10-1-2002

In Response: "Sports and Jesuit Universities"

James L. Sankovitz

Follow this and additional works at: http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations

Recommended Citation
In Response

Sports and Jesuit Universities

James L. Sankovitz

Issue #21 of Conversations (on sports in Jesuit universities) misses the mark by not considering the different publics that intercollegiate athletics serve.

I regularly read Conversations carefully, but the last issue attracted unusual attention. "Sports and Jesuit Universities" was a very noble try, but only a near miss! The contributors were substantial in their respective contributions but mostly self-serving, at best.

There is no easy way to describe intercollegiate athletic problems, let alone suggest corrective action. Division One NCAA aspirations versus Division Three is akin to professional sports' "large market" versus "small market." "Spirituality" as an answer is nice, has some potential, but in the long run just doesn't work.

Some of my specific reactions (not in order and certainly not in graded importance with many of the excellent points made in the various contributions to the series of articles) include:

1. Jesuit campuses (and others) send strong signals when coaches are paid much more handsomely than faculty. The 1999-2000 IRS Form 990 reports disclose that five Jesuit campuses included various coaches as among their highest paid employees, with upwards of $500,000 of income, not counting separate contracts for Radio/TV, summer camps and shoe contracts. Not one of the contributors to the Conversations essays mentioned that.

2. BC [Boston College] properly counts ice hockey as among its valued Division I sports. That's a territorial sway. Folks in the South would claim that volleyball, with its native habitat familiarity, is just as important. The same could be said of other sports. Such disparities just get in the way of reasonable debate over what to do about basic problems.

3. Club sports throughout was given short shrift. Yet, therein is the most fertile ground for applying the spirituality concept, as well as the notion of athletics as a way of improving physical shape.

4. The thread of athletic competition throughout fell short. To ignore the even larger transformation of "amateur" sports through the professional phase (let alone the consequences of similar change in the conduct of Olympic competition) is a head-in-the-sand approach. There is fundamentally no difference between the transformation of Olympic competition as between individuals to nation versus nation as there is Division One NCAA versus Division Three. Is BC a more substantial campus because it has a football team AND a law school than Georgetown, with basketball and a medical school?

5. To ignore the fundamental monetary mindset athletic directors have taken towards Title IX is tragic. It's easy to explain. It's not unlike the glass half-full half-empty. Campuses drop male sports teams in order to achieve parity with women's teams. The alternative of expanding women's teams to achieve proportionality is dismissed too easily because of revenue-generation reasons.

6. Murray Sperber has been a lone voice in the desert crying "shame" for many more years than simply those attributed to his anti-Bobby Knight passages. Jesuit Bill Neenan should at least get his reference to Sperber's campus correct.

7. Does athletic success equate with alumni attachment? There are far too many instances of the reverse to even consider this as a major contributing factor. After Marquette won the 1977 NCAA basketball championship, alumni contributions actually DECREASED.

8. Fr. Neenan's references to students moving away from home to embrace the excitement of athletic

James L. Sankovitz is former Vice President for Governmental Affairs at Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
victories on campus does violent disservice to families
who elect to have children attend local campuses. But,
maybe BC doesn't know better! (After reading his text,
I tend to agree with the unnamed panelist who gently
suggested Neenan's was a "macho, sexist and tribal"
contribution).

9. Former ACE president Bob Atwell may take an
extreme viewpoint (blame it on his previous experience
as a vice president at the University of Wisconsin!), but
I have long thought that he was simply trying to
motivate other academic leaders to understand just
how serious the economic/professionalism mess has
become in intercollegiate athletics.

10. We at Marquette have been spoiled. We have
had the benefit of a few sports people who have
allowed reality to influence athletic-related decision-
making. Bill Chandler comes to mind. So does Jack
Nagle, as does Frank Murray. More recently, we can
recount the Al McGuire impact. (a) What other
collegiate coach being lured to the pros claimed he
would go only if he was paid one dollar more than the
highest player? (b) What other collegiate coach was
held to his contract in the fashion that Ray McAuley
held Al? (and could become an example for other
places).

11. There is no doubt that this entire topic is
worthy of some serious deliberation, including that
which includes Jesuit spirituality and Jesuit campus
budgets. But we shouldn't forget some of the many
more basic notions that guide our attitudes. Again, I'll
call upon Al McGuire for a comment that cuts to the
chase. "I just don't understand. I've got a seventeen year
old kid wearing underwear at the free throw line and
the crowd is yelling profanities at him. If it was golf,
everyone would want silence and concentration."

Go figure, as the current idiom states.

I do not demean the issues' efforts. It's an
important topic. The major problem is that important
segments of the many involved publics have carved out
isolated remedies that have little realistic chance of
success.

Thank you and best wishes on future issues.