

BackTalk; In Athletics, Level Field Must Begin In Classroom

By Myles Brand

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On April 29, the N.C.A.A. took dramatic action to improve academic performance and graduation rates of Division I student-athletes. Football and men's basketball teams, indeed all teams, will lose scholarships and opportunities to play in postseason tournaments, like the Final Four, if team members fail to make genuine academic progress and graduate.

This past fall, the N.C.A.A. strengthened the requirements for individual student-athletes to become initially eligible to participate in intercollegiate athletics and to continue to be eligible. For example, it is now required that a student-athlete make 20 percent progress toward a degree each year -- not merely take low-level courses to accumulate credit.

Combined, these new, higher academic standards represent nothing less than the beginning of a sea change in college sports. The rules and sanctions are now in place that make it clear that those who participate in college sports must be students first, then athletes.

But before the ink is dry on the documents, and before these new standards can be implemented, the self-anointed radical reformers and incorrigible cynics are criticizing the National Collegiate Athletic Association and its member universities for a faulty reform effort. Some, clearly, want the N.C.A.A. to fail. Some want to turn collegiate sports into professional sports. Others have some pet solution, like freshman ineligibility, that they think is a silver bullet to solve complex, multifaceted problems.

The Drake Group, consisting of a small number of faculty members with an eye for publicity, wants to end university support of intercollegiate athletics. They want to turn college sports into minor leagues for professional teams. Others want the universities to pay student-athletes. None of these approaches, however, would stop the most talented athletes from leaving campus for lucrative professional contracts or solve the problem of poor academic performance and poor graduation rates.

The primary argument put forward by these critics is that the tougher academic standards embodied in the new N.C.A.A. rules will lead to academic fraud. To meet these higher standards, faculty members will be forced to cheat. Since cheating is bad, they reason, the standards should not be raised. But current standards are unsatisfactory. Thus, the only answer is to do away with college sports.

This is a remarkably unsound argument. It gives sophism a bad name.

The main premise of the argument is that higher standards inevitably lead to academic fraud. That is simply false. Academic fraud results from a lack of integrity, not the level of standards. This is the case for student-athletes, coaches, faculty members, academic advisers and even university presidents. No matter what the standards are, those who lack the integrity to be serious about learning, and to resist pressures and temptations, are prone to cheat.

The N.C.A.A. has increased its investigatory and enforcement staff by 50 percent. We will do all that is in our power to find and sanction those who engage in academic fraud. But the N.C.A.A. does not, and cannot, have an N.C.A.A. officer on every street corner of every university campus. It cannot, by itself, stop academic fraud.

Rather, the prevention and initial investigation of academic fraud is first and foremost a university's responsibility. Each university must establish and enforce principles of academic honesty and apply them to all students and employees, including faculty and coaches. Importantly, personal integrity, taking responsibility for one's actions, plays a central role. Institutional and N.C.A.A. rules and sanctions are necessary when there is a lack of personal integrity.

After 40 years in the classroom and in academic administration, I have concluded that the vast majority of faculty members are people of academic integrity, who will strongly resist pressures to commit academic fraud. The Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics, consisting of the elected faculty governance leadership of major Division I universities, released a statement in support of the N.C.A.A.'s new higher academic standards. Apparently, they too have faith in faculty members' integrity. For the very few who lack the moral backbone to abide by high academic standards, universities, with the assistance of the N.C.A.A. and the conferences, should redouble their efforts to identify and sanction these people.

Student-athletes and coaches are competitive people. Within the rules, they play to win. When the rules change, they adapt.

Well, the rules have just changed. There is no doubt now that being a student-athlete requires being a student. All young men and women who wish to participate in college sports will need to be serious students and on a path toward graduation -- or they will not play.

Coaches and student-athletes will adapt to these higher academic standards, I fully expect. And everyone will benefit.