

Sports on Campus

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The year before I arrived at George Washington University as president, the men's basketball team's record was 1-27. Yes, the order of the numbers is correct: one win and 27 losses — a fact prominently reported by *Sports Illustrated*!

I invited the coach in for a chat. "Plausibility is what I'm looking for," I said. "When coming to a game, fans need to believe that the team just might win. You can't regularly field losing teams, unless you are lovingly watching my own alma mater's football team, which won the Rose Bowl in 1934 and has been going down ever since. It is important to have an even chance of coming out ahead."

The coach seemed surprised that I showed interest. It was clearly time to give the team a fresh start. One of my early hires was a new coach, who led the team to seven post-season tournaments in his eight years on the job (four N.C.A.A.s and three N.I.T.s). That was plausibility. And it was also strategic.

Sports can be a catalyst for change and a statement of institutional values. A high-quality sports program has the potential to increase a school's profile and thus can enhance admissions and faculty and staff hiring. Our goal was to attract students and faculty to a campus to which they *wanted* to come, rather than to a place where they *had* to go. Too

often, we were a "safety" school for applicants who had been denied their first choice. And, likewise, too often we hired our second candidates for faculty or dean positions.

In part, because of the national visibility that came from an investment in sports, both situations were reversed within a few years, starting with a surge in undergraduate applications. As the university became more selective, more students wanted to come, and applications increased even more. Not surprisingly, the better the quality of students, the easier it is to recruit comparable faculty and senior staff. The more notable the faculty, the more students want to study with them. Sports jump-started a process that has a symbiotic academic relationship that continually reinforces itself.

The shorthand for this picture is called "the Flutie effect," named after Doug Flutie, the Boston College quarterback whose dramatic "hail Mary" pass in 1984 won the game for B.C. over Miami. Flutie's play caused a jump in B.C.'s applications. George Mason University had the same experience after

it advanced to the Final Four in 2006.

First-rate coaches develop star-power celebrity on and off campus: Coach K at Duke, John Wooden at U.C.L.A. and Pat Summitt at the University of Tennessee, for example, are living legends. In the springtime, Mike Krzyzewski addresses prospective students on the Duke campus — those young people who have been admitted but not yet committed to enroll. He's a powerful motivator. And many coaches are committed to academic excellence, mentoring student-athletes, encouraging them to stay in school.

I'm concerned, however, that the compensation of coaches has gotten out of line and sends the wrong signal about a university's priorities. When a coach is the highest-paid person on the college's payroll and there aren't comparable resources for the faculty, it is time to call a time-out and take a hard look at strategic priorities.

A coach once told me he had an offer to move to another school where he would be paid a seven-figure salary. He indicated he wanted to stay with us and hoped that I would match his other offer. I thanked him for his past success with us and then wished him well in the new job. To accommodate him would have distorted the school's mission and conflicted with other strategic priorities.

Talent is a sought-after commodity. Athletes have special abilities, and those skills may tip the admissions scales, much as might occur for tuba players or women physics majors. The obligation of a university is to ensure that each student-athlete has as much time for scholarship as for practice. It is too easy for an undergraduate to believe that one more hour at the free throw line will improve his chance in the N.B.A. draft. But we know that not everyone has the talent and success of Michael Jordan or Kobe Bryant or LeBron James. More likely, torn ligaments, shoulder injuries or a lack of three-pointers will derail future dreams.

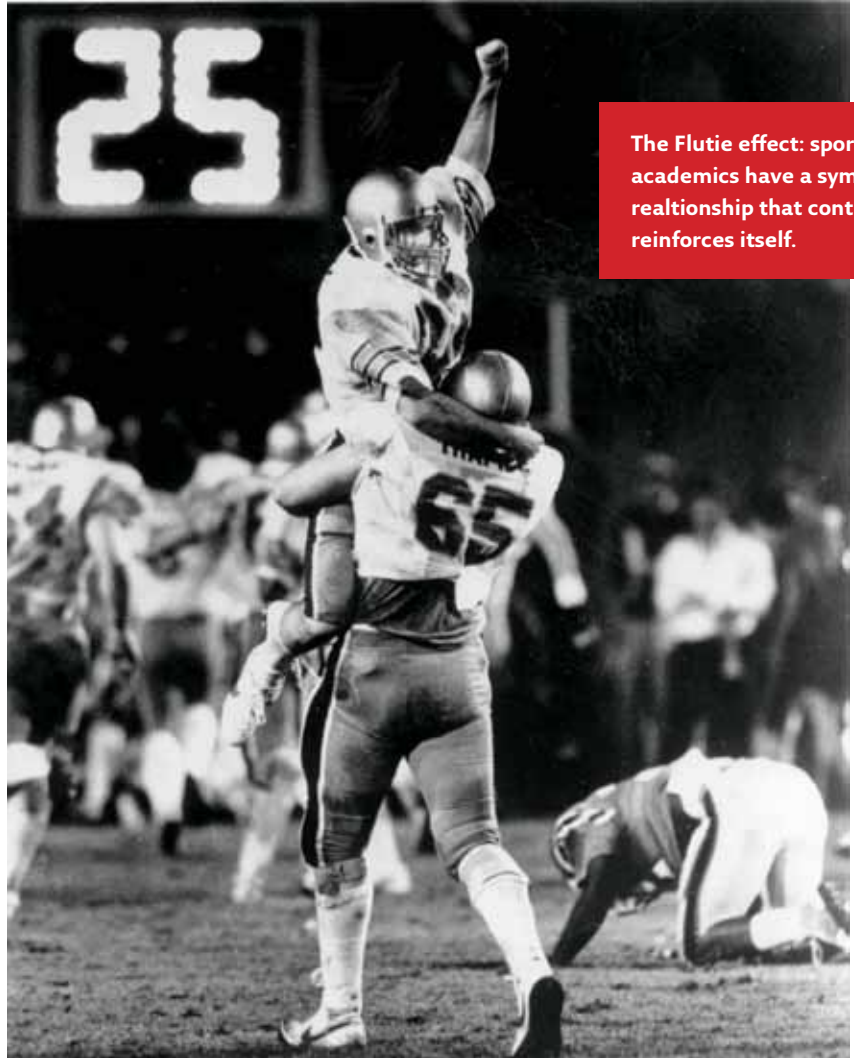
A fine athlete usually has ESP about his or her game — he or she learns to read an upcoming move seconds before the opponent begins execution. Coaches must continually remind student-athletes that thinking precedes reacting. Reading books, interpreting history and studying philosophy are as indispensable as mastering on-the-court maneuvers. Block the pass, recite a poem; get the rebound, solve an equation. Life is a series of drills.

To say that sports are an American pastime is to recite a cliché. But along with the hackneyed phrase comes another truism. Gambling, legal and illegal, goes hand in hand with sports, even on campuses, and this is troubling.

According to a recent survey, 45 percent of the American population filled out brackets for the 2012 N.C.A.A. men's and women's basketball tournaments — something that on the surface seems benign. Called by *The Wall Street Journal* “the most perfect three weeks in sports,” it is no surprise that office productivity across the nation diminishes during the weeks of the tournament. A friend who works at a public television station says that during March Madness, “Sesame Street” is replaced on the in-house feed by basketball games.

However, in 2007 the F.B.I. reported to the N.C.A.A. that \$2.5 billion was illegally wagered on March Madness. That staggeringly large figure alone — \$2.5 billion — qualifies as a definition of madness! Even more alarming is that at the same time, the F.B.I. also stated that nearly 30 percent of male college athletes and 7 percent of female athletes admitted to betting on sports beyond the basketball tournament. This is a sign that something is undermining the integrity of college athletics.

The world of college sports is divided into two distinct camps: the men's bracket and the women's bracket. Yes, but not only so. It is also divided into Division I and all other categories. Also, yes, but not only so. College athletics is most significantly divided into



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the world of football and all the other sports. Football rules the roost, on and off the field. It is the 800-pound gorilla in a world of sports that is itself made up of lots of heavyweights.

One of my blessings is that I have never been president of a university that had a football team, a sport that distorts campus life in too many ways. With notable exceptions, the costs to support the team frequently outweigh the benefits; student scholarship dollars are consumed by the offense, defense and special teams (and their coaches and support staff); multimillion-dollar facilities are used for only a few weekends, lying empty the rest of the year; the potential for injury to players is great; and in too many cases

athletes are devoted to N.F.L. dreams rather than to their education.

Many schools aspire to become athletic (rather than academic) powerhouses by allocating millions of dollars into upgraded arenas and playing fields in order to attract ticket buyers, entertaining fan clubs and outfitting marching bands at the expense of the academic side of the campus. Sports should be an ornament of campus life, not a defining presence.

And as a college president, one learns quickly a dominating factor of all of college sports is not the coaches, the players, the fans or the benefactors — it is the N.C.A.A., the godfather of regulators. To talk about that, however, we'd have to go into overtime. 