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College Basketball Returns

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - College Basketball Returns
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As the college football season comes to an unsatisfactory conclusion and four teams from the Power Five Conferences are chosen for the big payout in the national championship lottery, several other deserving teams not in the Power Five will be left to lick their wounds and take lesser excessive payouts for bowl games. If this is not something you care about, then you will be delighted that this past weekend marked the beginning of the college basketball season. This is where the money meets the road and sixty plus teams pick up some small change or big dollars from March Madness.

It is not quite mid-November and college basketball is officially underway, although in fact college basketball teams have been spanning the globe in search of dollars and recruits, and even actual students, for several months. ("Actual students" is a term that may be compared to that peculiarity of college sports, the "true freshman.") The NCAA website identifies some fifteen to twenty teams that have traveled to Europe, Asia, Australia, Canada, or the Caribbean over the past few months. Apparently there is very little off-season in college basketball.

One high profile trip came to light this past week in news from China where UCLA's basketball team has been playing in the Intercollegiate Shoplifting Invitational in Hangzhou, China. Three UCLA freshman were arrested for shoplifting by Hangzhou police.

Keeping in mind that we are now into early November and classes have been in session at UCLA for at least seven weeks, one might ask what the student athletes are doing touring China playing basketball, rather than going to classes along with their fellow students. Pac-12 Commissioner Larry Scott described this trip as

a "positive-student-athlete educational and cultural experience." If this is in fact the case the university should require such a trip for all students before they graduate. This seems to be the modern day "grand tour" of Europe that once was the province of the children of the rich.

Commissioner Scott did not mention that Alibaba, the massive Chinese web company, purchased the television rights to Pac-12 Basketball. Coincidentally this trip will raise the profile of college basketball and the Pac-12 in China. This would benefit not only Alibaba but also the Pac-12 as these trips are important elements in the recruiting of athletes from across the globe, and perhaps even more important, recruiting student non-athletes.

A number of universities and colleges across the country now employ student recruiting companies to attract wealthy students from abroad. The attraction is that these students will pay full out-of-state tuition fees unlike in-state students who pay less than half the cost of their university education at a typical state university. In times of shrinking budgets and rising costs, these foreign students can be an important element in achieving budgetary solvency. Coincidentally the new rich in China, and other places across the globe, seem to be predisposed to seek a college education in the United States for their offspring.

The new basketball season has also brought a new wave of scandal with coaches and assistant coaches under investigation and/or indictment by the FBI for taking bribes from representatives of athletic clothing companies. Others have been taking "cash bonuses" from agents to push their players to these agents.

One of the more ludicrous developments of the week occurred at Auburn where Head Basketball coach Bruce Pearl refused to cooperate with Auburn's internal investigation of the basketball

program. Now the university has told Pearl if he doesn't cooperate with the investigation, he risks being fired. Many may wonder why he wasn't fired as soon as he refused to cooperate with his administrative superiors. Pearl had previously been fired at Tennessee for lying to NCAA investigators.

In addition there have been a number of players at a number of universities suspended for various reasons as the basketball season is about to open. Meanwhile any number of coaches and university administrators have expressed the view that college basketball is in fine shape. There are problems, but as E. Gordon Gee, current president at West Virginia University said recently, things are "pretty healthy" at the moment. He added "you have to understand there are 98 percent doing it right and well." Gee has presided over a number of mega athletic programs while president of a number of universities in his illustrious career.

Indeed things are going so well at many of the major athletic factories that there seems to be a concerted search to find new ways to waste money on intercollegiate athletics. A week ago *The New York Times* reported on an interesting trend in what has been called the "arms race" in intercollegiate athletics. Of all things, it involves trucks, varying in size from vans to tractor trailers painted in the colors and logos of the university with depictions of football players wearing their football uniforms.

These are equipment trucks, and this pop art form is eye-catching. The use of these trucks is great advertising on the nation's highways for the university and its football team. The trucks are also used as recruiting devices. In some cases they are parked in front of the home of blue chip recruits. In other cases they draw public attention by the high powered locomotive horns that scream to all, "Look at me." In the case of Alabama the horn is the sound of a trumpeting elephant.

For a look at some of these trucks
visit <http://www.atlantamafia.com/>

What next?

Hard to say, but there is one thing we know from experience; those who feed on the vicarious glory of intercollegiate football or who benefit from it will always find new ways to spend athletic dollars. For the most part that spending will be designed to do one thing: Create more athletic dollars. The end result will be to compromise the integrity of higher education in the United States.

There is Midnight Madness and March Madness and more than enough other madness to fill any void that may develop. When all else fails, send those student athletes off for a positive-student-athlete educational and cultural experience that could start in the library.

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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