Proposition 48 and the Black Coaches Association

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Forty members of the Black Coaches Association met in Washington on Tuesday with the members of the Congressional Black Caucus. They addressed such issues as the declining number of scholarships available for basketball, the lack of `black administrators in intercollegiate athletics including the NCAA, and the rising academic requirements for eligibility to compete in intercollegiate athletics.

In 1989 John Thompson, the basketball coach at Georgetown, was the first one to dramatically call attention to the concerns over academic standards, as he conducted a one-man protest against Proposition 48 by walking out of game. This time Thompson has 40 coaches with him in the protest, and he feels the stakes have gotten even higher.

On the issue of academics Thompson is most concerned that schools are relying on standardized tests that are acknowledged to be culturally biased. These tests are also not a particularly reliable predictor of minority success in college. Thompson feels that opportunity for black athletes to go to college is thereby diminished.

It is difficult for anyone working in an institution of higher education to accept Thompson's analysis because it sounds like he is calling for lower standards. He would argue that he is calling for different standards, unbiased standards.

It is clear that standardized tests are not a great instrument for deciding who should go to college. Half of those who enter college do not finish for any number of reasons, some having to do with ability, and many who do not finish scored at acceptable levels on the standardized tests.

It is also true that many of those who come to college to play athletics have no interest in an education. This reality is often part of the argument to keep the academically unqualified athlete off the campus. In recent years concerns over this issue have grown, as intercollegiate athletics has come into the national spotlight.
But several points need to be remembered. Some of those who come to play or who come into the college without qualifications, do in fact change while in college, begin to study, and finally graduate. In addition there have always been a significant number of athletes on campus who had no interest in the educational process. This reality goes back to the beginnings of intercollegiate athletic competition in the late 19th century with the appearance of the tramp athlete who sold his services to the highest bidder, and to those athletes who seldom went to class. The stereotype of the dumb jock did not develop out of thin air but has roots in history.

If in fact we limit attendance in college only to those who want to acquire an education, we might find ourselves with very few students. There are many in college to party. There are many there, who have no idea why they are there, except that it is the next step for the middle class child coming out of high school. There are many in college because their parents are forcing them to be there. Should we exclude all of these people, along with athletes who want to be there only to play a sport? I doubt if there are many college administrators who would support that proposition, and I suspect they would haul out all sorts of data to show why it is important for these people to attend college.

The sad fact is that the institutions of higher education in America serve all sorts of functions other than educational ones, and that a precious few students are in college primarily to be educated. Many are there jumping through the hoops to get a degree, their ticket to the job market. Many of those who are there to play sport, are also approaching their experience as job training or as a means to a degree. This has always been true, but somehow seemed less urgent when these were white kids from the middle class, working class, and immigrant ghettos.

John Thompson says that when helping the poor was fashionable, the poor, especially the athletically talented, were taken into the colleges. He might also have pointed out that they were taken in to bring fame to the college, and in some cases they were cast away without a degree to return to dead end jobs. Now it is no longer fashionable and so standards are once again being talked about. As Thompson noted, he went to school and he got his job outside the patterns of normal standards, as did most of the coaches at the meeting. Athletics was a means to an education and an opportunity for them. He wants those opportunities to remain open, and not be closed by talking about standards, which while sounding nice, serve to exclude blacks.
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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