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**Review of *Before March Madness: The Wars for the Soul of
College Basketball***

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Book Reviews

Kurt Edward Kemper. *Before March Madness: The Wars for the Soul of College Basketball*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020. 320 pp. Cloth \$125. ISBN: 978-0-252-04326-0; Paper. \$24.95 ISBN: 978-0-252-8518-5; E-book \$14.95 ISBN: 978-0-252-05214-9.

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There is *not one* game summary, player analysis, or statistical comparison ubiquitously associated with sports in *Before March Madness: The Wars for the Soul of College Basketball* by Kurt Edward Kemper. Instead, this book is about the administrative “civil wars” from the 1920s through the end of the 1950s that defined the future of college basketball and, in effect, college athletics. Kemper details the unsuccessful fight by small colleges to keep basketball from becoming highly commercialized in the hands of the larger universities, as had happened with football.

Since its inception, collegiate football cast a “long shadow” over collegiate athletics in general, according to Kemper. By the early 1900s, football was big business due to sizeable ticket revenue, coaches’ salaries, and widespread media coverage. “Because of the game’s commercialization and its intense popular importance, football also witnessed preferential admissions for talented players, under-the-table inducements from alumni, and questionable academic practices” (pp. 12–13). *Before March Madness* depicts a quixotic, yet noble, effort to stop college basketball from following a similar path.

The book articulates the struggle through seven chapters. The first depicts a unified college effort to keep control of basketball away from Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) governance. This initial unification crumbled when college tournaments began, which is articulated in the second chapter.

The third chapter shows how the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), which evolved from a college basketball tournament, represented promise for the small college revolt. Race and its role in the development of both the NAIA and NCAA as well as the small college–large university disagreements are discussed in Chapters 5 and 6. The final chapter discusses the NCAA targeting the NAIA to maintain its dominance as the governing collegiate athletic body.

Kemper begins by noting a united collegiate front first emerged in opposing the AAU in defining the developing rules of basketball as well as organizing the first tournaments. Colleges argued many AAU basketball teams were semiprofessional, such as the squads organized by corporations whose players were paid employees. In addition, the AAU became the gateway to the U.S. Olympics for most sports, including basketball, when it was added in 1936, which threatened to usurp college membership under its governance. Thus, the AAU saw itself as the overlord of all amateur sports, including college basketball.

To fight back, college officials formed their own rules committee and coaching association and, in a move to build membership, the nascent NCAA passed a “home-rule principle” in 1907 that its regulations would not be binding on an individual college. Thus, universities could enjoy association benefits while maintaining independence, which became significant in the coming “civil war.” The “home-rule” policy reduced the NCAA into nothing more than a debating society (Gurney, 2017; Smith, 2011). Kemper noted: “This allowed the barons of college athletics to operate largely without oversight, to disdain those who would presume to restrain them, and to view college athletics as their fiefdom” (p. 14).

In the second chapter, Kemper explains how the battle to control tournaments ultimately ended

the unity among the colleges. He wrote: "...the rise of college basketball and the creation of its major postseason tournaments in the 1930s was a story of paranoid jealousies, intense turf wars, and overreactions that were both created by and representative of the civil war with the AAU..." (p. 36). All colleges and universities, regardless of size or resources, were considered equal competitors.

The highly commercialized National Invitational Tournament (NIT) run out of Madison Square Garden in New York City capitalized on sport tourism and media promotion of larger programs and paid teams to participate. The NIT was an independent college tournament, under no official collegiate organization. The National Association of Intercollegiate Basketball (NAIB) Tournament, began in 1937 and directed by Baker University's head coach Emily Liston, was headquartered in Kansas City. The NAIB evolved into the NAIA and catered to small colleges, the majority of which were NCAA members. The NAIB, guided after Liston's death by Al Duer, who left coaching Pepperdine University, developed into a competitor of the NCAA with national tournaments offered in several sports, all catering to the small college goal of keeping athletics under academic control. The NCAA tournament began in 1939.

Kemper articulates how the smaller liberal arts colleges, mostly from the Northeast and Midwest, sought to temper commercialization straddled the Kansas City tournament and emerging NAIA with NCAA membership. Within the NCAA, the small college reformers for two decades advocated abolishing preferential athletic admissions, keeping athletic budgets as an institutional line-item not dependent on gate receipts (thus equating sports with any other student endeavor), limiting financial aid to academic and financial need, and equating coaches with instructors.

With the "home-rule principle" stopping true regulation within the NCAA, the large universities with commercialized programs, prevented the small-college majority from gaining control. The NCAA's Small College Committee became the voice for the smaller institutions to express their concerns. While it provided a vital platform, it also became an isolated chamber since larger universities blocked small colleges from other committees, thus eliminating full participation in NCAA governance. "The problem, according to (Columbia University's Jesse Feiring Williams), was not so much that college athletics made money; it was that educators had allowed the making of money to be the sole condition on which decisions were made" (p. 96).

Kemper articulates the treatment of the small colleges by the NCAA and the allure of the NAIA through the story of Historically Black Colleges

and Universities (HBCUs). Strict racial segregation was maintained in college basketball prior to World War II with only seven Black players participating nationally at predominantly white institutions. Following the war, the notable programs in the South held to white-only policies, as did the Big Ten, which allowed non-white participation in some sports, such as track and field, but not in basketball, wrestling, and swimming. This was the case despite professional sports slowly desegregating at the time. The plight of the HBCUs was tumultuous. Mostly located in the South, the HBCUs formed their own conferences and held their own successful postseason tournament—the Colored Intercollegiate Athletic Association (CIAA) Tournament—with the aspiration to earn a bid to the NCAA tournament for its winner. The NCAA selection committee, however, annually denied the HBCUs based on their teams not playing against big-time programs during the season, claiming they could not determine how good the HBCU teams were without better competition. But playing bigger-named programs was impossible since southern laws banned interracial competition alongside northern implicit racism. Larger institutions simply did not schedule smaller colleges even when not for racist reasons, subsequently shutting them out from postseason consideration.

The NAIB (foundation of the NAIA) touted equalitarian policy in considering all teams regardless of size. Even though it did not formally address race, the NAIB was in fact segregationist. Manhattan College, a small Catholic school from New York City, in 1948, called this into question and refused to participate although it had no Black players, forcing the NAIB to address its restrictive policies. Other teams, both small and large, followed suit. The relentless work by HBCU's Black coaches, such as North Carolina College's John McLendon and Central State College's Mark Greene, drove both the NCAA and NAIA into confronting their practices. McLendon eventually would become one of the most notable coaches in college basketball as well as in professional basketball and earned entry into several basketball Hall of Fames, including the NAIA's (Katz, 1990; Katz, 2007).

NCAA claimed it could not force integration or white teams to play Black teams; however, Duer, fought for and achieved integration of the NAIB and NAIA after several years of struggle, first for white colleges with Black players and eventually for HBCU teams. This was not only in the realm of basketball, but it also extended to the segregationist policies of the Kansas City hospitality industry so Black players not only participated but had equal off-court experiences. By the mid-1950s, the NAIA under Duer's leadership fully embraced the HBCUs and Black players, a stance long avoided by the NCAA. As Kemper summarizes the effect of integration and its results:

But the struggles of historically black colleges and the support they eventually received from the NAIA inadvertently became wrapped up in the larger turmoil within the NCAA over the role of championships, the sectarian infighting involving small colleges, and the possible division into classifications. Quite simply, the NAIA's position as a safe haven for small colleges seeking a level playing field and for black colleges seeking access to national sporting culture now made the NAIA an undeniable threat to the NCAA, a threat the NCAA had no intention of ignoring or tolerating (p. 197).

In response, the NCAA, under its first executive director, Walter Byers, set out to diminish the NAIA as an effective alternative.

In the final chapter, the assault on the NAIA consisted of forcing the small colleges to decide between the two national athletic organizations since many belonged to both or competed in the NAIB tournament as NCAA members. When forced, the small colleges sided with the NCAA. Even original NAIA members bolted for the larger organization under the pressure. The allure of the NCAA was grounded in prestige gained by the larger state flagship universities as both academic research leaders and the allure of money they could earn in football and basketball. A reluctant culmination of this effort was creation of a small college postseason NCAA tournament in 1958 to appease those who left the NAIA or remained with the NCAA. Eventually, this evolved into creation of the three divisions in the mid-1970s—an organizational structure among NCAA members that remains today.

In the conclusion of the book, Kemper notes that the commercialization of sport continues unabated today:

Most recently in 2015, the so-called autonomy plan once again demonstrated the NCAA's privileged member demographic by essentially allowing the five most commercialized conferences to set their own rules within the organization. In each instance the association faced tremendous external and internal pressures and the possibility of revolutionary change yet managed to emerge little different from before with the interests of commercialized athletics as the organization's primary concern (p. 232).

This is an assertion supported by several other scholars (e.g., Clotfelter, 2011; Gurney, 2017; Smith, 2011).

The history of the evolution of college basketball from a fledgling enterprise toward the financial behemoth has been documented (see Carlson,

2017; Crowley, 2006). Scholars have also previously depicted the dilemma for smaller colleges to either oppose the onslaught of commercialization in athletics or join the spending acceleration to gain notoriety (see Brubaker, 1976; Smith, 2011; Thelin, 1994). Yet, Kemper's work adds to the scholarship on intercollegiate athletics by articulating how the institutional opposition to racial integration in college basketball became an impetus for the growth of the NAIA and eventual backlash from the NCAA to retain small college membership. While other sports historians have previously explored the NAIA's embrace of the HBCUs (Crowley, 2006) as well as their plight for athletic opportunity (Carlson, 2017; Cooper, 2014; Hawkins, 2015; White, 2019), Kemper's detailed research drawing on college officials' personal correspondence and the NCAA's Small College Committee records provides an added depth of understanding. Furthermore, this book contributes to the understanding of the formation of three divisions in the NCAA, and it begs the question why a complete, updated history of the NAIA has not been written (Hoover, 1958; Land, 1997).

Before March Madness is well researched, relying on primary archival and manuscript material including correspondence and organizational records. It is well written and maintains a captivating flow. Minor flaws do not detract from the book's contribution. Kemper's bent toward the NAIA is apparent. At times, assumptions of athletic knowledge are asked of the reader—such as knowing the power of today's March Madness finances, not fully articulated despite the book's title. Also, a voice not sufficiently heard is that of the small state college, which seemed to hold the sway in which way the small college reform effort tilted. One question left unanswered is: Did those smaller state colleges simply follow their state's flagship institution?

Kemper also curiously did not use Walter Byers' book *Unsportsmanlike Conduct: Exploiting College Athletes*, written after his retirement from the NCAA. Byers, in reflection, relatively ignores the NAIA, small colleges and Division III, and the plight of HBCUs while criticizing the escalation of commercialism under his watch, which supports Kemper's thesis (Byers, 1995; Smith, 2011). However, these points do not deter from the work. Anyone interested in understanding how the current college athletic structure and situation developed will gain from this book.

Today, college sports are at the threshold most feared by the early reformers who fought to keep athletics completely under the academic umbrella. Their efforts and arguments, even though futile in the end, are what Kemper skillfully articulates. The U.S. Supreme Court in summer 2021 is expected to rule on an antitrust case against the NCAA claiming it has illegally limited income potential

of athletes, which could open the door to professionalism. Depending on how the Supreme Court rules and its aftereffect, redefining the purpose of college athletics—or at least a major segment of it—may be in order. Thus, this sport history book has relevance as background to the current affairs in collegiate athletics.

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