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Madness on a Major Scale

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - Madness on a Major Scale
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Several years ago in their dedication to the student athlete, the NCAA copyrighted the term "March Madness." Some objected to this attempt to corner the marketing potential for this term. That objection now seems superfluous as the NCAA and intercollegiate athletics have cornered the larger market on "madness" during this month of March.

As the Road to Minneapolis continues, it is clear that the road is littered with the decaying remnants of corruption on a great and grand scale. The number of universities carry baggage down the road is growing by the hour, the day, and the week.

Louisiana State University has set the bar for baggage very high. Head basketball coach Will Wade has been suspended indefinitely following reports that detail his recruitment of one of his players. The source of the information was an FBI wiretap. The player was removed from the lineup for the final game of the season, but was in the lineup when March Madness got underway. In a phone conversation with a recruiter/agent, Wade complained that this recruit had not yet taken a "strong ass" offer made by LSU. At one point, Wade joked that the player would be making more than the NBA rookie minimum.

The wiretap was a result of an FBI investigation of corruption in college basketball and was used as part of the evidence to obtain two convictions in early March. This element of madness has just begun to reveal itself, and, reportedly, there is much more on the way as more universities and coaches will be exposed. Already on the list along with LSU are assistant coaches from Creighton, TCU, Arizona, Oklahoma State, USC, North Carolina State, Kansas, and Louisville.

Then, there are the coaches at the "Big Dance" who bring a lot of baggage with them. Bruce Pearl, head coach of Auburn, spent three years out of coaching after he was fired at Tennessee for lying to NCAA investigators. In addition, in the last few days before the tournament, Chuck Person, who was hired by Pearl, pleaded guilty to accepting bribes from agents for directing players to particular agents. Ira Bowman, who replaced Person, was suspended just prior to the start of the tournament, as he is being investigated on bribery charges in the admissions scandal at the University of Pennsylvania.

Also participating in the tournament is Houston head coach Kelvin Sampson who left behind a trail of probation at two former coaching jobs. The king of this sort of thing, or course, is Kentucky head coach, John Calipari, who had two final four appearances vacated by the NCAA at two of his former coaching positions. Then, there is North Carolina whose trail of academic fraud is near legendary.

Forgiveness is a freely given for winning coaches, many of whom are television analysts between firings. One can only wonder when Rick Pitino will be back on the Road to the Final Four.

Not all of the madness involved college basketball. Indeed, the biggest form of March Madness appeared in the headlines a week ago when the FBI sought indictments of university officials, coaches, and Rick Singer, who should be named "Entrepreneur of the Year." Singer is the mastermind and orchestrator of the vast admissions scandal that reportedly netted him fees ranging from \$200,000 to \$6.5M from his clients. His service was to get admission to prestigious and high-powered universities across the country for the clients, or more accurately, the children of his clients.

Singer's game was fairly simple. He would arrange for admission to universities based on some combination of phony transcripts, rigged tests scores, and bribes to admissions staff. Sometimes, there were fake biographies created for students to submit as part of the admissions process.

It is here that this fraud intersected with intercollegiate athletics. One of the roads to admission that Singer identified was low-profile sports. The options here were many and Singer's creativity and imagination were quite impressive.

For example, for one student seeking admission, Singer developed a profile describing him as a quality football player, while in fact his high school did not have a team. At Yale, the women's soccer coach accepts substantial bribes to seek the admission of a soccer player who didn't actually play soccer. At another institution, crew scholarships were given to two sisters who had never participated in the sport. A tennis coach at Brown took a bribe to give a scholarship to a recruit that he never intended to have on his team.

Athletic scholarships have gone to cross country runners who have never run cross country, lacrosse players who never played

the game; and on and on it went. All that was needed for Singer to succeed in his business was parents who were willing to pay dearly to get their children into desirable universities, admissions staff willing to facilitate the process, and coaches not averse to earning a few extra dollars by providing scholarships or just admission positions for phantom athletes.

Someone with knowledge of NCAA violations once told me that the most egregious violators of the rules were in the Division III schools and not at the Division I powerhouses because Division III operated below the investigative radar and no one really cared about them. Apparently, Rick Singer saw in the low-profile sports an analogous situation, especially at the powerhouse private schools. Opportunities for corruption were many and would likely go unnoticed, at least until now.

This may be the maddest March Madness ever, indicating all sorts of corruption by all sorts of people, and indicating that small-time intercollegiate athletics can corrupt a university just as well as big-time athletics have done over the past century and a half.

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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