

THE BONDING AND BRIDGING POWER OF UNIVERSITY SPORTS

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INTRODUCTION

The combination of being an athlete and a student is not as simple as it was in the past. As the increasing international competition makes it more and more difficult to succeed in both the field of sport and the field of academics, the value and practice of university sport seem to be threatened by a growing divide between the dynamics and requirements of athletics on the one hand and academics on the other (3,5,10).

Everywhere in the world, universities, sport organisations and athletes seek to solve this problem, because it is generally held that athletics is a highly prized endeavour that enriches the experience of students, and that sporting value and sporting practice give a new dimension to academic education, study and research. In most countries therefore, systems are developed and improved, aspiring to bring together the sport and university spirit, and looking for ways to do this in harmony and complementary to each other.

In this presentation, I will discuss some of these systems, how they try to prevent or bridge the academic-athletic divide, and what they mean for the use of the potential bonding and bridging power of sport.

The European and the American model

The university sport systems vary from country to country with two extremes at both poles of a continuum. On the one end of the continuum, one finds a model originally developed in some European countries. In this system, competitive sports are tied to community-based sport clubs, funded by their members or a combination of public

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and private sources, with hardly any involvement of universities in the field of sport. On the other end of the continuum, one can find the American model. In this system, the universities are of vital importance to the sport system, especially with regard to elite sport. The universities finance interschool varsity sport programs, sport facilities and sport venues, and they are highly active in recruiting talents with scholarships and training them for intercollegiate competition in their varsity teams (3).

Why did the European and American system diverge in this way? There are two main reasons for this. In the first place, higher education institutions were spread all over northern America when modern sport was developed and diffused at the end of the nineteenth century. According to the American sports historian Richard Mandell, in 1900 about 250000 young Americans were enrolled in universities and colleges, while these numbers in Germany and France were approximately 20000 (6). When organised sports spread all over these countries and indeed the rest of the world, the national network of universities and colleges offered ideal opportunities in the United States to set up local, interregional and national competitions. In Europe a similar network of higher education did not yet exist to the same extent. Europeans created a different network for their sport competition, not inside but outside the schools, by setting up private sports clubs in nearly every city and village.

Second, as the sport economists Robert Sandy, Peter Sloan and Mark Rosentraub argue, the educational institutions in the USA were highly autonomous compared to the rest of the world. Educational spending in the USA was and is largely left to the decisions of local or state governments and non-profit institutions. Moreover, the parents, who pay the taxes and are part of the boards of the high schools, have always had a strong hold on the determination of the curriculum. As a result of this, strong bonds were established in America between the educational institutions and local society. The educational institutions became an important framework for communal activities, like sport, as part of what was called the 'extra curriculum' (6,7).

In Europe, educational institutions were less autonomous. Local high school officials did not have the autonomy to spend tax dollars for education to sports programs for a tiny fraction of the students or to build giant sport stadiums and arenas. National ministries of education

determined local spending priorities of the educational institutions. Moreover, especially in Germany, and in countries within the German sphere of influence, physical education teachers opposed or hindered the introduction of modern competitive sports in educational institutions, as they did not correspond to their educational ideals (8).

When modern sports were spread to other countries in the world, the organisation of sport in each country was influenced by both the European sport club system and the American intercollegiate sport system. Which model became dominant, depended on the sphere of influence. In countries in which Americans were involved in educational reform in the nineteenth and/or twentieth century, like Japan or the Philippines, sport was integrated in the school system. In countries that were politically, military or economically dominated by England, France or Germany, a club system outside the school system emerged. In the course of the twentieth century, the club model and the school model have been mixed in most countries (9).

Elite sport programs at universities

High performance sport is part of a global status competition. In the context of this competition, sports organisations and governmental sports institutions in many countries are re-examining or transforming their elite sports systems to strive strategically for international success. In this process, they also put pressure on educational institutions to create good or better conditions for sport participation at a high level by their students; even in countries where sport is mainly practised in clubs (4).

Several initiatives in various European countries, like Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands, and the UK, have to be seen in this light. My own country, the Netherlands, can serve as an example here. The contribution of Dutch universities to the elite sport system is limited to some special study arrangements, like flexible timetables, exemption for specific courses, acceptance of delays in homework, and guidance of special tutors. However, educational institutions still lack special sport programs or sport venues. Elite athletes do not or hardly participate in intercollegiate competition, but still mainly in the context of clubs. Intercollegiate competition is low levelled and does not have any meaning for the non-sporting student population.

The opposite is true for the USA. In no other country is athletics so embedded within the institutional structure of higher education as in this country. This holds good for the big universities as well as the smaller colleges. Because there is little media coverage of US college sports outside of the USA, most people in the world do not realize the scale of these college sports programs. Conversely, most Americans have no idea that there is nothing like it anywhere else.

The expensive sport programs at American colleges and universities try to be self supporting or profit making, but a small part of the universities and colleges really make a profit in their sport programs (3). Nevertheless, universities continue to support these programs. The main reason for this, and this really distinguishes the American system from the European, is that sport has always been seen by American institutions as a mark of pride, and consistent with their broader academic philosophy. They offer the possibility of combining the demanding academic programs with abundant opportunities to take part in varsity teams (2).

The power of sport programs

American universities do understand the bonding and bridging power of sport programs at their universities. Summarizing the literature, sports sociologist Jay Coakley concluded that participation in a varsity team goes hand in hand with positive educational experiences for some students, reduced drop out rates, and increased identification with schools. Being a varsity athlete usually brings a student prestige among many peers, formal rewards in the school, and recognition from teachers, administrators, and even people in the community. Moreover, significant positive relationships have been found between identification with the university, integration in university life, perceptions of the university and persistence at the university (3).

However, this is only one part of the story. It is not known whether the bonding power of sport, the feelings of togetherness and identification with schools through sport, lead to the achievement of educational goals of the institutions. Identification with sport might distract attention from academic matters (3). From a sociological perspective, one can add that sport is a cultural practice which bears symbolic value, and is involved, at the symbolic level, in the power relations and competition between American universities and colleges.

All universities are in a prestige race, a race for rewards, reputation, resources and students. The sport programs play their role in this prestige race too. Although few students actually choose a college on the basis of the records of its sport teams, successful sports programs bring in more applicants because more people will have heard of the university as a result of the publicity the sport programs makes. These students are not usually the best students in the applicant pool, but that is of less importance for lower ranked colleges than for the most prestigious ones. Low ranked schools are generally more anxious to attract more applicants than highly ranked schools, which can always select strictly from a large pool of applicants (7,11).

The academic-athletic divide

Several authors have shown that the role of sport in this prestige race might be problematic. According to an influential study by William Bowen and Sarah Levin, the traditional values of college sports are threatened by the emergence of a growing divide between intercollegiate athletics and the academic missions of many universities and colleges in the USA. The authors showed that there is a tendency for recruited athletes to differ systematically from students at large in academic credentials, in academic outcomes and in patterns of residential and social life. This is the unintended consequence of the increased specialisation, professionalisation and commercialisation of athletic competition on the one hand, and the increased stratification of higher education on the other (2).

The authors demonstrated a significant admission advantage for athletes whose names appear on coaches' recruitment lists, consistent underperformance by such athletes in the classroom, and patterns of social behavior that set them apart from their fellow students. That their academic results are lower than would be predicted on the basis of pre-college achievement and other observable characteristics, is a relatively recent phenomenon. The authors suggested that increasing specialization in athletics, more intensive recruitment, and growing pressures to compete successfully in the post-season are taking a toll on the academic performance of the athletes relative to that of their classmates. And this might threaten the very core of the educational missions of the academic schools (2).

The authors know what they are talking about. William Bowen is the former President of Princeton University. Sarah Levin is a former all-American collegiate athlete, a graduate student at the Harvard School of Public Health and a research fellow of the Andrew Mellon Foundation. However, from a sociological perspective, their analysis must also be viewed in the context of the competition between universities. For lower rated universities, varsity sport offers a chance to gain status and thus symbolic power, in the prestige race with other universities; which they would not have if they had invested the same amount of money not in sport but in academic affairs. For academically top-ranked universities, like Princeton and Harvard, less and less credits can be gained by this sport competition. Their position might be threatened if sports performances become more and more important in the prestige race between universities (7).

Bowen and Levin's conclusion that the efforts to gain national prominence by improving sport programs might erode the educational and sporting values of the universities and colleges, cannot be interpreted in isolation from this context. The authors appeal to other top ranked colleges to withdraw from this competition and to come to decide together which schools they will play against, how much they will spend on athletics, how aggressively they will recruit talented athletes, what compromises they will make in terms of academic qualifications for admission, what they will expect of recruited athletes in the classroom, and how they will select and reward coaches (2).

The athletic-academic-divide is also relevant for the athletes themselves. Student athletes are often stigmatised and stereotyped as the "dump jock", and this is also felt by athletes who are dedicated students and who perform well in both the classroom and on the playing field. Bowen and Levin conclude that time commitment required by athletes can explain only a modest part of the underperformance they observe in their study (2). But this underperformance can better be interpreted as the result of a socio-cultural process of academic detachment and social isolation, as Patricia and Peter Adler have shown (1,3).

This process of academic detachment can be found especially in entertainment-oriented athletic departments and varsity teams. Of course, it is important to stress that many other teams in a variety of sports are organised in such a way that athletes are allowed to combine

sport participation with academic and social development. But the warnings on an athletic-academic divide need to be taken seriously. Athletes need support and special attention, not only for their sporting career and achievements, but also for their academic involvement. The importance of education needs constantly to be reaffirmed. The formation of an academic identity asks for special attention; as is the case for social contacts and experiences apart from sport.

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