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Intercollegiate Athletics and Midwestern Identity: A Brief History

Intercollegiate athletics has long been a prominent feature of midwestern social and cultural life, an activity universities and colleges use to promote themselves and foster community by giving people a reason to gather and cheer. The most obvious examples take place on autumn Saturday afternoons, from Columbus, Ohio to Lincoln, Nebraska and a myriad of places in between, when thousands of loyal fans pack college football stadiums, while millions more follow the action on television, radio, and the Internet. For many, this public ritual and spectacle has been historically an important feature of their personal and community identities. Moreover, a handful of midwestern college football coaches and players have achieved legendary status: Knute Rockne, Red Grange, and Woody Hayes immediately come to mind. And though college football is popular all over the region, different places have other passions. In Indiana, basketball is sacrosanct. In Iowa, college wrestling matches regularly draw over 15,000 people. In Minnesota, college ice hockey is extremely popular; after the University of Minnesota won the 2002 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) championship, one team member said, "The whole state has a huge smile on its face." Despite these kinds of hyperbolic claims, intercollegiate athletics is not just about school spirit and vicarious glory. For institutions with big-time athletic programs, it is a multimillion-dollar a year industry frequently beset by corruption and hypocrisy. It also raises important issues about the appropriate relationship between higher education and the athletic experience, amateurism, academic integrity, gender equity, and race relations on campus.
