

Big-Time College Sports is Big Business

A university makes money and gains prestige by having a big time sports program

By [Kéllia Ramares](#)

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Congratulations to Cam Newton of Auburn, who won the 2010 Heisman Trophy, and to the voters who selected him on the basis of the caliber of his play, despite the season-long rumors concerning his eligibility. The NCAA's amateurism rules are a hypocritical and anachronistic exploitation of students who are, in fact, workers.

Cam Newton's father allegedly tried to get Mississippi State to pay money in return for a commitment by his son to play there. Toward the end of this season, Auburn University declared Newton ineligible to play but it was reversed the next day by the NCAA on the ground that the NCAA had insufficient evidence to find that Cam knew what his father was doing. Still, prominent figures such as nationally-syndicated sports talk show host Jim Rome have said that Newton should have been declared ineligible even if he knew nothing.

This story is the latest in a series of "pay to play" incidents involving high-profile college players in "revenue" sports such as O.J. Mayo in basketball, and Reggie Bush, who returned his Heisman Trophy earlier this year. But the shame should not be on the players, or their parents, for looking to get paid. The shame should be on the universities and the NCAA for profiting from these players' talents, yet not sharing the money with the people who made it for them, all in the name of some 19th Century notion of amateurism and the "student-athlete."

College sports, especially men's basketball and football, are big-time businesses today. A university makes money and gains prestige by having a big time sports program. Often the revenue made by these programs allows the university to field teams in the "non-revenue" sports such as baseball and tennis, and to have intramural sports for the true amateurs. Sports teams help keep the alumni in touch with their schools. An alum who stays connected to the school is more likely to donate to it.

Conferences and even individual schools, such as Notre Dame, whose football team is currently under a "pay to play" cloud, have created their own lucrative broadcast networks. Despite the argument that a longer season would interfere with the players' studies, conferences have added post-season basketball tournaments. More games mean more revenue. Each year, there is talk of adding more teams to the NCAA's March Madness, which now ends in April. Why? Money. And when last I counted, there were 34 football bowl games. Why? Money.

Yet the players are expected to be satisfied with tuition, room and board, and books. They

may be Big Men On Campus but if they don't have family money to supplement the scholarship, they don't have the pocket money for a decent date. They see the university making money from their efforts and all they have is the hope that they don't get injured before they can finally sign that professional contract. Is it any wonder the very best of them try to cash in earlier?

When the hypocritical NCAA punishes a school, the punishment falls heaviest on innocent parties: the other members of the team, or even future players, who are banned from the post season or denied scholarships because the school has had its scholarships reduced as part of the punishment. There is some embarrassment for the school and maybe the player involved, but others serve as the whipping boy. This is neither justice nor deterrence as the school and possibly the player directly involved already got their payday. The tickets were sold; the games were played. Professional teams like those that signed Mayo and Bush and will sign Newton, care only that the player will help them make more money in the future.

If the universities and the NCAA want to stress the importance of integrity to the players, it is high time they owned up to the fact that big time college sports are no longer just extracurricular activities. They prepare certain young men for careers in professional sports just as other college subjects prepare students for professional careers. You can do professional work while you are a student. If an art student sells a sculpture, or a film student wins a documentary prize or an English major publishes a best-seller or a business major founds a profitable company, they don't get thrown out of school for making money from what they're studying.

Professional sports today is as viable a career choice for certain people as medicine or law is for others. Other nations, as we are reminded during the Olympics, have schools of "physical culture". The fact that many hopefuls do not succeed in a sports career does not make sports an illegitimate academic pursuit. Not everybody who dreams of being an actor is successful in that career, but no one suggests that Yale University should disband its prestigious drama program for that reason.

Some people may argue that these examples are different than selling your talents to the highest bidder in a "pay to play" scheme. But that sort of thing goes on all the time anyway, in the form of full-ride scholarships and offers of playing time. "Come to my school and you'll be a starter your freshman year," is as valuable an offer to some players as cold, hard cash is to others. It's just that the most lucrative offers to play are banned by the very institutions that stand to make the most money from their student-gladiators. Imagine two teams from the same conference vying for the same prospect and he says he is willing to play for whomever offers the most money. That opens a can of worms called capitalism. He's charging what the market will bear. Welcome to the real world. Perhaps such an arrangement is frowned upon because it would enable the owner of the skill to determine where that skill will be employed and at what price. Bosses hate that.

We could just ditch monetary systems altogether and then many activities, including how college athletes are recruited and retained, would not be considered as sordid as they are viewed when money is involved. But as long as we have a money-based world, not letting the people who do the work benefit monetarily from their labor is simply unjust.

As for the argument that even if I'm right, the rules are what they are now, so Cam Newton should have been declared ineligible to play, Auburn should not be in the BCS title game,

and Newton should not have been voted the Heisman Trophy, I say better to take the opportunity to ditch outmoded rules than to continue them simply because they are the rules. Maybe the NCAA was taking some tentative steps down that path when they reinstated Newton the day after Auburn declared him ineligible. If so, I say, keep going, NCAA.

Where the NCAA does need to come down hard on the students involved is in issues of academic eligibility. No one should be in college who does not belong academically. Players must realize that academic eligibility, even if they are going to be in school only one year, as basketball players do today, is their responsibility. They should consider it a part of their training. Professional athletics involves endorsement deals, public appearances and many other things beyond the game itself. It behooves a player to have some education. The schools should also know whom they are getting and should be prepared to help those who need it. Reports of functionally illiterate students in school primarily for athletics, who are then abandoned by the system when they get injured or their sports eligibility ends, are the true disgraces for the universities and the NCAA.

As for the sordid business of “pay to play”, make it legal and regulate it fairly. This is one of those cases in which the cover-up is worse than the crime.

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