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COMMENTARY

Palaima: College athletes often are losers when it comes to academics

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Austin American-Statesman Thursday, November 16, 2006

The University of Texas at Austin NCAA sports programs have been in the national spotlight. In early October, the chairman of the U.S. House Ways and Means Committee sent the president of the NCAA a letter containing 25 detailed questions about funding practices and educational values in big-time college athletics.

UT was singled out for its low six-year graduation rate in football. It is 29 percent or 40 percent, depending on whether the federal government or the NCAA is doing the calculating.

Even figured generously, three out of five football players who play in Royal-Memorial Stadium do not receive a degree from any institution of higher education within six years. But statistics, even casualty figures from Iraq, mean little to most of us, unless they are personalized.

A recent sad case of this use-them-and-lose-them practice is Ramonce Taylor. Right before the Rose Bowl last year, in a Daily Texan story titled "Ramonce Taylor is Texas' Reggie Bush," head coach Mack Brown heaped praise on Taylor: "Ramonce has steadily become our Reggie Bush. He is a guy who every time he touches it, he has a chance to score." Imagine the effect on an impressionable football-focused sophomore to be compared by his coach to an eventual Heisman trophy winner.

Taylor scored a touchdown in the Rose Bowl. It turned out to be his last one as a Longhorn. In early March, before the start of spring practice, coaches announced that he had academic problems he needed to work on. Last year, we witnessed the miraculous transformation of junior basketball star P.J. Tucker. In a widely publicized story, Tucker, with the help of a battery of tutors and advisers, went from academic ineligibility and a self-admitted lifelong disregard for academics to a 3.3 fall-semester GPA. That one semester earned him UT's Academic Services Student-Athlete Award. During spring semester, he left UT for the NBA.

There was no such good-PR happy ending for Taylor. The next time he made the headlines, he had been arrested in May in connection with a large quantity of marijuana. No matter. Coach Brown declared that Texas was clean. Taylor had already been excused from the team for academic reasons and would not be reinstated.

I have taught at universities for 30 years, including another top sports school, the University of Wisconsin. Academic problems do not only become apparent weeks after an athlete-student has scored 15 touchdowns in his sophomore season. In the old days, it was possible to look at what classes athlete-students were taking and what grades they were making. No more. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act furnishes college sports programs with a protective shield.

You and I will never know what Taylor's transcript looked like. But the demands of BCS-level competition and his coach's lavish praise of his athleticism did not help him stay on track toward a degree.

Is anyone looking out for the academic well-being of young athlete-students? The NBA and NCAA would like us to think they are. The NBA recently introduced a rule prohibiting talented young players, such as LeBron James, from going professional right out of high school. Now, they have to be mature 19-year-olds, and their graduating classes have to have been out of high school for a year.

However, sportswriters and sports Web sites have unmasked this fraud. The NBA rule is a bonanza for NCAA sports. The Denver Post on Saturday identified the UT Longhorns basketball team as big winners: "Texas hit the jackpot with 6-9 swingman Kevin Durant, who has skills from the paint to the 3-point line. He is so good a Texas newspaper boasted 'the next time they redecorate the Erwin Center, University of Texas officials might want to display prominently a portrait of [NBA Commissioner] David Stern.' "

Two days earlier in the American-Statesman, Durant declared that his being barred from the NBA was "a blessing in disguise." He was enthusiastic about how much he could learn, about basketball, "in four more months" before turning pro. When pressed, he said, "Maybe I'll leave this year; maybe I'll leave next year."

It would be nice if the NCAA were to give coaches in its bent-on-winning programs instruction manuals on how to maintain the pretense that these rent-a-players are focusing on their intellectual and cultural improvement in the 1 1/2 to 3 1/2 semesters they spend on college campuses.

The NBA rule is designed to protect the quality-of-play of NCAA teams and thereby their television-broadcast revenues. It also saves NBA teams millions of dollars in salaries rising stars would receive while they are being developed. College athletes work for scholarship stipend money.

But it violates the economic rights of 18-year-old athletes. Why force them to spend parts of one or two years on college campuses masquerading as students?

My own vain hope is that some enterprising law professor here at UT, let's call him or her the anti-Joe-Jamail, will step forward and file a class-action suit against the NBA and the NCAA - and maybe even against UT athletics as accessories after the fact.

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