

Almost everyone has something to say about intercollegiate athletics—especially during the Fall of the year when experts are born as the multi-colored leaves drift downward. I suppose that it is only fair to say that I am not an expert—not even an ex-athlete. My only excuse for having something to say is that I have listened to many of the experts, and have had dealings with a number of athletes. All this was in the line of duty during a three year stint as Chairman of our Faculty Board in control of Athletics at the University. And it will be generally admitted that willy nilly the President of Notre Dame must have a nodding acquaintance with the intercollegiate athletic world.

Generally speaking, I have found two extreme attitudes in most of the experts. Those who favor intercollegiate athletics praise it out of all proportion to its merits. And those who decry sports in college are quite blind to the values that do exist on the playing field. I realize that this amounts to saying that neither the friends nor the foes of intercollegiate athletics are quite honest, or let us say balanced, except against each other. However, whether you explain it by overenthusiasm or just plain ignorance, many of the experts seem to have missed the mark in assessing intercollegiate athletics.

Now you can see why I take refuge in not being an expert. There is an old saying that the spectator gets the best view of the game. Here are a few things that one spectator has seen.

I should make it clear from the beginning that we are in favor of intercollegiate athletics at Notre Dame. Some would say: "And how!" Rather than leave it there, I must add that we favor intercollegiate athletics within their proper dimensions. It goes without saying that the proper dimensions should be those of university life and purposes. But if this goes without saying, it does not happen without doing, and continual doing, on the part of those in charge of the university and athletics

The fundamental difference between intercollegiate and professional athletics is that in college, the players are supposed to be students first and foremost. This does not mean that they should all be Phi Beta Kappas or physics majors, but neither should they be sub normal students majoring in ping pong.

Once this fundamental principle is accepted three equally obvious conclusions follow as the day the night.

First, any boy who has demonstrated during his high school days that he is quite incapable of doing collegiate work should not be admitted to college—even though he may have been an all-state high school fullback.

Secondly, once a qualified student, who also happens to be a good athlete, is admitted to college, he should follow the same academic courses, with the same academic requirements as the other students. Presumably, he is in college for the same reason as the others: to get a good education for life, and to earn a degree in four years. This means in practice, no fresh air courses, no special academic arrangements for athletes.

Thirdly, the athlete should enjoy (and I use the word advisedly) the same student life in college as the other students. He should not be treated as prime beef, should not be given special housing and disciplinary arrangements, made a demi-god on a special allowance who is above and beyond the regimen that is found to be educationally best for all the students of any given school. In this connection, I am reminded of the animal who is enthroned and crowned with great ceremony at the annual Puck Fair in Ireland. It happens to be a goat.

You will note that basic to all of these conclusions is the thought that the boy and his education are the first consideration—not public relations, not financial benefits to the school, not conference championships. I have said that it takes some doing to conduct inter-collegiate athletics in such a collegiate framework. Maybe you would be interested in how we try to do it at the University of Notre Dame.

First, entrance requirements are the same for athletes at Notre Dame as for everyone else—and they are rather high, because we always have more applications than openings at the University. Many excellent athletes are not admitted because of their high school deficiencies. I recall one fine halfback who applied with only six, instead of the required sixteen credits for four years of high school work. He was not accepted at Notre Dame, but he certainly had his day elsewhere, making long runs against us on a Saturday afternoon a year later.

Secondly, all the student athletes who come to Notre Dame are told that we would like them to win a monogram, but not without a diploma. Of course, this takes some doing too, and continual doing. The passing mark

at Notre Dame is 70%. Athletes must have a 77% average before they are eligible for competition in any varsity sport. The watch dog in this case is our Executive Vice President, Father Joyce, who is also Chairman of the Faculty Board in control of Athletics.

The academic averages for athletes are the first to be compiled after semester examinations. I remember receiving the list about five o'clock one bleak Friday afternoon in February. A quick glance showed that two first string basketball players, and one of the best substitutes, who had tossed the winning basket in the last game, had fallen below par: the required 77% average. A phone call followed to the Director of Athletics. "My Gosh, Father", he moaned, "the team is just leaving for the toughest game of the season against Kentucky tomorrow night. They'll be murdered without these men. If you sent me the word by mail, the normal way, I'd get it Monday morning."

No one likes to be Simon Lagree, but all I could say is: "You've got the word now. And I'm not so much worried about being murdered as about being right." As a matter of fact, we did lose the game to Kentucky, but only by one point, in an overtime period. At times like this, when the walls are falling in on an administrator, it is good to seek quiet courage in the epigram above a hero's grave: "Death is not rare, nor is it of ultimate importance. Heroism is both." But no medals yet!

I remember another recent case when a star athlete almost hit the mark, but not quite: his average was 76.8%. You can understand them asking you to be reasonable in situations like this, but then even athletes

did not get excited about the mile as long as there were fractions, no matter how small, after the four minute mark. And you don't catch planes two seconds after they leave. When the pressure is on, once you tamper with a standard, you lose it.

Then there was the sad September day when I went over to the stadium for the opening of fall practice. A quick count of the varsity squad showed only 48 players on the field, which in the days of the two platoon system was not enough to scrimmage offensive and defensive squads, given the disproportionate number of backfield substitutes. I asked the coach where the rest of the players were. With a monumental effort to maintain his accustomed poise and gentility he replied evenly: "Two of them are still at home, and you dropped the others from school in June on account of their academic work."

Another incident grew out of that small squad. Before the first game, a senior came to see me. He was one of the former football players at the Military Academy who had transferred to Notre Dame some years before, following the difficulty there. "You have the smallest squad and the toughest schedule in the country," he began. "There are about a dozen ex-army football players here who would be delighted to play for Notre Dame, if you let us. After all, the other schools are letting the ex-army athletes play." There is only one difficulty," I explained. "You were all offered a scholarship here by an anonymous benefactor on condition that you would not compete in inter-collegiate athletics. You see, we have a long standing rule here against transfers competing. It eliminates any temptation of inducing good players to transfer from other schools. If you have any doubt about the necessity of

such a rule, I can quote you some all-Americans at other schools who began here. Now you can play all the intra-mural sports you wish, but we are on record for this other principle. And without preaching, I'd like to add that part of the education here consists in learning to live by principle rather than by expediency."

"OK Father," he said, "It's your funeral."

"Well, I'm not singing the requiem yet," I countered. "Frank Leahy is a great coach. Injuries could ruin us, but we'll be praying that we don't have any."

I wish that I had met the lad again after the season. Frank Leahy did one of the best coaching jobs of his career with that small squad, and we had no serious injuries, thank God. By the end of the season, we had beaten the conference champions of the Eastern Conference, the South Western Conference, the Big Seven Conference, the Pacific Coast Conference and the co-champions of the Western (Big Ten) Conference.

Perhaps the most cogent argument for the compatibility of athletics and collegiate endeavor is the fact that I know of only two of our monogram men in the past ten years who have failed to win a diploma during the normal course of their life at school. Moreover these athletes have not taken fresh air courses because we do not have any. Normally, our varsity players are rather evenly distributed throughout the undergraduate colleges of Arts and Letters, Commerce, Engineering, and Science. A surprising number of them, like our present twenty-six year old head football coach, Terry Brennan, go to Law School after graduating. Incidentally, Terry majored in philosophy as an undergraduate, and I can say, after having had him as a

student in class that he performed as well there as on the field. As for the record over the years, look at the present professional and business standing of the famous four horseman of the twenties, and you will feel less need to apologize for intercollegiate athletics.

The third and last working principle I mentioned earlier is that athletes should live a normal collegiate life. Before they come to the university, this means that they should be offered only the opportunity to receive an education. Under-the-table deals are doubly cheating a boy. First, they confront him at an impressionable age with the worse possible aspect of double-dealing and graft, giving him a disreputable standard of values—and from educational institutions of all places. Secondly, if the boy wants to play for money, he would get much more from the professional teams who are organized to do this. I suspect that many of the so-called offers "from thirty or forty schools" are embellished in the telling, but where there is so much smoke, I suppose that there may lurk a convertible or two.

The least a university can do in this regard is to tell its alumni and friends exactly where it stands and then to investigate thoroughly any reports to the contrary. The worst that a university can do is to play the three monkeys who see, hear and tell no evil. I assume that with the pressures that do exist for winning teams, well-meaning but ill-advised alumni and friends will cut corners at times—but not for long unless the university insists on seeing and hearing nothing.

Institutional integrity is the only sure guarantee in this matter.

National policing agencies can only approve ^{sound} policy and wave a stick. We were somewhat chagrined a year or so ago when the NCAA publicly criticized us for a relatively minor abuse that we had ourselves discovered and corrected some time before they begin to investigate it.

Once an athlete comes to the university, he should live a normal collegiate life. To safeguard this, our varsity athletes are evenly distributed in all the fourteen residence halls. They all have jobs compatible with their studies and seasonal sports activities. They make the morning and night check of all the other students on their floor, deliver mail, help the priest on the floor maintain order and do other odd jobs for which they are available. It is difficult to become a strutting hero if one has to work for the other students.

I must say, after some years of personal experience with these athletes as a teacher and as hall rector, that compared with the student body as a whole, most of the athletes are superior men in many ways. The record of their lives after graduation confirms this impression.

The nation at large knows that all of the Catholics on our squad (Notre Dame is open to students of all races and faiths) attend Mass and receive Holy Communion the morning of every game to pray that no serious injury will come to the players of either team that day. What most people do not know is that many of these boys are up earlier than necessary many other mornings, some every day, for Mass and Holy Communion before class begins.

Moreover, the athletes are bound by the same disciplinary regulations and penalties as every other student. The reason for all this

is that since our monogram men are often National figures, we want them to be as representative of a Notre Dame education as any other student.

Some educators have said that athletic ability should not be considered at all in making an education available to a prospective student. Of course, athletic prowess should not be the only, or even the prime consideration. It cannot be, if the system outlined above is strictly maintained. A boy never loses a scholarship at Notre Dame for failure to make a team, but he will and often does forfeit a scholarship for academic or disciplinary failure.

To answer the critics more directly, our former President, Father John J. Cavanaugh used to ask: "In the matter of obtaining an education, what is so sacred about money? Here are two boys. Both have the ability and the desire to obtain a good education. The father of one boy has money. This boy is welcome at the University. The father of the other boy is poor, but the boy himself has developed his natural athletic abilities in difficult and typically American competition. This boy would like to represent some great school in intercollegiate athletics. He is also willing to study, to keep the rules, and to work as much as possible. Why should the first boy be given the access to an education because of something his father has, and the second boy refused if he offers the school something useful to it that he himself has developed—whether it be athletic ability, debating ability, musical or dramatic ability?"

Some will counter the argument: "But intercollegiate athletics today are commercial exploitation." To this I would reply that in the case

of a private university like Notre Dame, a quarter of a million dollars athletic income in a good year makes a small contribution to an annual operating budget of \$11,600,000.00. Our athletic income has always helped to face the deficit and to improve the educational facilities for all the students who pay only about 65% of the cost of running the University. With ^(except Governmental research grants) no outside support from Church or State, any contribution looks good, even athletic.

Then, the critic adds, you have the temptation to commercialize athletics to pay the bills. To answer this, I return to my opening principle. There are no insurmountable temptations or dangers in intercollegiate athletics if the basic working principle is: Always consider first the boy and his education. I will not deny the temptation to get the bills paid. For example, during the past twenty-five years, we have had the offer of a post season bowl game almost every year, with a possible total income of millions of ^{for cost money} dollars. We had four such offers, last year alone. Notre Dame did play a bowl game in 1925. We will not play another. Why not? Because, as far as our students are concerned, we know that they cannot be engaged in as exciting a pursuit as football for three quarters of a semester and still maintain a 77% average. If they do not have the required average, either they do not play the next year, or we lower our standards, and then they stop getting diplomas. Like most temptations (if I might indulge in a little theology), this one involves a whole chain of further temptations. We don't want to start walking down that road. Because if we apply our basic principle of the boy's interest first, we cannot play one bowl game, and then a series of bowl games, despite the financial rewards involved.

The same principle applies in the case of medical care of

athletes. The University doctor, not the coach decides when a boy can or cannot play at Notre Dame. Another application of the principle might offend a few more experts, but here goes.

Most of the experts agree that there should not be a try-out of a prospective athlete before he receives a scholarship. But the same experts allow schools to grant a great number of one-year provisional scholarships, so that the coach may try out many boys for a year and then drop all but the best. The poor goats who were king for a day are then finished with college or have the poor prospect of trying to obtain a scholarship at another school with failure already riding behind them and only two years of eligibility left.

I do believe that if this basic principle of considering the boy and his education first were generally and consistently applied, it would automatically eliminate every major abuse in intercollegiate athletics. But the cynics still must ask: can this principle be applied generally and consistently? Granting intelligence and moral courage on the part of most top university administrators, I would say that the principle can be applied with the following ifs:

- 1) if educators really believe in the importance of even one boy's life, and the impact of his total college experience on his life.

- 2) if there is such a passion for institutional integrity that no price can buy it, and all victories and achievements are hollow without it.

- 3) if directors of athletics and coaches are not unmercifully pressured for victories, remembering that after all, even football is still a game, and one side always loses, even though we must always play the game to win.

4) if directors of athletics and coaches are really brought into the family of educators, for they might as well be training horses in a ring, if their work at a university has no educational impact on the lives of the boys they coach.

I should like to mention one important point in closing. My non-expert attempt at assessing a rather difficult situation is meant to be constructive rather than critical of other people or institutions. Intercollegiate athletics are too valuable a part of American college life, too sadly missing in the educational life of other countries, to be ruined here by uninformed critics or falsified by sophomoric praise.

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