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Division on Campus Over Athletics

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How many out there remember the name Jan Kemp? Or Linda Benzel-Myers? My guess is that more people are likely to remember the name Murray Sperber? All three have several things in common. They publicly criticized the athletic programs at their universities, and as a result became unwelcome members of their university community and were subjected to harassment. All paid a high price for their insistence on academic integrity and standards.

Jan Kemp was fired from her job at the University of Georgia in the 1980s for insisting that the university enforce its academic standards for football players as well as other students.

Linda Benzel-Myers charged that the University of Tennessee, her employer, used altered grades and plagiarized papers to keep athletes eligible. As a result she has been harassed by students and fans, her marriage has suffered, her lawyer socially ostracized, and she has been isolated by university administrators.

Murray Sperber, English professor at Indiana University and the author of several books critical of the corruption in intercollegiate athletics, most recently became a public critic of IU basketball coach Bobby Knight. For his efforts Sperber has been personally threatened by Knight supporters, chastised on web sites, and faced threats of disruption of his classes in the fall. Sperber recently decided to take a leave without pay from Indiana.

What is clear in all these cases is that university administrators are more likely to support their athletic programs and coaches than their faculty. When it comes to a choice between academic integrity and the wishes of the athletic department and boosters, the choice will consistently turn on the interests of winning athletic programs. Athletics has a higher claim on most campuses than academics, and as a result the corruption of the academic life of the university is inevitable. Worse, this is not viewed as a serious issue in many quarters. Examples are everywhere.

Recently a colleague told me that while he was a graduate teaching assistant he gave failing grades to athletes only to see them changed by administrators. When he objected to his

department chairman he was told not to concern himself with these matters. As a graduate student he backed off immediately.

Two other colleagues tell a tale of an athlete withdrawn from their courses after the term had ended. The withdrawals were done by a university vice-president to keep the athlete eligible for competition. When confronted with the evidence of this activity the president of the university called their department chairman to seek a suppression of the incident. Failing to achieve that, the president manipulated the faculty senate to clear the administrator of any wrongdoing. For its efforts the department fell into institutional disfavor for the duration of the president's term.

There is a highly strained relationship between athletics and academics on campus. Despite the high sounding claims that the two are compatible, the simple fact is that both coaches and professors highly resent one another's presence in the university. Professors resent the attention and dollars that are showered on coaches and see the games as a violation of the educational mission of the university. Coaches resent any interference with their athletic empires especially from those who have never "played the game."

The rift between mind and body has been a long-standing reality in American culture, and the coach-professor relationship in part reflects that rift.

During the recent flap over Bobby Knight's choking escapade, Temple basketball coach John Chaney appeared on ESPN with IU professor Murray Sperber. In the midst of one of their exchanges a visibly irritated Chaney said to Sperber, "Let me tell you something. I don't care how many (books) you've published, but my point is that I think that you're in a foreign area when you start talking about athletics." A few moments later Chaney hit the bottom line, "I didn't come here to listen or be lectured by some professor who knows very little about the field that we're in."

Chaney was adamant about his territory, and in fairness one should add that a professor would be equally adamant about their own primacy in the classroom. What Chaney ignores is that the university has primary rules of conduct and neither coaches nor professors should be allowed to violate those rules.

It is not difficult to understand what is happening here. The money and institutional prestige at stake in intercollegiate

athletics is massive. It can be no wonder that university presidents do what they do. Who is more important to the institution, the English Department or the Athletic Department, the professor or the coach?

More difficult to understand is the notion that this system can be reformed. The primacy of athletics over academics has been a reality since the late 19th century. The control of athletics has rarely resided in the faculty or the university presidents, while the enormous money at stake now makes reform all but impossible.

Faculty can object to the signs of corruption but faculty critics will only be tolerated as long as athletics is not seriously threatened. The public, the politicians, the administrators, the trustees, the boosters, the students, the alumni, the corporate sponsors, and the television networks have encouraged the growth of this massive on-campus entertainment colossus and they do not want to see it damaged by some zealous professor.

If intercollegiate athletics can only be sustained by a little corruption; if the only price to pay is a violation of a few NCAA rules or the academic integrity of the university; if a few grades have to be given or changed; then so be it. It is a small price to pay for the spectacle, the pageantry, and excitement at the big time sports entertainment university.

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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