

# Amateurism, eligibility, and doublespeak

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE  
Amateurism, eligibility, and doublespeak  
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It's difficult for me to acknowledge that in the case of Mike Williams of the University of Southern California the NCAA may finally have done something right. Williams applied for reinstatement of his eligibility to play football at USC following the federal court decisions that virtually overturned the lower court decisions allowing underclassmen to make themselves eligible for the National Football League Draft.

After allowing USC and Williams to twist slowly in the wind until the eve of the opening of the new football season, the NCAA finally made its ruling. NCAA officials say that the decision was based on the fact that Williams hired an agent and dropped out of school last spring. He did not need to do either of these things to declare himself eligible for the draft.

If this is all that was involved the NCAA made the right decision within the context of its own rules. Had Williams remained in school and not hired an agent would the NCAA have reinstated him? We will never know, but it should be remembered that much more was at stake in this case than simply the eligibility of one player. Williams tried to backtrack on his decision by cutting ties with his agent and enrolling in summer classes, but the NCAA ruled that this was not enough.

This seems a sensible ruling as enrolling in class as a means to eligibility should not be regarded as sufficient proof of anything. We know, of course, that enrolling in courses to maintain eligibility is done all the time in intercollegiate athletics. Some athletes major in eligibility and have no other interest in being at the university. Many enroll in classes and seldom see the inside of a classroom and although the NCAA does not endorse this sort of thing, nothing it has done has curbed the practice.

The NCAA seems to be more consistent with its dubious past in its decision to deny eligibility for football to Jeremy Bloom. In this case the NCAA affirmed the absurdity of its regulations when it ruled that because Bloom has taken endorsement money for his professional skiing career, he has lost his eligibility for football. The NCAA has a one-size-fits-all rule against endorsement money.

At the same time the NCAA allows an athlete to be a professional in one sport without compromising eligibility in another sport. This means that a football player could sign with a major league baseball team, receive a huge bonus, collect a nice salary, and still be eligible to play college football.

In Bloom's case there was no big signing bonus available for professional skiing, nor a salary of any kind. If Bloom is to support himself while skiing he must find it from sponsors, which he has done. The added irony here is that although a professional skier Bloom will still be eligible to compete in the 2006 Olympics. What he will not be eligible to do is play football at the University of Colorado.

The NCAA continues to insist that there is some legitimacy to the professional/amateur distinction and that such a distinction has something to do with money. This quaint notion from the 19th century British tradition was never anything more than a means for the aristocracy to keep the masses out of sport. When the concept was transferred to the U.S. it retained legitimacy in a democratic society. Cash payment as the defining mark of professionalism became embedded in the American sporting culture and although much has changed in recent years there remain some corners of the sporting universe where vestiges of this absurd distinction are still made.

The NCAA claims that it exists to serve the athlete and to protect the athlete. Jeremy Bloom's case demonstrates that it is still business as usual and that the NCAA's adherence to its inconsistent rules belies all efforts to change. Jeremy Bloom has been victimized by a vestige of the past and a myopic athletic bureaucracy.

Finally there is another Williams case that is worth returning to briefly. Many will recall that Willie Williams the highly recruited high school football player from Miami had accumulated an impressive arrest record, a fact which escaped the attention of those teams recruiting him. In addition Williams kept a diary during his recruitment process detailing the absurd levels to which football coaches and recruiters were willing to go to entice him to their campus. The diary was published in the Miami Herald in serial form and provided endless column inches of entertainment.

There was much speculation about whether or not Miami would admit Williams after news of his arrest record was made public. In the end Williams was admitted to the University of Miami

setting off a considerable outcry across the state and nation. None of this was very surprising; much of it was very amusing.

What was best however was the public statement issued at the time by the university president, Donna Shalala. In it she staked out her potential new career in comedy writing for Saturday Night Live. The combination of pious nonsense, academic double-speak, and sheerchutzpah was beyond my descriptive capabilities. It would do a disservice to Dr. Shalala to quote only selected portions of the statement as the richness of the document can only be appreciated in its full glory.

It was, as they say, a keeper and should win her Academic Administrative All-American status for the year, if not the entire decade. \*\*\*

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

\*\*\* I would be happy to send copies of Dr. Shalala's Statement to anyone requesting it.

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