

Should College Athletes Be Paid?

-Josh Dooks

The smartest people in the United States are located at colleges, universities, and...the NCAA? These people have tamed one of the richest gold mines of modern day business, all while letting others do the heavy lifting, and/or hitting and dunking. By manipulating Division 1 college sports (specifically football and basketball), administrators at our nation's centers for higher learning reap benefits from the hard work of young "student-athletes". These administrators are facilitated by the NCAA, which keeps the profits made from these athletes flowing back into the pockets of seemingly everyone involved with running college athletics except for the people actually competing on the field (and the band...but I'm not tailgating and paying to get in the stadium to hear the star trumpet soloist's G sharps). In a system resembling fair and honest enterprises of the past such as feudalism and slavery, Division 1 football and basketball removes the right of individuals to profit from their work and likenesses. If a star running back that will declare for the draft early rushes for thirty touchdowns and attracts thousands of fans to the stadium, ticket sales could help finance the building of a new math building at his school...one that he will never attend classes in! If a basketball player leads his team to a March Madness title run, the money the school gets for reaching the championship game does not go to the player or anyone else that touched the floor, but rather the pockets of an athletic director who was watching the game on television just like millions of other viewers. Just to clarify, I am an avid college sports fan. Nothing excites me more than a late fourth quarter comeback or an improbable Cinderella upset in the NCAA tournament, but the business side of these sports is downright unfair. Yes, expanding your school with the funds you bring in from your play is a great thing that helps many young minds, but the players definitely deserve a cut of THEIR money. Division 1 college athletes should be paid because they bring in lucrative amounts of money for their school, they are as strapped for cash just like every other college student despite what most people think, and the very top teams are no more than glorified farm teams for professional sports.

To see the impact that Division 1 sports have economically on college campuses, one merely needs to have a set of functioning eyes. From my experience touring colleges, the campuses with the biggest and most beautiful buildings also coincidentally had extremely high grossing sports teams. Penn State University for example is set in the legitimate middle of nowhere, seemingly an open patch of fields littered with matching buildings. Shortly after I arrived on campus, I started to look for the famed Beaver Stadium, which boasts a capacity of over 110,000 people making it the second largest stadium in the country. Looking off into the distance, I noticed a devilishly huge monstrosity from about a mile away. This was Beaver Stadium, and it was one of the biggest things I have ever seen in my entire life. It was financed largely by football revenue. With the ability for top college athletics programs to potentially bring in millions of dollars to fund projects like billion dollar stadiums and sprawling training facilities, they could surely afford to pay their athletes even a small stipend to get them through the month.

The myth that college athletes are economically more stable than regular students is quite believable. Yes, many athletes receive free tuition, room and board, and sometimes books. What people neglect to remember is that there is more to a college student's life than tuition and a set of textbooks. The athletes that people see on the field on Sundays and on the court on weeknights are also the same kids that hit the bars with friends and dabble in other activities off

campus to get their mind off sports for a night. Many of these players were recruited from terrible situations and a life of poverty, but used sports as a way to get out. Once they arrive at college, they quickly realize that the real world can be very expensive. Athletes that come from a poor background might not have money to get by for simple things such as food and clothes, but can't get a job because essentially playing sports is their job. During the season, top teams are working out all day. A morning lift followed by a series of practices, walkthroughs, and game film sessions can make up a typical day during the football season. Throw on the responsibility of college level classes and a normal day can begin as early as 6 am and end at 12 pm, followed by three hours of studying for an exam. With such a huge time commitment, athletes simply do not have time to get a job to earn any spending money. Some argue that a full scholarship is enough for these kids, but when someone can't even afford to buy a shirt or put shoes on their feet and needs extra cash, they become desperate. With all of the reports of athletes happily accepting some "walking around money" from sports agents to keep them living comfortably, it is clear that they think they deserve to be properly compensated.

While most college athletes will never go pro, there are a handful of teams that seem to merely function for the purpose of sending kids up the pipeline to the NFL or NBA. Two examples of this are the University of Miami football team and the University of Kentucky basketball team. The UM football team has always been a powerhouse in college football, perennially being ranked in the top 25. An enourmously high percentage of Miami players end up making it into the NFL. How high? Considering that a Miami alum had scored a touchdown every week (of the season) in the NFL from December of 2002 to November of 2011, pretty high. And that only counts skill positions(players that touch the ball), so there were plenty more UM grads on the field in each of those weeks. From the 2001 Miami team that ended up winning the national championship, 18 of the 22 starters ended up getting drafted, which is almost unheard of. If athletes are choosing Miami for the chance to go pro, not necessarily for the education, then why not pay them for essentially doing their job? Not every player on the team will go pro, and a lot of them are indeed there for a great education and football playing experience. For the ones that are chiefly there for football, why not pay them strictly for their performance on the field? A scholarship is essentially useless if one has only three quarters of a Miami undergrad degree if they decide to come out and enter the draft, so why not just give them a cut of the revenue they earn for the school and be done with it. If you cringe at the notion of the situation at Miami, the situation at the University of Kentucky is much more extreme. Kentucky has brought this issue even more into the forefront with their NCAA basketball championship. John Calipari, the coach of the UK basketball team, is known for his notorious "one and done" system. Since the NBA began requiring one year of college experience for recruits to make it into the league, teams like Kentucky have been taking these recruits in for a one-year deal of sorts. These players take the bare minimum course load during the beginning of the season and after the season is over just stop going to classes altogether, seeing as they are a lock for the NBA draft in the summer. They drain academic resources and money that could be going to students that are there for a four-year education and desperately need it, but instead this money goes to these "student"-athletes. These players should be treated for what they are, as simply athletes for hire. The revenue that they bring into the school from tournament appearances and publicity can go back towards academic funds to help pay for the scholarship that was taken away from a deserving student to help a kid play basketball.

Division 1 football and basketball are too lucrative to ever stave off corruption completely. As long as TV contracts, apparel sales, ticket sales, and all the other ways these sports make money continue to thrive, the notion of amateurism in college sports is just a lie. These are businesses, not mere "extra-curricular activities". While most student-athletes are advertised and actually hold up the student end of their title, a large handful of them are on these teams just as athletes. For an athlete, money is better spent not on the portion of education that they will be abandoning for riches and fame in pro sports, but rather directly on themselves. Many of these kids would not be able to get in these institutions on academics alone, but reap the benefits of a sliding GPA scale all but guaranteeing them admission. Is this fair to the physics student who gets rejected from his dream school in favor of someone who will only experience the physics of lifting weights? What about a student that tries to fight his way out of poverty and carry his 4.0 all the way to a scholarship...but instead of going to him the money goes to a 6'7" basketball recruit who will be turning pro the next season anyways? Colleges have important decisions to make about the direction of athletic programs in the near future. If they are going to use athletic programs strictly as a cash cow to reap profits and send kids to the pros, then they need to stop using the illusion of "student-athletes". These kids are simply not students, just hired bodies to enhance the prestige of universities. If these administrators are truly dedicated to breeding student-athletes, then they could at least allocate a small stipend for these kids to live on. College athletes should be paid, plain and simple.

© You may distribute this piece and permission from the author of this piece and from the Headlight newspaper editor.