division I basketball players:

No other students are required to miss 15-20 percent of their classes to receive their scholarships, grants, or loans... For schools in post-season competition, the percentage of required absences on class days would approach 30 percent in the January-February-March period.

Rhatigan also suggests that the 12-hour minimum load requirement may be unfair, when you consider the minimum number of hours required by other students working fewer hours than the athletes, for essentially the same remuneration. Another possibility would be for universities to offer courses, open to anyone at the university, that meet twice as often for half the semester. This is often done to serve the needs of special weather conditions or special populations. So far athletes have not been one of the special populations. Coakley (1982) wrote of the inaccurate perception of some that athletes are the subjects of favoritism. There is undoubtedly concern on the part of any administrator who might have thought of this, that some elements would perceive this as the favoritism Coakley wrote about. This is an example of the double standard often applied to athletes.

Another example comes from a large midwestern university that has had very successful football and basketball teams. The players were often sought out for interviews with the media. Some of the players were well-spoken and comported themselves very well; others were obviously flustered, uncomfortable and were struggling for words. A nearby agency which dealt with public relations problems, among other things, offered to give a course to the players in order to help them prepare for interviews. The local media reported that the conference head office had become informed about this offer and told the team and the company that the deal was off unless they planned to offer the course, in the same manner, to all members of the university. If officials had required that the course be offered to all students at the university who might be in positions that could bring them in front of a TV camera, representing the university, there would have been some logic to their argument.

It is interesting that both academic involvement and athletic involvement are found to develop similar personal characteristics in students (Astin, 1984). Both groups of students develop intense loyalties to the institution and are affected less by their peers than are the average students. Since both activities take up a great deal of time, both types of students are to some degree isolated.

A new emphasis on the intellectual athlete is appearing in the news. Considering professional football defensive players, playing positions not previously known for using intellectual heavyweights, it is interesting that commentators doing 1985 NFL Chicago Bears games kept repeating how bright those players had to be to understand the complicated system. Some coaches admit that the player with whom the coaching staff has a hard time maintaining eligibility is often the same player who also fouls up on the playing field or court. It is totally illogical to assume that an individual who is able to memorize a long and complicated playbook is unable to learn other material. An overall look at the situation does not seem to indicate that schools have to accept individuals who are totally inept academically because they are athletes of unmatched skill. With the help of Proposition 48 to emphasize the expected requirements for all students planning to continue their education, it will be up to physical education and student development professionals to cooperate in developing programs that will help college students find ways to develop their minds and bodies toward reasonable career plans.

Blann (1985) studied 568 students, male and female, non-athletes and athletes, from team and individual sports, and from NCAA Division I and Division III schools. Findings were that underclass male athletes from both divisions were less able to formulate mature career and educational plans than any other group. Twenty-eight percent of the male athletes in Division I and ten percent in Division III planned to achieve professional status, while only four percent of the females in Division I and none in Division III had the same intentions. A portion of this may be blamed on the tendency found by Yiannakis as cited by Blann (1985) of the tendency to spend a significant amount of time thinking about practice, winning, and the next competition, not leaving much time for making realistic career and education plans.

Before college athletics are condemned for encouraging daydreaming and other non-productive activities, the effects of participation in other extracurricular activities need to be examined. Though no studies are cited, observation has led to the conclusion that other extracurricular activities could be substituted for athletics in these findings.

Students who are involved in drama or music or even student government can become so totally immersed in their activities, that they barely function as students. Their lower profile accounts for some of the reason that their GPAs or graduation rates are not emblazoned across the top of the nation's newspapers. Another inequity is that music or drama or other students can

major in the activity they enjoy most, that occupies the majority of their waking thought. However, when the student-athlete wants to major in physical education, people belittle the choice. This denial of the athlete's legitimate option to choose to major in the program he perhaps most enjoys, is a denial forced on no one else. As a matter of fact, little is thought about the artist who takes few courses in college outside his art, even though his chances of becoming a professional artist are very slim, maybe about the same as the athlete wanting to make "pro."

Research has shown (Mathes & Gurney, 1985) that student-athletes in revenue-producing sports are actually more interested in the academic reputation of the school than are those in non-revenue-producing sports. Regardless, students who have no idea of what they want to do, or who have no interest in anything but their sport, present a problem. A number of studies (Bradley & Wark, 1984; Munday, 1976) have shown that a lack of career decision is a common reason given for leaving school or getting poor grades.

Terenzini & Pasarella (1978) found that the two best predictors of retention in students have to do with the curriculum. They found that academic appeal, as perceived by the student, is positively correlated to retention and the amount of dullness in the academic program is negatively correlated. If one accepts as fact that all events in life are relative to one another, it is not too difficult to understand how easy it is sometimes for the academics to seem relatively dull when compared to hearing 50,000 people cheering.

In the case of athletes, they are not as likely to drop out if they perceive the curriculum to be dull, but they will do very little more than the minimum. A portion of this problem still comes back to the question of preparation. It will be up to teachers, administrators, parents and the students themselves to make sure that students enter college as well-prepared as possible. Evidence seems to indicate that athletes' academic problems are more likely to be because of motivation toward academics rather than a lack of aptitude.

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