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Sports and Jesuit Universities: A Winning Combination

William B. Neenan, S.J.

The level of intercollegiate sports varies across the twenty-eight Jesuit universities; at Boston College they serve many institutional purposes.

"Football has become a business, carried on too often by professionals, supported by levies on the public, bringing in vast gate receipts, demoralizing student ethics, and confusing the ideals of sport, manliness, and decency." Frederick Jackson Turner, the historian of the American frontier, pronounced this judgment in 1906.

Apparently Murray Sperber of the University of Indiana thinks little has changed in the past century. The major public universities, according to Sperber, neglect undergraduate education while keeping the masses amused by staging huge tailgate drinking orgies around football and basketball games. For him bigtime college sports have simply translated the Roman bread and circus into an American idiom.²

It is not just the major universities that are charged with being infected with furor athleticus. William Bowen and James Shulman contend that many selective private colleges have diluted the academic quality of their campuses by succumbing to the lure of intercollegiate athletics. Since these colleges aggressively recruit athletes with only passing regard to their academic qualifications, Shulman and Bowen feel that as many as one-third of the student body may be academically inferior, thus compromising the intellectual standards at these elite colleges.³

These judgments are just a sampler from a centurylong drumbeat of condemnations of intercollegiate sports. College education is no longer restricted to an exclusive elite as it was a century ago. Still today's indictments of collegiate sports sound remarkably similar to those offered when the Rover Boys where living it up in the Ivy League in the years before the Great War. Over the past century new Jesuit colleges have been established, and all have grown from small institutions enrolling several hundred students to the current array of twenty-eight colleges and universities that are fully established in the mainstream of American higher education. Hence it may not be surprising that Jesuit universities are largely indistinguishable from their peer institutions in terms of support for intercollegiate sports. Does that mean the charges leveled against college sports in general apply also to programs in Jesuit colleges? Is there indeed a pervasive beer and circus atmosphere on Jesuit campuses? Are there so many academically inferior athletes enrolled in Jesuit universities that the intellectual climate at these institutions is compromised? Why in the world would a Jesuit institution striving to promote the greater glory of God by educating men and women for others wish to maintain a major intercollegiate sports program? In a word, must Jesuit universities wishing to be faithful to Jesuit educational ideals drastically reduce their commitment to intercollegiate sports? intercollegiate sports indeed contribute to the Jesuit mission in higher education?

Before addressing these questions it will first be useful to determine the extent of intercollegiate sports at Jesuit universities. I will then make the case that intercollegiate sports do indeed contribute to the mission of a Jesuit university in twenty-first century America. Even though I will argue primarily from my experience at one Jesuit university with a major sports

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program, Boston College, my conclusions should apply *mutatis mutandis* to other Jesuit institutions.

All Jesuit universities field intercollegiate teams. Club and intramural sports also are alive and well on all Jesuit campuses. In these respects they are simply responsive to American attitudes. Americans are sports-minded, especially college-age Americans. Students avidly follow the exploits of their own college teams as well as all college and professional sports on the networks, ESPN, and ESPN2. Sports Center is one of the most-watched TV programs on campuses including Jesuit campuses. Interest in sports is not exclusively a passive coach-potato TV exercise. Collegeage men and women are heavily invested in their health and physical appearance. It is not surprising that all Jesuit universities have major recreational or "wellness" facilities where students expend calories running here and there and lifting this and that. The basic rationale for these facilities is simple: enrollment would suffer without them. No one has seriously suggested that these facilities be dismantled; however, few contend that a wellness facility is an essential component of the intellectual mission of a university on a par with the core curriculum. Intercollegiate sports programs do not enjoy a similar pass. Some critics contend that college sports should be seriously curtailed if not dismantled entirely. As we shall see, this action would affect a significant portion of the student body and as I will argue would result in a singular disservice to Jesuit aspirations in American higher education.

Sports in Jesuit Universities

Boston College has approximately 800 student-athletes representing thirty-four teams, as seen in Table 1. Eight Jesuit universities field twenty or more teams and all are represented by at least nine. At twelve of the universities, athletes constitute ten percent or more of the student body, while Wheeling Jesuit University appears to be the most sports-intensive with over twenty percent of the student body being athletes. All in all nearly ten thousand or eight percent of all undergraduates in Jesuit universities were student athletes in the academic year 2000-2001. These figures are fairly representative of universities in the United States. Some of the elite universities have a higher percentage of athletes among the student body than the Jesuit schools, and some universities

TABLE 1

JESUIT UNIVERSITIES, TEAMS, TOTAL ATHLETES, PERCENT OF ALL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

2000-01					
Institution	Division	(M) Sports Teams	(W) Sports Teams	Total <u>Athletes</u>	Athletes as Percent of Total Undergraduates
Boston College	I	17	17	800	8.4
Canisius College	I(AA)	10	10	413	11.8
College of the Holy Cross 1		12	13	450	16.1
Creighton	1	6	8	230	5.0
Fairfield	I	10	11	587	13.7
Fordham	I	12	10	454	7.1
Georgetown	I	14	14	625	9.6
Gonzaga	l	7	7	350	1 2.4
John Carroll	Ш	11	10	375	10.4
LeMoyne	1,11,111	8	8	400	17.5
Loyola College (MD)	i	8	8	350	10.7
Loyola Marymount	I(AAA)	9	8	340	7.6
Loyola Chicago	I	7	8	200	2.5
Loyola New Orleans	I(NAIA)	4	5	105	3.2
Marquette	Ī	8	7	250	3.4
Regis	11	5	6	175	2.0
Rockhurst	11	6	6	210	10.7
St. Joseph's	I	10	10	400	12.1
St. Louis	I	5	6	250	4.1
St. Peter's	ľ	10	9	375	12.6
Santa Clara	l	8	9	323	7.4
Seattle	II(NAIA)	5	7	175	5.6
Spring Hill	I(NAIA)	7	8	189	16.8
UDM	I(AAA)	8	8	240	5.7
USF	ľ(AAA)	7	7	280	7.8
University of Scranton	Ш	10	9	350	8.7
Wheeling	II	8	8	270	20.3
Xavier	I	7	7	240	6.2

Source: Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities

undoubtedly have a lower percentage. Harvard University, for example, is represented by 1,500 athletes or 23 percent of the undergraduate student body on some forty-one Division 1 teams.

However, there are sports and there are sports and there are athletes and athletes. The rationale for maintaining a Division IA football team with eightyfive scholarships in a Jesuit university will differ in many respects from that of a fencing team with no scholarships. It will be useful therefore to divide sports programs into two categories. In the first category are Division 1 teams, with scholarship athletes, a potential for media coverage as well as revenue from gate receipts and TV and radio contracts. In the second category are other NCAA Division 1 as well as Division 2, Division 3, as well as NAIA Division 1 and NAIA Division 2 teams. The NCAA Division 1 category includes football, men's ice hockey, baseball (men), softball (women), men's and women's basketball and men's and women's soccer teams. Boston College is one of the two Catholic universities -- Notre Dame being the other -- and the only Jesuit university to field a Division 1A football team. Holy Cross, Fordham, Georgetown and Fairfield have Division 1AA football Boston College, Holy Cross and Fairfield support Division I hockey programs. Many Jesuit universities have Division I men's and women's basketball teams, some of whom appear regularly in the NCAA March Madness basketball tournament. Several have successful men's and women's soccer teams as well as track and field, baseball and softball teams. Thus there is great diversity among the sports programs at Jesuit universities, and no one template can adequately describe and justify the sports programs at all twenty-eight schools. My remarks in the remainder of this essay will be based therefore on my experience at one university, Boston College, over the past twenty years and will be relevant to other universities only by an appropriate adaptation.

Why should Boston College allocate its limited resources to an intercollegiate sports program when other needs -- faculty salary increments, library acquisitions, financial aid for undergraduates -- also have a claim on university resources? Why buy into the competitive American mystique that extols winning

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at any price? Why dilute the student body with athletes in place of the more academically qualified? Why run the risk of being associated with activities that might besmirch the good name of a Jesuit institution? In the face of these questions why should a Jesuit university sponsor major intercollegiate sports?

Let me count the ways. University sports 1) stimulate school spirit, 2) serve enrollment goals, 3) promote alumni attachment, and 4) develop *mens sana* in corpore sano. After developing each of these points I will offer a concluding remark.

School Spirit. If a person takes pride in one's community many benefits ensue; similarly, disaffection from one's environment and associates can make life unpleasant and a person listless. Last winter a freshman at Boston College told me that he first realized he was "home" at BC when he rushed the court following a rousing basketball victory over arch-rival Syracuse. "home" he reduced some of the usual freshman anxieties about life away from his family. "At home" at Boston College he will now be able to focus his energies on the academic and cocurricular activities that constitute the heart of college life. A productive life becomes more possible with pride in one's community. Intercollegiate sports is one way of generating such pride in one's university.

Spectator sports are enjoyable to view; often the lasting memories from college surround an exciting game. A fall afternoon, thousands of cheering fans, marching bands, colorful cheer leaders and the two rival teams competing on the field -- this spectacle can cause a great rush of adrenaline for many -- students, alumni, parents and others only loosely associated with a university. Years later friendships will be renewed by recalling the thrill of an overtime hockey victory for a national championship or the dismay at being stuffed four times at the one yard line in a frustrating loss. When evaluating college sports one must not be overly earnest. After all sports are intended to be a diversion; they are meant to be

entertaining. The banter and sociability surrounding a sporting event bring enjoyment to many. I think that is good. Some angry philippics against college sports seem to stem from a fear that someone somewhere is having a good time. It has been remarked that the Puritans were opposed to bear-baiting not so much because of the pain it caused the bears as for the entertainment afforded spectators.

Boston College offers orientation programs each summer for 2200 matriculating students as well as parallel programs for parents. returning home the parents ransack the Boston College bookstore for sweatshirts and caps emblazoned with eagles and the school seal replete with its mystifying Greek motto. These sweatshirts and caps will be worn proudly in several weeks upon the parents' return for a Parents' Weekend that concludes with a Boston College football game. This sporting event thus becomes an event that allows parents to identify in a special way with the university that will be their children's home for the next four years. Is it too much to claim that this football game initiates a new stage in the relationship between parents and the young adults who have left home, really, for the first time? At the very least this sporting event annually becomes a focal point for celebrating the Boston College extended family.

Enrollment Goals. In addition to fostering a union of students and parents with their university, can sports also be an instrument to achieve various enrollment goals? Do sports attract students to a university? Do they attract certain targeted students? Are there any costs associated with this strategy? Admission officers at colleges debate whether there is a "Flutie factor" in a student's choice of college. Does a successful sports program, a "hail Mary" Doug Flutie pass, a Northwestern Rose Bowl victory, the Knute Rockne tradition at Notre Dame, Gonzaga's remarkable basketball success -- do these sporting phenomena actually attract qualified students to a university? I suspect Notre Dame feels it does.

But what about Boston College, Northwestern, and Gonzaga? Some years ago a bright student from Hattiesburg, Mississippi told me that he first thought of attending Boston College after watching on TV Boston College defeat Notre Dame with a last second field goal. I have considerable anecdotal evidence derived from numerous conversations over lunch in the Eagles Nest at Boston College that a strong sports program is one of the factors that does attract academically strong students to Boston College.

One "Hail Mary" pass won't do the trick, however. Evidence supporting the existence of a simple "Flutie Factor" is thin. Boston College's applications were growing in the years before that pass in the Boston College-Miami game and have continued to rise even though most high school seniors today may well not be influenced by a 1984 football game. But the presence of sports at a school does appeal to students. They enjoy the sociability of attending games with fellow students; they take pride in attending a university that is known and recognized by their peers. Students look forward to pulling out that sweatshirt purchased during orientation and wearing it in the mall at Thanksgiving or when flying home at Christmas knowing their university will be recognized. One rousing victory alone doesn't generate this recognition; but one big game can call attention to the university especially if you are from Hattiesburg and thinking of going to Notre Dame.

Can a sports program be used to attract certain kinds of students? All Jesuit universities have more female than male undergraduate students. In several the female percentage approaches two-thirds of the total enrollment. A generation ago there were more men than women attending college. Today fifty-four percent of four-year college students are women. So again Jesuit universities find themselves in the mainstream of American higher education. How should Jesuit universities respond to this development? No

response would be called for if Jesuit universities wished to become women's colleges. But since presumably this is not the case and there probably is a tipping point beyond which both women and men who wish to attend a coed university may be deterred from attending a university whose enrollment is becoming single sex, Jesuit universities must be concerned about this growing female/male disparity.

A carefully designed sports program may offer some assistance in addressing this problem. Certain sports are more popular among men than women. Ice hockey is one of these and perhaps also football. These are also, along with basketball, the principal collegiate spectator sports. experience at Boston College suggests that a carefully designed array of sports might well be useful in making a university more male-friendly. Such efforts, of course, will need to be complemented by other considerations such as the mix of a university's academic offerings before the female/male ratio issue can be appropriately addressed. Can a sports program be designed to attract minority students? Perhaps. Georgetown University's appeal to African-American students has been enhanced by the high visibility and great success of its basketball program with stars like Patrick Ewing and the tutelage of John Thompson.

Do the students participating in the Division 1 sports program at Boston College seriously compromise the overall intellectual climate of the university? Or do athletes pursue their studies in a manner similar to other students and graduate with their classmates? The answers to these two questions are probably not and probably yes. Granted, athletes are sometimes admitted to the university under different criteria than many of their fellow students. But athletes are not the only students so admitted in this fashion. All universities balance many institutional and societal goals in deciding which students to enroll. Consequently the student body is enriched in ways that would not be achieved by pursuing an

admission policy defined exclusively in terms of SATs and class rank.

Athletes at Boston College graduate at the same rate as do other BC students, ranking Boston College consistently with Duke, Northwestern and Notre Dame among universities with major sports programs. Over the past eight years the average graduation rate for football players at Boston College was 87 percent, while the graduation rate for all BC students during that period fluctuated between 85 and 88 percent.

 Alumni Affiliation. Acute observers have remarked two major differences between American and European universities. In contrast with the European experience, alumni of American universities continue long after graduation to identify with alma mater, maintain close contact with fellow alumni and financially support their universities; and American universities, unlike their European counterparts, have popular intercollegiate sports programs. There is little doubt that for many alumni an emotional attachment to their university is maintained by a continuing interest in the university's sports exploits. Apparently Europeans have long been puzzled by this American fascination with sports. The Jesuit publication *Company* reports that the first Italian Jesuits at Santa Clara in the 1850s "...were surprised at the American love of athletic competition. There are no conversations 'in which sports are not spoken of, complained a newly arrived Italian." (*Company* (Summer 2001), p. 19)

Many university functions to entice alumni back to campus are scheduled in connection with sporting events -- homecoming football games, for example. Boston College held the kickoff for its capital campaign in northern California on the eve of the Boston College-Stanford football game last fall. This sporting event was a catalyst that energized support for the campaign among alumni, parents and friends of the university.

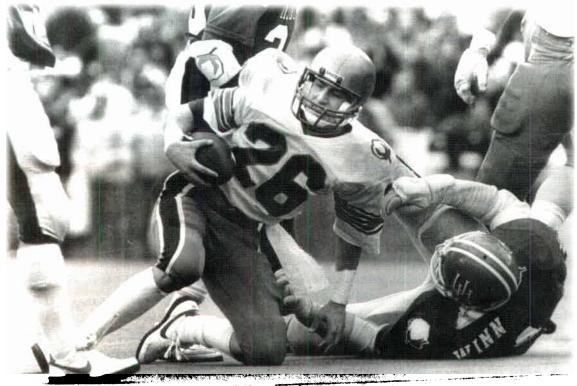


Photo Courtesy of Boston College

Mens Sana in Corpore Sano. The vast majority of the nearly ten thousand athletes in Jesuit universities will never appear on television, never hear the roar of thousands of fans cheering a last minute slam dunk to win a conference championship, nor cherish a hope, however remote, for a professional career. But all athletes follow a rigorous training regimen, balance their team obligations with other demands of college life and in the process learn the meaning of teamwork, discipline, and the sacrifice associated with the pursuit of a common goal. All athletes at some moment experience defeat and then must move on with their lives; they will also taste success and it is hoped will learn to be gracious. These are important lessons learned from competitive sports that are fully consistent with the Jesuit educational goal of promoting emotional and spiritual maturity among students.

Conclusion

Many charges against intercollegiate sports have some validity -- promotion of an irresponsible sports mania, exploitation of minority students who receive neither diplomas nor become professional athletes, and the dilution of the student body with academically-challenged athletes. These charges, however, do not seem compelling when brought against Jesuit universities, at least not in my experience at Boston College. There certainly are costs associated with college sports; some are the costs of vigilance against the charges discussed in this paper; some are the financial costs of supporting coaches, team travel, and facilities as well as tuition remission in those universities with athletic scholarships. The financial costs as a percent of a university's total operating budget may be highest in those schools with modest sports programs since these programs generate little or no revenue. Dollars spent on sports indeed are drawn from limited university resources that also must finance directly academic activities as well as various support functions, such as parking facilities, dining halls and wellness centers. The Jesuit university must balance its budget by allocating limited resources across these

competing needs based on the judgment of how much each contributes to the overall mission of the university. In my judgment an intercollegiate sports program makes a positive contribution to Jesuit education and so is entitled to sit at the budgetary table and receive an appropriate piece of the financial pie.

Sports are an integral part of the American higher education scene; on the whole their contribution is positive; and they have much to contribute to the Jesuit educational mission. Jesuit universities would be ill-advised to turn their backs on their sports tradition in some misguided desire to become pure. Recall Charles Péguy's observation -- one can keep one's hands entirely clean only if one were to cut off one's arms. Sometimes the price for absolute cleanliness is too high.

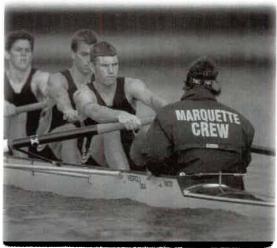


Photo Courtesy of Marquette Office of Public Affairs

ENDNOTES

¹Ronald A. Smith, Sports and Freedom, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, p.214

²Murray Sperber, Beer and Circus, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000, 380pp.

³James Shulman and William Bowen, *The Game of Life: College Sports and Educational Values*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001, 447pp.