Such a Farce!

by

*Eyes Right*

**Springfield, VA –** We are in the midst of madness – specifically, *March Madness*, the annual NCAA Division 1 Men’s basketball tournament. I say “We” because a large number of Americans, perhaps 20%, have been closely following the proceedings. There is a women’s tournament running concurrently; it has its smaller share of interested viewers, and, compared to the men, their series of games do not command the same level of viewership or print.

Much of the interest in March Madness involves gambling – not necessarily with bookies (online or in a shady alley), but in pools where a large group (often friends or office mates) attempt to predict the winners of each of the 63 games played to determine the champion (there are actually 67 games, but most betting pools do not include the first 4 games played to get into the final backet). Each pool has its own rules for determining the winner, because the odds of predicting the winner of each of these 63 games is astronomical. This year some may be able to do so because it has been a “chalk” tournament. [This is a bettor’s term for saying that most of the winners have been the favorites. Its origin began in horse racing days of old when bookies at tracks posted odds on a board with chalk which he could erase and change depending on how much had been bet on each horse. I actually observed this at a minor race track in England many years ago.]

What has been most interesting to me about this year’s men’s tournament is the composition of most of the teams. Most of the players are “rent-a-jocks.” It has not been unusual to have four of the starting five players new to the school. These youngsters were all in different universities (or in the final year of high school) the previous year. They all have been “recruited” to jump ship from their prior school to come play for the new school. The incentive is not only to play for a famously successful coach on a team which can contend for the national championship, but also financial. We are talking bucks – BIG bucks.

This trend began only a few years ago (2021) when athletes began to be allowed to accept/earn money in return for the commercial use of their name, image, and likeness, commonly abbreviated as “NIL.” A good college basketball player can now earn several hundred thousand dollars a year; a great player can haul in over a million. Many athletes now hire agents to take care of the business deals which are available. Some states now have laws (mostly different) allegedly designed to regulate this activity, but in reality they are often rigged to assist businesses in their state at providing this NIL money to prospective athletes. One highly sought-after college football player was given close to $5 million dollars last year. There has been no end to some of the marketing ploys which have capitalized with major national companies throwing money at these athletes. Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups, for example, has over a dozen students with the last name “Reese” being paid to endorse their products and appear in ads. Wealthy alums pony up huge amounts to entice stars to play for their alma mater.

What has made all these athlete moves from one university to the next while seeking a better deal has been the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) which eliminated previous restrictive rules prohibiting an easy transfer from one school to the next. A “transfer portal” was established consisting of a data base which stores the name of each player seeking to find a new home (university). This allows other universities to find him (or her) and offer a deal. The main significance is that any athlete using the portal is eligible to play the following year without having to sit out a year. The result has been that athletes now are able to go to the highest bidder year after year throughout their period of eligibility (usually four years). Several of the basketball players in the NCAA tournament games this year have played at *four* different schools over the past *four* years.

The result of NIL and the transfer portal has been that top athletic talent ends up at those schools having access to the fattest wallets. The athletes are now hired guns (or in the case of basketball, hired shooters). The previous term favored by the NCAA for college players was “student athletes.” WHAT A FARCE! The old NCAA rules which at least created the façade of athletes attending university classes are now a total non-factor. The only practical requirement now for being “eligible” to play is having a relatively steady pulse, and that can be waived.

But let’s be frank. The previous NCAA rules for academic participation by athletes was often in the “a wink and a nod” category, but at least most universities attempted to have their athletes in occasional classes. It is doubtful now that any of these top level athletes ever attend one class or write one paper. If they would have to do so, they certainly now have the money to pay someone else to do it for them.

I thought you might like to know.

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