

Emerging Discourses: NCAA Sport

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Q: What are your earliest memories of collegiate sport? How did you first find or encounter collegiate sport?

A: When you're really young, I think there's a tendency to gravitate toward pro sports, simply because pro sports are driven by celebrity culture. Celebrities translate to little kids in a way institutions and programs do not. My very, very earliest memories of sports are all about professional athletes. I do, however, have a specific memory from 1981, when I was eight: I was in third grade, and we came inside after morning recess. My teacher said she had some serious news: Reagan had been shot, and nobody knew what was going to happen. She then asked if anyone had any questions. I raised my hand and asked if they were still going to play the Indiana-North Carolina national championship game that night. So I must have had some interest in college sports at that age, although my reaction is probably more a reflection on how little kids think about history. At the time, I could probably name six total presidents and two of them had been assassinated. I almost expected presidents to get shot.

One thing that was different in the 1970s and 80s, especially for people who didn't have access to cable TV, was just how rarely college sports were actually available. There was usually only one or two games televised per week, until the Supreme Court changed the way TV operated in 1984. But the players almost always stayed in school for three or four years, so you could build these relationships over time. I'd see someone like Ralph Sampson play four or five times a season for four straight years, during a period of his career when he was visibly evolving. That made the relationship much deeper, because there'd be these long stretches of time where all you could do was think about a player. I was also influenced by my father and my older brothers, all of whom acted liked college sports were just inherently more important than pro sports. I obviously didn't have the lexicon to explain or understand this at the time, but the unspoken inference was clear: A game like OSU-Michigan was a big deal for all these cultural and regional and historical reasons, while a game between the Cowboys and the Redskins was only important as a media construction. Here again: Nobody ever said this to me. My dad was a farmer who never went to college. I would have been too young to understand what those things even meant. But this was how people of that generation thought about sports. The idea of watching an NBA game when a college basketball game was available seemed unserious. But nobody thinks like that anymore, of course.

Q: Having grown up far from major professional sport cities, how, if at all, do you believe geography influences one's experience of collegiate sport?

A: There are some obvious influences and some latent influences. The obvious part is that the local media is going to prioritize whatever happens to be the biggest team in town, so a college program located in a place

where there's no pro franchise is going to have this outsized presence in the community. In the 1980s, North Dakota State was a Division II program. But the newspaper in Fargo covered NDSU the same way the newspaper in South Bend covered Notre Dame and the same way the newspaper in Minneapolis covered the Vikings. NDSU games were always on the radio. The football and basketball coaches each had their own 30-minute coaches show that would air after the local news on Sunday night. The best players seemed famous. So part of this is that there's always a predetermined amount of media space to fill, and -- if there's no pro team to eat that space -- the college team gets treated like a pro team. You end up perceiving the program the way it's presented.

The less obvious part is the regional quality of collegiate sports, which just can't happen at the pro level. Teams within the same college conference tend to recruit the same type of kids and play the same style, which generates a sense that it's possible to understand the values of an entire region. If you go to Nashville, you will see people wearing hats that say SEC. You won't find anyone wearing a hat that says AFC SOUTH. That would be insane. I doubt anyone even makes hats that say AFC SOUTH, because divisions at the pro level have almost no intrinsic meaning. Plus, if you root for a specific college team, or if you hate a specific college team, you're unconsciously supporting or attacking the kind of person who goes to that school, including the people who are not on the team. There's a certain type of person who goes to Stanford or Duke. There's a certain type of person who tends to go to Mississippi State or BYU or Cal. Those qualities don't really change over time. The central identity of an institution doesn't evolve that much.

Q: Collegiate sport is peculiar in that it remains frozen in time, preserved from the inevitability of age or redundancy. In a past ESPN article, you wrote that "People used to bemoan the thought of a mythical national champion, but it all seems mythical to me. It still does, and it always will."

How do you believe that myth, memory, or nostalgia influence the role collegiate sport plays in contemporary North American life?

A: The role that myth plays hasn't changed. What's changed is the degree to which Americans need their subjective myths to be packaged as some kind of objective fact. This is true in sports, and in life.

Look: I love the college football playoff, and it hasn't damaged the regular season at all, which was always the fear. The NCAA basketball tournament is my favorite sporting event of the entire year. But those things do not prove the thing they are ostensibly designed to prove. The best team is not always the team who wins in the end. If the best team always won, a playoff wouldn't be interesting or necessary. It works about half the time. The single-most dominant men's college basketball team of the last 30 years was UNLV in 1991. They didn't win the title. It happens. There have been years when a team who didn't make the college football playoff might have won the championship if they would have been selected to participate. But even if that had occurred, it wouldn't prove they were necessarily the best team in the country. It would prove they were capable of beating two good teams during the last two weeks of the season. The only reason playoffs exist is for entertainment.

For a long time, a big part of college football was this unknowable argument about who was actually the best team in any given year. The bowl system was almost consciously constructed to make that argument happen. But modern people are less willing to accept that kind of unclarity, even if the alternative is arguably less compelling. Modern Americans are repelled by cognitive dissonance. Which is ironic, because the level of cognitive dissonance has actually increased. Part of the idea behind a football playoff is that it operates objectively, and that it actively eliminates the influence of myth and memory and nostalgia. Yet the thing people love most about college football is its relationship to those very things. So we've improved the sport by de-emphasizing its best qualities.

This is only partially related to your question, but the public obsession with imposed clarity makes me think about instant replay as a means for officiating. Few things have damaged sports more. The game is played by humans, yet humans aren't qualified to officiate the game? It's crazy, and it makes the whole endeavor preposterous. If you make something more important than it actually is, it has the opposite impact. We all sit there for 10 minutes and watch a referee staring into a monitor, trying to deduce if the ball should be spotted at the 25 yard line or the 22 yard line. It feels stupid. The outcome matters, but it doesn't matter that much. Mistakes are part of life. Chance is part of everything. It's embarrassing to think that some error over a shot clock violation needs to be reevaluated and overturned with video technology. People go to prison with less concrete evidence. But there's just this idea that if we can pursue some fabricated sense of certainty through technology, we have to do it, even if what we're trying to verify is borderline meaningless and antithetical to the larger experience.

Q: Previously, you have said that "The world at large can change and I won't mind; I can always evolve with the world because I never understood it in the first place ...However, I already understood sports when I was 8. I need those old laws to remain in place because -- intellectually and emotionally -- these principles are static."

Is your connection to collegiate sport "static" in this same way? Or has your understanding of college sports evolved?

What I meant by that was that sports have defined rules and life is chaotic and random. Part of what makes sports a satisfying escape is that it's possible to understand those principles and accept that they're true. So when those principles change, it feels weird. For the first half of my life, a major college basketball team starting five seniors had a huge advantage over a team starting five freshmen. Now it's the complete opposite. Now, if Kentucky can start five freshmen, it means they probably have the best team in the country. But I also assume the one-and-done rule will probably be eliminated, so that relationship will suddenly switch back. These kinds of philosophical changes are easy to understand but hard to like. I remember when all the football conferences were re-aligning, and there was a momentary possibility that Boise St. was going to join the Big East. The "east" is indeed "big" if it theoretically encompasses Idaho. That was just dumb. I think it's bad that Nebraska is in the Big 10 now, and it's idiotic that the Big 10 has 14 teams. I want Nebraska to play Oklahoma every year at Thanksgiving. But that's how it goes.

There is, I realize, a part of college sports that appeals to reactionary thinking. The coaches matter more than the players. The institution matters more than the individual. The espoused values are traditional, to the point of being archaic. I understand why it makes some people uncomfortable. I taught a semester of college in Germany, and the kids over there just couldn't comprehend why Americans have such an intense relationship to sports teams associated with academic entities. It was an almost impossible thing to explain. But the contradictions are part of it.

Q: If you had the power to shape college sport, how would collegiate sport look to future generations?

A: I wouldn't want that power. My goal would be to keep the experience of college sports operating as it does right now now, which would mean upholding off-field concepts that I know are bad. The illusion I want is at odds with the only way to achieve it. I have some ideas, but I don't think they're remotely tenable.

Everyone agrees that the single-most corrosive thing to college sports has been the influx of such massive amounts of money, and the corruption and hypocrisy that money generates. Well, one way to mitigate that would be to radically decrease revenue. I think college sporting events should be free to anyone attending the school hosting that event. If you're a student paying tuition at Penn State or UCLA or Bowling Green, you absolutely should not have to pay anything to watch a team that theoretically represents you. And if you're an alumni of that school, and you retain your student I.D., your ticket price should be \$1 for the rest of your life. Everyone else pays \$10 a seat. No pre-sales, so no scalping. Every ticket is a walk-up. No reserved seating. It would be amazing for the atmosphere, and the revenue from TV could still support the programs. The NCAA men's basketball tournament makes almost \$1 billion on its own.

In terms of compensating the players: There is a lot of support for the Olympic model, where the athletes can keep any revenue they earn outside of the sport itself. But there are problems with that. If the NCAA were to adopt this model, you would immediately see situations where some booster in Austin, Texas, pays an in-coming freshmen quarterback \$1 million to host a monthly podcast sponsored by his car dealership. The competitive balance would get worse. The goal, in my view, is to compensate players without turning college sports into some bastardized version of pro sports. So what if they used the Olympic model, but the revenue was pooled? The ancillary money that college athletes generate, including all the money from jersey sales and video game sales and public appearances and any other avenue, would be placed into the same fund. That money would then be distributed equally to every student-athlete in the country playing that sport. The student-athletes would periodically receive little dividend checks, and they'd be operating as a collective. There would, certainly, still be situations that were out of balance -- people like Tim Tebow or Johnny Manziel would generate way more merchandising revenue than they would receive in return. But those guys would also be virtually guaranteed to make money from sports after they leave college, whereas the long-snapper at San Jose St. almost certainly will not.

I'm not sure what can be done about college basketball at this point, in terms of how the game is played. It might just be irrevocably wrecked. I once interviewed Adam Silver, and he argued that a robust

college basketball system was good for the NBA. But it seems like things are now moving in the opposite direction. It would improve the culture of basketball, in a general sense, if kids had to play in college for a minimum of two years before entering the NBA draft. It would be good for the game itself, and good for the long-term viability of the sport. But the growing sentiment seems to be that this policy would be a form of indentured servitude, and anything that stops a player from earning as much money as possible is a form of oppression. So I don't know what the solution is. Big-time college basketball has started to resemble low-end pro basketball, where the style of play is just like the NBA but the participants are younger and less skilled. At this point, I'd rather watch the mid-majors than the ACC. College football, as an on-field product, has fewer problems. The style of play has never been better or more diverse, and it's more entertaining than the professional version of the same game. But I do think the Power 5 conferences will probably break away from the NCAA within the next 10 years, and the highest level of college football will just be a form of professional football, where the players are paid to represent schools they might not even attend. But a lot of people reading this interview would argue that it's already like that now, and I'm just deluding myself. And who knows? They're probably right.

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