

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Fair Play for College Athletes: Racism and NCAA Rules

Herbert I. London

Last year, John Thompson, the basketball coach at Georgetown University, walked out of a game to protest a new National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) rule. After the "Star-Spangled Banner" was played and the starting lineups were announced, Thompson strode off the court to a standing ovation from the fans and the members of his team.

Mr. Thompson's dramatic gesture was aimed at the NCAA's Proposition 48 and the recently passed Proposal 42. Proposition 48 bars high school graduates from athletic scholarships if they do not achieve a 2.0 grade point average in eleven academic courses and attain at least a combined score of 700 on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or a 15 on the American College Test (ACT). Because the severity of this bylaw generated a good deal of opposition from coaches and some black educators, a compromise was proposed and passed.

According to Proposal 42, partial qualifiers, i.e., students who graduate with a 2.0 grade point average but fail to meet the minimum standardized test score, can still receive an athletic scholarship, but are obliged to lose a year of athletic eligibility. Coach Thompson declared, however, that even thus modified the new rule represents an iniquitous attempt to stem the flow of black athletes into predominantly white universities. As evidence for this contention, he argued that the SAT and the ACT "have been proven culturally biased."

John Cheney, the basketball coach at Temple University, also didn't mince words. He referred to the NCAA as "that racist organization" and admonished parents not to send their children to any institution that endorsed Proposal 42. Dale Brown, the basketball coach at Louisiana State University concurred, observing that he "smelled" an effort at "disguise"; presumably, a disguise meant to conceal subtle forms of racism.

Clearly these coaches aren't disinterested parties. Big-time college athletic programs demand a steady supply of top quality athletes in order to maintain a competitive edge. The money involved is astronomical. Recent revelations suggest, for example, that North Carolina State University coach Jim Valvano is paid at least five times as much as the university's president. This is hardly unprecedented. Several big-time college coaches have seven-figure incomes.

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What Proposition 48 and Proposal 42 are intended to achieve is a modicum of academic respectability for big-time sports programs. And lest John Thompson give a false impression, no one in the NCAA is demanding a knowledge of differential calculus to play college basketball. Keep in mind that a student scores 400 (200 math and 200 verbal) simply by writing his name and address correctly on the SAT, and is assured of an 800 score if he can read and understand a typical newspaper editorial and perform seventh grade arithmetic problems.

That black students are disproportionately affected by the new rule is probably correct. But the measures were designed to introduce minimal academic standards where none previously existed and to force high school administrations to institute curriculum reforms that teach high school athletes basic study skills. After all, it is as important for a black high school athlete to be able to solve a long division problem and comprehend a newspaper article as it is for a less athletically inclined student, black *or* white. If anything, the suggestion that black athletes shouldn't have to meet these minimal standards itself smacks of racism.

Behavioral standards are also frequently waived for the sake of the team. When athletes are found guilty of a university infraction such as drug use or fighting, coaches, players, and the administration often protectively close ranks. Thus, when Vernon Maxwell, the University of Florida's all-time leading scorer, reportedly tested positive for drugs three times before his senior season, school administrators failed to enforce their standard policy of a one-year suspension. Justifying the three-game suspension thought more appropriate, Dr. Richard Sharra, the team physician, said university officials wanted "to help" the star player, who has since gone on to become the starting guard for the San Antonio Spurs of the National Basketball Association.

Similarly, after a university judicial board found that they had "engaged in wrongful behavior in violation of general university regulations," Syracuse basketball star Derrick Coleman and four other student athletes were reprimanded and given the lightest possible penalty for a fight that they started and for two apartment break-ins. Following this slap on the wrist, Syracuse coach Jim Boeheim commented that Coleman "admitted what he did was wrong and now he's been punished for it. It's over with." Not so quickly dispatched, however, were the criminal charges resulting from the allegedly unprovoked assault by these athletes on a fellow student during an attempt to crash a fraternity-sponsored dance. Had such an altercation been prompted by anyone other than a basketball or football player, the university penalty would certainly have been far more severe.

So obsessed with winning teams are John Thompson and many of his colleagues that they have lost all perspective on their roles: they are presumed to be educators first and coaches second, and their recruits should be students first and basketball players second. If this isn't the case—and in many Division I schools it is not—the pretense should be eliminated.

Perhaps the problem could best be solved by letting basketball teams become clubs, like track and field associations, which rent space from universities. The players on such teams would then not need a university affiliation. If college kids want to go to their games and root for them, so be it, but unless they could meet undeviating academic standards the players would not be students.

However, if the present system is to continue unaltered, we should at least have the courage to acknowledge certain uncomfortable facts, among them that only a small minority of black college athletes actually completes degrees and that even those who graduate often lack minimal communication and computation skills. It's time to reveal the hoax that is being foisted on many black kids. Most won't make the pros; they will merely be coddled through four years and then left to drop out disillusioned and uneducated. This is the real pattern of exploitation and it behooves Thompson, Cheney, Brown, et al., to acknowledge its reality.

It is certainly unadorned hypocrisy to argue for an "educational opportunity" that allows a 6-foot, 10-inch, 240-pound center to enter the university, but limits his meaningful "educational experience" to the gym and weight room. The coaches crying foul over modestly tightened NCAA standards should look at themselves in the mirror and ask why their humanitarianism doesn't result in higher rates of graduation, or anything but cruel disappointment for the dropout. I suspect that honest answers would lead to broken mirrors.