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Incentives, Swoopes, pink lockers

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Incentives, Swoopes, pink lockers
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While I was on the road much of the last two weeks a number of things happened that caught my attention and now that I am back at my desk I would like to discuss a few of them. First, and indeed most curious, was the announcement from the NCAA that they would be offering financial rewards to those institutions whose student athletes actually perform as students. What a concept!

The NCAA will pay colleges up to \$100,000 each if their athletes do particularly well in the classroom and an improved percentage of them actually graduate from college. The biggest payouts will go to colleges whose athletic programs make significant improvements in graduating players, while some money would also go to programs that are struggling academically and need assistance.

Up to \$10M per year could be spent on this brilliant idea which includes funds for those programs whose funding for tutors and other educational assistance is inadequate. The money will come from the increases in the amount that CBS will be paying for their rights to televise college basketball. Details are yet to be worked out by the NCAA, but this could be a new form of March Madness.

It is in many ways a brilliant program that gives the appearance of vigorous action on the academic front without ever really bringing the hammer down on any university or athletic program. The notion that money should go to a program that performed miserably on graduation rates and now is performing less miserably is silly. Perhaps the NCAA will see the folly of this by establishing some kind of threshold to qualify, and that threshold should be more than reaching a fifty-percent graduation rate. If athletes are kept on scholarships and in competition for five or six years with a bevy of tutors to assist them in maintaining their academic standing, surely it is not unreasonable to expect a higher graduation rate than that of the general student body.

The notion that giving money for more tutors and other academic assistance also looks good in the newspaper and on ESPN where Dick Vitale can promote it as a great step forward. However,

programs that are run on better than average budgets should never get this support as it will simply allow funds to be released from existing bloated budgets to be spent on non-academic athletic expenses.

Athletes and athletic programs should not be rewarded for complying with the notion that athletes should be students. Rather, athletic programs that do not offer their athletes an education or require them to be legitimate students should be punished. Indeed, this has been the tenor of most discussions of the "problem of low graduation rates." It seems clear, however, that those who did not want anyone punished for failure academically have won the day, and now we will have the smoke screen of rewards over punishments.

The appearance of reform has always been preferred to the reality of reform in the long and checkered history of the NCAA. Add this "reform" to that long list.

The other big story of the last couple of weeks was the announcement by Sheryl Swoopes that she is a lesbian. Much was made of this story in some quarters but indeed the news should be that this is news at all. Bigger names than Swoopes have come out of the closet, such as Martina Navratilova, and indeed it is likely to cost Swoopes much less than it did Navratilova in the area of endorsements.

Rightly or wrongly there is little shock over Swoopes' announcement as there are still many among fans and the general public who assume that female athletes are lesbians. This is the legacy of over a century of accumulated attitudes about sport and sexuality in an enterprise that from its origins has claimed a special role in building men.

The bigger news, as many have pointed out, would be if an active male professional athlete revealed that he is gay. This is much less likely to happen given the still Neanderthal attitudes concerning sexuality and sport on the male side of the equation. Sporting traditions are steeped in masculinity and the testosterone driven world of the male athlete is not likely to welcome a gay man to the fraternity.

As if to underscore that point, there is an ongoing controversy at the University of Iowa where for years the visiting football locker room was painted pink because former football coach Hayden Fry said pink had a calming and passive effect on people. Naturally Fry was a psyche major.

As part of a two-year \$88M renovation the pink theme was enhanced as the walls, shower floors, lockers, carpeting, sinks, showers and urinals were all done in pink. One of the visiting law school professors at Iowa complained about all the pink, seeing it as insulting and demeaning to women. Clearly the professor believes that the pink motif was in the same category as deriding an opponent for "throwing like a girl" or calling the opposition a "bunch of pussies." Indeed, in the current culture this meaning of pink seems likely. The law professor has been fielding death threats for her efforts.

This episode coincides with the discussion engendered by Sheryl Swoopes and offers another chance to look at the archaic attitudes still extant in the world of sport. Whether any of this will move the discussion into the new world of sexuality remains doubtful.

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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