

Editorial

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ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF TRANSITIONAL SERVICES FOR AT-RISK ATHLETES

The economic impact of collegiate sports can't be questioned. In many states (such as my own home state of Alabama), the financial tentacles of collegiate football can be felt statewide in increased lodging, gas and sales tax collections, increased employment, increased donations to universities and in recessionary times, increased populational optimism. In many respects, the economic impact of the collegiate sports is immeasurable. The socially unacceptable conduct of a small minority of collegiate athletes and the inability of many universities to monitor and control this group has the potential to jeopardize the long term profitability of many of these programs, their conferences and the NCAA, generally.

Almost daily, the print, television and internet media cover countless numbers of arrests of student-athletes at NCAA member institutions. Many of these arrests occur in BCS programs whose athletic department budgets are well in excess of \$50,000,000.00. These programs are quite often reliant on revenue generated from television contracts, luxury suite sales, sponsorships, private donations and corporate advertisement. The fiscal significance of positive reputational value and goodwill for these programs is considerable. Player arrests for offenses ranging from battery, assault, drug offenses and rape to murder jeopardize the competitive integrity of the game and may serve to undermine the financial vitality of collegiate sports. Drastic measures must be taken at the institutional level to afford at risk student athletes necessary support and transitional services to maximize their potential for academic, social and athletic success at the university level; a scholarship, a warm bed, three meals and a sixteen hour class schedule do not assure success. Further, the National Collegiate Athletic Association must consider modifying their initial and continuing eligibility rules to address incidents of "serious" criminal conduct. Those athletes that are found guilty of "serious" criminal offenses during the term of their eligibility must be permanently denied athletic eligibility by NCAA member institutions. Those that were adjudicated guilty by the juvenile justice system prior to their entry into colleges should be admitted on a probationary, "zero tolerance" basis. At the same time, these "at risk" athletes must be afforded transitional services by their universities to assure their successful matriculation and improve their likelihood of success. Such programs would be monetarily beneficial to collegiate sports and, when successfully implemented, would increase the brand value of respective NCAA member institutions and conferences. We can only guess how much nine player arrests in one collegiate football program during one calendar year might impact that program in financial terms. What is the value of a drug arrest of a high profile player? A domestic assault charge? A well publicized on campus fight? A point shaving allegation? A murder? All high level collegiate programs are possessed of the necessary resources to greatly stem the frequency of these incidents, if not eliminate them entirely.

Many of the student-athletes in the more high profile “revenue sports” must be characterized as “at risk”. They were quite often educated in financially desperate public school environments, raised in crime infested urban and rural communities and born into dysfunctional, intergenerationally poor families. It is entirely unrealistic to assume that many of these student-athletes are capable of an incident free matriculation into major college sports. Universities have an economic incentive to assure the transitional success of these student-athletes and routinely have all of the necessary resources on campus to address the unique needs of this insular group. Successful transition of these players and a dramatic reduction in off the field incidents could substantially impact the value of television contracts and sponsorship deals in the future. Further, such a reduction in arrests and high profile occurrences of anti-social behavior could improve the possibility of new business alliances with college sports. A wholesome brand image has considerable pecuniary value. It is in the best interests of institutions and conferences to assure the efficient assimilation of at risk student-athletes into collegiate sports. A well planned program of university and conference provided transitional services for at risk student-athletes could enhance the brand value collegiate sports.

In recent years, there have been countless examples of student-athletes at major universities that have committed serious felonies. Among the more serious offenses was a former Baylor University basketball player murdering one of his teammates. The player that committed the murder had rather serious emotional issues that, had they been properly diagnosed, could have been treated. Had that occurred, the entire scenario (which resulted in considerable damage to the university's reputation and a costly NCAA investigation) could have been avoided altogether. Certainly, proactive steps in the Baylor case might have saved one player's life and greatly impacted the quality of life of another. Furthermore, timely intervention might also have saved the university millions, and conceivably tens of millions, of dollars in lost revenue, goodwill, attorneys' fees, lost sponsorships and donations. A simple utilization of resources already available on most college campuses could have negated Baylor's potential financial exposure resulting from the admission of an “at risk” student-athlete. In many respects, Baylor University has not recovered from the incident and its aftermath.

The increased professionalization of collegiate sports and heightened media scrutiny have created an environment that requires proactive measures to (both) serve the interests of student-athletes and economic interests of institutions and their conferences. These preventative actions can serve also to dramatically increase the value of television and sponsorship contracts at the university and conference level. Fiscally conscious athletic administrators at the university and conference level may be required to analyze the relative benefits and burdens of implementing such programs. The harsh reality of college sports is that it only takes one socially unacceptable action by a student-athlete to tarnish a university for decades. The simple fact of the matter is that these types of incidents are entirely avoidable if appropriate preventive actions are taken.

Donald Maurice Jackson, an attorney, is the Principal of The Sports Group (www.thesportsgroup.org) and the author of Fourth Down and Twenty Five Years to Go: The African American Athlete and the Justice System.