

The Damage done by College Football

Today (January 8, 2014) CNN.com ran a story about the gap in education between college athletes and their fellow regular students (CNN referred to them as “peers”). The point of the story is that athletes aren’t “academic” peers and that many star athletes are deficient in reading and arithmetic as well as ignorant in many other areas.

I spent my career as a Physics Professor (1971-2007) at Georgia Tech where over many decades the football team and the basketball team have at times performed at the highest level. Many players in each of these sports have gone on to play professionally. Some have even been good students despite the CNN report. For example John Salley has three championship rings as an NBA player and a degree from Georgia Tech, a degree he returned to school to complete after leaving early for the NBA.

My purpose in this essay is to add to the outcry regarding the damage done by college athletics, damage done to the players and to the institutions that support the teams. I challenge both the Universities and their Alumni to make public two pieces of information:

- 1) A year by year list of the percentage of football players in a given year who eventually graduated. For those who did graduate in a given year, provide a list of their degrees and their GPAs. The FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) law prohibits attaching names to this list. Do the same thing for basketball players. Also do the same thing for other sports, such as track, tennis or swimming, if these sports are dominant on a particular campus instead of football or basketball. Finally provide, year by year, what percentage of eligible players in a given year actually made it to the professional level for at least one season. After all, instead of wanting or getting an education most players dream of making it to the professional level.
- 2) A year by year account of the earnings of the athletic program from all sources such as ticket sales, TV revenues and Bowl games. Of special importance is an account of how much of this earned money *goes to benefit* the academic enterprise and how much money *comes* from the academic side.

The data from **1)** will bolster the CNN report almost surely. It will be especially saddening to find out how few players make it to the professional level and how many players do not ever graduate (at GT the graduation rate for football players is not bad, but check the majors and remember that GT is an engineering school).

But more shocking will be what is learned from **2)**. During academic year 1995-1996, I served on the President's Intercollegiate and Recreational Facility Study Group. That's the President of Georgia Tech (GT). I was chosen as a faculty member representative because of my regular use of facilities as a racquetball player, one who had attained national ranking for a short time. What I learned on the committee what a shock. Facts quite similar are surely true at most other Division I schools.

The GT Athletic Association is a financial entity that is separate from the academic and financial entity that we call the University. What the Athletic Association earns from TV and Bowl games is theirs and has no bearing on the cost of the educational mission. Georgia Tech football supports the other intercollegiate programs through TV revenues and Bowl game revenues. It usually takes both to make a University football program financially viable. By far most Division I schools fail to make money. Georgia Tech sometimes made millions of dollars a year. While almost none of that money helped the academic program financially the academic side helped the Athletic Association financially. For example Bobby Dodd Stadium is owned by the Board of Regents (which governs 32 campuses statewide) and was leased to GT in 1995 for one dollar a year. In turn the stadium was provided to the Athletic Association for use in the intercollegiate football program. Custodial service for the stadium came from the academic side budget. Maintenance of the field came from the academic side budget. Both were at no cost to the Athletic Association. I cannot assert that these arrangements are the same today but they are characteristic of the asymmetry that is usual at Division I schools.

In 2012 USA Today reported that only 23 of 228 Division I schools reported a financial surplus. That's just 10 % ! From year to year the earners and losers are different but the percentage is fairly constant. The NCAA reports about 10 billion dollars in revenue for all sports and all divisions was earned in 2012. The University of Texas earned about \$100 million dollars from just football recently. This is big business. But does it have a place in academic institutions? Star faculty, such as Nobel laureates may make 300-600 thousand dollars a year. So will some

MD's in medical schools and some lawyers in Law schools, and many University Presidents of big schools make 600-1500 thousands of dollars. Most full professors, however, after years of teaching, publishing, patenting, earning grant money for research and service to the University and to their profession make less than \$200 thousand. Assistant coaches in Division I football programs make twice, even thrice that. Such a separation of valuation of athletics from education and research in a University is unwarranted and damaging to faculty morale.

There is a myth that real support for the academic side from athletics is actually indirect. The argument is that during good years for the football program, alumni donations are higher to the academic side. It is further argued that the athletic programs are required in order to get big donations for the academic side. The evidence doesn't support these claims. Schools such as Caltech, the University of Chicago and MIT, which do not have vaunted athletic programs, get great alumni support. Even GT has high levels of alumni support for the academic side when the football team is not doing so well.

Also impacted by high powered athletic programs is the opportunity for ordinary students to play intercollegiate sports. Sports used to be another way of broadening a student's academic experience, many decades ago. Now semi-professional, faux-student athletes take up all the opportunities and neither they nor the real students benefit in the end. I have already acknowledged that there are great athletes who were great students as well, especially at GT, but they were relatively rare and few in number.

I went to a small college in Portland Oregon, Reed college. I played intercollegiate football. It was *six* men on a side, but on a regular size field and with pads and helmets on. We played equally skilled teams such as Concordia University in Portland. Were we even as high as Division III? It was fun and I enjoyed the camaraderie, being on a team and entertaining the 45 or so spectators. Had I gone to a Division I school, I would have been deprived of this experience and relegated to the ping pong team, the chess team or perhaps the squash team. Foremost for me was getting an education. Athletics is a way to prepare oneself for sociability, teammanship, learning and good health. Using Universities as a "farm system" for professional sports is an abomination. The all mighty dollar drives this and TV networks provide the money. Is it any wonder that the US has fallen so far behind other nations in literacy, numeracy and competence in science? As long as these farm teams continue to exist in their present form and Universities call their students "customers" while claiming their education's purpose is to earn them more money, our system of values will decay and this lunacy will get worse.

Coaches earning \$5 million dollars a year while distinguished professors earn maybe \$200 thousand is extremely warped (obscene, outrageous,...) *in a University setting*. How are young persons (students) going to react to this disparity? What will motivate them to learn? Won't these questions be especially pertinent for big school intercollegiate athletes? It is no wonder that CNN made the report referred to at the outset of this essay. Maybe they can follow up on the facts requested in **1)** and **2)** above.

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PS: To demonstrate that the distribution of salaries used to be more rational in Universities, I have an example from over 50 years ago. My father (SWF) was a biochemist who received a considerable amount of grant money (NASA provided several grants for a total over \$1,000,000) in 1961. In the table below I show his salary and those of the FSU President and the FSU Head Football Coach in 1957 and in 1964.

1957	Robert Strozier	\$17,500	1964	Gordon Blackwell	\$19,300
1957	Tom Nugent	\$9,500	1964	*Ara Parseghian	\$20,000
1957	SWF	\$9,600	1964	SWF	\$23,100

*The FSU coach in 1964 was Bill Peterson but I wasn't able to find his salary. Parseghian was the new coach at Notre Dame at the time and is used here for comparison as representative of the norm.

Note that in 1964 SWF topped both the Football Coach and the President. Such an impact for so much grant money has become a separate problem for Universities that has resulted today in great disparities in Professor salaries. Either in coaching or in research , large amounts of money create distortions in what we value.

For comparison, I include here fiscal year 2013 salaries for Georgia Tech (each datum is a matter of public record).

President	George P. (Bud) Peterson	\$602,000.04
Football Coach	Paul Johnson	\$2,600,000.00
Chemistry Professor	Gary B. Schuster	\$370,395.96

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