

“To a Journalism Student About Sports”

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Having read some of my writings on sports, in late 2008 a journalism student at a university in the eastern part of the United States e-mailed me that she was writing an article for the campus newspaper about sports and wanted my reply to some of her questions. With some editing and augmentation, her message, questions, and my answers follow.

Professor Griffin:

I have read the essay on your web site "A very Big Regret," as well as excerpts from your book *Sports in the Lives of Children and Adolescents*. I am writing an article for my school newspaper on the topic of fan support at college sporting events and whether it has a positive impact on athletes. Also, I want to consider the issue of whether people take college sports too seriously. I would like to include your views on these matters in my article. Below are questions for you to answer.

Thank you in advance,

[signed]

Her questions and my responses:

*1. Do college sports fans take sports too seriously?*

Some do and some don't. If going to a game is just a fun thing to do with friends and that's it, and when it's over it's over, that's one thing. But when being a fan of a team and/or its players becomes a big part of one's life, and when it squeezes out other involvements and detracts from attending to one's own life and getting on with it successfully, it becomes problematic.

*2. Does a large fan base have a positive or negative effective on student-athletes? Does it encourage them to focus more on athletics than their studies?*

My guess is that a large fan base, as you put it, has a slight but generally overestimated effect on what students do on the field and in their schoolwork. By and large, athletes play for themselves and each other and their coach and perhaps to affect what their family and love interests think of them; and, along those same lines, what they do about school comes much more out of that than whether they have a fan base. It's my impression that except for mom and dad and sis and their girlfriend in the fifteenth row, for most athletes fans are an amorphous, undifferentiated "them" and basically immaterial to anything. I think a lot of fans assume athletes care about them more than the athletes actually do.

Athletes say it matters greatly that fans turn out to their games and enthusiastically cheer them on, and I think the athletes who say that really believe it. But people in all areas of life believe a lot of things that aren't actually true; or at least aren't true to the extent they assume they are. That's why, as a journalist, while you need to solicit self-reports, you also need to look hard at reality for yourself. And you need to analyze yourself: In particular, check into the extent to which you have uncritically bought into the conventional wisdom about something or another. All your life--in school and from the media and from family and friends--you have been taught how the world works and ought to work. To be a good journalist is to gain independent insight and perspective. There is no area that is more embedded in conventional wisdom than organized sport; the challenge for you is to go beyond parroting it.

*3. Do you think colleges today focus more on athletics than academics?*

I think colleges do what we all do: act in their/our perceived best interest. Colleges see it as good for them to be heavily invested in intercollegiate spectator sports. They think it helps attract students and money and favors of various sorts. Many scholars and commentators think those assumptions are not grounded in reality, however. A good book on this topic is *The Game of Life: College Sports and Educational Values* by James Shulman and William Bowen.

My own view is that schools at all levels create sports programs and hype them in a way that significantly detracts from their academic missions. Students end up practicing hours every afternoon (and, often, early in the morning) under the direction of professional coaches whose reputations and livelihoods depend on winning games and traveling here and there and putting on highly charged sports shows for the public and getting scrutinized by the media and going to summer camps. The concept of “opportunity cost” applies: one way to look at the cost of sports or anything else is what you could be doing if you weren’t doing that. When you are playing ball, or watching it, you aren’t reading great literature, learning about math and science, finding out about history, doing theater, and so on. More, for many athletes, including those who aren’t all that proficient in their sport, sports isn’t merely a valued but minor part of their lives, something they do now and again for fun or companionship. Rather, it is their *identity*: it is *who they are*—athlete, student-athlete (note that the two involvements are on a par in that term), jock. All of us check out who we are before we do anything, and if who we are is an athlete we aren’t likely to read *The Brothers Karamazov*. Of course under these circumstances schoolwork is likely to take second place to throwing tight spirals. In fact, many student-athletes who are held up as exemplary in their schoolwork aren’t really true students. Instead, they are dutiful, deferring course takers jumping through academic hoops. Their primary focus is what happens on the field, not in the classroom. Supported by the media that make money off the games young people play, schools have enterprisingly created settings where it makes sense for students’ hearts and minds to be on athletics rather than academics. I find that highly ironic and terribly unfortunate.

What is sobering to contemplate is that even colleges that don’t seem to be in the sports business—Ivy League schools, small liberal arts colleges—actually are. They too give athletes a leg up in admissions, and they tailor standards and programs to athletes’ taste—more emphasis on business majors and away from the humanities, for example. Big time sport programs eagerly recruit students from among the absolute bottom rung in academic ability and interest; and frankly, some of these people are dangerous for other students, especially women, to be around. Very often, these “student-athletes” cluster in such “majors” as hotel and restaurant

management. I consider it absurd and sad when colleges give lackluster, or worse, students academic scholarships and preference in admissions because they are good at a recreational activity not part of the colleges' programs of study.

Having said all that, in general, I don't think colleges focus more on athletics than academics, but I do believe they are in the intercollegiate sport business more than they should be. Many people justify big-time sports as a major money-maker for colleges and universities. Economists I've read—check Shulman and Bowen citations—dispute that generalization. But whatever the economic reality, whether an endeavor makes money shouldn't be the criterion for determining its legitimacy in a college. A strip club would undoubtedly bring in revenue, but that doesn't warrant giving scholarships to strippers.

Read the book by Kim Townscend, *Manhood at Harvard*, which deals with how college sports were viewed around 1890. Back then, if you were a college student the idea was that sports was something you participated in vigorously (not watched), and if you were making a big deal of it and trying to get super good at it something was out of kilter in your life. The professionalization of sports, including the Olympics, has filtered down to the schools. Now, much less college sophomores, thirteen-year-olds are modeling their engagement in sports on the pros—all out, all year, get as good as an NBA all-star. A good book on the contemporary sports circumstance is *Sport: The All-American Addiction* by John Gerdy.

A positive trend in our time that I note, jocks are becoming less the focus of attention in schools and less revered by their fellow students. I have the impression that most students, at the secondary level and even more so at the college level, by and large ignore, and even look down upon, the athletes and their games, find both them and their preoccupations silly and immature. With many if not most college games, older people are in greater attendance than students.

4. *My university is currently instituting many programs and promotions trying to increase attendance at sporting events. What are your views on this?*

I think the emphasis in schools at all levels should be on sport participation and health and fitness. A college near me has decided to go in this direction—which sounds better to me than encouraging students to watch hired hands who are not representative of the student population play with a ball. If schools are going to try to increase attendance at games, they are duty bound to go beyond cliché and document exactly what good that does for the spectators.

*5. Is it possible to balance sports and academics effectively in college?*

If by balance you mean anything resembling equal weight, I don't think schools at any level should try to balance sports and academics. I think the issue for schools at all levels is putting sports in their proper perspective. In my view, schools ought to be first and foremost about academics. If students want to play games after school or, on their own initiative, compete against students in another school, fine. But let the pros put on sport shows for the public. If it were up to me, and I'm serious, I would tear down all school sport arenas and stadiums. Athletics for the athletes. For the spectators, get a life.

*6. Is there anything else you would like to comment on that you think would be useful in my article?*

Nothing comes to mind at the moment. Good luck with your article, and to you personally. I hope this has helped.

Sincerely yours,

Robert S. Griffin