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A New Method for NCAA “Madness”

The Power of Sports
Aaron Miller
March 13, 2017

A Billboard in San Francisco, CA in 2017 promotes office pools of the NCAA “March Madness” Tournament. Yahoo! and other Internet companies profit handsomely from

March Madness office pools. Aaron Miller

The upcoming men's college basketball tournament, which is run by the National Collegiate Athletic Association, or NCAA, is all about the upsets: "underdog" colleges taking down perennial powerhouses. These upsets are so routine that the event has earned the moniker "March Madness." The Madness, which brings countless hours of missed work and widespread Tournament office pools, is as central to American sports fandom as the Super Bowl party. Although I relished watching the NCAA Tournament growing up and even stayed up late to watch it when I lived abroad, ever since becoming a student of sports "beyond the boundaries of play," I have become increasingly convinced of the NCAA's own ***madness***: its furthering of commercialized college athletics at the expense of athletes' academics and futures.

College basketball emerged as the NCAA's cash cow in the mid-1980s, after the NCAA lost the rights to negotiate college football television broadcasts in a 1984 Supreme Court ruling. During the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, the NCAA earned its revenue by skimming 4 percent to 12 percent off the top of rights it negotiated with the main terrestrial television networks. At the time, the NCAA argued that they needed that share to cover its overhead, but the big football schools balked, and eventually decided to sue. In 1984, these schools challenged the mighty NCAA in court and won, convincing a majority of US Supreme Court Justices that the NCAA was restricting trade and thus in violation of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. Since that time, the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament has become the NCAA's central source of revenue; according to former NCAA Director, Walter Byers, the Division I men's basketball tournament and its TV contract are "the NCAA's crown jewels. Tournament income, for practical purposes, finances the entire organization". The NCAA reportedly enjoys a 50 percent profit margin for men's basketball (today's powerful college football conferences, which control football rights, enjoy a 40% margin).

The rise of cable television helped these profit margins shoot to the stratosphere, but the NCAA has also made moves to ensure that they create further revenue streams. For example, Cedric Dempsey, who was NCAA director from 1994 to 2003, trademarked the phrase "March Madness," so that, according to Nocera and Strauss, "the NCAA could license its use to sponsors while keeping it away from anybody who didn't pay for the privilege". What's more, the NCAA now sells "official" rights to select companies for "prime" sponsorship privileges (e.g., Coca-cola is the NCAA's "official soda"). Apparently that association brings brands like Coke greater awareness among fans, and it seems most likely that such awareness is raised because these young men and women are seen as upstanding "student-athletes".

Indeed, according to Murray Sperber, most of the money made from March Madness is used for NCAA administrative services, public affairs, publicity and promotion of the organization's role in furthering the "**ideal of college sports as an educational tool**". Yet, this ideal is not often upheld, and at times the NCAA willfully or negligently accomplishes the exact opposite. For example, recent research found that **the number of searches JSTOR decreased markedly** after the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament bracket was announced on "Selection Sunday," suggesting that "March Madness" has a direct and negative impact on academic productivity at American universities. And I'm sure I am not the only student who has "called in sick" during the first and second rounds of Tournament play, which are matinees played on Thursdays and Fridays. Of course, the madness most impacts athletes themselves, and not often in a way that enhances their academics. In addition to the rupture to their academic schedules, the Tournament also generally decreases many young athletes' prospects for graduation. It has been shown that graduation rates of college athletes in big-time sports such as football and men's basketball **are much lower** than the general student body's, and that colleges that send basketball teams to the NCAA Tournament are 33 percent less likely to graduate their black athletes. In fact, men's basketball (and football) players are also **considerably less likely to graduate** from college than their non-athlete peers, regardless of whether they attended a highly ranked university. The NCAA itself reports that only 1.2 percent of its men's basketball players are drafted into the National Basketball Association, and it is widely known that an even fewer number than that will have successful, long-term, and profitable careers, all of which suggests that college graduation rates should be much more important to the NCAA than inking "official" sponsorship deals. The spectacle that is the NCAA Tournament, with its underdog upsets and weekday excitement, may generate the lion's share of NCAA revenue and may also open space for water cooler conversation at the office, but it may create the false impression that professional basketball is a statistically likely career, which it is clearly not. Shouldn't the NCAA do more to ensure that "the 98.8%" come up with academic-based career goals to fall back on when the bright lights of the Madness begin to dim? The NCAA's own stated **core values** are to promote college athletics that balance academic and athletic values, but are they doing the best they can?

The NCAA and its member schools can and should work toward increasing graduation rates of these "big-time" athletes, not by lowering academic standards, but by **incentivizing coaches to balance the time they allot to academics and athletics** and by creating financial incentives that reward athletes ***post-graduation*** for their athletic ***and*** academic work for the university. After all, it is likely the excellence of athletes on ***and*** off the court that entices Coca-Cola and other sponsors to partner with the NCAA in the first place. Low graduation rates enhance the brand value of neither universities nor their corporate sponsors, so the NCAA should reassess its priorities and make long-awaited reforms to the economic and educational ecosystem it manages.

With the NCAA and its member schools profiting so handsomely from this “crown jewel”, at the very least some of this money ought to be shared with the players who make it possible; by tying their payment to their successful graduation, the NCAA and its member schools would take action that befits their core values and effectively create a true win-win. Education is not sport, after all; there need not be only one winner and it need not be a zero-sum game; athletes and universities alike can benefit from a more balanced system that takes everyone’s long-term interests into account. Although the NCAA has begun to talk about tying academics to athletics in a more meaningful way, there is still a long way to go. The Madness is not going anywhere, so the NCAA might as well begin to give it an ethical method.

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In this monthly column, “The Power of Sports,” Miller considers the social and political nature of sports in American society, with an eye toward opening the minds of readers to the seriousness of these so-called escapes.

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harumi Befu says:
March 27, 2017 at 7:50 pm

Hi Aaron:
Your argument is well taken. Glad you showed your erudition on sports.
harumi befu

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Aaron says:
March 28, 2017 at 4:27 pm

Thank you, Harumi! Your example is an inspiration!

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