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THE Ohio State University and the Eligibility Major

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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The Ohio State University is regarded by the people of that state and its alumni, as well as by many across the country, as one of the great state universities in America. Its educational and research reputation has grown over the past several decades, and it has arrived at a place of leadership in many academic disciplines.

It is also an institution that for many more years has been regarded as one of the great football schools in America, a perennial national gridiron power. The name of Woody Hayes was synonymous with college football for decades. Saturday afternoon in Columbus is considered to be one of the ideal places to observe and participate in what is affectionately called "all the color and pageantry of college football."

Over the years the educational and entertainment missions of American universities have come into conflict around their commitment to football. This is not surprising. Indeed it is inevitable that such conflict would develop from time to time.

Last week I read with interest that as always Ohio State is considered to have one of the very best football teams in the nation. In many pre-season polls the Buckeyes are ranked number one. I also read with interest that three key players, all-conference and All-American players, are in danger of losing their eligibility because of academic difficulties.

One of them is reported to need a "C" average for three courses taken this summer. Failure to achieve this high standard will result in loss the of football eligibility. Specifically this student-athlete is faced with the daunting task of reaching this high academic level in courses in "music," "golf" and "AIDS Awareness." Yes, this is a formidable intellectual challenge! One that brings great pressure on this student to perform at the "average" level.

So this is what it has come down to. A great American institution of higher education is held up to public ridicule in order to win football games and become number one. The embarrassment for Ohio State should be suffocating and humiliating. For those who lead this great institution, it is apparently neither.

I don't want to be too harsh here, but in many places around the country courses of this genre taken by football players during the summer term seeking to maintain their eligibility are generally not all that academically challenging. The music course is no doubt of the "appreciation" variety, the "golf" course (no pun intended but still appropriate) is what is called an "activity" course, and the "AIDS Awareness" course probably stresses social behavior rather than biological analysis.

Many universities have these kinds of courses and they serve various needs in the curriculum as well as for the extra-curriculum. When I was an undergraduate I took such courses to fill certain kinds of requirements. In fact I will confess that I took "golf" during winter quarter at the University of Minnesota.

Most of these courses share a common requirement of consciousness and physical presence on the part of the student. If you are there, participate, and perform minimally, a "C" is automatic and a "B" or "A" is not a major intellectual achievement.

To be concerned that someone taking three such courses may not be able to achieve a "C" average in order to maintain athletic eligibility is a sorry state of affairs. It means that the athlete in question has no interest whatsoever in their role as student. It also makes the university's claim to academic or any other kind of integrity a laughing stock. It is a national disgrace, and it is all too common.

It is also not new. In the early 1930s James Thurber created a satirical character named Bolenciewicz, a dumb tackle and "an outstanding star" at Ohio State University. In the hilarious "College Days" Thurber's football player was desperately trying to keep up his grades in order to maintain his eligibility.

Thurber describes Bolenciewicz's eligibility problem as "a very difficult one, because although he was not dumber than an ox, he was not any smarter." Then in a hilarious classroom sequence Bolenciewicz is asked the simplest questions imaginable by a sympathetic economics professor trying desperately to give the football star a passing grade. This may mark the invention of the dumb jock in American literature, and it may be more than coincidence that Bolenciewicz toiled on the line for Ohio State University.

I would suggest that in choosing the classroom and the sympathetic professor for his satire, Thurber was illustrating the widely accepted belief that the American university had already sold its academic integrity for the cash and glory at the heart of college football.

The university was not only willing to bring an athlete to campus who was eminently unqualified to be a student, but then was willing to sacrifice its academic standards to keep that athlete playing football while maintaining the fiction that he was a bona fide student.

The sad case at Ohio State today, like the case of Thurber's Ohio State of the Thirties is not unique. Indeed that is the problem. For a century now institutions of higher education have willingly, and with great enthusiasm, cheered on those who can win football games, while turning the blind eye to the degradation of the integrity of a significant public institution.

So as universities reconvene for the fall term, it is time to welcome back all the color and pageantry of college football and ask the burning questions of the autumnal season in America: Whose number one?! And, Isn't anyone embarrassed by all this!?

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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