

Requiem for Sport

by

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(Seward C. Staley Address)

Dr. Seward Staley, in whose honor I am privileged to give this lecture today, was one among many physical educators such as William Hughes and Harry Scott who supported sport and athletics as part of education from the 1920's to the 1950's. Intercollegiate competition was justified because it contributed to the total education of students and to the improvement of the social order. On this basis these leaders worked hard to combine the administration of athletics with physical education and to keep it in the educational family. to have coaches employed on a full-time basis, to secure faculty status and tenure for coaches, and to upgrade the educational qualifications of coaches to teach classes in addition to coaching teams. In an effort to achieve desirable educational objectives in inter-scholastic athletics, Frederick Rand Rogers in the mid-1920's devised a plan of having the competing coaches sit on the sidelines for the entire game with the captains in charge from start to finish. This idea was used in parts of New York state and in the schools of Detroit by Vaughn Blanchard for several years.

However, events of the past ten or fifteen years clearly indicate that the concept of sports as an educational enterprise in many colleges and universities is perhaps not dead, but it is close enough to death to justify this requiem. Athletics is no longer education but a business. The new breed of athletic director is represented by Don Canham at the University of Michigan whose job is to be a sports promoter and to run athletics on a business basis for profit. Frankly stated, this means a winning team in at least football and basketball. In recent years while physical education has remained within the educational framework of the university, athletics has moved away from the educational environment and has tended to isolate itself. For example, it was the student newspaper at Ohio State University which revealed the existence of a Rose Bowl fund for assistant football coaches solicited from alumni and boosters. It also learned that the athletic director was using a car donated to him by a local auto dealer. Neither of these facts was known to the university administration.

The whole recruiting process to provide top athletes to insure winning teams was aptly described by Bill Bradley, a former Princeton basketball star, as "a means for adult men to manipulate 18-year-olds, to get them to come to a university and provide it with a winning team, with money, with fame." Joe Paterno, football coach at Pennsylvania State University, said that "recruiting is demeaning." A former coach at V.M.I., John McKenna, declared that he will never return to coaching because of the "fawning on teenage athletes" which that job often required. In addition the academic integrity of the university itself may be compromised. In one specific case an athlete who attended classes for just one week at the University of Alabama on a football scholarship before returning home in disgust, received mid-term grades of C for all his courses.

Clark Hetherington, founder of the Missouri Valley Conference, stated that "professional athletics are for the pleasure of the spectator and amateur athletics are for the pleasure and benefit of the participant." Four recent actions by the Big Ten all exemplify professional athletics as defined by Hetherington:

1. Freshmen made eligible to compete so that the number of scholarships can be cut without reducing the number of players.

2. Red-shirting was made legal and thus college was extended to five years for these students.
3. The number of football games was increased to eleven in order to get more income and keep up with other schools.
4. The no-repeat rule for Rose Bowl participation was abolished.

All of these actions were financially motivated primarily for the benefit of the institution and were not for the benefit of the participants.

Perhaps the worst aspect of the entire situation is that we have lost the capacity to critically examine our athletic programs and their administration. Nobody, especially athletic councils, raises meaningful questions. The press and sports media almost unanimously sing the praises of college athletics and college athletes. It is practically un-American to question anything that goes on, especially in football. Unfavorable facts are suppressed and illegal acts are vehemently denied. The National Collegiate Athletic Association has a meager four investigators to enforce regulations for over 700 institutional members, and the membership itself this year voted down a proposal to employ more investigators.

In 1910 Dudley Sargent wrote:

“Our present method of competition leads to madness and destruction. . . . We have allowed the fighting impulse, represented by the spectacular side of athletics, to get the better of the educational and developmental side. In other words we have lost control.”

It is my fear that these words describe a situation which is little better today.

It is evident that no big-time sport program exists without recruiting and athletic scholarships. The history of athletics in the United States convincingly tells us that athletic scholarships in time will destroy sport as education. This is a pertinent lesson for my Canadian friends who should regard athletic scholarships as an insidious import from its southern neighbor which should be denied admittance at the border.