
CHU, DONALD. *The Character of American Higher Education and Intercollegiate Sport*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989. Pp. 208. Notes, bibliography, index, figures, tables. \$21.95 cb.

Donald Chu takes on the important and formidable task of attempting to uncover a reasonable justification for the marriage between higher education and sports. In this pursuit, he looks at the history, sociology, psychology, economy, and philosophy of intercollegiate athletics. Clearly and persuasively written, Chu's book traces the emergence of sports as a fundamental part of higher education's mission back to the turn of the twentieth century when "a sports-hungry populace consumed athletic entertainment with increasing gusto as the tempo of industrialization, urbanization, leisure time, and accumulation of expendable

capital quickened” (pp. 33-34). Large land-grant institutions seeking increased public financial support saw the development of athletic teams as a means to unify an increasingly diverse and geographically disparate populace behind the mission of the school. Chu writes, “By the first decade of the twentieth century a sports program became both the institutional rule and a means of engendering an institutional myth” (p. 4.5). In essence, sports became a way for college and university leadership to respond to the financial and enrollment needs of their institution while also fulfilling the deeper social and cultural purpose of offering people a demonstration of American character through the asceticism, discipline, courage, and grace of athletics.

After presenting the historical justification for intercollegiate athletics, Chu takes direct aim at what he calls the “Big Lie”—the pretense that intercollegiate sports are primarily funded and supported to benefit the student-athlete. “At this time there is little empirical evidence that conclusively validates the thesis that college athletic participation generally promotes character growth, academic performance, occupational and economic aspiration of achievement” (pp. 73-74). Chu also debunks the myth that athletics raise money for schools. Except for those big-time National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I football programs, sports at colleges and universities generally do not generate enough revenue to match or exceed costs. In addition, “early studies seemed to indicate little, if any, correlation, between alumni giving and athletic success” (p. 88).

Instead of helping the student-athlete or the financial health of the school, Chu claims intercollegiate athletics generally reflect all that is wrong with America’s *laissez-faire*, capitalistic society. Without a clear charter as to its goals and purposes, higher education in the United States has been left to its own devices in defining its social role. Created largely by the Standing Order in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a means to perpetuate its power in the face of an emerging democracy, colleges and universities typically have mirrored the values of the elite. In part embracing a neo-Marxist perspective, Chu writes, “while sport and education both mouth the virtues of the meritocracy of talent, both demonstrate the racism and sexism that contribute to the maintenance of the existing class structure” (p. 12.5).

So, is there any reason to perpetuate this relationship between higher education and sports? Chu responds with a resounding “yes!” He claims sports, especially in their collegiate form, can serve society the way organized religion once did by simply and efficiently encoding a generally accepted value system. Confronted with increased ethnic and religious diversity since the turn of the twentieth century, intercollegiate athletics “has provided a definition of the proper American character widely acceptable to a larger body of the citizenry” (p. 173). Sports act as a system of symbols that a diverse population can use to make sense of its environment. Chu believes the real rationale or mission for intercollegiate sports is in how they show us not only what we were and what we are but also what we can be. “Through sport, especially the seemingly innocent intercollegiate variant, we see what we can be and what the American dream says we are capable of becoming. Within everyone there is the potential for greatness, for lifting

spirit, for heart" (p. 182). Intercollegiate sports should not be justified because they develop special qualities of character in athletics or raise money for the school; instead they should be supported because of their ability to promote a sense of community, create character myths, and foster, in the student and fan, a commitment to the school.

Throughout the book Chu makes two arguments about why corruption, discrimination, and exploitation exist in intercollegiate athletics. First, the culture of intercollegiate sports merely reflects the hypocrisies and social ills that afflict the university and college campus. Chu wonders, for example, how we can expect coaches and athletic departments to quit exploiting the college athlete when male professors are too often allowed to sexually harass their female students. Second, he implies the systemic pressure to exploit and cheat would diminish if trustees and presidents acknowledged the abstract worth of athletics instead of perpetuating the lie that sports are played for the benefit of the student-athlete and the fiscal health of the school.

It is difficult to argue with Chu's point that the problems of intercollegiate athletics are a reflection of larger social problems. The abuse of power and desire to win at all costs certainly pervades American culture and, not surprisingly, has seeped into the world of college sports. However, Chu's call to embrace the abstract worth of intercollegiate athletics is less convincing. In the first place, the most profound abuses of the system come from those institutions Chu exempts from the Big Lie—that is, big-time Division I football programs that do, in fact, make money for their schools. It is the reality, not the myth, of making a profit off of intercollegiate athletics, especially men's football and basketball, that is the root of much of the abuse. Second, the abstract benefits of sports Chu celebrates exist as a part of the problem, not the solution. Those American values people take in while watching college sports include an obsession with winning, total submission to authority, and a naive acceptance of the American dream that says all can achieve success with a little hard work, discipline, and teamwork. These are the very values that allow the existing power structure of college athletics to believe the exploitation of the student-athlete is actually for the larger social good.

The strength of Chu's book is his historical analysis of how and why sports became a significant part of higher education. Thoroughly researched, Chu does a good job of explaining how the absence of centralized funding and a stated charter for higher education in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America has left a vacuum of public support that school leaders ultimately tried to fill with organized athletics after the turn of the twentieth century. Published in 1989, Chu's analysis of the current state of affairs in intercollegiate athletics is a bit dated. For example, as anyone who reads the papers knows, the landscape for women's and men's sports has changed dramatically over the last ten years because of new court-ordered enforcement of Title IX.

Overall, Chu's *The Character of American Higher Education and Intercollegiate Sport* makes a valuable contribution to an interdisciplinary analysis of the significant role of sport in American culture. Effectively using the theories of Clifford Geertz, Andrew Masland, and Michael Novack, Chu, like scholars before

him, reveals that the symbols and rituals of sports have become nothing less than a religious experience for Americans. Chu reminds us what historians like Benjamin Rader told us long ago: The arenas and stadiums of college and professional sports are the churches and cathedrals of our age.

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