

The 1981 College Basketball Gambling Scandals: An Examination of the Role of College Officials

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The pervasiveness of gambling in sport in our society today and in the past has largely been ignored by sport historians. While specific individuals have devoted part or an entire book to the topic, there is a lack of information relative to the role of college officials (i.e., presidents, athletic directors, coaches, regulatory agencies) in the scandals which have periodically surfaced in collegiate basketball. This paper will examine the role of college officials in the 1951 gambling scandals which surfaced throughout the United States.

Professional and collegiate basketball has not been immune and untouched by gambling. The recent arrest in 1985 of Tulane University players who were charged with "point shaving*" is a reminder of the ubiquity of sport gambling and specifically the ease with which it penetrates collegiate sport.

The popularity of collegiate basketball was stimulated by the promotion and staging of inter-sectional games by Ned Irish in 1934 in New York's Madison Square Garden and later in arenas in Buffalo and Philadelphia and coincided with an increased interest in gambling on the outcome of the games. The infiltration of gambling into collegiate basketball games was documented as early as 1938. It intensified in the early 1940s as bookies recognized the

inherent attraction of posting “point spreads” instead of odds, significantly increasing the amount of money bet on collegiate basketball.

By 1945 college basketball had become the most heavily bet sport in America. To what degree games were fixed is not easy to document, obviously all bribe offers were not reported despite the widespread knowledge of gambling in collegiate basketball.

What is most striking in the literature from the reports dealing with gambling during this time period is the relatively minor responsibility attributed to officials of colleges whose players were prosecuted and convicted of “fixing games.” When the fullest extent of the scandals became known in 1951, most of the convicted players some of whom had attractive and lucrative professional careers ahead of them saw this dream shattered. College officials expressed disbelief, even unawareness, at the mention of any “fixed games” even in an atmosphere where “college athletics” were sacrificed at the expense of educational principles to generate extra dollars for athletic budgets. The players, victims of an overemphasis fueled by promoters, alumni, athletic directors, presidents, and coaches and labeled by the legal system as guilty, prompts the question then and today - what are the responsibilities of college officials when there are clear signals visible athletic programs are under the influence of forces beyond institutional control?

In 1951, 33 basketball players from seven institutions admitted conspiring to rig the results of 90 games. Six years later the “rumblings” of another scandal were heard and in 1961 a bigger and more extensive scandal surfaced. The recent allegations regarding “fixed games” at Tulane University may portend college officials have not read the “history of the gambling scandals.”

Redefining Athletic Excellence in the 1960s

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In 1964, late in the fourth quarter of a football game, Princeton kicked a field goal to seal a narrow 55-0 win over the University of Pennsylvania in front of Penn’s Homecoming crowd. The field goal clearly signaled that the 1950s Ivy League quest for sanity in sport was nearly at an end. Within the next five years, Penn itself would dynamite the remnants of Ivy League civility by firing its Ivy-covered athletic director, Jeremiah Ford II. Ford, who exuded moral ethics from every pore, would be replaced by Fred Shabel, who exuded winning from every pore. Shabel took Penn’s athletic program to the top of the conference and, in a few cases, to the top of national rankings. No one at Penn and few outside accused Shabel of illegalities. He ran a clean program. But the differences between Shabel and Ford were those of night and day, and their positions on sport and winning and the fortunes that awaited them were symbols of the redefinition of excellence that took place at Penn in the 1960s. The reactions and approaches to winning at Penn were in concert with a broader shift in sport from an ideology of service to an ideology of winning. This subtle but important