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The “Dumb Jock” Myth is Dumb

A musical opened on Broadway in 1927 called *Good News*.

These were the days before professional football, and the college game was as much the rage of 1920’s America as flappers, speakeasies and Al Jolson performing in blackface.

The play was set on the campus of mythical Tait College, and it told the story of star football player, Tom Marlowe who must pass a second-chance geology test on Friday if he is to play on Saturday against arch rival and also mythical Colton College. Just in case the audience missed the point that college athletes were not the brightest bulbs in the collegiate lamp and needed special favors and academic dispensation to continue playing, the script also included a behemoth lineman named Beef Saunders, who was large of size, slow of wit and the prototypical dumb jock.

If this wasn’t the birth of the dumb jock myth, it certainly put the idea into popular culture.

Unfair in its generalization, dumb jock is a myth that has stuck to college sports like corruption has stuck to American politics. And like most myths, there are a few anomalistic instances of genuine academic shortcomings among college athletes that perpetuate the image.

Fast-forward from Broadway’s Tait College in 1927 to 1989 when former Oklahoma State University and Washington Redskins defensive star, Dexter Manley, broke down in his testimony before a U.S. House of Representatives committee and acknowledged that he had been passed along from elementary school to high school to college to professional football and could not read or write. In a surprise confession that made national headlines and rocked the education community, Manley recounted how in an attempt to write a letter to his wife, he tried to spell the word “about.”

“I couldn’t do it and I broke down and started crying,” Manley testified. “How had I gotten through school and couldn’t spell ‘about’?”

The Dexter Manley story of being passed along through the educational process because of his incredible athletic skills when he could not read past a second-grade level was among the reasons the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics was founded the same year. It’s seminal report, “Keeping Faith with the Student-Athlete,” was published two years later and helped push higher education toward academic reform efforts that continue today.

Despite these tragic but isolated instances, the idea that all college athletes — or even many — are disinterested, dysfunctional or disengaged in the classrooms of higher education has been around for a long time and hasn't gone away.

But when you look at the facts, sustaining the dumb jock myth is just as wrong as believing that all politicians are corrupt.

And here's the proof.

Student-athletes in Division I — where the dumb jock myth is most firmly attached — graduate on average at a higher rate than the general student body, according to data gathered by the federal government. Student-athletes graduate at a rate of 63 percent, one point better than all other students. Given that more than 100,000 student-athletes participate in Division I, the differences in federal rates are statistically significant.

African-American student-athletes graduate from 10 percentage points (males) to 13 (female) percentage points better than African-Americans in the general student population.

In fact, the only demographic of student-athletes that doesn't out perform its counterpart in the student body is white males. I don't know how to explain that anomaly. On the other hand, female student-athletes consistently graduate at higher rates than males, and I don't have to explain that one.

When you use a fair accounting of transfer students — which the federal rates do not and in fact penalize institutions when students transfer by counting them as academic failures — the numbers are even better. (And by the way, according to the federal governments own research, more than half of all college students will transfer at least once.)

Based on the Graduation Success Rate (GSR) the NCAA established as a new metric to include transfer students, student-athletes graduate at a rate of 77 percent. That percentage has increased by four points over the last five years and will likely increase again when the new rates are reported later this month.

In 2004, the NCAA studied a group of regular students and student-athletes who graduated from high school in 1994 — ten years earlier. Of that group, 88 percent of all student athletes had graduated in the 10-year window, 21 percent had obtained advanced degrees and 91 percent were employed in full-time jobs. All those numbers were higher than their classmates who were not student-athletes.

When you look at the facts — and avoid stereotyping from unfortunate anomalies — the myth of the dumb jock makes no sense. Indeed, the vast majority of student-athletes are out-performing the general student population in the classroom and graduating at higher rates. And when they leave the campus, they are succeeding at higher rates than other students, including higher salaries.

And yet, the idea persists that college athletes are little more than knuckle-dragging Neanderthals incapable of being real college students — dumb jocks. It's an idea that should have gone the way of flappers, speakeasies and performing in blackface.

Mostly, it's just dumb.

In part two of this discussion, I will focus on current academic reform efforts and the surprising results from that initiative.