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The Beauty and Corrupting Power of March Madness

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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March Madness has the power to mesmerize a nation. It has done so to me. The games of the past two weekends offered precisely the sort of thing that makes college basketball so compelling and entertaining.

In the opening two rounds big upsets, some of which weren't really upsets, were in ample supply. On this past Thursday Indiana's upset of Duke brought with it more story lines than Stephen King's roll top desk. The Kent State saga rolled on as they beat Pittsburgh in overtime, after any normal team would have been devastated by an official's idiotic call that prevented their win in regulation. Two days later Kent State was buried quickly by an avalanche of three point shots by Indiana, only to come back in the second half and make one last run at glory. Then Sunday's finale matching Maryland and Connecticut saw over twenty lead changes in a game whose outcome remained in doubt until the final fifteen seconds.

Just when you are caught up in the wonderful spirit that is college athletics two stories roll over you forcing a return to reality. College athletics is a big business involving big money and as such it creates big problems. The corrupting agency of this institution was again put on public display as stories from Kentucky and Michigan hit the presses. The incompatibility of college athletics and the mission of the university, not to mention ethics and sportsmanship, forced itself back to the collective consciousness.

In Detroit, Ed Martin, a former booster of University of Michigan basketball was indicted by a federal grand jury on charges of giving ex-Wolverine players more than \$600,000 over an eleven year period beginning in 1988. Martin, a former employee of the Ford Motor Company, was allegedly using these payments as a way of hiding profits from gambling operations in Ford plants in the Detroit area.

The indictment cites as major recipients Chris Webber, who received in excess of a quarter of a million dollars beginning in his freshman year in high school, Robert Traylor who received \$160,000, and Maurice Taylor who received about \$100,000. All three played at Michigan and are now playing in the NBA.

Equally distressing is the developing situation at the University of Kentucky where new President Lee Todd is attempting to deal with corruption inside the athletic department. Todd fired Larry Ivy, the athletic director, earlier in the month when Todd discovered that Ivy retained 165 tickets to athletic events that he used to enrich himself. Upon retirement C.M. Newton, Ivy's predecessor, was given a contract as a consultant for \$75,000 per year with a private company as well as a condo in the Bahamas by grateful boosters.

Not all of these activities and arrangements are violations in the NCAA world of rules and regulations. But some are. The NCAA has cited Kentucky's basketball and football programs for questionable activity and said the university lacked "institutional control" over its football program.

More depressing perhaps is one of President Todd's remedies to the problem. He proposes spreading the perks around to those outside of athletics by taking faculty and administrators on road trips with the teams. Somehow he thinks that the excitement generated in the athletic program can help the academic purpose of the university.

This will simply give the athletic department another tool to use in corrupting the educational mission of the university. Perhaps Todd doesn't think that university professors and administrators can not be bought off at such a low price, or that they would not be unduly influenced by getting caught up on the inside of a successful athletic program.

Such naivete is stunning!

So we see two prominent athletic programs at two large state universities awash in money. Both programs have been subject to previous rounds of punishment by the NCAA without any apparent impact. These athletic departments operate in a vacuum created by their revenue making ability, their support from booster organizations, and their disregard for the normal administrative processes of the university. They are out of control and operate in a culture of money, glad-handing friendships, and favors. And they are not alone.

The NCAA and university presidents have been trying without success to bring this kind of thing under control for several decades. Those presidents who think they can change an entrenched athletic and booster culture generally find out otherwise and are soon out on the job market. Being "number one" is still more important than anything else on most campuses and little can be done to change that.

These stories out of Michigan and Kentucky tell us more about intercollegiate athletics than all the hours of March Madness that CBS disseminates.

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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