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Regular Contributor

Failure to reform NCAA is at root of cheating scandals

As we move through life, we experience moments of revelation when we see clearly what meaning we want our lives to have, how we will spend our time on this earth. Saul, on the road to Damascus, was surrounded by a blinding light, went three days without sight, food or drink, and changed his ways of thinking. He became St. Paul.

Sometimes we realize we have had enough, like world welterweight boxing champion Roberto Durán 35 years ago conceding his rematch with Sugar Ray Leonard by telling the referee, "No más, no más." Durán was widely ridiculed, but he knew it was the right thing to do. He went on to hold titles as a light middleweight and middleweight and is considered the greatest lightweight boxer of the 20th century.

In the Chronicle of Higher Education, Brad Wolverton alleges that three student athletes who played basketball between 2003 and 2014 at the University of Texas were guilty of academic misconduct and "illustrate how the university has appeared to let academically deficient players push the limits on academic integrity as it has sought to improve its teams' academic records." Notice how easy it is to blame the victims.

From September 2008 through May 2011, I was the UT and Big XII representative on the Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics, a national organization formed originally to try to make sure that all student athletes in the big-time sports entertainment industry known as the National Collegiate

Athletics Association get something we could call an education.

COIA's members have a bit of St. Paul in them. They are mostly senior professors who have reached a point where the problems that major NCAA sports programs cause for the academic integrity of their institutions obligate them to try to do something.

In my case, the timing seemed right. In 2007 the Austin American-Statesman published a series of front-page stories on the excesses of UT's NCAA program. Remarks from the UT athletic director and his chief financial officer like "We eat what we kill," meaning we raise lots of money for sports and are darn sure going to spend it all on sports, and "We are the Joneses," meaning we kill and eat so much more than most everybody else that they all want to be like us, made me think that someone in a position of power in the UT Tower or the Legislature or the Board of Regents would do something.

I was dead wrong. Likewise, graduation rates for minority athletes were embarrassingly low, and the differentials in standardized exam scores between regular students and basketball and football players were shocking to anyone who prioritized intellectual life.

In late January 2011, COIA met at Big Ten headquarters near Chicago. We heard talks from NCAA President Mark Emmert, from Big Ten Commissioner Jim Delany, and then from Graham Spanier, for 15 years president of Penn State University. All stressed the morality and integrity of NCAA

sports and the need for independent faculty oversight of NCAA programs. There is still none at UT.

Spanier went further. He assured us that every year he spoke to everyone having anything to do with NCAA sports on his campus and told them if they knew of the smallest infraction, he wanted to be informed so he could correct the matter. Nine months later, in November 2011, came revelations about sexual predator Jerry Sandusky and the "conspiracy of silence" by Spanier and other top officials at Penn State. That was my "no más" moment.

The NCAA mandates that student athletes should devote no more than 20 hours a week to their sport. Their own survey in 2008 proved that football players average 44.8 hours per week. Their Academic Progress Rate requires cumulative GPAs of 1.8, 1.9 and 2.0 at the end of the second, third and fourth years. UT's average GPA for all students, including athletes, is circa 3.2. And a satisfactory APR requires completion of only 80 percent of coursework by the end of the fourth year. The NCAA then runs a system in which student athletes have too little time, many make poor grades and many end four years without a degree.

The academic misconduct of the NCAA, countenanced by regents, university presidents, college coaches, season ticket holders, men's and women's athletics councils, sportswriters and NCAA officials is what needs to be addressed. They should all head toward Damascus before it's too late.