

The very short end of a very long stick

College athletes deserve compensation in an era of billion-dollar profits



When I was a 17-year-old, barely a week out of high school, I was chosen for an unpaid internship at a local magazine in the Portland area. I was ecstatic to get my foot in the door of the industry I so wanted to be a part of — print journalism — at such a young age.

I signed the contract, turned 18 and became an “adult” just a few weeks later. At the end of the four-week editorial apprenticeship, I had learned a great deal. I had networked, met people who would later help me in my professional pursuits and, most importantly, matured over a short period of time in a way many of my peers likely hadn’t done. The opportunity was immense and the things I learned and saw indispensable.

But something happened while I worked there that never sat right with me.

One day, between tasks, I was doodling in a notebook when a member of the marketing staff walked by and saw my drawing — a collection of abstract shapes of various colors. “Whoa, that’s pretty cool,” he said. “Can I see that for a second?”

I thought nothing of it, ripped the page from its binding and handed it over. Three weeks later, the publication released its much-anticipated annual special edition.

And what do you think graced the cover of that sleek, glossy tome? Yep, my doodle.

Initially, I was quite proud. Mere weeks into my “adult” life,

I had made a professional mark, even if only a small one. Still, it was my art put front and center.

However, after most copies of the special edition had flown off the shelves in record time, I stopped to think: They charged \$5 a pop for that publication. I had overheard in a meeting that they printed 10,000 copies. Though they likely didn’t sell every copy, my simple recently-graduated brain could easily do the math, which would have been thousands of dollars-worth of magazine sales — of which I didn’t receive a dime.

I felt wronged yet, ultimately, I only had myself to blame. I had signed on the dotted line and, apparently, didn’t read the fine print close enough: I was an unpaid intern with no rights to profit from any work I’d done on company time. It’s a mistake far more likely to be made by a 17-year-old who is chomping at the bit to grab life by the reins and realize their dreams.

The experience was still impactful, the connections I made still strong. I was lucky to have that opportunity — yet I just couldn’t shake the image of someone, somewhere, counting a stack of money made on the back of my creation while I went home empty-handed.

Warning: None of the above is true.

I apologize, sincerely. I’m not a natural liar. However, that example is akin to situations that collegiate student-athletes find themselves in every day across the country. They sign contracts, accept scholarships and, in turn, are given an immense opportunity to compete at the

highest level athletically while getting a universi-

ty education that is often fully paid for.

I haven’t yet met anyone making the argument that those factors don’t count — and count for a lot. But there is nuance to this issue and, much like me and my doodle, they are ultimately getting the very short end of a very long stick.

Yes, student-athletes attend classes just like any student. And yes, their scholarships often cover the exact same expenses. Like other students, they live in dorms, eat at campus cafeterias and bum around from class to class with oversized backpacks and sweatpants.

The similarities end there,

partisan effort — later to be voted on in the senate and require Governor Kate Brown’s signature if ratified — which would make Oregon the second state after California to allow university student-athletes to receive compensation for endorsements as well as the use of their name and likeness.

To be clear, athletes are not about to start making fixed annual salaries. Sabrina Ionescu, for example, could get paid to be in a commercial for a local car dealership, something she would currently have to do for free, if she so desired. A football player, as another example, would be within his rights to demand a cut of EA Sports’ multi-billion-dollar video game profits for using his face and name

in their products — something these athletes currently have no control over.

Many of the arguments against student-athlete compensation boil down to a feeling. We college sports fans tend to get very emotionally connected to our favorite teams. They play in our hometowns. We grow up rooting for them right next door. We bleed their colors. We even attend the same institutions.

It’s personal. I understand. I’m a Eugene native and graduate of the University of Oregon. Ideally, it would be wonderful if every student-athlete that passed through Matthew Knight Arena or Autzen Stadium felt the same fervor towards the Ducks as I do, but that’s unrealistic.

The 17- and 18-year-olds signing on a dotted line are often doing so with no thought other than, “This is the best opportunity for me to achieve my dreams.” One or two years later, they can become a cog in an unstoppable, billion-dollar behemoth within which they are a product, being sold. Yet, despite their exceptional abilities,

their rarity, their central role in a massive industry beloved by millions, they get nothing more than adoration and a pat on the back.

But just like the fictional example about my 17-year-old self, the math is disturbingly simple. In 2018, the NCAA basketball March Madness tournament made \$933 million over a three-week period in media rights fees, ticket sales, corporate sponsorships and television ads. In 2016, NCAA president Mark Emmert made \$2,078,075 in base salary, a one-year, 42-percent raise or \$615,000 more than he made in 2015. In 2009, the top 14 NCAA executives made nearly \$6 million in salary. The highest paid public employees in 40 of our 50 states are head coaches of NCAA athletic programs. The examples are endless. There is fabulous wealth to be had in the industry of college athletics.

These executives have worked hard to get where they are, surely, but it doesn’t sit well with me that they are compensated so handsomely while the product (student-athletes) generates millions of dollars — and leaves the field or hardwood to go back to their subsidized meal plan and a dorm room.

I don’t know how this situation will shake out. There are subtleties to be addressed and, if SB 1501 passes the state senate, the new regulations wouldn’t go into effect until 2023. It would be a vast change of direction from a system we have gotten very used to.

It may feel wrong; college athletes should play for passion, love of the sport, love of their school.

But, at least for me, it will never feel as wrong as a young “adult” having nothing to show for being the integral part of such a financially prosperous industry — whether it starts with a double-play, a dunk or a doodle.

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