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PAC 12 Grand Canyon University

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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While waiting for the other shoe, or perhaps shoes, to drop in the anti-aging campaign by Major League Baseball, and noticing that Bud Selig is not getting any younger, it has suddenly hit me that college football is about to descend upon us with all the hypocrisy that it can muster. As a result crime reports in the sporting press will escalate, and there will be a new harvest of "Boys Gone Wild" videos as student-athletes begin their late summer season. One can only hope that "old school" football coaches do not retain "old school" training techniques that endanger the health or lives of their players. And to be sure Pope Urban will have some pious platitudes for us concerning his ex- and current players.

In the midst of all of this, one can only wonder when some new form of nonsense and/or hypocritical activity will float into public view. Just when you think that all possible permutations have been achieved, new mind-bending activity is undertaken by someone within the college pigskin scene. Recently that promise has been fulfilled.

The first example surfaced about a week ago when the on-line daily site of academic and campus news, *Inside Higher Education* reported that the PAC-12 membership has decided that it will no longer schedule athletic competitions in any sport with Grand Canyon University.

This fall Grand Canyon University will have 8,500 students on its Phoenix area campus, and another 47,000 enrolled in on-line courses. It describes itself as a Christian university with a Christian Viewpoint. GCU operates as a for-profit institution without state assistance or subsidy. Although it has no football team, it has 22 teams competing in men's and women's sports. For the past ten years GCU has competed at the Division II level, and will now move to Division I as it becomes a member of the Western Athletic Conference.

So what's the problem?

As reported by *Inside Higher Education*, PAC-12 members in a letter to the NCAA claim that for-profit universities do not belong in the NCAA, and asked the collegiate watchdog to keep them out of Division I athletics. The PAC-12

expressed concern over how for-profit institutions might use athletics, and how athletics would fit into the academic mission of these universities. Conference members argued that non-profit status ensures that athletics are integrated into the academic mission of the university. The success of student athletes is the primary concern of PAC-12 members. On the other hand for-profits are businesses and are not accountable to their students or faculty. According to Michael Crow, the president of Arizona State University, the move to Division I is simply a way of inflating the stock price of GCU's parent company.

One wonders where to begin with this news. How about the claim that the primary concern of PAC-12 members, and by implication any non-profit university, is the success of its student athletes? If this is a reference to academic matters, it is a dubious claim, except in the sense of maintaining academic eligibility for its student athletes. Graduation rates, particularly of recruited African American athletes, are not improving and the gap in rates between them and others is growing. At the same time graduation rates at GCU compare favorably to those at PAC-12 institutions.

The guarantee that student athletes are integrated into the academic life of non-profit universities is another dubious assertion. The fact that athletes are often isolated socially, are herded into athletically friendly courses, and are often discouraged from choosing certain majors or taking classes that conflict with practice times, gives the lie to such a claim by the PAC-12 officials.

What of the claim that for-profits as businesses are not accountable to students and faculty. As a faculty member at a non-profit state institution I can assure you that these institutions are not accountable to either students or faculty. If for-profits are accountable to stock holders, the equivalent for non-profits is an accountability to state legislators, major contributors, and athletic boosters, but certainly not faculty or students.

If, as Michael Crow claims, GCU is only using athletics to inflate their stock price, the equivalent for non-profits is an inflation of the "university brand" and the ability to raise funds and sell merchandise. The notion that the profit motive is not a major engine driving intercollegiate

athletics is laughable. It is the primary engine, and perhaps the sole engine, moving the juggernaut forward.

What may be at work here is difficult to say. Certainly Arizona State doesn't want to see another Division I program in their city. If it builds a successful athletic program, Grand Canyon University could cut into the donor pool, the sponsor pool, and the merchandise sales pool locally. In some sports GCU success could over the long term make athletic recruiting for ASU and other PAC-12 schools more difficult and that might also mean more costly. But then as President Crow assures us, the PAC-12 and ASU are not about profit, so that certainly couldn't be the source of concern over the for-profit university in town moving into big time athletics.

No, as is always the case in big time intercollegiate athletics, the only concern of athletic administrators is the welfare of the student athletes. We know that is true because university presidents, athletic directors, coaches, and the NCAA have repeatedly told us it is so.

And we know we can trust all of them, all of the time.

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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