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"Signs of the Times" in Intercollegiate Athletics

By Patrick Kelly, S.J.

There is currently a crisis of meaning in sport in the United States, and it is related to the emergence of what Harvard political philosopher Michael Sandel has called a "market society." According to Sandel, the shift from having a market economy to being a market society began in the early 1980s when there was a new emphasis from political leaders in England and the U.S. on the free market and deregulation as essential to prosperity and freedom. In a market society, we regard an increasing number of human activities in terms of their market value. The problem, according to Sandel, is that sometimes market values "crowd out non-market values worth caring about."

Such a trend is clearly evident in U.S. sport and in intercollegiate athletics. While intercollegiate athletics have had a commercial component ever since they were first sponsored by schools, their market orientation has now reached unprecedented levels. The advent of 24 hour cable television coverage of sports played an important role in this process. ESPN began its 24-hour coverage in 1980, and several other cable channels have been added since then. In large part due to increased television coverage, intercollegiate athletics has become a much more significant part of the entertainment landscape in the United States than ever before. These developments led to the recent massive conference reshuffling which was driven by the desire of universities to form strong football conferences that could obtain lucrative television contracts. In the process several long-standing rivalries and geographical ties were abandoned. Student athletes in many conferences now must travel further to compete, which has led to an increase in the number of missed classes and is more costly to the universities.

In this context, there has been an arms race in spending on athletics. According to the Knight Commission, spending on athletics at Division 1 public universities has recently been increasing twice as fast as spending on academics. This spending is for such items as larger stadiums and exorbitant coaches' salaries, which will help schools recruit the top ath-

letes in order to *win*. The thinking is that winning teams fill the stadiums and open the door to television dollars, which will lead to increased revenues. Of course, a winning team will come about only if there is a year-round, professional-style training regimen which leaves student athletes with less time for academic pursuits and no chance of internships, study abroad experiences, and the like.

Given all of these developments, much discussion is occurring about the fact that student athletes are the only ones not benefitting financially. In 2014 a regional director of the National Labor Relations Board declared that football players at Northwestern were employees of the university and could form a union. In the same year Ed O'Bannon won a lawsuit against the NCAA challenging the use of images of former student athletes for commercial purposes. Jeffrey Kessler has filed a lawsuit which challenges the ceiling on compensation paid to student athletes for their "services to the big business of college sports."

In an indirect response to such issues raised by current and former student athletes, universities in the Power 5 conferences (ACC, SEC, Big 10, Pac 12, Big 12) declared themselves autonomous from the NCAA to make up their own rules with regard to areas such as providing more financial support to student athletes, flying families to tournaments, recruiting, and so forth. While the autonomous ruling might keep student athletes and attorneys at bay temporarily, it was short-sighted because it did not address fundamental issues related to commercialization and professionalization. In fact, the Power 5 conferences put a new distance between themselves and other athletic conferences, and this means they will now be getting more of the best players and the most lucrative television contracts and corporate sponsorships. In other words, the rich will keep getting richer.

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Saint Joseph University goes up against University of Connecticut.

The framework within which we are thinking about problems in intercollegiate athletics and higher education is inadequate. And the resources we use to reflect on the problems can't extricate us from them. For example, our understanding of freedom in a market society tends to be limited to democratic traditions and the free market. Within this framework, it makes sense that schools and conferences should be able to find the best television market for themselves and try to raise as much money as possible. We recognize that they are free to spend as much as they like to build winning programs, looking for a return on their investment. Even the NCAA, which is supposed to be safeguarding the integrity of college sports, is free to sign lucrative television contracts. Most reformers don't question this framework and argue instead for a different distribution of revenues.

What is missing is any acknowledgement of what Ignatius of Loyola refers to as "interior freedom," namely freedom from "disordered inclinations." For Ignatius, the most problematic of these disordered inclinations is to wealth. In his view, persons and societies get off track by being ensnared by money, which leads to the honor and esteem of this world, culminating in surging pride. From this dynamic flow all other vices. This lens provides us with a very accurate description of what is happening in intercollegiate athletics at the moment. But because we don't acknowledge interior freedom as a category, these dynamics remain largely out of our awareness.

The recent developments in intercollegiate athletics have impacted and will continue to impact Jesuit universities. For example, shortly after Seattle University returned to Division 1 status and joined the Western Athletic Conference, most of

the schools exited the conference to join large football conferences. Because the schools that subsequently joined the conference were located at a much greater distance, Seattle University student athletes now must travel further to compete. The increased travel results in students missing considerably more classes, and costs to the university are higher.

The Power 5 autonomy ruling will have the most impact on Jesuit universities such as Marquette, Georgetown, Creighton, and Xavier in the Big East conference and other universities like Gonzaga. They are the Jesuit schools that can currently compete with the national powers in men's and women's basketball. The schools in the Power 5 conferences will now be able to offer recruits deals that Jesuit schools will have a hard time matching, at least from a financial perspective.

In the next article I will discuss how Jesuit schools in Divisions I, II, and III are uniquely positioned to offer a critique of the current state of intercollegiate athletics and help us begin a deliberation of what the "non-market values worth caring about" are in college sports and how these values are related to the ends of higher education. I will write about the role that coaches, athletic directors, academics, presidents, and boards of trustees at Jesuit universities and athletic conferences such as the Big East and the West Coast Conference can play in this process. ■

This article is the first of two articles about intercollegiate athletics in higher education by Patrick Kelly. The second article will appear in the online edition of *Conversations* in September 2015.