

"We're All Playing Games" The Incompatibility of Athletic and Academic Excellence

GEORGE HOCHFELD

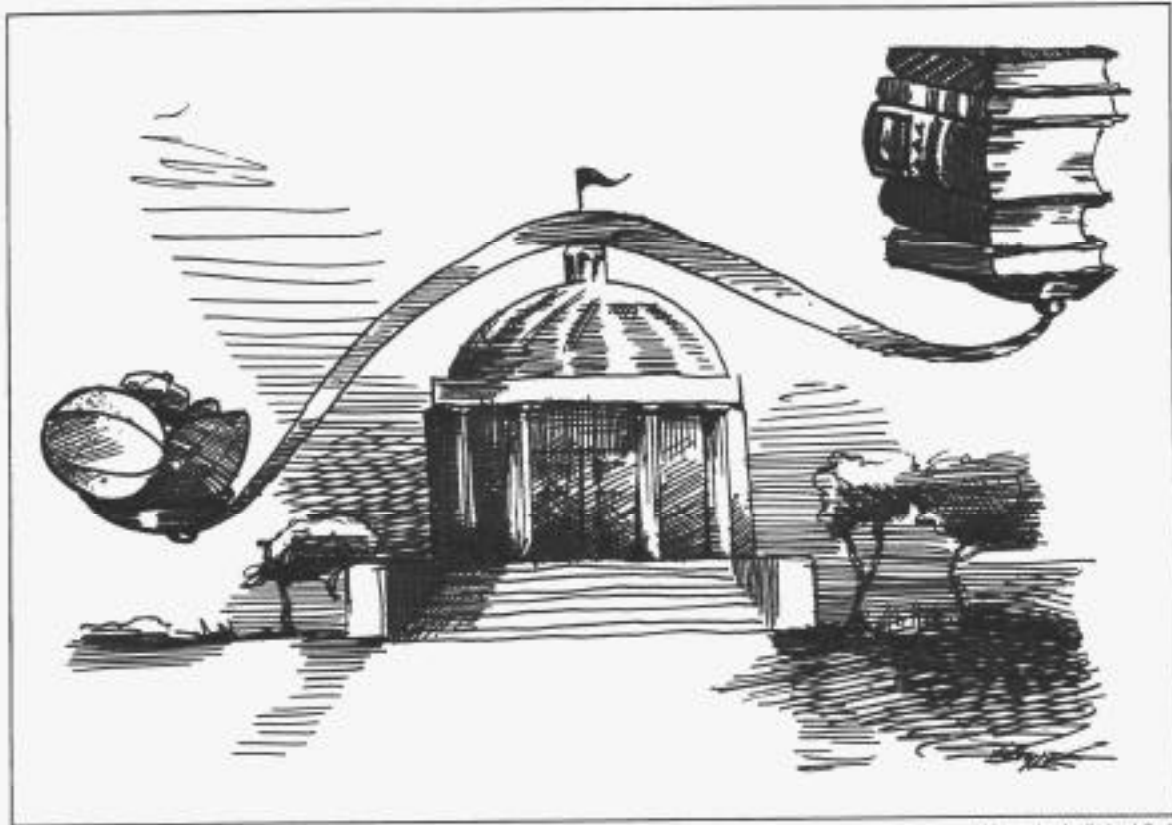


Illustration by Richard Boyle

Last year, despite a good deal of faculty opposition, the leadership of the State University of New York at Buffalo persuaded the SUNY Board of Trustees to rescind its longstanding rule against the granting of athletic scholarships. This was the first step in carrying out a plan, adopted in the spring of 1987, for the "upgrading" of the athletic program at Buffalo from Division III to Division I. President Steven B. Sample, who was known to think that "you cannot have a first-rate university without Division I," said when the plan was adopted, "We believe the upgrade will be a positive step for students and the university and, indeed, for all of Western New York."

Perhaps the most vocal of the faculty opponents was Professor George Hochfeld, who carried his

opposition to Division I athletics to the pages of the *New York Times*. Professor Hochfeld, who is still nursing his wounds and insisting that the battle is not necessarily over yet, here interviews himself for *Academe*.

Q. Professor Hochfeld, why are you so violently opposed to a change that the president sees as beneficial for so many people?

A. I am normally opposed to big-time campus sports, but the violence comes from my bafflement at my university's choosing, in this day and age, at a moment when scandal has never been so rife in the world of college sports, to commit itself to a wasteful, corrupt, and degrading system.

Q. Whew! You really don't like it, do you? But after all, in American higher education everybody does it.

A. For repeating that stupid phrase, which I must have heard at least a thousand times during the past year, you deserve strangulation, not a polite

GEORGE HOCHFELD is professor of English at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

response. Was there ever a more idiotic reason for doing anything? Everybody gets drunk; everybody smokes pot and snorts cocaine; and everybody lies, cheats, steals, and commits fornication! No, everybody doesn't. These things are all matters of choice, and so is starting or continuing a big-time sports program. The assurance that everybody is supposed to be doing it only spares people the effort (or embarrassment) of thinking about it.

Q. Well, nevertheless, everybody does do it. They must have good enough reasons.

A. I have studied the matter with some attention and I think the reasons are worth very little. There are only two, in point of fact, and the first one is simply publicity. (The second I'll get to in a moment.) That is, when the promoters of the "College Sports Industry" (as the *Times* called it last summer) try to explain the advantages of big-time athletic programs, what they mostly talk about are things like "national attention" and "visibility." Buffalo wasn't getting enough "national attention"; it wasn't sufficiently "visible." Now, by going to Division I, it will demonstrate that it is a "first-rate university" and begin to get the "national attention" it craves.

Such attention, of course, is not only a good in itself; it is supposed to bring in money. Presidents and alumni fundraisers characteristically link visions of future wealth with ambitious sports programs. Visitors will flock; alumni pockets will be opened; research grants will be won; not only the university but all of Western New York will flourish. One member of the delegation that went to persuade the SUNY Board of Trustees to change its rule against athletic scholarships was the president of the Buffalo Area Chamber of Commerce.

How much of this is a pipe dream, I don't know. Nor do I know how much money will have to be invested before there are any returns. But, returns or not, I do believe that the whole enterprise is misguided. If one is looking for a way to improve the quality of a university and enhance its reputation, is this the way to do it on the verge of the twenty-first century? Or is it to choose precisely what everybody else has been doing for the past century? I think it is a mindless surrender to conventionality, a mad plunge into the mainstream where all the midwestern whales already occupy the waters. The "visibility" one can hope to achieve there will be minimal, and other, more valuable possibilities will have to be ignored or sacrificed.

The plain, irreducible truth is that there is no rational connection between higher education and professional sports, and universities ought to do other things than field football and basketball teams as ways of distinguishing themselves. Let them do it by means that *do* have a rational connection with higher education. Institutional public relations, I suppose, is here to stay—the Office of University Relations (as it's called) is the fastest growing administrative component on my campus. But let them make hay out of our scientific research, our music and theater and dance, our splendid libraries. Those are a few of the things that deserve "national attention" at universities. If students are educated well, alumni will know their value and will learn to support them. We degrade our alumni, as well as ourselves, when we sponsor athletic contests as a way of stimulating their generosity.

Q. Are you serious? There isn't a college president in the country who wouldn't tell you that alumni demand sports. The president's job sometimes depends on the success of the athletic program.

A. They deal with the wrong alumni, who have in my terms been badly educated, and they have only themselves to blame if they become the victims of what they themselves have helped to create. If presidents allow sports to become the principal means of "public relations" with alumni, then of course they will have to deal with alumni demands for athletic success. It's hard to feel sympathy for them. Only a few days ago, a friend of mine heard the president of one of the most important public universities in the country¹ call Buffalo's decision to go to Division I "insane." The sports program at his university, he said, was like "a noose around [his] neck." What has he done to loosen its grip? When you get right down to it, he'd rather live with the noose than risk his job by telling people straight out that sports have become insane at his university. But maybe if he did he'd discover a lot of alumni who agree with him and would help him keep his job.

Q. You've referred several times to the corruption associated with sports. Are you thinking of the recent scandals involving drugs, rape, falsification of grades, and so forth?

A. No, something else. Big-time sports infect a campus with hypocrisy and cant. They are an assault on the integrity of the institution—no resistance is possible. I'm not talking now about

the inevitable cheating that goes on everywhere: the payoffs, the grade changes, the rule-bending for the sake of admission and eligibility. Those are the scandals the NCAA is supposed to wring its hands over and punish people for—as they occasionally do with punishments that never deter the crimes.

I'm talking about something more fundamental: the lying that begins with the first and original lie all university presidents have to mouthe: "The pursuit of athletic excellence is compatible with the pursuit of academic excellence." Putting aside the probability that most of these gentlemen haven't the foggiest notion of what "academic excellence" is, or would be terrified at the prospect of having to take it seriously, the fact remains that they repeat this untruthful formula ceaselessly, and it's hard to believe they don't know it's untrue, however willing they may be to delude themselves and others.

The pursuit of "athletic excellence," which means winning games and playing in postseason tournaments or bowls and making money at the gate and acquiring a national reputation as a sports power, is simply *not* compatible with "academic excellence." You have first of all to recruit athletes, a highly competitive affair that necessarily leads to the lowering of admission standards (assuming, to be sure, that the "academically excellent" institution actually has admission standards). This happens because the preponderance of athletes worth recruiting are just not likely to be very good students. Why should they be? Their chief interest has been, and will continue to be, elsewhere. They...

Q. But what about...?

A. Bill Bradley? You were about to nonplus me with that name, weren't you? Bill Bradley always gets mentioned at this point in the argument. But he's a rare exception, as you know perfectly well. The average college athlete is much more likely not to graduate than to win a Rhodes scholarship and become a United States Senator. And while proceeding to nongraduation, the average college athlete is likely to take a bizarre melange of remedial, trivial, and sport-related courses. How can it be otherwise? If a team is to be "athletically excellent," it must demand a large proportion of the athlete's time. It must take him away periodically from his classes, and confine attention to them within strict limits. The athlete is inculcated with the knowledge that he or she has one serious

purpose on campus and that only one kind of performance really counts. The athlete's payment (i.e. scholarship) depends on it as well as any hope for a professional career, and everything else is a farce. The athlete knows what really matters, however often the president (and even his coaches) intone their pious fraud of "academic excellence." Thus the athlete is steeped in hypocrisy from the moment he or she becomes an object of desire to institutions of higher learning.

I sometimes imagine a scene in which the star of the basketball team tells his coach that he's unable to make a road trip because he must catch up on his reading of *The Commedia* or perhaps *Swann's Way*. Our spontaneous response to such a fantasy tells us just how much "academic excellence" means on most American campuses.

Q. Still, isn't it true that many worthy young men and women have been helped to a college education by means of athletic scholarships?

A. Do you really think so? Your question, pardon me for saying it, is only another expression of the hypocrisy I've been talking about: pretended benevolence disguising exploitation. If universities were truly concerned about the education of a few thousand worthy young men and women, they could surely find other means of encouragement, and without degrading the quality of the education bestowed.

Q. But surely you do not mean to suggest that all athletes are mercenary.

A. No, I suppose not. But even if the athletes are not all mercenary, the universities are. Division I sports programs are expensive and they must be made to pay for themselves. I understand relatively few of them do, but they all must try. It is another factor intensifying competition for athletes and heightening the pressure on them for success. Of course, all this hustling is cloaked in the same old verbiage of "excellence." The plain realities are that the athletes must pretend to be students, and the universities must pretend to be interested in their education. It says something about the moral character of the academic profession that its members accommodate themselves so comfortably to these obvious dishonesties practiced upon and by the students whom it is their life work to educate.

Q. Well, even granting that a certain amount of dishonesty is inevitable in major sports programs, don't you think they add something important to the college experience? Don't they create school

spirit and school loyalty? Don't they give many people a chance for involvement in an exciting, harmless activity? Don't they "enhance student life"?

A. I won't dwell on your interesting thought that one might overlook a certain amount of dishonesty for the sake of enhancing student life. But you have indeed opened up an important subject. Here is the second reason given in justification of expensive, attention-getting sports on campus: school spirit, loyalty, the good, clean fun of Saturday afternoons at the football game. All of them seen as "enhancing student life" and no doubt linked with the so-called "pursuit of academic excellence."

I have to say that I regard this justification as empty-headed and mischievous. Consider seriously now, what question is really at stake when those phrases about "school spirit," etc., are used in connection with university athletics? It is the central question, to which we always get back one way or another, of the effect that universities ought to have on students and, through them, on the society to which they belong. Or, put in another way, it is the question of the university's relation to popular culture, the culture by which our students are formed and in which their minds and lives are saturated.

What do you suppose people actually have in mind when they talk about "school spirit," etc.? Not gratification over a biology class or freshman English. Or appreciation for the attentions of the dean of student affairs, or for the quality of the library. So far as I can make it out, "school spirit" is a feeling specifically associated with participation in the ritual of athletic contests: something concocted out of pre-game rallies, rehearsed cheers, and the joy of being on the winning side (losing is never thought of as conducive to "school spirit"). All of this is supposed to lead to a sort of "patriotism": What a wonderful place is Monumental U where all together we cheer on our teams and feel uplifted by their victories! Thus is student life enhanced.

It hardly needs saying that this "school spirit" tells us nothing about how well students are educated. It's a response to a particular stimulus, essentially the same feeling experienced by New York Yankees or Buffalo Bills fans, with the difference that no one pretends there's a peculiar virtue associated with fandom (as there's supposed to be with "school spirit").

Now we all recognize that there's something

childish in the feelings usually aroused by athletic contests. A person for whom the victory or defeat of an athletic team of which he or she is not a member is an important event, who really cares about such things, has something undeveloped about him. "School spirit," in my opinion, is precisely the expression of such a lack of development. When a university cultivates it and takes pride in the degree of "school spirit" it has elicited in its predominantly adolescent student body, it is not enhancing student life but debasing it. "School spirit" is a sign of the infantile character of an institution.

Q. Oh, professor, surely this is going too far! An innocent matter like . . .

A. I've only begun. And you've provided me with just the word I need. What underlies the satisfaction people take in "school spirit"? Why do administrators rub their hands contentedly in its presence, and parents and editorialists smile benignly? Big-time sports on campus are a way of extending the childhood of students, that is to say, their innocence. You should understand that the world outside the university, for all of its credulous faith in the social and economic advantages of higher education, is deeply distrustful of what may happen there. The university is a place of unpredictable intellectual possibilities. Most students, it's true, manage to resist them, or never even encounter them, but many do, and lives can sometimes be changed that way. A new idea, if it takes root in a person, has the power to awaken the critical spirit, possession of which is the only true adulthood.

The world outside—and I include most university administrators in this category—is not especially comfortable with that sort of thing. It wants the university to perform its training function, and for the rest to preserve as much as possible the innocence of the children it sends there. And innocence is made visible in images of the football stadium and basketball court: thousands of excited faces in passionate enthusiasm over a childish contest; cheerleaders in short skirts leaping to the shoulders of their fiercely smiling male counterparts; multitudes of index fingers waving at the television camera as they are identically waved on every campus in the country. These images all confirm the fantasy of college innocence, a world of games.

To provide students with more and more games, therefore, is to pandering to their immature selves; it is a betrayal. (You understand, of course, that I'm

not talking about the games people actually play but the mass games, the ones performed by a few dozen professional athletes before huge crowds of spectators.) You may take it as a simple rule of thumb: the more "school spirit" whipped up on a campus, the more infantile the student body.

Q. I refuse to believe. . .

A. This theme of childishness, its preservation and encouragement, is a very important one. It is one of the fundamental attributes of popular culture in America. Ask yourself, please, what cultural experiences a person growing up in America is likely to have had by the time he or she arrives at the university. Perhaps only someone who has tried to raise a child during the past twenty-five years can grasp the full horror of it. Apart from the normal mental vacuity and sports obsession of the American high school, the world of the young consists of the omnipresent commercial media where everything is designed to preserve adolescence as a permanent state of being: the ceaseless music with its baby-talk poetry, the disk-jockey chatter, the talk shows and game shows, the sitcoms, the beer and automobile ads, the movies, the *Playboys* and *People* magazines, Ann Landers and Brenda Starr, football games, basketball games, hockey games, baseball games, bowling, boxing, golf, automobile racing, wrestling! To be sure, no one experiences *only* these things, and some people do outgrow them, more or less, but more and more people know life primarily through them. They are more intimate than one's neighbors; they are the subjects of opinion and conversation; they are the form and substance of consciousness itself! The citizens of Cleveland rejoiced recently at the establishment in their city of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

In such a culture the prospects for the critical spirit are dim. Where is it to find encouragement? Obviously, the university is one possible answer. And so we come back to the question of how universities ought to influence their students. The mass-sports programs sponsored by American universities, programs controlled as much by the demands of television as by the needs of ordinary



Illustration by Richard Boyle

"live" (as they say) spectators, are simply ways of embracing popular culture. They obliterate the distinction, so fearful and threatening, between the university as a home of ideas and the world outside where a mindless popular culture reigns unchallenged.

Q. I fear you are not only a Utopian. You sound to me suspiciously like—I must say it—an elitist!

A. And you sound suspiciously like one of my students. Or perhaps the associate provost for undergraduate education. Of course I am an elitist. What else is higher education for but to convey the best, most truthful, most interesting and important culture that mankind possesses from one generation to the next? The university is by its nature an elitist institution; not all the efforts of presidents and provosts, of alumni associations and chambers of commerce, can quite extinguish that fact. Sport is one of the instruments most favored to hide and smother it: Look, there's nothing dangerous going on here! We're all playing games!

Q. The critical spirit! Do the honest, hard-working people of this country need that?

A. Don't they?

NOTE

1. The "president" here referred to is Chancellor Heyman of the University of California at Berkeley, who has since delivered a bold and praiseworthy indictment of the contemporary situation in university athletics at the recent NCAA Special Convention in Dallas.