

March Madness

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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It is March Madness time. This usually means it is time for the NCAA to take those to court who are violating their copyright of that phrase.

This March there seems to be a slightly different kind of madness in the air. It still involves college basketball and it concerns some of the major "programs" in the country led by some of the "legendary" coaches in the country.

The most recent example of this rendition of March Madness involves the basketball "program" at Syracuse University where for the past several decades Jim Boeheim has become a coaching legend amassing a truck load of wins. Boeheim has been head basketball coach at Syracuse since 1976. Prior to that, he had been an assistant coach, and before that a player, at Syracuse. He is a true Orangeman, a lifer.

Syracuse basketball and Jim Boeheim are synonymous. Over the years Boeheim repeatedly won Big East championships, and regional championships resulting in four Final Four appearances. It was not until 2003 that his team won an NCAA championship and when it did the Syracuse faithful and many of Boeheim's fellow coaches were delighted for him. It was said that he had more than paid his dues, and if anyone deserved a national title it was Jim Boeheim.

At the same time there were those who were not so enamored of the tall and thin bespectacled coach as the Syracuse program was not entirely clean. In the early '90s there were revelations of wrongdoing and as a result the university was hit with NCAA sanctions in 1993. Boeheim overlooked this bit of history last weekend when he claimed that over the past 37 years he personally had worked to keep Syracuse in compliance with the rules. Cash and gifts had come to players from boosters and one player retained eligibility for a Big East tournament through a grade change. Apparently the coach didn't work hard enough.

In its report released last week the NCAA found that for over a decade Syracuse University had not controlled nor monitored its athletic programs, and that the head coach had failed to monitor his "program." Indeed the person Boeheim hired to "fix" the academic problems of his players in 2005 led the athletic department and the

basketball program in creating a system of academic fraud that involved the local YMCA. What would the Village People think?

This weekend Boeheim reacted by being a no-show at a post-game press conference, and then appeared at a booster club dinner where he did speak. He told the Hardwood Club that he isn't going anywhere, and that was met with a standing ovation. This was a clear message that Boeheim is still number one among the Syracuse faithful, and it was a clear message to any mere university administrator to not even think about removing Boeheim as head coach.

As with most major college coaches, Boeheim is virtually untouchable and clearly a more important figure on campus than the university president. Indeed, there are many presidential careers that have crashed and burned seeking to control powerful coaches and booster organizations.

What is remarkable in this current version of March Madness is how many other major "programs" are under fire. The NCAA will be returning to the North Carolina case of massive academic fraud soon and another big name coach will be put in the spotlight.

Down the road from the University of North Carolina, even the impeccable basketball "program" at Duke University is under a shadow, as is its head Coach Mike Krzyzewski. The case is clearly elusive but the fact that anything negative involving Coach K should become public is startling.

No one and no university is immune from the temptations posed by the need to win and keep on winning. What has become clear over the past two decades or more is that college basketball, and intercollegiate athletics in general, has become a high stakes operation involving money, power, and ego. The relationship of elite college athletics to the educational mission of a university is tenuous at best. Too often it is not even tenuous, but in fact, detrimental to that mission.

To change any of this is a task that would make Sisyphus run for the exits. It simply cannot be done and those who think it can be done are either hard core optimists or blind to the athletic realities both on and off campus.

When intercollegiate athletics lives up to the promises of its mythology, it is a wonderful thing. The case for this ideal will be presented over and over during the month of March as the NCAA, the leading conferences, and the television networks present their version to a gullible or indifferent public.

The scandals at Syracuse and North Carolina, the shadows over Duke, the many scandals of the past and future will not vanish. The only thing that ultimately will vanish is the integrity of American higher education. That is the real Madness of March.

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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