A major gain for college sports?

BY JAMES WAGNER


SALLY JENKINS FROM D1

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If we would quit being half-ashamed of college sports and assign them some real value, we might just cure some of their corruptions. The NCAA should stop treating athletic departments as ticket offices attached to universities like tumors and instead treat them as legitimate academic branches. In fact, why shouldn’t we let kids major in sports? Aspiring athletes should be able to pursue their real interest, as a business and an art.

High-performance athletes study a craft, with a science, theory, history and literature, just like music or dance or film majors do. Varsity athletes deserve significant academic credits for their incredibly long hours of training and practice, and if they fulfill a core curriculum they deserve degrees, too. A school could design a rigorous Performance of Sport major by requiring the following:


stop worrying about “exploiting” athletes and whether to pay them. Yale drama undergraduates don’t get a cut of the box office — their remuneration is first-rate training for the stage. They aren’t exploited. They’re privileged.

Too many college presidents harbor the secret conviction that athletics are trivial, if not evil, entertainments that exist merely to please donors. Back in 2004, former NCAA president Myles Brand was scandalized to learn that some schools gave athletes limited academic credits for varsity participation. “We can’t have that,” he said.

That attitude has to change. Sports aren’t trivial. Among the things college athletes strive to learn: how to bring their best every day, how to deal with the fact that their minds and bodies will betray them under pressure, how to accept the consequences of public performance, and how to withstand violence or pain and create something beautiful and excellent despite it — or even from it. The vast majority of them, even the so-called cheats and chokers, are highly focused, dedicated, self-appraising, self-motivated and highly aspirational.

The NCAA’s stated mission is “to integrate intercollegiate athletics so that the educational experience of the student athlete is paramount.” So do it. Stitch college sports into the rest of the university by recognizing their value as an academic major. Once college presidents make that fundamental shift in their thinking, they might be inclined to make other changes too. They might mandate that athletics be answerable to an academic dean, like any other discipline. They might decide that coaches should be faculty members who teach.

"Athletes need to be acknowledged as something legitimate and serious," says Oriard, a former Notre Dame and NFL football player who is now an associate dean and literature professor at Oregon State. Given that college sports have become multibillion dollar industries and national institutions, he says, students should “understand the ethical, cultural, social and historical dimensions of their activity.”

Oriard observes that athletes devote as much time to their craft as a student violinist, and “there is an intelligence that is required of athletes that is similar to music, too.” We congratulate music majors for their passion, and tell them that even if they don’t make it in the symphony, they are acquiring an art and a method of thought that will be theirs forever. But for some reason we tell athletes who aspire to the highest levels that they are academically illegitimate, and look down on them as vocational students (forgetting that without vocational students, our cars wouldn’t start).

But what if we taught and talked to them differently? What if we pulled available college courses together into a more coherent, meaningful way for them, instead of hurling them into General Studies?

What if we taught that athleticism, like musicality, is a "lifelong discovery," Oriard says. Above all, surely we should teach that their performance "is valuable in itself," quite apart from commercial value.

Such thinking would not only benefit athletes, it would sharpen the decision-making of administrators. Because frankly, any resistance to this idea begs the question, "Then why have sports on campus at all? Why do universities build sports stadiums? Well, why does a university build a hospital? Not to gouge and rip off the infirm for profit. They do it because the research and teaching in a hospital is vital and enhances a university’s standing.

There’s no reason the NCAA can’t reconcile commerce with education in a more honorable way. If presidents see athletes as worthy students, instead of unpaid labor, then they themselves might act more like educators, instead of carnival barkers grabbing for easy cash.

What a concept. College sports are salvageable. But first, we have to correct an underlying fallacy — that despite all that money, they are worthless.

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Put coaches in the classroom, not just on the field or the court

by Sally Jenkins

The best college coaches are real teachers. The trick is to get rid of the clowns who think they're paid seven figures to watch film and run slush funds. If an NCAA Division I coach isn't capable of teaching a class to the general student body, they shouldn't be employed.

Coaches are at once overpaid yet underappreciated as instructors. We should ask more of them — and in the process, make it harder for college presidents to rationalize hiring frauds. It doesn't seem like too much to insist that Nick Saban, in return for his millions in yearly salary, be capable of devising an academically worthwhile and coherent lecture course, with a syllabus and reading list, that's offered each semester to all Alabama undergraduates.

A few years ago, Duke asked the question, why should Mike Krzyzewski's teaching on leadership be restricted to a handful of ballplayers? After all, corporations pay good money to hear Krzyzewski lecture. The result was the Coach K Center on Leadership and Ethics, a program at Duke's business school through which Krzyzewski does some teaching and writing for MBA students each offseason. How about we export that concept throughout college athletics, and ask coaches to share their coaching with all students?

"I don't think there's any question that the principles they teach, whether leadership or organization, would be wildly popular and really useful to anyone," says Jay Bilas, the former Duke player and ESPN broadcaster. "Every coach will tell you, "Hey, I love to teach,"" says Kara Lawson, the former Tennessee basketball player who is an ESPN broadcaster and WNBA player. "That's at the core of any coach, because you can't be successful in that environment if you aren't at heart a teacher."

Last week in this space, I proposed that varsity athletes should be allowed to major in sport-performance, similar to kids who major in dance or music or theater, because we need to fundamentally shift how we think about college athletics, and treat them as intellectually worthwhile exercises. The NCAAs stated "mission" of integrating athletics with academics doesn't have to be a lip-service fad: let's really do it. Let's recognize the deep interest that athletes have in learning a craft. While we're at it, let's recognize that coaches — the good ones — teach subjects with valuable content. If we did, we'd feel a lot better about their presence on campus.

This doesn't mean athletes should be absolved from core curriculum requirements in composition, literature, foreign language, history, economics, math and science. A major is simply an emphasis. It doesn't mean letting coaches lead exaggerated gym classes, either, with multiple-choice exams that include questions on the definition of "offenses." It means emphasizing the teaching content of athletics and making coaches — all varsity coaches, from lacrosse to tennis — answerable to academic deans and faculty senators.

People who like to refer to "the academy" will insist that sports has nothing to teach, that it's an intellectually worthless recreation, and no argument will win them over. But ask any athlete who studied under a good coach, and they will tell you that some of the most effective and inspired teaching they received in four years came from their coaches. Bilas and Lawson were pretty good models for student-athletes. Bilas majored in political science at Duke, and then received a law degree. He contends basketball was not only intellectually challenging but required as much immersion as law school did.

"I don't see any difference in terms of the time and the focus and the mental energy," Bilas said. "It's not better because it's athletics, but it's certainly not worse either. And you don't see people going through the library and saying, 'You're spending way too much time in here.' It seems like the academy can live with that.

Lawson majored in business and finance, but she credits Tennessee Coach Pat Summit with teaching her more about communication than she learned in her public speaking classes. All of Summit's teams have to read books about organizational success and executive decision-making, and prepare weekly reports on them — and are responsible for a teaching a chapter to their teammates.

"The stuff you have to remember, the concepts that you have to get down, are difficult, and it's actually harder than studying for a test," Lawson says. "When you study for a test, we all used to cram and then dump it off 24 hours later, but you can't do that in sports. . . . Your recall in sports at the collegiate level has to be instantaneous. And for that to happen, you can't just study it; you have to be freaking own it. And there's still a bigger difference between studying something and owning it.

Isn't that kind of ownership what all teachers wish they could embed in their students? The best college coaches teach sport as a set of problems and how to tease out the solutions. They don't just teach content and skill, but how to transfer it into real-world performance through study, organization and communication under pressure. They ask, what happens if you follow a strategy to its logical conclusion? What are the consequences of making things up as you go along? Why do things break down? What are the traits of successful organizations across professional boundaries?

Not all college coaches are great teachers, of course, any more than every member of the English faculty is. Some coaches would no doubt mail in their lectures, or barely participate, or dish off their teaching responsibilities to their assistants or to grad students. Emphasizing the teaching aspect of coaching wouldn't cure the ills of college sport or eradicate academic fraud. Cheating is a vice, like smoking, that won't go away. But we can at least sharpen our mind-sets and identify what it is we really want from college athletics, and get the emphasis right.
Rather than pay athletes, show them respect

You may have noticed that the people in college football are the uinest bit obsessed with money, from light-fingered bowl executives to numb-voiced university presidents dorning about “impermissible benefits” while pocketing seven figures. Alabama’s $4 million coach, Nick Saban, looks like he should be cruising on a yacht sipping Bacardi in the self-thrott of a marine engine. No wonder players are preoccupied with compensation, and the answer to every NCAA scandal or controversy lately amounts to, “Pay us.”

Look, I know the money is indecent and the NCAA system is blatantly unfair to athletes. The Southeastern Conference made $1 billion last year, and it would be nice if some of that reached the players at No. 1 LSU and No. 2 Alabama, whose individual sweat reached the players at No. 1 LSU and No. 2 Alabama, whose individual sweat reached the players at No. 1 LSU and No. 2 Alabama, whose individual sweat reached the players at No. 1 LSU and No. 2 Alabama, whose individual sweat reached the players at No. 1 LSU and No. 2 Alabama, whose individual sweat reached the players at No. 1 LSU and No. 2 Alabama, whose individual sweat reached the players at No. 1 LSU and No. 2 Alabama, whose individual sweat reached the players at No. 1 LSU and No. 2 Alabama, whose individual sweat reached the players at No. 1 LSU and No. 2 Alabama, whose individual sweat reached the players at No. 1 LSU and No. 2 Alabama, whose individual sweat reached the players at No. 1 LSU and No. 2 Alabama, whose individual sweat reached the players at No. 1 LSU and No. 2 Alabama, whose individual sweat reached the players at No. 1 LSU and No. 2 Alabama, whose individual sweat reached the players at No. 1 LSU and No. 2 Alabama, whose individual sweat reached the players at No. 1 LSU and No. 2 Alabama, whose individual sweat reached the players at No. 1 LSU and No. 2 Alabama, whose individual sweat reached the players at

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Richardson, that will make everything right. It won’t. Though it would be satisfying. Paying players isn’t the answer — not because it’s wrong or violates some creaking old amateur code, but because we have yet to devise a fair, feasible way that won’t create more inequities, killing scholarships in other sports, not to mention creating regulatory nightmares and legal uncertainties. In the meantime, we have a much deeper, underlying problem to solve. What college athletes need from us, more than cash, is a fundamental shift in how we view them. Pay them? We don’t even respect them. When you watch LSU and Alabama this weekend, ask yourself what you really think about the players on the field, underneath your admiration for their physical skill. Deep down. Do you really believe they belong at a university, or does some part of you think they’re just muscled-up entertainers and users, fake students who don’t think, read or aspire academically?

In 2007, Cal-Berkeley education professor Herbert D. Simons published a study of more than 500 college athletes entitled “The Athlete Stigma in Higher Education.” Here is what he found: 62 percent of them experienced negative perceptions and stereotyping. Athletes reported that their professors made negative comments about jocks in class, as did fellow students. When they asked professors for help to meet their practice schedules, 61.5 percent were refused, or criticized for asking. A shocking 28.6 percent of African American athletes reported they were suspected or accused of cheating, compared to 6 percent of whites.

Generally, Simons concluded, athletes were perceived as having “low intelligence, little academic motivation, and receiving undeserved benefits and privileges,” and treated as if they harmed the academic reputation of the university. Just 15 percent felt they were positively perceived.

Before we can sort out how to close the gap in pay, we have to close this gap in perception. We can’t be treating athletes as if they’re worth more than a licensing fee.

“There are some educational steps we could take that would be very bit as valuable, if not more, than trying to answer the problems with financial issues,” says Derek Van Rhenen, an education researcher and director of Cal’s Athletic Study Center who was an all-American soccer player. When we watch Alabama and LSU, let’s try a thought experiment: Take a moment, at some point during the game, to think about Trent Richardson as an intelligent man with a helmet off who is majoring in business with a 3.26 grade-point average, and carrying the expectations of his family back in a Pensacola, Fla., housing project. Think of the tension he must feel, backed at by coaches if he gets too distracted by books, yet sneered at by teachers if he fails asleep in class. Consider the 40 hours a week he puts into grueling physical practice and weightlifting, followed by film study and game-planning, an intellectual load comparable to any class he takes.

“It’s an absolute skill to read the game, it requires cognitive and intellectual ability,” Van Rhenen says. Players “are literally looking at cues and prompts, like an avid reader does. People don’t give credit to athletes, because they think it’s instinctive. It’s not. It’s cognitive.”

When you watch players on both sides, imagine how it feels to do homework at midnight with head nodding and limbs throbbing from soreness or injury, a fatigue no one else understands. Yet despite this, they will graduate at a higher rate than their peers. The latest graduation success rate numbers for the ‘Bama team was 69 percent last year; LSU’s 77 percent, both considerably higher than the national rate for all students.

Unmotivated? Low intelligence? Harmful to academic integrity? The dirty little secret of college sports is not that Richardson and his teammates are on the bottom rung in compensation, driven into an underground economy. It’s that they are on the bottom rung of expectations. Too many NCAA presidents secretly believe they are unworthy of teaching, and should be grateful just to be on campus.

As for the loser, well, that’s where a mark of respect — or not. It can also be a form of dismissal. If you want a kid to feel less used, don’t just pay him. Try honoring him. jenkins@gwpost.com
Time to rein in super-sized spectacle

It's a rough morning-after for the NFL. The Dallas Super Bowl was a bender, but now that the confetti has fallen, it looks like litter. The hangover has hit, a splitting headache and a sour stomach from the $10 margaritas and the $12 wine and the $10 beers and the rest of the fiscal insanity. Is this really what the NFL wants to become? A divorced-from-reality debauch.

I don't know about you, but I don't want to live in Jerry World. In Jerry World, the state of Texas spend $1 billion to host the Super Bowl, even as deficits force public school cuts. In Jerry World, it can cost $900 just to park. In Jerry World, fans pay hundreds of dollars to stand outside the stadium. Buried somewhere in all of the superbowl, the Boise, bad concerts and relentless commercial squeze, there was a good football game between the Green Bay Packers and the Pittsburgh Steelers. But to be honest, it was an ancillary event. The NFL may want to rethink that strategy. It may also want to rethink its tendency to look like the Marie Antoinette of the sports world.

Everything you need to know about the future of the NFL could be seen in the gloriously decadent stadium that hosted this Super Bowl. As NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell pointed out, "Quite frankly, that's our stage." It was the cleanest, safest, nicest stadium anyone has ever visited. It was also the most extravagant and economically stratified. It cost double what Jerry Jones said it would, and taxpayers financed about a quarter of it, yet its innermost marble interiors are totally inaccessible to the average fan.

A tipping point was reached with this Super Bowl, for me. It was the screwed-over anger of those 1,200 people without seats that did it. Those travel-weary, cash-whipped fans paid small fortunes to go to the game, only to discover their stubs were no good, because fire marshals declared some sections unsafe. All of a sudden the whole thing seemed offensive. It was just too much.

For absurdity, how about those four Navy F-18s flying over the stadium — with its retractable roof closed? Everybody inside could only see the planes on the stadium's video screens. It was a strictly a two-second beauty shot. Know what it cost taxpayers? I'll tell you. $450,000. (The Navy justifies the expense by saying it's good for recruiting.)

It's not clear what the pain threshold of the average NFL fan is: Thirty-two owners digging relentlessly in our pockets haven't found the bottom yet. But the NFL would be advised to recognize that it's getting close. Those folks who found themselves without seats? Many were among the league's most loyal paying customers, season ticket holders. Yet they were treated like afterthoughts, awarded half-built, jerry-rigged seats, folding chairs on auxiliary platforms. Which beg the question of what the "NFL fan experience" really means anymore. A day later the league did its best to make it up to them with offers of tickets to Super Bowl XLVI in Indianapolis and Goodell called it "obviously a failure on our part."

This Super Bowl was the future, and it set some lousy precedents. Every owner in the league wants a stadium like this one, and they will be pitching — maybe even extorting — their communities to help them build one. They want ever larger luxury suites and bigger restaurants, and giant scoreboards and TVs, so they can replicate this Super Bowl, and sell standing room space in plazas and blocked views of a big screen for $200.

"Of the 100,000 and change tickets they sold, how many of those people actually had seats, and how many could actually see the field?" asks Neil deMause, a stadium-financing watchdog who co-authored the book, "Field of Schemes." He adds: "That's revolutionary if you can sell tickets to not actually watch the game. That's a whole new ballgame. So obviously everybody is saying, 'Hey, we want to get one of those.'"

It's the shiny new toy in the league. New stadiums are such a priority for owners that it's a critical piece of the labor negotiations taking place with the players' union. A major reason owners reseent the 60 percent cut of revenue that goes to players is because it's not easy to finance stadium projects. They want a restructured agreement so "we can make the kinds of investments that grow this game," Goodell says, bemoaning the fact that no new construction has started since 2006.

But how much growth does the league need? It already generates an estimated $8 billion, and owners get the first $1 billion off the top. If you really love the NFL — and I do — you have to wonder if the billionizing of the league is really good for it. The average cost of attending a game for a family of four is $432.64. At Cowboys Stadium, it's a staggering $758.58. That's what the league calls growth.

Don't get me wrong: The Super Bowl can be electrifying for a community, and can be priceless in civic pride. Disclosure: I'm from Fort Worth, and I spent the week down there rooting for it to be a success. Cowboys Stadium is a gorgeous structure with some grand qualities, and Roger Staubach, who lobbied for the game, is a lovely guy.

But in the end, this Super Bowl taught me a lesson: Luxury can actually be dehumanizing. The last great building binge in the NFL was from 1995 through 2003, when 21 stadiums were built or refurbished in order to create more luxury boxes, at cost of $8.4 billion. Know how much of that the public paid for? $4.4 billion. Why are we giving 32 rich guys that kind of money, just to pry on us at the box office and concessions? The Dallas deal should be the last of its kind.

When an owner grows tired of a facility and leaves, guess who picks up the tab? New Jersey still owes $101 million on the old Meadowlands home of the New York Giants and Jets, and when both teams moved to their new $1.6 billion, privately financed stadium, they got a huge tax break. According to The Wall Street Journal under their old agreement they paid $2.6 million a year in tax revenues; now they will pay only about $6 million a year. Know what New Jersey's deficit is? I'll tell you: $36 billion.

At its best the NFL is a deeply embedded piece of American culture, with an indissoluble bond with fans. But it's grown far removed from the grass-roots recreation it started as, the competitive emblem of mill towns, and their enormous civic resilience. As fans, we share blame for being willing to pay anything for it. We've allowed league owners to cash in on American pride, and hunger for entertainment. We should insist they share American economic problems.

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In defense of college athletics

Let’s kill the athletic scholarship! A college campus is no place for ballplayers training for professional careers. You know what else is a scandal? How many culinary students end up cashing in on cheer! And don’t get me started on those mad school kids whose only goals are to become doctors.

What an intolerable climate of professionalization we’ve created at our universities with division I-A football and basketball. How impure that should people use college as an avenue to the NBA and NFL, and try to collect on their earning potential. We need to get rid of them, so that every campus can become an Ivy and serve nobler purposes — such as training 58 percent of Harvard’s grad to go into finance or consulting.

Stadiums and arenas take up valuable space where more legitimate classes might be taught, such as “Introduction to Folklore,” and “Freening the Gospel From Political Captivity,” and “The Significance of Wolves and Lightning in 19th Century Literature.” What’s learned at a Final Four can’t possibly be as meaningful as what’s learned in the classrooms of most U.S. colleges, especially when it comes to ethics. An athlete accepting a backpack full of cash from an alum is much worse than Gordon Fee spending $700,000 in Vanderbilt University funds on catering.

God forbid that commercial interests should nixy campuses — unless of course it means major corporations funding supposedly independent academic research. Or scholars sitting on corporate advisory boards and loading up with stock. Especially if it’s Goldman Sachs, and you’re the president of Brown.

All right, end of riff. The intention here is not to excuse the blooming sports scandals at Ohio State, Auburn, Oregon, Connecticut and Tennessee. It’s not to say the Fiesta Bowl is anything but a Caribbean slush fund.

It’s merely to say that our universities are highly commercialized places, touched by many forms of corruption, and they are used as farm systems all the time, by all kinds of professionals. Why are we blaming athletes unpardly for this?

The Drake Group, a coalition of reform-minded faculty, contend “the academic mission at many schools has been hijacked by the professional college sports entertainment industry.” As opposed to students being hijacked by Internet apps? The panic over the spate of NCAA scandals has drawn extreme suggestions ranging from paying players to killing the athletic scholarship altogether, courtesy of Ralph Nader, who wants to “de-professionalize” all campuses. To Nader, the scholarship is to blame for illegal recruiting, high school players put up for sale by parents and coaches, and the money handshake by overvalued alum.

As we consider the subject, let’s unpack some of the issues. First, the athletic scholarship is well worth defending, even if it’s hard at the moment to scrape it free of slops. There is nothing inherently wrong with giving someone a free ride for having physical talent. People get scholarships for all kinds of things — band, art, public speaking. My friend’s sister won a scholarship for being third runner-up in the Colorado Junior Miss pageant, which required her to design a dress, play the guitar, and walk gracefully in heels.

Second, there is no need to pay players. They are not abused simply because the university makes money on them. So what. Yearly tuition at Auburn or Tennessee is more than $37,000, and that doesn’t count the world-class professional training, the showcase in front of prospective employers, the medical care, the free head-to-toe Nike or Adidas gear, the plush travel and nice hotel rooms, and all the other exquisite privileges Division I athletes enjoy in exchange for their efforts.

They get a four-year ride free of the mountainous student loans that burden so many of their peers — a collective $900 billion worth. Ask any parent who is paying tuition what a scholarship is worth. Pay players? Please. We’re already paying them as much as a half-million dollars apiece over four years, maybe more. And we’ve done a lousy job of explaining that to them.

The vix of corruption in college sports is this: A relatively small number of high-profile athletes, isolated in two sports, enjoy scholarships (and perhaps some extracurricular salary) while having a very weak connection to their classrooms. The question is whether these few truly impinge on academic integrity.

I’m not saying the NCAA doesn’t have some serious problems. But there is nothing wrong that can’t be fixed by 18 strong college presidents — that’s how many seats there are on the NCAA executive committee — acting in concert to curb their own worst excesses, and impose stiffer penalties. It’s ludicrous for Gee, now the Ohio State president, to suggest he has no power over football Coach Jim Tressel. Gee is an in-demand fundraising wizard and a corporate-board veteran whose leverage at Ohio State is far greater than Tressel’s, as he knows. He can impose discipline on the program any time he wants — and if he did, a lot of other presidents might grow the guts to follow his example.

The connection between sports and campuses is a long-lived one that goes back at least 1892 and the first Oxford-Cambridge boat race. It’s always been a messy and uncomfortable connection, ripe with temptations to cheat, but that’s actually part of what makes it rich and valuable, and it’s worth the exchange.

Intelligence, what little we understand about it, is based on the capacity to grasp relationships of all kinds. Not just the relationship between your own various limbs and skills, but your relationship to the objects around you, and to the people around you, starting with the person Monica Seles liked to refer to as “the other opponent.” It’s about trial and error, mastering direct and indirect stimuli, to learn that while you can’t master events, you can at least master yourself. I don’t know that revenue sports, basketball and football, are more valuable than any other performance-based learning experience, in which stakes are damn high and the audience brutally demanding. But they’re certainly not less valuable. Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. once praised sports as “high and dangerous action,” because, “in this snug, over-safe corner of the world we need it, that we may realize that our comfortable routine is no eternal necessity of things . . .” One thing you learn in college is that comfort isn’t the only thing worth seeking. Sometimes the best questions are the ones that make us most uncomfortable.

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