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Madness in March

The first clue that March Madness, the annual intercollegiate basketball tournament, is truly mad is that it ends in April. (The final game is on April 2.) It runs late because, like every other major sport, the college basketball season has gotten longer in order to generate more TV revenue. Every individual conference now has its own tournament to determine which of its teams will make it to the “Big Dance,” and in order to add games to their schedule and money to their coffers.

To vilify the universities as profit-driven because they encourage their teams to compete in March Madness only scratches the surface of why intercollegiate sports, and the industries that have sprouted around them, have become obscene. Athletic departments are actually big businesses. As reported in *Sports Illustrated* (March 5, 2007), Ohio State University’s athletic department made \$2.9 million in profit on \$104.7 in revenue last year. Its football team alone generated \$60.8 million in revenue and \$28.5 million in profit. That big-time coaches receive astronomical salaries, while student-athletes get paid nothing beyond their scholarships, has been noted and deplored many times.

To criticize the campus sports industry on these grounds isn’t quite fair. After all, the entire university, not just its athletic department, has become profit-driven. Especially at large institutions like Ohio State, researchers are expected to show a return for the investment made in them. Generating economic activity, as Stanford did for Silicon Valley and MIT for Route 128

in Boston, is the holy grail of the modern university. It's hard to complain about the football team making a pile of dough if everybody else on campus is trying to do the same. Furthermore, it may not be fair to object to the salaries that star coaches receive when the same market forces have driven up the salaries of star faculty as well. To keep top-notch professors of medicine or economics, two fields where private industry beckons with big money, universities have to pay a competitive wage.

University presidents have become far more like CEO's of corporations than educators, and they are constantly on the hunt for grants, government contracts, and donations from alumni. Every individual unit on campus must now justify itself in terms of cost and benefit. The athletic departments, at least at a few places like Ohio State, are simply more successful at fulfilling their mission. (Although, as the *Sports Illustrated* story showed, many also fail at this.)

Critics lambast the fact that elite college athletes often leave school after a year or two to make, or try to make, their fortunes in the professional leagues. Two of the best players in this year's basketball tournament, Greg Oden of Ohio State and Kevin Durant of Texas, are freshmen, and most commentators expect them to sign contracts worth millions when this season finally ends. But to criticize this is also somewhat unfair. After all, most American students go to college to enhance their professional opportunities. Higher-education has largely become vocational training. As a result, it's hard to figure out why any student, athlete or otherwise, who can pursue his or her vocation without having an actual degree shouldn't do so.

What's really wrong with big-time college sports is that they have monopolized and thereby destroyed the spirit of the university. They have become the primary, sometimes the only means by which students, staff and alumni forge an emotional bond with, even come to love, their university. To be affiliated with Ohio State is to be a Buckeye. It is not to be a student

in the philosophy or chemistry department. Only the sports teams produce enough energy and stimulation, and sometimes sheer pleasure, to create a communal identity. There is a passion for the football team unlike anything that can be generated for the chemistry department.

In relinquishing the attempt to develop a communal identity independently of its teams, the American university has abandoned a “spiritual” responsibility. There simply is no spirit on campus except on Friday nights or Saturday afternoons when the cheerleaders cheer and the crowd works itself into group madness.

This development is all the more pernicious because of the racial demographics on most major college teams. A large majority of elite basketball players, for example, are African-American. They have been brought to campus to supply entertainment, to help students bond with the university, to please the alumni, and to generate revenue. It is not uncommon to see a game when all ten of the players on the floor are black, while the two coaches and the referees, and probably the TV announcers as well, are white. The demographics are changing, of course, as more African-American assume leadership positions throughout the society. Nonetheless, the too familiar spectacle of a tight-faced white man barking orders to his largely black players reeks of the plantation. It is even more disturbing when the TV camera pans the crowd and shows that the vast majority of the audience is white. The black players have been brought to campus to provide the students and the alumni with an occasion for frenzy.

This spectacle is particularly egregious at universities in states like Iowa, whose population is largely white. The black student-athletes who become “Cyclones” or “Hawkeyes” have in fact been imported from New York or Chicago or Los Angeles. It is equally pathetic to witness what goes on at an elite institution like Duke when its academically proficient student body works itself into a uproar. Perhaps at places like Duke the athletes have been imported in

order to give their over-achieving and stressed out fans a much needed outlet. What has the American university become when its best students celebrate and thereby forge their communal identity only by watching black kids whose services have been purchased?

Many individual athletes, black and white, have benefited tremendously from the educational opportunities afforded them by the scholarships they have won. (Although, as Derrick Jackson reported in the *Globe* on March 14, at some big-time universities the graduation rate of the black players can be as much as 90 percent lower than for its white players.) And not all coaches who get paid millions of dollars are corrupt. Nonetheless, the cultural model broadcast on TV is terrible. The games of March Madness, with their millions of viewers and millions of dollars of TV revenue (as well as the millions that are wagered), promotes the message that there is a golden path to success. Black children are being encouraged to wear their tattoos proudly in front of the white kids, and make them howl in ecstasy. A tiny fraction of these young basketball players will actually be able to earn a decent living playing the game, but many kids crave only the chance to perform in front of the cameras. That American universities encourage this, and that they have abandoned their responsibility to forge some sort of communal identity that does not depend on the performance of athletes, is shameful.