Student Athletes and the College Sports Debate

A 2020 study from the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), in association with the Gallup Organization, looked at the subjective outcomes for college athletes versus those who had not participated in college sports. The study looked at five measures of well-being:

Purpose—enjoying one's daily life and/or work and motivation to achieve life goals.

Social—forming healthy, supportive relationships.

Financial—effective financial management and achieving financial security.

Community—engaging with some form of community, be it a neighborhood or a community of likeminded people sharing an interest.

Physical—maintaining health and energy and effectively managing energy towards goals.

While this effort to estimate something as nebulous as well-being is necessarily subjective, the researchers felt they were able to classify respondents as "thriving," "struggling," and "suffering." Researchers have found that those who are "thriving" in multiple categories of well-being tend to have better outcomes. Individuals who are thriving in all five categories were found to be more resilient and likely to succeed in life. Overall, the study found that 12 percent of athletes were thriving in all five categories, as compared to 9 percent of nonathletes. Being a college athlete might give students a three percent better chance of achieving a healthy, satisfying, and ultimately successful life.[1]

Why do athletes thrive just a little bit more than nonathletes? The reasons are complex and involve aspects of upbringing, childhood experience, and access to resources, among other things. But proponents of collegiate and youth sports—and sport in general—might hold that participating in sports is educational in its own right. Those who take part in sport learn lessons about health and fitness, communication and teamwork, managing pressure, making relationships, taking instruction, and strategizing and planning. In other words, through sports young people learn lessons that translate into more successful efforts in other areas of their lives.

The Gallup-NCAA study is not the only research indicating lasting benefits for collegiate athletes, and there is a wealth of anecdotal evidence and testimonials that likewise speak to the benefits of sport for young people. For many years, playing sports at the high school and collegiate levels has opened up opportunities for

hardworking young men and women for whom opportunities might otherwise be difficult to obtain. For some, sports can be a way out of a difficult home life. For others it can be an alternative to more dangerous or destructive paths. For many, sports represent a ticket to higher education, travel, and experiencing new things. College sports can expand minds and can enrich lives.[2]

Despite these acknowledged advantages, many players, parents, and social welfare experts have identified some serious issues with the collegiate athletics system. The primary reason is that college athletics have increasingly become a matter of money, and potential profits often result in risking the health and welfare of the college athletes.

Risks and Rewards

Student athletes are expected to be both students and athletes, but this is a difficult line to walk. Many studies and anecdotal evidence demonstrate how difficult it is to succeed equally in academics and athletics. At the highest level, playing a sport is very much like a full-time job, and students who take on this challenge, in addition to other commitments they may have in their lives, face considerable pressure and stress. The strain can be extreme and, in some cases, athletes struggle to concentrate on the educational half of their lives. Only a small percentage of collegiate athletes will go on to play professional sports or to have a related occupation. In fact, while playing a sport can impart qualities that can help a person thrive in many facets of life, studies indicate that athletes and nonathletes have similar financial outcomes.

Not all college sports are stressful or intensive. The pressure experienced by a student on a fencing team is not the same as that faced by an athlete participating in the annual March Madness competition, or playing on a top NCAA football team. The United States is unique in having an amateur sports system that attracts national and sometimes even international attention. No other country has elevated amateur athletics to this level, and this means that America's college athletes are in an unusual and unprecedented position within their society. Soon after the first intercollegiate games were organized, it became clear to educational institutions that sports wasn't just an educational benefit or a way to engage local communities but a potential gold mine. Since then, the evolution of college sports has followed the desire to maximize the revenues that this industry produces.

Each year, the NCAA has reported revenues of over $1 billion, and the peripheral revenues generated by college sports constitute additional billions.[3] However, few college athletes reap financial rewards. Some critics feel that this is unfair and exploitative, and one of the biggest debates in the world of college athletics concerns whether or not athletes should be paid. Critics say that this would make college sports a profession, rather than part of an educational system, but proponents of paying athletes argue that the system as it exists allows the NCAA and institutions to exploit players, building wealth for investors and executives without compensating the players, many of whom come from impoverished backgrounds.[4]

Another reason that advocates are pushing for compensation for college athletes

is the considerable risks that many college athletes face. Injuries and concussions remain common among college athletes and can have long-term or life-changing consequences. Compared to nonathlete students, college athletes are more likely to suffer long-term injuries to their limbs or backs, concussions, and many other types of overuse injuries. While most athletes recover from injuries, there are well-documented cases of former or current athletes suffering fatal or severe injuries. What's more, athletes must purchase their own medical insurance. This is another major debate in the college sports field, and some argue that the NCAA should offer free insurance and injury coverage paid for with the revenues earned through college sports competitions. Questions about insurance have resurged as COVID-19 imposed additional risks on collegiate athletes.[5]

Long-Term Challenges and New Challenges

Compensation, or lack thereof, is the biggest current issue in the world of collegiate sports, but there are many other long-term challenges and problems facing the industry. Many critics argue that racial prejudice continues to play a major role in collegiate sports, especially in the distribution of benefits through schools and the NCAA. For most of American history, athletes of color were denied access to collegiate sports, and the integration of college sports teams was, in many ways, exploitative. Among those advocating for compensation for college athletes, many cite the exploitation of minority players as one of the reasons that NCAA economic management is problematic. Many young players of color come from impoverished backgrounds, and the distribution of resources means that the resources tend to go primarily to white students and students in the upper classes. A 2020 survey released by ESPN showed that 76 percent of college coaches and 65 percent of athletes see racism as a continuing problem on college campuses, and even higher percentages see racism as an issue in the college sports industry as it exists.[6]

There is also a disparity of investment and support for women's sports across the board. Numerous studies and years of reports from athletes and coaches show that interest in college sports among women has increased markedly over the past half century. But the NCAA and colleges have continued to invest heavily in male-dominated sports, with a far lower level of investment in women's sports. It has been argued that this is because audiences are more interested in men's sports, but this argument is problematic given that audience attraction is not supposed to be among the priorities of collegiate sports organizations. Further, many critics have argued that there is a substantial audience for women's sports that has gone largely untapped because media outlets, the NCAA, and colleges fail to market and emphasize their women's sports programs. With women increasing their share of the sports and fitness market nationwide, many critics have argued that organizations and the media need to devote more time and attention to this side of the college sports industry.[7]

Encouraging diversity can also be seen in the debate over the participation of trans athletes, which centers around whether they should be allowed to compete on teams aligning with their chosen gender or teams aligning with their biological sex.

The issue has divided Americans on many levels because there are concerns about fairness and equity to be considered, both with regard to the way that trans athletes are portrayed, treated, and made to feel accepted, and with the way that traditional leagues and teams have been constituted along perceived gender lines. The discussion on this issue is causing Americans to rethink some of the fundamental traditions in modern sports.

The Future of Sport

There is another major direction of change that is forcing Americans to reconsider definitions of competitive athletics. Esports, or "electronic sports," are based on participating in virtual digital contests. More than simply professional gaming, esports is a diverse and rapidly developing field that has dedicated competitors, investors, and fans around the world. It is creating an entirely new dimension to collegiate sports. The esports era has been developing for some time. In the 1980s, innovative video gamers first created the potential for player-versus-player (PVP) competition in digital environments. In the decades since, game designers have capitalized on wireless networks and internet technology, in conjunction with cutting-edge digital design and art, to create digital platforms where players can test their skills against other players virtually anywhere in the world. In the 2010s multiplayer online gaming reached a new zenith, and streaming platforms began broadcasting games. Some players began streaming their own content, in the process creating a new career, a "streamer," in which an individual earns revenues from sponsorships and advertising features. It soon became clear that gamers were drawing in massive audiences, and potentially massive revenues from sponsors and advertisers.

The draw of competitive gaming eventually helped foster the idea that it might be considered something similar to games like chess or checkers, strategic games that test hand-eye coordination, intelligence, strategic ability, and other characteristics.

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1
Educational Environments

Photo of Faurot Field by Clare Murphy/KOMU, via Wikimedia.

The University of Missouri was sanctioned by the NCAA in 2018 for academic fraud after a tutor admitted to performing academic work for a dozen student athletes.

Balancing Sports and Studies for College Athletes

Since the beginning of college sports, there has been a debate over how to best balance the academic and athletic goals of educational institutions. Collegiate athletics is a multibillion-dollar industry that provides colleges and universities with millions in funding for student services, staff, and academic interests. But critics have also accused the collegiate sports industry of exploiting students and their families. Decades of reforms have been aimed at supporting the educational welfare of college athletes, who must balance academic achievement against both the desire to play and the economic pressures that drive the college sports industry.

What Do Sports Do for American Higher Education?

Writing about collegiate athletics in a 1970 article in the *American Quarterly*, Guy Lewis argued, "In many ways, sport contributed to the destruction of the isolated academic world and helped to make the nation more conscious of its colleges."[1] The introduction of organized college sports helped to create a sense of ownership among state residents, who could feel a sense of pride in their state's college teams. Prior to this era, colleges and universities were set apart from the general public. Increased public interest in the performance of colleges then helped generate revenues for colleges and universities to use on other projects and encouraged citizens to consider donating or otherwise supporting their local educational institutions.

According to sports historians, organized collegiate sports grew out of an effort to redirect the aggression of college-age men. In the early days of American higher education, colleges could be rough places. Each year, incoming freshmen were violently "hazed" by sophomores in a tradition that came to be called the "rush," and student attacks on faculty were common enough that the phenomenon was well known in pre–Civil War America. A number of universities tried to curb violent behavior by engaging students in manual labor, but this did little to solve the problem. A solution was found by engaging students in the same kinds of games and contests students organized in their free time. During the annual rushes, students often took part in informal football matches. In the decades leading up to the Civil War, a number of colleges and universities established organized contests between students. Boxing and rowing were among the first organized sports introduced at the Ivy Leagues, but many popular American sports were later added to the college and university athletic programs. College baseball games began in 1859, while football got its start with the establishment of the first collegiate football association (which included only Harvard, Yale, and Princeton) in 1872.[2]

Around the same time that the first collegiate sports were in development, universities and colleges also added physical education to the basic curriculum. Gymnasiums were built to accommodate classes and doubled as arenas for college sports teams to practice. Over time, college administrators and the public came to embrace physical education and collegiate sport as an important part of higher education. It was and is still frequently argued that physical education and participation in sport offers important lessons in cooperation, overcoming adversity, and teamwork while also improving students' physical skills, coordination, and health. Whereas sport had once been considered an activity primarily for the lower classes, participation in certain sports was incorporated into elite culture as well, and the contests between universities provided another dimension of collegiate allegiance among students, their families, and other local. Though the college sports industry has frequently been the target of criticism, numerous studies have shown that college athletes retain important life lessons that can, in some situations, assist in their later careers and in achieving other life goals.

The Scholarship Debate

In the late 1800s, colleges began recruiting students on the basis of athletic skill; this was the beginning of the "athletic scholarship" system in which colleges and universities subsidize educational fees for talented athletes. After the establishment of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in 1906, it became more common for universities to offer support and incentives to student athletes in order to recruit them for their sports programs. Competition between schools led to an escalating scholarship war, and there are many documented instances of universities and colleges engaging in unethical and perhaps illegal practices in order to attract top athletes. Eventually, the NCAA and state politicians attempted to regulate the college athletics system, in part to put an end to corruption and other unethical practices.[3] Though there were a number of movements to regulate collegiate athletics and the scholarship system, athletic scholarships remain a multibillion-dollar industry in the United States. In the 2019–2020 school year, for instance, colleges and universities invested more than $4 billion in athletic scholarship awards.[4]

One of the primary concerns among critics of athletic scholarships has been institutional exploitation. Critics argue that colleges and universities must also ensure that any student recruited as an athlete is also provided opportunities for education and other services to further academic achievement. As a result, the NCAA requires that any athlete playing collegiate sports must be an active student in good standing. A number of colleges and universities further limit a student's ability to participate in athletics unless the student maintains a certain level of academic performance. These measures are meant to protect the welfare of student athletes, most of whom will not achieve work as professional athletes after leaving higher education. The basic idea is to ensure that educational institutions investing in student athletes also emphasize academic achievement and career preparation.

Many of the scholarships offered to student athletes in the 2020s are offered through the NCAA, which has annual revenues of some $1 billion, most of which

2
The Cost of College Athletics

Photo by Vlad Vasnetsov/Pixabay.

College track and field and golf teams are often targeted to be cut for budgetary reasons.

The Hidden Perks and Expenses of Collegiate Sports

While collegiate sports bring in tremendous amounts of revenue to colleges and universities, educational institutions also spend heavily to build and maintain their athletics programs. What's more, the effort to continually improve college athletics, and to remain competitive in the field, has led to an increase in the cost of education. The high cost of lucrative and popular sports has also led many educational institutions to streamline their academic offerings, eliminating or reducing funding for other sports and extracurricular student activities.

Deficit Spending

In 2020, the University of Texas recorded more than $220,000,000 in revenues from the school's collegiate athletics programs. The university was one of dozens of universities and colleges that bring in more than 100,000,000 in sports program revenues each year.[1] However, not all schools earn revenues through their sports programs and, for some, funding college sports is a substantial cost. An NCAA study on the finances of intercollegiate athletics found that fewer than 25 percent of schools record a positive net balance from their sports programs. This report also showed that the median loss for schools not earning profit was around $15 million.[2] Across the field, then, while a few fortunate universities can earn millions, for many colleges investing in sports is a significant drain on resources.

If college sports is a losing proposition for so many institutions, then why do universities and colleges continue to invest? The answer lies in the myriad advantages that athletics programs bring to educational institutions. Some universities can draw millions in revenues from media partnerships, ticket sales, donations. But even unprofitable athletics departments have advantages. For one thing, collegiate sports franchises are part of what gives a university or college its identity. Many Americans learn about schools through collegiate teams and performances. Sports teams provide opportunities for branding and marketing, and this draws indirect revenue, especially for those with well-known sports franchises.

The benefits of collegiate athletics are also lasting and multifaceted. Schools with sports franchises enjoy an advantage in alumni and public engagement, as members of the community take pride in the accomplishments of local sports franchises. Alumni and public engagement is a step toward earning donations, grants, and other support from individuals invested in educational institutions in part because pf sports franchise. For alumni especially, following the teams representing one's former educational institution is a way to remain connected with the institution, and this increased can manifest in advantages for the institution. The indirect

profits accrued by universities and colleges with athletics programs, especially those with nationally or internationally famous franchises, are such that universities and colleges continue to invest even when the cost of college athletics significantly outweighs the direct financial gains. Yet, critics argue that the college athletics industry is poorly managed and that the entire industry has grown increasingly wasteful at a significant cost to students and their families.

With millions in potential revenue from college sports, why are so many institutions running at a deficit? Part of the answer is that universities and colleges hoping to compete in high-profile intercollegiate contests are engaged in a race to attract high-profile athletes and also audiences as well as to keep their alumni and other donors engaged. In addition to funding scholarships and other programs to attract new athletes, universities and colleges spend money on equipment, sports facilities, and amenities. One of the most significant contributors to inflated athletics budgets is the high cost of hiring top-level coaches. A 2020 *USA Today* report stated that the average salary for a college football coach was $2.7 million, with top schools sometimes paying tens of millions to coaches and staff to manage their programs.[3]

What's more, the cost of collegiate athletics is increasing. A 2017 report from *USA Today* noted that investment in college athletes had been increasing markedly over the past decade and found that there was a positive correlation between spending on athletes and athletic performance. Of course, universities and colleges vary widely in terms of initial resources, and big-money institutions enjoy a serious advantage when it comes to building and maintaining competitive franchises.[4] The increasing cost of attracting athletes and other talent to collegiate programs also means that fewer and fewer institutions may be able to afford to offer robust athletics programs or compete in high-profile intercollegiate competitions.

Sources of Revenue

To attract top talent and interest, universities must be willing to spend lavishly. One of the chief criticisms of college athletics is that ultimately citizens pay much of the price for collegiate athletics programs. Many students and their families are unaware that much of what colleges and universities spend to maintain athletics programs comes from nonathlete students in the form of mandatory fees.[5] The amount charged to nonathlete students for athletics programs has also been increasing, and some critics argue that it is unethical to charge students increasing prices for education when the funding is not used to improve educational offerings or to provide any benefits for nonathlete students. In an era where many Americans struggle to afford the increasing cost of higher education or are forced to sacrifice considerably to pay off education loans, many critics feel that it is immoral for universities to increase the cost, and the long-term burden, only to fund programs that offer little to those who pay for them.

However, though some feel collegiate athletics draws too much away from an institution's educational commitments, revenues from collegiate athletics programs can and do allow educational institutions to provide resources that would not otherwise be available. Economic analyses indicate that some colleges and universities

3
Lives on the Line

2009 Harvard Crimson and Brown Bears game by chensiyuan, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia.

College football is one of the main causes of traumatic brain injury in student athletes.

Health Risks to Student Athletes

While participating in athletics is a great way to build strength and speed, athletes also risk their health by participating in competitive sports. Concussions, back and knee injuries, and other kinds of medical problems are common in athletes of all ages, to the point that many communities are now debating whether certain sports are appropriate for younger athletes. Controversially, colleges and universities often offer little in the way of assistance for injured players, and this is one of the issues often cited by critics and reformers in the field.

How Common Are Sports Injuries?

According to a 2015 study published in the *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* from the CDC, there were 1,053,370 injuries among NCAA athletes for the 2013–2014 season, out of 176.7 million exposures (meaning situations in which an athlete could potentially have been injured). The potential for injury varied widely among different sports. College football players, for instance, were most likely to get injured playing the game, but wrestling had the highest injury rate overall.[1]

Other studies have found similar results, with as many as 20 percent of NCAA athletes experiencing injuries that required a week or more for recovery. In college football, there are more than 20,000 injuries recorded each year, which includes 4,000 knee injuries and 1,000 spinal injuries. While injury rates for other sports are not well known, injuries are also common in wrestling, baseball, hockey, and basketball. Overuse injuries were the most common type of injury recorded for college athletes, and most of these were recoverable and not considered severe. But even seemingly minor injuries can have serious consequences.[2]

Intensity of activity is the key factor in injury statistics. Division I athletes may need to dedicate as much as 30–40 hours per week to exercise and may spend more than 4 hours per day engaged in practice, exercise, or other activity with the potential to cause injury. Added to this are the demands of academic commitment and the nature of college life, meaning that college athletes are less likely to dedicate sufficient time to sleep and recovery and often lack adequate nutrition. This combination puts college athletes at an extremely high risk for certain kinds of injuries, especially those from overuse and muscular injuries.[3]

Concussions and Mobility

By far the most concerning and oft-debated kind of sports injury is concussion, a type of traumatic brain injury (TBI) that occurs when an individual receives a blow to the head or to the body that causes the brain to rapidly shift or twist within the skull. When this occurs, areas of the brain may be damaged and there are chemical

changes in the brain that can also cause problems. People with concussions can experience a variety of symptoms, including headaches, difficulty thinking or recalling information, loss of motor control, loss of consciousness, or mood and behavior changes. They may become nauseous, experience problems with balance or vision, or have difficulty adjusting to light or noise. Symptoms can immediately follow an injury or manifest several days later.

While a minor concussion may present little or no danger to an athlete, severe concussions can leave an injured person with lifelong symptoms. Individuals with severe concussions can have long-term problems with cognition and memory, learning, or managing their emotions. On a more physical level, concussion sufferers may have long-lasting problems with speech, hearing, or vision and may have difficulty with coordination and balance.[4]

According to the CDC, 1.6 to 3.8 million sports-related concussions occur in the United States each year. CDC data also indicates that 10 percent of contact sports athletes experience a concussion once per year. Concussion is most common in boxing (where at least 87 percent of professionals have sustained lasting brain injuries) and in football, where data suggests there is at least one concussion for every five football games played. At least 10 percent of college football players and 20 percent of high school players will suffer a brain injury at some point during their time playing the game.[5]

Concussions are one of the most concerning types of sports injuries because many concussions are never diagnosed and, further, damage to the brain is cumulative. Studies indicate that a person who experiences one concussion is up to 6 times more likely to suffer another concussion. Each time an athlete's brain is injured, there is an increased chance that he or she will suffer long-lasting or severe injury; athletes who suffer multiple concussions are at high risk for developing problems later in life, such as chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a neurogenerative disorder. Repeated studies have shown that boxers and football player are at extremely high risk for developing CTE, which may not appear until much later in life. A 2017 study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found evidence of CTE in 110 of 111 former NFL players studied and in 48 of 53 former college football players.[6]

The public debate over the risk of concussions and complications like CTE tends to focus on professional football players and on high school players, out of a concern for child welfare, but studies indicate that college players are also at extremely high risk. Greg Ploetz, who played football in college but did not enter a professional league, developed CTE in his 60s, which led to severe emotional and cognitive decline, a loss in motor control, and an inability to speak; Ploetz required 24-hour nursing care. While Ploetz's CTE is among the worst diagnosed outside of professional sports, his experience raises serious questions about the welfare of college athletes over the longer term.[7]

Concussion is only one of the many types of injuries frequently suffered by athletes. But the concussion controversy touches on the broader issue of student athletics and injury. Student athletes, to remain competitive, must dedicate significant

4
Access to Athletics

Photo by Wymzee, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikipedia.

Bailar—the first openly transgender NCAA Division I swimmer—speaking at a 2017 Pride conference.

Race and Gender in Collegiate Athletics

One of the issues in collegiate athletics has been the struggle for fairness and equality. At one time in US history, only white males could compete. The field was eventually opened to white women, and gradually to people of color. Despite this progress, there are still challenges in terms of diversity and representation. The entire field of competitive sports is changing due to new questions regarding the status of trans athletes at both the college and professional levels.

Race and Collegiate Sports

A cursory look at collegiate sports in 2021 might seem to indicate that color barriers have been broken and that athletes of color enjoy the same access to athletic opportunities as any white student. For most of American history people of color were not accepted in the world of organized athletics. Prior to the 1950s, segregation laws meant that most people of color were prohibited from playing collegiate sports in mixed-race teams. This remained the case until well into the twentieth century, with local and state laws prohibiting black athletes from playing games with white athletes. While not specific to collegiate athletics, these laws limited the involvement of athletes of color in professional and amateur athletics. Black athletes of any age could still "negro leagues," but they were largely barred from participating in the mainstream collegiate or professional leagues.

Informal rules and prejudice meant that athletes of color could not join in collegiate sport even in schools with no specific rules prohibiting their involvement. Black athletes were also accepted in some northern states long before they were embraced in southern schools or professional teams. Teams that had black athletes would keep them off their playing rosters when visiting the South. A famous instance of this happened in 1916, when Rutgers University kept Paul Robeson—who went on to become an American entertainment and civil rights icon—off the field because the opposing team, Washington and Lee College, refused to play otherwise.

More than any other factor, the growth in the popularity of college sports after World War II, pushed integration of collegiate teams. With increasing pressure to build winning franchises that could earn increasingly lucrative revenues, colleges began recruiting athletes of color even though there was significant social reluctance to integration. Historian Timothy Davis, in his article "The Myth of the Superspade," argues that integration only came to sports that earned significant revenues and thus that integration was exploitative at the onset.[1]

Over the years, activism and changing cultural standards brought people of color into collegiate sports in far higher numbers, but players of color still face racism and prejudice. In addition to overt forms of racism and discrimination, athletes of color are also exploited because of structural and institutionalized racism in the way that the benefits of collegiate sports are distributed.

As of 2021, black players play an essential role in the two highest revenue-earning men's sports, basketball and football, and yet little of the revenue from these sports filters back into black communities. A 2020 study from the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) looked at the distribution of profit from collegiate sports and found that students who are predominantly white and come from upper-class neighborhoods enjoy most of the benefit from collegiate athletics profits. Revenues from college sports subsidize resources that are most often utilized by white students and their families. The authors argue that this means that players of color are being exploited by a system that monetizes their effort and skill but does not compensate them, returning little revenue to athletes of color, their families, or their communities.[2]

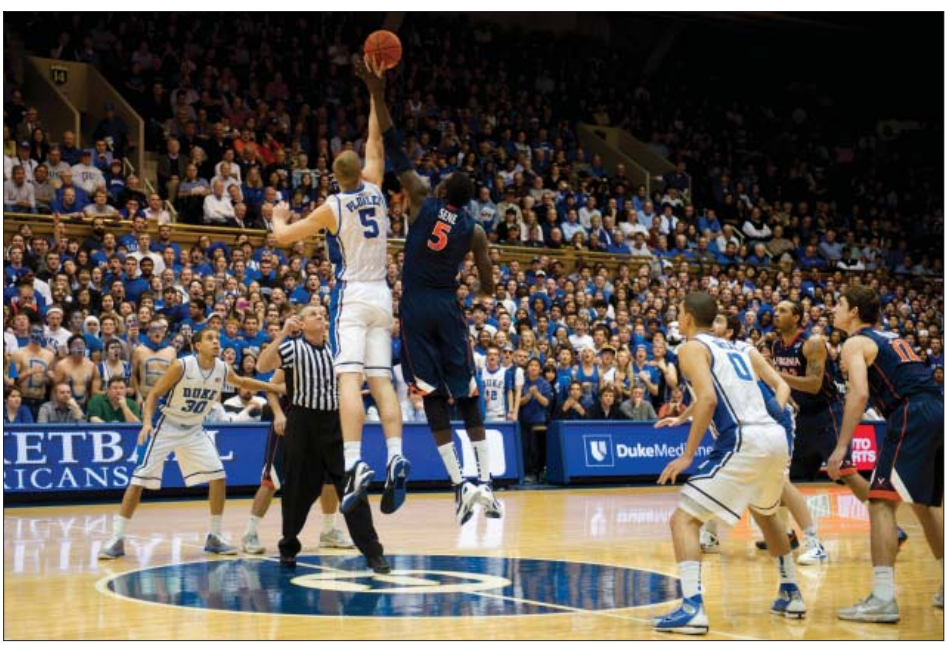
The Gender Lines

In the United States, women have long been prohibited from taking part in professional sports because of sexism and misogyny, and in the past arguments have been put forth that playing sports was dangerous for women because of the physiological demands of menstruation or child birth.

Despite these efforts to keep women out of sports, women's leagues and groups organized and played their own games. There were informal sporting leagues in many major cities in the early 1900s, with women playing games like archery, tennis, croquet, and bowling, though few women engaged in games that were still stereotypically considered part of the male domain, like football, soccer, or baseball. Women's basketball was first introduced at Smith College in 1892 and spread to other colleges in the next decade. Women athletes wanted to compete with athletes from other institutions but this was considered inappropriate. The first extramural women's sports competitions at the collegiate level took place in 1896, between women's basketball teams from California and Washington.[3]

The feminist movement of the 1920s began to change things in women's sports, with more and more colleges investing in women's teams and holding competitions, but progress stalled during the Great Depression, as did women's enrollment in colleges and universities. The situation changed during World War II when, with so many men overseas and drafted into the military, women were called upon to play a more direct role in professions that had previously been reserved for men. Organized as a substitute for men's teams because of the war, the All-American Girls Baseball League (formed in 1943) was one of the first professional women's sports teams, paving the way for a much higher level of interest in sports among women of all ages. By the 1950s, this led to more and more women taking an interest in collegiate sports.

5
Professionals and Amateurs



Virginia Cavaliers and Duke Blue Devils by D. Myles Cullen, US Department of Defense, via Wikimedia.

The Supreme Court ruled in June 2021 against the NCAA's limits on education-related perks for college athletes.

The Pay-for-Play Debate

Collegiate athletics is a multibillion-dollar industry, and these massive revenues filter down through many levels of American society, enriching investors, shareholders, and individuals at many other levels. But what about the athletes whose effort and passion is the fuel for this economic behemoth? It is tradition that NCAA athletes, because of a philosophy known as "amateurism," do not and should not derive any direct remuneration for their participation in collegiate sports. But there are many critics who argue that this is unjust. With so many young women and men putting their health and welfare on the line as they work as hard as any professional in any field, some Americans believe that it is only fair for athletes to receive some portion of the revenues they help to generate. The debate over whether college athletes are entitled to compensation has been ongoing for decades, but broader cultural changes are adding urgency to this issue. One of these issues is the emergence of esports—virtual, digital competitions that are challenging traditional conceptions about athletics.

The Monetization of Sports

College sports has not always been a money-making machine. From the beginning of Western culture, in ancient Greece, athletic contests were very profitable for the state and provided one of the few ways that a person born into the lower levels of society might ascend to the elite. Even Grecians born into slavery could, if they succeeded as professional athletes, earn enough to place them in the aristocracy. This feature of professional sports has remained intact throughout the centuries, with many millions of young men and women born into poverty dedicating themselves to sport in the hopes of hitting the lottery in the form of a professional sports contract.[1]

While professional sports have always been lucrative, college sports began as something different. The first organized college sports in the United States were created as a way to refocus the inherent aggression and energy of young male students. Over the decades, sport became incorporated into the philosophy of American education. The idea was that young students needed to hone both their bodies and minds, and that organized athletic training and competition could provide long-lasting benefits. It wasn't long before collegiate sports became an important economic factor for colleges and universities. Colleges and universities learned that having sports franchises associated with their schools had many benefits, such as increasing interest from prospective students, helping to engage members of the public with the school, and creating a framework for long-term alumni and donor engagement. As institutions competed to field winning teams, more and more resources were devoted to this effort.[2] As college contests became more popular, colleges and universities began to see direct monetary benefits in terms of selling

tickets and, much later, in terms of television contracts and the like. One of the figures most directly responsible for the monetization of college athletics is Walter Byers, the first NCAA division president and the man who organized the initial television deals that created the economic phenomenon of "March Madness."[3] Byers, the NCAA, and others helped build college athletics into a multibillion-dollar industry. But, as this occurred, the field became the target of criticism alleging that the focus on revenues intensifies the exploitation of student athletes.

Should Athletes Be Paid?

For decades, reformers have argued that it is wrong to maintain college athletes in a state of "amateurism" despite the industry's massive revenues and the effort and risks associated with being a college athlete. Less than 2 percent of NCAA athletes will receive a professional sports contract, and so only a vanishingly small number of college athletes will be in a position to earn serious money.[4] In addition, more than 90 percent of student athletes experience some kind of injury, and 12 percent suffer concussions or other potentially deadly injuries. Because the NCAA and colleges do not automatically provide medical coverage for student athletes, athletes are further risking their own financial well-being. The number of college athletes who suffer long-term medical issues as a result of their collegiate experiences is far higher than the percentage who can expect any serious financial remuneration.[5]

Given this risk and the seeming inequity of prohibiting college players from profiting from their efforts, many critics have argued that college athletes should simply be treated as professionals. The industry is certainly professional in terms of revenue, with many individuals enjoying lucrative careers by promoting college athletic contests. Some argue that athletes should enjoy a share in these revenues. This argument takes on another dimension when taking into account the large number of college athletes, especially athletes of color, who come from impoverished backgrounds. If the NCAA were to allow profit sharing, the revenues earned by athletes could transform their lives. It has likewise been argued that refusing to allow profit sharing means that the NCAA, educational institutions, and executives in the industry are actively profiting from the exploitation of minority and working-class athletes, while the financial benefits are enjoyed primarily by individuals in the upper classes.[6]

The arguments against paying collegiate athletes are complex, but typically revolve around the perception that it is important to preserve the relationship between education and athletics for the student-athletes who compete in collegiate leagues. Some argue that paying student athletes would essentially make collegiate athletics a job and so would discourage athletes from focusing on obtaining their education or preparing for a future career. Given that less than 2 percent of them will go on to have professional careers in sports, it can be argued that it is important for college athletes to engage in the educational aspect of their college experience. Other defenders of the current system argue that a system in which college athletes are paid might as well be considered another level of professional play rather than a part of the nation's collegiate system.

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Websites

College Athlete Advocacy Initiative

www.4collegeathletes.org

The College Athlete Advocacy Initiative is an activist organization that provides legal information, advice, support, and advocacy for athletes. The organization was founded in 2019 and is a product of *CBS Sports*. The organization will provide assistance for college athletes on issues involving financial aid, health and safety, and concerns about abuse or exploitation. The organization will further develop campaigns supporting athlete activism and protests and will provide pro bono legal assistance for athletes.

College Athletes Players Association (CAPA)

www.collegeathletespa.org

The CAPA is a national, nonprofit advocacy group dedicated to providing assistance and aid for college athletes at all levels. The CAPA lobbies on behalf of college sports reforms, supports and funds studies on college sports issues, and provides advocacy services for college athletes and their families. It is one of the largest mainstream organizations lobbying for compensation for college athletes.

National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA)

www.naia.org

The NAIA is an alternative to the NCAA that serves small North American colleges and Universities. In addition to being active in the United States, the NAIA also represents colleges and universities in Canada and in the US Virgin Islands. The NAIA oversees and holds championships for men's and women's basketball, football, lacrosse, soccer, swimming, wrestling, volleyball, tennis, and track.

The National College Players Association (NCPA)

www.ncpa.org

The NCPA is a nonprofit advocacy group that provides outreach and resources for players and advocates for fair treatment of athletes. The NCPA has been involved in efforts to lobby for new rules meant to prevent or reduce the likelihood of brain injury and has also been active in campaigns to increase scholarships and stipends for student athletes.

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