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The NCAA and Jobs for Athletes

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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Is it possible to do something both nostalgic and progressive at the same time? Would it be a shock if the doer of the deed turned out to be the NCAA?

The decision this week to allow scholarship athletes at Division I universities to seek and take employment up to a total income of \$2000 annually is at once nostalgic and progressive.

The element of nostalgia is self-evident to those sports fans over fifty. In America's folk culture of sport, the 1940s and 50s produced a raft of tales about star athletes and the "jobs" they held in and around campus. Some involved going to check to see if a particular door was locked once or twice a week. Another involved the turning of a switch or valve once a week. In return for these vital services the athlete was paid a bit more than pocket money.

Better yet were those athletes who worked for the local businessman-booster or graduate of Enormous State University. They were paid lucrative salaries for work not done, or the occupation of a geographic space for a specified period of time. These folk images also appeared on stage and screen as campus companions to Thurber's dumb jock.

Now all of this returns and we have a chance to relive these charming moments from our storied past. Better still there will be new variations on these tried and true themes. The new technologies seem to offer limitless possibilities for the creation of ghost jobs throughout the burgeoning economy of the 90s.

The progressive side of the NCAA decision is the more important one. The ethical watchdogs of college sport have created an environment in which the quasi-legal paying of players will be facilitated, and the illegal paying of players will be made much easier. The NCAA has finally come very close to saying that paying college athletes is now legitimate. We should applaud this progressive action.

The star athlete receiving legitimate funds will find it much easier to receive the additional under the table funds. The same people who were slipping them cash and emoluments surreptitiously, can now do so out in the open, while stuffing

the pay envelop with little extras that neither the IRS nor the NCAA need know about.

The fact that the NCAA made no attempt to maintain the barriers it has been erecting between the athlete and the boosters over the last few decades, is a clear signal to the both parties that the finger is no longer in the dike. The flood is coming. Let the good times roll!

Will this also mean that within the framework of employment, the athlete might find as his or her job something in the area of marketing and promotions? Let's just call them marketeers. The star running back selling cars at Booster Chevrolet or Fanatic Ford would be quite the marketing coup. How about the executive suites that have the Heisman Trophy Candidate serving as a receptionist, or greeter, in the outer office. This is an attractive prospect as it will prepare the ex-jock for a future in Vegas or Atlantic City.

What in fact will be the model? Is this going to be something like the old industrial leagues where players were hired to do certain jobs in an industry, but were freed up to participate in sport in the name of that industry? Or is the model to be the Soviet one, in which the athlete is an officer of an organization, such as the Red Army, but the only duties are to participate and win in the arena?

Of course there will be those who will wonder if the NCAA has simply thrown in the towel and admitted that the idea of the student athlete and amateur athlete are dead. If that is the case I applaud them, and encourage the NCAA to push the changes even further.

How can an athlete participate in a sport for 30 hours a week in activity that leaves them exhausted and requires considerable travel on behalf of the university, take a "full time" load of classes thus qualify as a student, and at the same time hold down a job? Is it too much to ask of our young gladiators?

Let's just drop the student part of student-athlete or make it minimal (one course during the semester of competition). This would give us a better explanation for low graduation rates, and create a new character on campus, the worker-athlete. Then we'll bring back the old Marxist cheer, "Workers of the World Unite." Rah! Rah! Rah!

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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