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Jeremy Bloom, the NCAA, and Hypocrisy

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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It was reported yesterday that Jeremy Bloom one of the top mogul skiers in the U.S. is seeking an injunction against the NCAA. Bloom wants to play football at the University of Colorado this year but NCAA regulations will not allow it because Bloom has received money for personal appearances, endorsements, and modeling. These are related to his skiing skills, not his football prowess. Although the NCAA will allow an athlete to sign a professional contract in one sport and compete in another sport, NCAA bylaws allow them to receive money from other pro sports only if that money is made in salary.

The beauty here is that the NCAA is seeking to defend a virginity that has long since been lost. The archaic rules of the NCAA, and indeed other vestiges of amateur sport, seek to defend the notion that being paid for sport participation somehow violates the purity of the athlete and/or the sport. This nonsense inherited from the British aristocratic ideal of the 19th century was designed to keep the rabble out of upper class sport and has created enormous problems in American sport, and indeed international sport, ever since.

In turn the NCAA, the IOC, and other sports organizations have largely given up this fiction of amateurism, but for some reason odd vestiges of it reappear every now and then. And here we have one such case. The contradictions within NCAA regulations are glaring and the pretense to amateurism is absurd. One can only hope the courts will blow some fresh air into this world of nonsensical and hypocritical regulations.

This case is of course only one of many headlines in the past week that expose the hypocrisy in intercollegiate athletics and lay open the reality that all that matters finally is the money.

The Collegiate Licensing Company reported last week on the top revenue producers in the lucrative merchandise market. Maryland and Miami on the wave of their NCAA basketball and football championships jumped into the top twenty in revenue from sales. Maryland is now at 17 and Miami has moved up to 13 but neither could crack the Top Ten.

One reason champions generate more revenue, beyond their obvious popularity, is that schools receive a four percent increase in royalty revenue on national championship licensed products. Just one more reason why winning is the only thing. North Carolina is still at Number One in revenues despite a dismal basketball year, while Michigan, Tennessee, Nebraska and Florida round out the top five.

To my knowledge the NCAA has not declared any institution raking in money for its athletic prowess to be ineligible to compete in NCAA sponsored events. This apparently does not violate the amateur code despite the fact that it involves millions of dollars. Let an athlete pick up any portion of this money however and the amateur purity police will hang them out to dry.

Meanwhile future NBA and NCAA Hoop stars were showcasing their stuff over the past few weeks at basketball camps sponsored by Nike and Adidas. In an attempt to control the money swirling around future college players the NCAA has implemented a host of new regulations. College coaches cannot have contact with the players at these camps, cannot have contact with camp or AAU coaches, and the camp counselor can not talk to a prospect if the counselor is from a school recruiting the player. Without a doubt this will ensure the purity of college basketball.

Alas for all the control over speech or eye contact or indirect contact, the money flow has not been contained and the NCAA is about to be faced with a new problem beyond their control. Seventeen year old high school junior LeBron James of Akron, Ohio, may well come out of these camps having signed a \$20M endorsement contract with one of the two shoe giants a year in advance of James being the first pick of the 2003 NBA draft. What will the high school authorities say of this? What if a large number of high school stars sign with shoe companies? Will the NCAA prevent them from playing college ball?

Fat chance! They need the stars to keep the NCAA Basketball money machine running. The new six billion-dollar contract with CBS to televise the NCAA basketball tournament through 2013 kicks in this year. It is certain that if the NCAA should keep the best players out of college ball for a little thing like a shoe contract the TV people would look to renegotiate. The goose that lays the golden eggs will soon be wagging the dog, if I may mix my \$ports metaphors.

It is interesting as well that James' high school is pulling down substantial appearance fees reportedly in the \$15,000 neighborhood for road games. The school cashed in for between \$200,000 and \$300,000 last year as they moved their games to the 5,000-seat arena at Akron University. Certainly no one is silly enough to think that James is not getting a cut of the take some way or another. And indeed he should be.

But what then of his amateur standing? The simple reality is that there isn't an amateur within miles of any of these basketball camps, shoe companies, or most college campuses.

And what does any of this have to do with a university or a college education? James and thousands of other young athletes living in this atmosphere of money and hypocrisy are already earning an advanced degree in corruption, crass commercialism, and the amoral world of American sport. This will prepare them well for their future endeavors whether they be in sport, politics, or stock options.

Now that's an education.

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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