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Amateurs and professionals in college sports

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Amateurs and professionals in college sports
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During this past week, The New York Times published two stories concerning the eligibility of tennis players to participate in NCAA competitions. The point of contention has arisen over a very high number of international players who have been dominating championship play over the last few years. Last year, in the NCAA national championships, 38 of the 64 male competitors and 33 of the 64 female competitors were international players, and one estimate is that half of these players were professionals under NCAA rules.

According to the Times from 1999 to 2004, twenty-eight percent of the men and twenty-one percent of the women competing in NCAA tennis were internationals. This year, six of the ten players ranked in the NCAA top ten are internationals. The NCAA classifies a player as professional if they earn more money than expenses in tournaments. The application of the NCAA standards has seemed fuzzy or inconsistent to many coaches and parents, especially as it appears that the standards as applied to internationals is not the same as that applied to Americans.

The Chancellor of Vanderbilt University, Gordon Gee, wants his fellow presidents to look into this matter. "The issue of amateurism and the corrosion of it, which in this instance is a very blatant one, is very important to college presidents," said Gee. "The process of being able to wash one clean through a convoluted process that supposedly would make one amateur again is not acceptable."

At the center of the problem are the definitions of amateur and professional that entered the United States in the 19th century from Britain. These definitions, created for a rigid class structure and designed to keep the unwashed masses out of sport, have been haunting American sport ever since. In the British view sport was for gentlemen and the easiest way to keep it exclusive was to restrict it to amateurs while defining a professional as anyone who played for money.

The fact that this made no sense for a society in which class was at least somewhat fluid didn't stop the elite practitioners of sport at Harvard and Yale from borrowing the British model and seeking to apply it in the United States. The remarkable thing is that it stuck, and not only stuck, but became

entrenched in the American sporting culture during the 20th century.

As time passed and sport increasingly came to be seen as a means to social mobility, the amateur/professional distinction became pernicious and not just nonsensical. If those who wanted to play sport were of limited economic means they would need financial assistance to do so. When the institutions of higher learning got into the sports business they provided that assistance, and in doing so insisted that this did not violate the amateur standard because it did not involve cash payment, except surreptitiously. Scholarships were not money so there was no problem. This fiction served the institutions of higher learning, allowing them to avoid the very expensive business of paying their athletes, while relying on under the table payments to the best of their athletes.

The hypocrisy of the system was seldom questioned as college sport became a major business and benighted supporters of university athletic programs compensated the elite athletes in cash and kind. In order to provide some sense of moral rectitude to the entire process, the NCAA made a great show of punishing transgressors of their convoluted rules, even occasionally punishing the big time programs.

And so here we are in the 21st century still worrying about the amateur/professional distinction, even after it has been driven from the Olympic movement, the onetime bastion of elitism in sport. It is nice to know that in the United States someone is still fighting to maintain a distinction designed to ensure the survival of the 19th century British class system in sport.

What is needed is a new definition of professionalism. In intercollegiate athletics, in most interscholastic athletics, and indeed in some youth athletics in America, the standard for participation requires the individual athlete to devote a major portion of their time to the sport they choose to play. This activity becomes the most important part of their lives, and occupies most of their attention and energies. Once that level of commitment has been reached, that athlete should no longer be classified as "amateur" but should be classified as "professional."

There is no reason to deny these athletes compensation for their skills and achievements. In tennis this means being paid for winning tournaments without regard to whether or not this exceeds expenses. Sponsors, endorsements, winnings, and

compensation should be available to anyone that is seen as being worth such an investment by anyone willing to make that investment.

This would not only take the colleges, universities, and the NCAA out of the accounting and detective business, it would provide increased opportunity for those who wish to sell their athletic skills, either inside or outside the institutions of higher learning. It would end one of the major hypocrisies of the current intercollegiate athletic system, although it could be financially difficult for some institutions. It might even lead to some of these institutions of higher learning to return to amateur athletics, if indeed that is what they truly value in sport.

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.

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