

## Review Articles

### **Time Out! An examination of the relationship between sport and higher education in the United States of America**

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**Gary D Funk**, *Major Violations: The Unbalanced Priorities in Athletics and Academics*. **Leisure Press, Champaign, Illinois, 1991;**

**C Fraser Smith**, *Lenny Lefty, and the Chancellor: the Len Bias Tragedy and the Search for Reform in Big-time College Basketball*. **Bancroft Press, Baltimore, 1992;**

**Murray Sperber**, *College Sports Inc.: the Athletic Department vs the University*. **Henry Holt, New York, 1990.**

Over the last decade there has been an increasing number of studies devoted to the relationship between athletics and higher education in the United States (US). Books by Lapchick and Malkoff (1987) *On the Mark – Putting the Student Back in Student Athlete*; Donald Chu's (1989) collected work, *The Character of American Higher Education and Intercollegiate Sport*; and Rick Telander (1989) *The Hundred Yard Lie*, have each examined the association in some depth. Although written from a variety of perspectives, invariably the works have been critical of the elevated position of athletics in US colleges and have detailed at length many of the system's inherent abuses. Moreover this is not a recent phenomenon. Systemic concerns have been an ongoing facet of North American athletics for many decades, especially in the alleged 'revenue producing' sports. Despite the establishment of inquiry groups such as the Knight Commission and the NCAA President's Commission, the major

thrust of inquiry into college athletics has focused on damage control rather than true reform. Hence resultant findings and recommendations have been basically exercises in public appeasement. In many cases it has been business as usual for athletic departments.

Three studies since 1990 have been of particular interest. Murray Sperber, *College Sports Inc.*; Gary D Funk, *Major Violations*; and C Fraser Smith, *Lenny, Lefty and the Chancellor*, have each contributed to the debate in diverse ways. The authors – an academic, a journalist and an athletics adviser/academic – have obviously constructed their own view of the nature of the relationship. As a result, while the works are conceptually and thematically similar, the perspective in each case is quite different. Fortunately, such variety facilitates increased comprehension of the debate. Furthermore, these studies have stimulated a wider discussion, beyond the particular content of each book, because of continuing interest in the educative climate which they describe.

Murray Sperber, *College Sports Inc.*, has written a insightful book on the financial sham associated with ‘big-time’ college athletics. Sperber argues that ‘intercollegiate sport has become College Sports Inc., a huge commercial entertainment conglomerate with operating methods and objectives totally separate from, and mainly opposed to, the educational aims of the schools that house its franchises’ (Op. vii). In the process of unveiling the financial machinations associated with the organisation and administration of US collegiate sport, Sperber sets about debunking many myths by those who argue the validity of the association. He contends that commonly held beliefs such as, college sports are not only part of the educational mission of American colleges but are also incredibly profitable, are simply fallacious. However, this is not the sum of his study. His suggestions that college coaches are not irreplaceable and do not deserve their exorbitant salaries, along with the incapacity of the NCAA to correct the problems in college sport, have resulted in the debate entering a new realm.

Sperber is a Professor of English at Indiana University (IU), which is also home to Bobby Knight, the preeminent college basketball coach in North America. There are more than thirty references to Knight in Sperber's work including a discussion of how IU manipulates the statistics related to the graduation rates of their basketball players. Knight argues that his program graduates 100 per cent of its athletes. However, if the data related to basketball is analysed in the manner applied to the student body at large his graduation rate is nearly halved (p. 299). Nevertheless, this is the model program used by the NCAA and advocates of collegiate sport to add weight to the ideological soundness of their position. In reality, it is little more than a blatant recruiting strategy employed by Knight and Indiana University in an attempt to attract 'blue-chip' athletes and elevate their program above the likes of University of Nevada at Las Vegas, Oklahoma and a number Texas colleges.<sup>1</sup>

Following the publication of his book Sperber become a persona non-grata in many circles. Douglas Lederman in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* of 9 September 1992 suggested that Sperber has not been treated well in terms of salary adjustments. The author believes that he was punished for two reasons. First, 'officials at Indiana – whose public image is dominated by its basketball program – dislike his slam dunk critique of college sports', and second, the writing of a popular sports book (it sold more than 60 000 in less than two years) was hardly worthy of serious academic pursuit. In the words of Wesleyan University president, 'Sperber left the reservation'.<sup>2</sup>

Structurally the book consists of four sections with each further subdivided into numerous case studies and vignettes. At the end of each section there is a summary highlighting major points. The final section identifies a series of potential solutions and although simplistic makes the reader wonder why change has not been implemented. Perhaps a future debate could focus on where the call for change is coming from given that it does not appear to be institution initiated or desired. The work is

complete with extensive notes and an index section that rounds out a work which is both readable and thought provoking.

Gary Funk, author of *Major Violation*, is both Assistant Professor in the Department of Reading and Special Education and Director of the Academic Support Center at Southwest Missouri State University. Funk approaches the debate from the perspective of the student athlete and broadly argues that athletes are often forced by athletic departments to choose between education and athletics. Furthermore he contends that society (US) exacerbates the problem with conflicting values and ideals. In the process he is much less critical of the NCAA than is Sperber although that is hardly surprising given his pivotal role in intercollegiate athletics at his institution.

The book is divided into seven chapters with notes, a thorough bibliography and a useful index. Although *College Sports Inc.* explicates the major themes of the student-athlete debate more fully than *Major Violations*, Funk's adoption of the student-athletes' perspective is refreshing. Moreover, his examination of the culture that nurtures such a relationship is insightful. The author quite successfully argues a number of critical issues. First, educational institutions neglect the educational development of the athlete in order to serve the former's pecuniary interests. Second, many academic staff take the high moral ground in dealing with athletes who are woefully unprepared for the rigours of college education. Third, to maintain academic eligibility certain student athletes are provided with 'soft' options in general studies or physical education programs that provide little in the way of academic development and progress towards graduation. While the author does not hide his sympathy for the plight of the athlete, he acknowledges rightly the social hypocrisy inherent in a system that promises so much and delivers so little.

More specifically Funk draws attention to the special circumstances surrounding the black athlete. He argues that lack of concern for their college preparation, limited willingness on the part of many professors to

make an effort at understanding the nuances of black culture and lesser expectation of their scholarly performance has resulted in a system that has stigmatised the black athlete as one with limited academic capacity. Funk suggests that the 'good kid theory - he's dumb as a post but he's a good kid' has become a staple of college athletics (p. 92). The resultant effect is that the black athletes are stereotyped through an institutionalised perception which is then internalised by the athlete resulting in serious under-achieving.

Funk's solutions to the problems associated with college athletics are clear, concise and rooted in a concern for the student-athlete. He contends that, working with public schools, dispelling the pro-myth, changing the revenue distribution, reforming coaching, introducing freshman ineligibility and establishing degree programs in athletics would be positive steps to redress a system that in many cases is morally bankrupt. However, as the author admits, much of this is 'wishful thinking' (p.139).

One university that has made a concerted effort to redress the problems associated with collegiate athletics is the University of Maryland (UM). Yet this only occurred in the aftermath of a tragedy. On 17 June 1986 Len Bias became the Boston Celtic's number two pick in the NBA draft. Two days later Bias died from a drug overdose. *Lenny, Lefty and the Chancellor: The Len Bias Tragedy and the Search for Reform in Big-time College Basketball* written by C Fraser Smith is an examination of the circumstances surrounding the death of a college basketball player, Len Bias, and its impact on University of Maryland basketball coach Lefty Driesell and the college Chancellor, John Slaughter. The book is written in a popular style and is complete with interesting end notes and index. It also contains a chronology of major events related to both the Bias tragedy and athletic abuses at the University of Maryland over a five year period from 1986 to 1991.

On one level this book is an examination of the key factors in the untimely death of a talented student-athlete. However, at another level, it is a critical examination of the role of college athletics at both the university and state level, along with the role of coaches and athletic departments. Also debated was the degree of culpability on the part of university officials in the machinations of the athletic department.<sup>3</sup> In many ways the death of Bias refocused the debate at Maryland which resulted in the institution recognising, and in part solving, some the abuses inherent in its system. Chancellor John Slaughter's valiant struggle to redress the problem associated with Maryland's athletic department is a major focus of the work, as are the numerous obstacles he encountered in his push for reform. In the process he was admonished by powerful boosters, challenged in his endeavours by the Board of Regents and questioned by the State Governor.

In the aftermath of a UM Task force report and a Grand Jury inquiry Coach Driesell resigned. Two years later he took up a similar position at James Madison University. In the intervening period he stayed on the UM payroll and received an award from the Maryland State Legislature. Also resigning at this time were head football coach Bobby Ross and athletic director Dick Dulls. Two years after the death of Bias, John Slaughter left Maryland to take up the presidency of Occidental College in California. The following year (1989) the NCAA charged UM with 18 rules' violations that allegedly cost the university \$3m in lost revenue. Nevertheless, by this stage, the University of Maryland was well on the way to recovery having recognised and attempted to deal with problems associated with its athletic department.

*Lenny, Lefty and the Chancellor* is an excellent case study of the great personal trauma often associated with college athletics. Fraser Smith exemplifies what Funk alludes to in terms of the influence of powerful boosters on college athletics, the inordinate amount of power wielded by coaches of big-time college sports and the lack of any sincere regard for

athletes as students. In the post-Bias period Maryland has undertaken significant and successful reform of its athletic program. However, given that similar incidents have taken place at other US colleges over the last five years it appears that the death of Bias and the angst experienced by those associated with the university and the program may have been in vain.

The works of Sperber, Funk and Fraser Smith have given a multi-faceted insight into the world of college athletics and each, in their own way, has called 'time-out'. There is no question that the relationship between higher education and athletics in the United States is in need of a radical overhaul. However, this is easier said than done as many of the problems endemic in collegiate sport in the US are reflective of those that exist in society at large. Nevertheless, ongoing analysis of the relationship between athletics and higher education is useful in that it allows continuing attempts at the reappraisal and redirection, or reaffirmation, of athletics in the educational environment.

## NOTES

1. In most critical discussions of the relationship between higher education and sport in the United States, Texas institutions are routinely used to exemplify many of the conceptual underpinnings of the debate. Sperber makes references to the eight member colleges of the Southwest Conferences on at least sixty different occasions.
2. Murray Sperber is not the only US academic ostracised for his involvement in an academic pursuit of sport. Peter Adler who, along with his wife Patricia, wrote *Backboards and Blackboards – College Athletes and Role Engulfment*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1991, also contends he was forced back into the fold of respectable academic pursuit following his foray into the world of college athletics.
3. In this instance the University of Maryland were no different to a vast number of institutions which allow its athletic departments to operate as individual fiefdoms.