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Myles Brand

Myles Brand has just become President of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Formerly a philosophy professor, his academic research is into the nature of human action. **Tim Madigan** finds out how sport's new philosopher-king sees his new job.

What is a philosopher like you doing in the crazy world of sports?

This is the first non-university job I have had since I was seventeen and pumping gas. But there are similarities, as well as differences, between the academic world and the world of intercollegiate athletics. The main similarity is that the focus remains on undergraduate students and the universities and colleges they attend. The difference from my position as a university president is the extensive coverage by the national broadcast media and press. But I must say that I am enjoying myself. There is much to learn and new issues to resolve.

What are the biggest ethical challenges you think student-athletes face today? Have these challenges increased in recent years?

They have indeed. One good example is sports wagering. Given the dramatic increase in gaming in many states and the easy access to Internet wagering, student-athletes have both greater opportunity and greater pressure to succumb to these pressures.

The NCAA is unambiguous about requiring student-athletes, as well as everyone engaged in intercollegiate athletics, from coaches to officials, to abstain totally from any form of sports wagering. Intercollegiate sports wagering is illegal in almost every state, illegal on the Internet (according to the 1961 Wire Communications Act), and the use of credit cards for sports wagering is illegal.

Yet, every major campus has student sports bookies. According to a recent University of Cincinnati study, approximately 25 percent of Division I men's basketball and football student-athletes stated that they wagered on another college's sporting contest. Far worse, almost four percent stated that they had wagered on a game in which they competed, and 0.5 percent said they had received money from a gambler for not playing well in a game. Other studies have confirmed these results.

Certainly, there is a lack of commitment to fair play and honest behavior among these student-athletes. This is an ethical challenge of serious proportions for them, for their home institutions, and for all those involved in intercollegiate athletics.

What are your views regarding rewarding schools for their graduation rates of student-athletes?

I believe that strong incentives and strong disincentives are necessary for the current reform movement in intercollegiate athletics to be successful. It is obvious that there should be disincentives, such as loss of scholarships and, in extreme cases, elimination from championships (such as the men's basketball

tournament) for those athletics programs that aren't successful in graduating student-athletes. But I also believe in positive reinforcement for programs that substantially exceed the graduation rates of their home universities. Rewards could include additional revenue from the NCAA, or additional scholarships. It is well known that positive reinforcement can change behavior.

The sportswriter Dick Vitale recently argued that student-athletes should be paid to play sports. What is your view on this?

I am opposed to pay for play. The college game has integrity, and that integrity is directly tied to amateurism. To pay student-athletes for their play is just to turn the college game into the professional game, a third-rate professional game at that.

Young athletes have opportunities to earn professional salaries, if they are capable of competing at the professional level. In basketball, hockey, soccer, boxing, ice skating, and other sports, college-age athletes become professionals. In basketball, some athletes bypass college altogether and become professionals. That is fine. Of course, these young men and women can and sometimes do attend college as they are working as professional athletes or after they complete their professional careers.

Those athletes who choose to attend college are entitled to scholarship aid. I believe that they should also be entitled to at least some of the additional costs of attendance, and certainly to adequate health care and insurance. This is controversial, and not every institution is willing or able to assume these extra costs.

The most important point is that student-athletes are entitled to the full opportunity for an excellent education. Every coach and athletics administration and every university president has a duty to take steps necessary to make that the case.

Do you still have time to philosophize, and if so, how do you do it?

I cannot stop philosophizing. I am pathologically addicted to it. In my free time, when I do have some, I tend to read philosophy. As president of two universities for the past fourteen years, I continued to teach and write philosophy, though of course, at a reduced rate compared to when I was a full-time faculty member. I have every intention of continuing to do that.

One difference, however, is that my experience as president of the NCAA is leading me to think about the role of sports in our culture. So, in addition to analytic philosophy, I expect that I will expand my interests to philosophical issues in cultural studies. So, rather than diminish, my philosophical interests are likely to broaden and deepen.