

How to Solve the NCAA's Ugly Ethics Problem

The NCAA enforcement problem has festered beneath the surface for decades, and been allowed to grow into a multi-institutional monster. I think its problems are too complex for a single simple solution. There are root causes we still don't dig down and deal with. Some societal, some economic, some just plain greed or ignorance. Nor can all the issues be adequately treated in a single post. But there are some issues that seem obvious to me that no one seems to what to address. I have a few suggestions or considerations. One seeks to inspire players to do the right thing. The other is more drastic, borrowing from criminology and technology. That's for those who still don't get it. But I'll save that for another post.

First, we need an enhanced way of inspiring the at-risk teenagers to do the right thing. The reason is because the university setting is not supposed to act like the criminal justice system. We must admit that we are asking for voluntary compliance by players to comply with NCAA rules. The problem with getting at-risk star players to conform to NCAA rules doesn't start with college. Grown-ups identify and coddle those with superior athletic ability at or

THE SCHOOL OF LAW

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before puberty. Then the adoring community that loves to see their schools win, including some teachers, sends the subtle but consistent message that for these youngsters, the normal rules do not apply. It should not then surprise us that some of these mixed-messaged 10-12 year olds become teenagers who are high risks for rules violations. And then there is often family dysfunction where too often the absent or incarcerated father is replaced by AAU coaches or other sports pimps of sorts. The player becomes more a commodity than the loved one.

Yet the essence of fatherhood is irreplaceable. The loving daily presence gives a special standing and *entre'* to the kid's heart and mind. The father can then penetrate the athletic aura and say, "Oh no. You won't do that!" Magic Johnson has plenty of stories about how his father made sure certain behaviors were put in check despite his tremendous fame in high school. He was blessed with that loving connection and correction as part of daily living. Many blessed with great

talent are not so blessed with the simple parental influences that many of us take for granted or have forgotten.

We should remember too that there are plenty of studies about the disparity—in rules and resources—between the urban public schools in large urban areas and the schools most college students come from. The vast majority of African Americans in public schools are from a dozen urban under-resourced schools with

the players, we have little chance of knowing what buttons to push to create changed behavior among those likely to commit NCAA infractions through their own choice. The separate and next issue is what to do about it. One part of the solution is for qualitative family circumstances early in life. But the past links us to the present and that tragically will take far longer to fix.

So we need to start with inspiring teenagers to transform a past

ers he already dreams to be like—players that are already in his consciousness and subconscious recesses of his mind. And last I checked it is still the mind that controls the decision of whether to go to the strip club after curfew.

Several centuries before there was an NCAA or its rules defining players as amateurs there was a respected Chinese philosopher named Lao Tzu that said, "To lead people, walk beside them." The sports translation in my view is, "To lead players away from NCAA violations, enlist the help of those who have walked in their shoes."

Currently, coaches bring in idolized pro players for pep talks to inspire their kids just before big games. That's a good thing. But the occasional occurrence still squanders a bigger opportunity to inspire the wide-eyed teenagers to have behavioral excellence off the field as well. These pro players have already walked in their cleats. They speak a language with the college players I cannot fully comprehend.

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Set up a mentorship program featuring pro athletes who played by rules

challenges very different from the suburban high per-capita cost per student schools. All those factors among others bring tremendous adjustment issues once these players go to college. And college itself is the first sniff of almost complete freedom that has snared more than just athletes.

I am not making excuses for bad behavior, just reasons why it exists. If we don't understand the problem, we are less likely to find a solution. And unless we understand what motivates and inspires

"rules don't apply to me" mentality to the new and very daunting set of rules found in the near-IRS Code level NCAA rule book. Some of us with little appreciation for this transformational issue act shocked as to why such players don't instantly transform themselves. But for the star teenagers most at-risk, the motivational threat of "I better not go to the bar because of NCAA Rule 1.2 or whatever..." is not working.

I think such a player is more likely influenced by the pro play-

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