Case 6: Foul Ball or Fair Play?

There’s big money in college sports. A *New York Times* opinion piece from September 14, 2016, noted that in forty states, the highest paid public employee is a college coach. Yet, according to an article in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* of September 15, 2013, nearly all universities lose money on athletics and cover the shortfall through tuition and taxes. Schools direct to athletes resources that are not available to other students, siphoning money from academics and students’ services. The Knight Commission reports that in 2010, Division I colleges with football teams spent seven times more on athletes than on other students, while Division I colleges without football teams spent three only times more on athletes than on other students.

Despite the resources designated for athletes, increasing concern is voiced about their exploitation. Many scholarship athletes come to college with dreams of a glorious college career, followed by a lucrative pro contract. Often these students are poorly prepared for the academic rigors of higher education, and their training and game schedules leave little time to study. The reality is that few are chosen by pro teams, and many leave college unprepared for careers.

One suggestion to address this concern is the creation of a college major in athletics, where students would earn a degree by training and playing. A second option would also include classes in sports-specific curricula that would prepare students for a career. Courses might include sports law, sports finance, broadcasting, team management, coaching, training, and public speaking. Another recommendation is to pay non-student athletes a professional salary and run athletics as a semi-pro revenue-producing side business that would provide the intangible value sports often bring to the college: pride, identity, and lifelong loyalty.

Some critics oppose a college major in athletics on the grounds that, in addition to failing the athletes who would graduate with limited marketable skills, this would undermine the fundamental purpose of higher education, and diminish the value of a college degree. Others are opposed to high tuition charged to non-athletes to support non-academic programs for athletes, or tax dollars used for sports entertainment already provided by pro teams.

*Case from the 2018 National Ethics Bowl. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/. © 2017 Robert Skipper, Peggy Connolly, Robert A. Currie, Cynthia Jones, and Heather Pease.*