



Same Players, Different Game:

An Examination of the Commercial College Athletics Industry

By John C. Barnes.

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In *Same Players, Different Game: An Examination of the Commercial College Athletics Industry*, author John C. Barnes examines the big business of collegiate athletics and the contradictions that parallel this billion dollar industry. Public attachment of intercollegiate football and basketball are ingrained in our society, and top marketers at Fortune 500 companies like Walmart, AT&T, Amazon, and Home Depot know that fact. Barnes does a good job explaining how certain aspects of the sports industry are impervious to reform and criticism for their commercial nature. The author establishes competing viewpoints to support and/or reject his claims of commercial dominance of certain conferences and university athletic departments. The history of the field of intercollegiate athletics, past and current student-athlete concerns, and the future are all discussed in the text.

The first chapter focuses on the current business model of college sports. It is often said that college athletics are the front porch of the university. Changes in what American society expects of universities has shifted from exchanging new ideas and theories to implementing practical experiential knowledge. Universities have adjusted to this rationale by providing an educational product opposed to viewing it as a public good. Similarly, athletics has changed to become more commercialized. Barnes explains that a successful athletic department must be well integrated in the overall functions of the university to be competitive.

The second chapter provides a background on the history of intercollegiate athletics. Even the most seasoned sport historian will enjoy this chapter. Stories of stakeholders clashing on institutional control are shared from early histories of Michigan President James G. Angell and football coach Fielding Yost. In the early 1900s, college football was rampant with impropriety of non-student-athletes playing, athlete compensation, academic misconduct, and player deaths on the field. There was no regulation as these early iterations of sport were organized by students opposed to administrators. College football would have been eliminated without the influence of U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, who helped organize meetings between university administrators. These meetings led to the creation of the original national

governing body of college sports, the Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the United States (IAAUS), which later became the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). According to Barnes, this early version of the NCAA acted more as an advocacy group without much power.

The third chapter addresses what being a student-athlete means in the 21st Century, discussing student-athlete graduation rates, academic support systems, and other various issues that students face today. Barnes argues that college athletes should be viewed differently than how they were in the past to address student success and adjust to changing times. Like the general student body, student-athletes desire social and cognitive development while dedicating one-third of their lives devoted to their sport. Public perception of a college athlete lacking intelligence is a collective fallacy. Non-cognitive factors and stressors that Division I student-athletes face must be discussed by administrators and athletic department administration including lack of social support, alienation from their peers due to time demands, poorly developed study habits and skills, and stereotyping by instructors and classmates. Just like the general student population, student-athletes require dedicated advisement as they are also college students that strive to become the leaders of the next generation. Psychosocial development is crucial in order to address these challenges on any college campus that has athletes.

The fourth chapter examines the principles of amateurism and the college athlete. While the argument evolved in 2023, it is important to acknowledge the debate on collegiate sport amateurism and student-athlete compensation is not a revelation. In the late 1700s, literary societies recruited students for what we would call debate teams. After the war of secession, it was common practice for Ivy League schools to pay some of their players. Though the line of professionalism is evident now, the early days of college sport saw some faculty staunchly against compensating players. The first standards of amateurism were drafted in the precursor to the NCAA in the early 20th Century and inspired by the amateurism rules of Victorian England. Now, the NCAA altered its athlete compensation regulations due to the decisions in the *O'Bannon* and *Alston* lawsuits, which have compromised the NCAA amateurism policies. Interested observers of college athletics in the coming years will have much to converse regarding the NCAA's definition of amateurism as Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) must be a factor.

Commercialization of college sport is reviewed in the fifth chapter. Impacts of the business on college sport is felt by the metaphorical "arms race." The Power Five institutions build the latest and greatest facilities to match each other. This system ensures long term success, even with dedicated fan loyalty. Non-elite, mid-major programs cannot build like these powerful schools as they lack resources, talent, and support; thus, they struggle to join the elite ranks. Inequality is seen in media rights as well. The Power Five conferences become stronger with new schools being added, causing the mid-major conferences to scramble for new members to remain competitive in this power vacuum. Some speculate the top 40 athletic departments may separate themselves from the others due to the commercialization landscape. Other experts argue that excessive spending will yield what Barnes calls a winner-take-all market where excessive spending will cause athletic departments to cancel each other out as each will have what they need to win.

In the sixth chapter, Barnes considers the inequalities in America and within college sports. Revenue inequality is not a new development in sport. The biggest and most wealthy athletic programs built their stadiums in the late 19th century, creating advantages for recruiting and revenue generation. Currently, wealth inequality has only grown within the college sport

landscape affecting all sports and the industry's sustainability. Like chapter five, this chapter tackles more financial instability within Division I-Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) athletics, citing a capitalist market economy, perpetual funding for athletic departments, and the NCAA's governance structure as influential factors. As an example, in 2016, the NCAA distributed approximately \$57 million to the Big Ten Conference for its members that qualified for the 2016 NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament. In comparison, the NCAA awarded the non-Power Five Southland Conference below \$10 million. The Big Ten Conference had seven schools represented while the Southland Conference had one school, Stephen F. Austin University, in the 2016 tournament. Inequalities like this example were derived from the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in the 1984 *NCAA v. Board of Regents* case, which removed control of media revenue from the NCAA to the individual conferences and member schools. Though the case result proved to be beneficial to the Power Five conferences, the decision removed the NCAA's ability to evenly distribute a significant portion of the total revenues generated by the commercialized college athletics. Concurrently, media coverage has strengthened this inequality as networks like ESPN and Fox Sports highly promote the Power Five conference schools, establishing a "Pied Piper" effect on fans and potential recruits.

In the final chapter, Barnes discusses the unanswered questions that remain in sport. Title IX has not created the equal foothold for women in sport as originally intended. The gap that exists between men's and women's sports is only becoming a bigger disparity in the industry. Institutional responses to gender equity and Title IX issues are still not answered in this century. Barnes writes that Title IX still has a long road to go to achieve full compliance now that NIL compensation for athletes is allowed by all institutions. However, Title IX has been successful in changing the gender ideology in the college sports industry. Women in sport are celebrated and not seen an oddity in college campuses and athletic programs.

Overall the book is good overview of the current and everchanging landscape of collegiate athletics. The book provides a good overall history of the early improprieties of college sports. The author explains how the colligate sports landscape has to adapted to wars, civil rights, social changes, and Title IX. Given that this book was published in 2020, the recent changes of the NCAA transfer portal and new NIL laws could be mentioned in further editions of this text. NIL laws vary between institutions and states, leading to more questions than answers at the moment. The incoming new NCAA president, Charlie Baker, will be tasked with deciding new regulations concerning NIL and its impact on Title IX. The book makes no recommendations, judgements, or coercions on what college sports has become or will transform to in the future. The author lets the reader make their own deductions from the information and history presented. This book would be helpful to graduate and undergraduate sport management professors teaching administrative issues to help understand what college athletes have gone through in the past and the present to help guide future policies and procedures.