

Striving for the Competitive Advantage

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The quandary facing more and more college athletic programs over the past several years seems to be, "How can we gain a competitive advantage, no matter what the cost?" As a result, many of the institutions asking this question find themselves falling victim to NCAA scrutiny.

Since 1987, there have been more than 45 major NCAA rules' infractions, most involving improper recruiting and financial aid, academic fraud, and lack of institutional control. Between 1990 and 1995 alone, major infractions increased well over 100 percent from the previous time period. The NCAA currently publishes two reports listing current institutions on probation and a historical account of all institutional infractions. 30 teams from all divisions are currently on probation with an additional 232 teams listed as having had an infraction.

As the pressure to succeed and the desire for money permeates every aspect of championship-level college athletics, so does the propensity for these programs to bend, or even break, the rules. The institutions or programs themselves are not the only ones to carry the blame. Unethical administrators, employees and coaches, influential boosters and alumni, outwardly-vocal fan base, along with lucrative professional contracts, unscrupulous agents and at times even the parents of the athletes, all have their share of culpability.

The age-old question in college athletics has been: Has the desire for funding and a winning program caused unethical behavior? As the current evidence suggests, the answer is obvious. With success come the spoils. Ultimately, the question rests on who is responsible.

School administrators tend to find themselves with the most at stake, usually in the form of revenue and tenure. Winning programs equate to lucrative endowments, increased alumni contributions, corporate sponsorships, television contracts, ticket and merchandise sales, at last and certainly the least, fan support.

Coaches and their staff succumb to privileges afforded to successful programs through access to sought-after recruits, increased pay and incentives, higher visibility, and an increase in their standard of living. To a lesser to degree would be the job security of the coaches and staff. Downward pressure from school administrators and the influence of program boosters make job security an afterthought.

Fans desire success, but to varying degrees. The die-hard fan supports a team, win or lose. But administrators even at the smallest institutions are aware that fans interested only in a winning program spend the most money on tickets and merchandise and capitalize on this awareness at every opportunity.

If you question these assertions, try to keep track of the number of logos present on player uniforms or decipher the plethora of corporate-sponsored bowl games in December and January.

But let us not be naïve. It all starts earlier than we think. Recruiting of athletes in practically all sports is starting as early as junior high or middle school. Visiting one of the infamous “shoe schools” and speaking with a parent who has relocated or drives hundreds of miles for their child to attend the school should give you an obvious answer. However, there is a fine line with varying degrees of blame.

Talented young athletes with very few prospects other than sports, along with their parent or parents, trying to afford every opportunity for success are not to blame, especially in today’s competitive society. On the other hand, the world is populated with parents that are willing to sacrifice their own morals and ethics for the sake of a successful prodigy.

Corporate sponsors from all industries, not just shoe companies, are trying desperately to place their products in front of brand-conscious consumers. But are they part of the problem, or simply businesses capitalizing on an opportunity? Scrutiny needs to be given to the administrators, representatives, and coaches that create the policies and practices which allow these products to permeate the lives of these young, impressionable adults and the funding received as a consequence. The bottom line for a majority of institutions seems to be ‘the bottom line’.

Are all of these actions a microcosm of the competitive nature of society today? Or has society been complicit in placating the issue? An interesting study would be the trend of high school players at so-called “shoe schools” that migrate to the institution in which the same logos are present? The results may be surprising.

What may be even more surprising is that we, as fans and a society, do not question the means but only the end. Unethical conduct goes unquestioned during winning seasons, and becomes the primary basis for losing ones. Recent evidence suggests that the institutional polices created to monitor these events simply slows the rate of known violations but does little to prohibit the behavior (Arkansas and Miami were both placed on probation while researching this article).

With the number of violations and investigations continuing, normal behavior for several institutions seems to be to ask for forgiveness instead of permission, and then deal with the consequences.

For example, of the 262 schools listed in the NCAA major infractions database, there were a total of 529 infractions. With slightly more than 1,000 active NCAA members, statistically

speaking, 1 of every 2 athletic programs has been levied an infraction. This is a trend that sees little publicity. Nor is it alarming.

With the increased media coverage permeating every aspect of amateur athletics, the lives of the participants, and the search for the next child prodigy, the pressure to succeed at any cost increases exponentially. These pressures, as so duly noted, have led more than a few programs to bend or break NCAA guidelines in order to gain a competitive advantage.

With all of the conjecture surrounding responsibility, the NCAA should not be excluded from the debate. Several bylaws and regulations have been enacted over the past several years to in an attempt to govern its member institutions,

Nonetheless, perusing the list of infraction-causing activities, most consistently noted was "lack of institutional control." The only interpretation of this is that the NCAA is somehow failing in its primary commitment to these institutions, and the institutions are failing in their responsibility to the NCAA: ensuring fair and ethical practices by its programs, players and staff; and in the future academic development of the next generation of young adults.

Many of these institutions lack proper guidance in adherence to policy, especially in the areas of ethical conduct. Without the repercussion of stiffer penalties, the NCAA fails in its attempt to abate the continued behavior.

The NCAA has taken several necessary steps to control this downwardly-spiraling situation. Title IX was enacted to "maintain and improve the competitiveness of Division I-A football without altering the existing governance structure." While an excellent program for excelling all college athletic programs and creating greater competition, it has undoubtedly placed downward pressure on established athletic programs, such as football, to succeed, ignoring the potential ramifications. Athletic and academic programs appear to turn a blind eye to questionable behavior off the field for the sake of performance on the field.

The Nebraska state legislature has recently passed legislation that in its simplest form pays college athletes for playing. I suspect the pending legislation in Nebraska has prompted the NCAA to, only days ago, announce the creation of a general use fund for student-athletes and distributed through NCAA member conferences.

Initially funded with \$17 million, the fund is to be increased 11 percent per year for the next 11 years, for a total of over \$300 million. These funds are to be dispersed to student-athletes on an as-needed basis, outside the supplements these players already receive.

While a good beginning for the NCAA, what I was more interested is what I did not see. I did not see any mention that these recipients, or any scholarship athletes, receive required money or financial management curriculum to accompany these funds. The NCAA and its

member institutions not only need to take responsibility for the examples they set but also find solutions to correct and prohibit the behavior.

So the debate rages on. Who or what is ultimately responsible for the current state of college athletics? Consistent throughout this analysis is the theme of “financial motivation” as a primary driver for a majority of the activities taking place on today’s campuses. School administrators want continued and increased funding for their academic and athletic programs; coaches want longer and more lucrative contracts and increased exposure; corporations want more locations to place their brand in front of consumers, and are willing to pay handsomely for it; and players are enticed by the media coverage of the rare few that make it to the professional level, and those that want to help them get there.

The NCAA list of infractions indicates that all of these wants and desires, enticements and endowments, lead to the propensity for impropriety. The NCAA needs to draw a line in the sand with multiple violators. Examples need to be set and guidelines strictly enforced. Until the NCAA recognizes that without strict parameters in place and proper institutional guidance, violations will continue to perpetuate themselves from this generation of athletes to the next.