

College Athletics During the Roaring Twenties

by

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In the entire history of higher education in the United States, nothing is quite so perplexing as the role of organized athletics. College sports were started by the students in the post Civil War period of the 1860's and 1870's. By the 1880's intercollegiate athletics were in full swing with football, baseball, crew and track and field the most popular sports. Despite the opposition of the faculty and administration, sports programs grew in popularity, both with the students and the general public.

Sports continued to expand in the twentieth century, largely because of the rising standard of living, the growth of cities, and the extension of leisure time. Finally, World War I provided the great impetus for sports in general and intercollegiate athletics in particular. The nation as a whole was tired of the war and ready for some diversion. The next decade, which is usually referred to as "The Roaring Twenties," found intercollegiate athletics reaching unprecedented heights. New sports, such as basketball, golf, tennis, soccer, lacrosse, swimming, gymnastics and fencing were added to the program. The colleges were forced to provide new facilities including large stadiums, seating thousands of people, and new and bigger gymnasiums for the popular indoor sports.

This increased emphasis on college athletics led to some serious problems, such as commercialism, pro-secting and subsidization of athletes, and coaches who believed in winning at any cost. The formation of the National Collegiate Athletic Association in 1906 had resulted in the colleges and universities assuming some control over their athletic programs. This in turn created a number of administrative problems, such as financing the program, providing adequate facilities, scheduling contests, eligibility of athletes and trying to maintain the program in an educational framework.

Fortunately, during this period physical education was undergoing some changes, too, and its new emphasis on games and sports moved it closer to the athletic programs. By the end of the decade the merger was virtually complete and finally the physical education teacher and the athletic coach were one and the same. However, even this development did not completely solve the problems of intercollegiate athletics. Commercialism, high powered recruiting and some unethical coaches have made life difficult for conscientious faculties and administrators.

There is general agreement that athletics can make a contribution to education through their physical aspects as well as their ethical and moral considerations. However, it is discouraging to note that most of the problems in intercollegiate athletics in the roaring twenties are still with us today.