

## ***Journal of Issues in* Intercollegiate Athletics**

### **College Athletes' Rights and Well-Being: Critical Perspectives on Policy and Practice**

By Eddie Comeaux. Published 2017 by John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, M.D. (232 pages).

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The labyrinthine nature of the collegiate athletic landscape in the United States today requires multiple experts to adequately explain its complexities and nuances. Editor Eddie Comeaux was astute in his approach, bringing to light the interwoven issues of athletic participation, higher education, and the NCAA in the book *College Athletes' Rights and Well-Being: Critical Perspectives on Policy and Practice*. With each of the sixteen content chapters written by subject-matter experts, the level of detail achieved would not have been likely with a single-authored text. In each chapter, readers are given introductions to issues, a lens to explore those issues, and proposed recommendations for change. While not all objectives outlined in the preface were achieved, as a whole, the text provides a solid introduction to many of the issues plaguing Division I athletics and athletes.

The book is broken up into four sections which highlight the various elements of policy and practice that constrain and control athletes to the point of damaging their well-being or removing their citizenship rights. Not unexpectedly, the chapters are hyper-critical of the NCAA and of many institutional practices. The chapters, however, inconsistently pair practices back to the personal and social rights of athletes. Some chapters focus more on the system rather than exploring the resulting experiences and impacts on athletes living within the system. Therefore, some readers may not get what they anticipated when reading the title of the text. That being said, the diverse array of topics presented in the chapters provide an accurate snapshot of many of the contentious aspects of collegiate athletics today and how student-athletes fare within the intercollegiate landscape.

The first section contains a single chapter exploring the historical perspective of how athlete voices and choices have been limited. In Chapter 1, readers are introduced to organizations both inside and outside the NCAA whose primary function is to advocate for student-athletes. Framed within radical flank effects, the reader learns how the presence of similar groups can provide both positive and negative flank effects. While Chapter 16 presents

additional details about particular cases of engagement by these groups, Chapter 1 is underdeveloped in articulating how self-advocacy can be grown at the grassroots level so that these organizations are cognizant of places where their pressure and actions are needed.

The second section is where the bulk of athletes' rights issues are discussed. In the seven chapters within, issues related to both NCAA policies and federal guidelines showcase the extent to which student athlete rights are being diminished--if not extinguished. Chapter 2 does an excellent job of articulating who is bound by the National Letter of Intent and how that affords athletes the least amount of power within the contract. Chapters 3 and 4 are important in presenting the myth of amateurism and how Title IX regulations might fit into reform efforts, but could fall short depending on the reader's baseline knowledge. Understanding these chapters would be quite challenging for those with little knowledge of economic theory or the complex nature of Title IX enforcement. Chapter 5 effectively discusses the gaps and issues with concussion protocols and the policy guidelines outlining their treatment. As this issue clearly relates to overall athlete well-being, the reviewer was pleased to see the author of this chapter include classroom implications as well as sport implications.

Chapters 6 and 7 provide the most complete contextualization of content and blend of historical knowledge in their exploration of transfer restrictions and due process rights. Each of these chapters show clearly how these topics are issues of athlete rights (or lack of rights) and therefore explicitly contribute to the purpose of the book. Chapter 7 provides authentic recommendations for improvement as more variables are considered. By suggesting the use of items currently available, namely the Court of Arbitration of Sport, the process of change does not seem so insurmountable. The 2018 remarks of a Fox News reporter amounting to "shut up and dribble" is essentially the focus of Chapter 8. By first presenting collective bargaining history and policy, the author outlines the steps lawmakers and policymakers have taken to minimize the athlete voice in advocating for themselves or others like them.

Chapters 9 through 11 explore the commercial enterprise of college sports. While many aspects of Chapter 9 are redundant to other chapters in the text, Chapters 10 and 11 offer creative and innovative perspectives on issues publically discussed only at a surface level. Discussion of conference realignment in Chapter 10 explores both in practical and theoretical terms a method to understand the topic and the key data supporting these approaches. The presentation of competitive equilibrium placements for different market models in Chapter 11 allows the reader to see how shifting policy can clearly be related to positive change, but may never result in a truly equal playing field. The most important element introduced in this chapter is the idea of non-price competition.

Too often throughout the book, policies are emphasized or recommendations made without the contextualization of intangibles. The probability of winning, the prestige that comes with programs which have historically dominated, and an athlete's own values expand beyond the boundaries of policy and cannot be measured in any sort of objective way. Yet these things are all necessary to understand and be dealt with in attempts to restructure college athletics. Chapter 11, and later in Chapter 15, key variables are introduced which provide more grounded suggestions for improving athlete well-being. Aspects of athletic and cultural capital and the different experiences of first-generation college students have disparate impacts on athlete well-being and should therefore be considered in the broader context of possible changes. Most chapter recommendations are oversimplified and do not adequately address the steps necessary to change the mindsets of those in power so that they might be willing to explore the proposed policy alterations that would provide student athletes more rights.

Sport sociologists will appreciate Chapters 12-15 in the exploration of the unique experiences of minority athletes, namely African-Americans and Pacific Islanders. Situated in different contexts of PWI's and HBCU's, these chapters share the voices of athletes themselves and outline several strategies for improving athlete well-being already in place in select institutions. Greater understanding could have been achieved if a bit more detail of Pacific Islander and Polynesian cultures were presented, but what was provided was enough to demonstrate the adjustment difficulties felt by members of these populations who are recruited to play Division I sports in the United States.

The final content chapter revisited the Student-Athlete's Human Rights Project organization that was introduced in Chapter 1. The reader is presented details from cases at Colorado State University and Rutgers University where the Project got involved. Although it is disheartening to read how efforts to support athlete rights are seeing limited results, the chapter indirectly demonstrates the power that institutions have, how long it will likely take to resolve many of the issues discussed in the book and what it will take for real change to actually come about.

The overall layout of the book is conducive to semester scheduling of content as the chapters are relatively short and can be read in almost any sequence. The content is unbalanced in the depth, rigor, and writing style as some chapters would be more appropriate for graduate students and others are understandable to mid-level undergraduates. However, with scaffolding of information, instructors will find this book a solid supplement to courses related to collegiate athletics.

*College Athletes' Rights and Well-Being: Critical Perspectives on Policy and Practice* provides an introduction to issues being faced by those in intercollegiate athletics and explores the systematic decision making of those in power to curtail athlete rights and avoid consideration of how policies impact athlete well-being. While the chapters are all current and present timely information, not all are framed in the context of athlete rights and well-being. It is sometimes inferred by just changing policy, rights will be granted and well-being improved. This is an oversimplified view of the complex nature of both higher education and athletic administration. An additional layer in many chapters that explored how changes will result in explicit differences in athlete experiences would have strengthened the premises.