

MAGAZINE | NEIL SWIDEY

Our college sports system is broken. Do we have the guts to fix it?

From big-money Division I football and basketball to the privileged niche sports caught up in the Varsity Blues scandal, campus athletics needs a complete overhaul. Could this bold idea work?

By [Neil Swidey](#) May 15, 2019, 7:47 a.m.



(ADOBE STOCK)

he college admissions scandal dubbed Operation Varsity Blues has served up a powerful cocktail of outrage and schadenfreude. We've witnessed unabashed

T "Aunt Becky" blithely signing autographs outside Boston's federal courthouse and learned about CEO dads staging photos of their fake-athlete kids as haplessly as Mr. Felicity Huffman's car salesman character in *Fargo* attempted fraud with his pencil.

The details exposing the vanity and amorality of the rich and famous who used

the [so-called side door](#) to get their kids into elite colleges are so delicious that they can mask a darker truth: When it comes to college sports, these grasping parents, entitled offspring, scheming advisers, and corrupt coaches aren't the only ones who've lost their way.

Girls and boys are being saddled with adult-strength pressure to secure their future by delivering on the field or court, leading to the craziness of recruits committing to college teams even before they've had a chance to finish middle school. Meanwhile, youth sports have become beset with runaway professionalization, commercialization, and overuse injuries. And an overall sense of panic has taken hold of many parents who spend years chasing the rabbit of college scholarships for their children and become desperate for a return on their investment of so much time and so many resources.

Please don't misunderstand me. I love college sports. Although my undistinguished athletic career ended when I left high school, my connection to sports never did. In college, two of my closest friends led Tufts' Division III football team. I wrote a book about the power of high school basketball to help propel boys out of Boston's toughest neighborhoods and onto college campuses that offered them the promise of a better future. As a student, a journalist, a mentor, a parent, and a fan, I've seen sports at their transcendent best.

So I take no joy in reporting that our college sports system is fundamentally broken.

ADVERTISING



The American higher education system is the only one on the planet that is also intertwined with a professional-in-all-but-name, multibillion-dollar college sports system that can warp academics and sometimes even swallow it whole. We see this on the Division I level, of course, but the problems go all the way down to Division III. And the damage is increasingly leaching into fields far from campus. Remember, the side door through the athletics department, which rich and famous parents allegedly exploited, was available only because our unhealthy emphasis on sports had already distorted the college admissions process.

It's time that we all ask ourselves: What are we really doing here?





The scandal involving “Full House” actress Lori Loughlin (a.k.a. “Aunt Becky”) and other wealthy parents highlights the way sports have distorted college admissions. (SARAH RICE/NEW YORK TIMES)

* * *

The outsized influence of sports on campus is not a new problem. Robin Lester, in his book on the history of football at the University of Chicago, describes how the Chicago superintendent of schools accused shameless college coaches at Chicago and Michigan of “practically stealing boys out of high school for athletic purposes” before they could even earn their diplomas. When did he level his accusation? Try 1903. Just two years later, Harvard hired its first paid football coach, at almost twice the average salary of a full professor.

Before we get to the abuses in lower-profile, lower-level college sports, let’s start where the insanity began: big-money football and men’s basketball programs. If you haven’t read the 2011 *Atlantic* piece [“The Shame of College Sports,”](#) by Pulitzer Prize-winning civil rights historian Taylor Branch, it’s truly worth your time. Even eight years later, almost all the points in Branch’s indictment of the National Collegiate Athletic Association and its top Division I programs hold up. How pioneering NCAA honcho Walter Byers — he of the toupee and cowboy boots — cagily crafted the term “student-athlete” in the 1950s. How colleges have since used that magical hyphenate as a fig leaf to avoid having to pay athletes in top programs for all the revenue they bring in to university coffers,

and to avoid having to pay out workers' compensation claims when student-athletes get injured "on the job." And, most of all, how the fiction of amateurism pushed by the NCAA denies many top college athletes a genuine college education and all top college athletes their true economic rights. This fiction reduces them to serfs who are perpetually at risk of punishment for violating the overlord's regime of arcane, arbitrary rules.

Imagine if Harvard had classified Mark Zuckerberg as a "student-technologist" and demanded ownership of Facebook (total valuation: more than half a trillion dollars) because he created the platform as an undergraduate. Or if UCLA had garnisheed "student-actor" James Franco's take from starring in *Spider-Man 3* (worldwide gross: \$890 million) while he was enrolled there.

The only point from Branch's 2011 argument that doesn't hold up is his confidence that several lawsuits threatened the NCAA's Vulcan grip on the college game. During a recent conversation, Branch admits to me that he was overly optimistic. "They're like the Vatican," he says. "They're going to hang onto their lock on the market as long as they can. Reform has got to be imposed on them."

Branch argues that as the NCAA ferociously protects the billion-dollar-a-year lifeline of March Madness television revenue, it remains fearful that the biggest athletic conferences in college basketball might someday do what their counterparts in college football did years ago: negotiate their own broadcast deals, cutting out the NCAA.

What's preventing the colleges from doing that?

"That the NCAA will say, 'We're not going to enforce your amateur rules.' What the colleges get from the NCAA," Branch says, "is the imprimatur to continue on with an economic system that benefits them so much." (NCAA committees, made up of member colleges, vote on the rules while the NCAA brass oversees enforcement.)

Branch argues that's why, instead of seriously cracking down on abuses by powerful colleges and their exalted, absurdly compensated coaches, the NCAA spends a lot more energy penalizing individual players when they or their family members violate a rule. Recall those five Ohio State football players who were punished in 2010 for the unthinkable sin of accepting [discounted tattoos](#).

"They can't deal with the big stuff, so they flex their muscles where it doesn't matter," Branch says. "By crushing a kid over a silly thing, they advertise their power."

Consider, for a minute, just how arbitrary and foolish many of the NCAA rules are.

My favorite example is Shabazz Napier and the bagel-and-cream-cheese rule. Napier is an NBA player, currently with the Brooklyn Nets, who as an undergrad helped lead the University of Connecticut to two national championships. When I got to know Napier, his profile was quite a bit lower — he was a kid from Roxbury playing JV on the Charlestown High basketball team, the focus of my first book. In 2014, in a [locker room interview](#) just before he led UConn to its second title, Napier stunned the national sports media by revealing a hidden truth about life as a D-I student-athlete. "There are hungry nights that I go to bed and I'm starving," the college senior said.

For anyone who assumed a full-ride athletic scholarship meant, you know, a *full* ride, Napier's lament didn't compute. Sure enough, he was speaking the truth. The NCAA forbade colleges from providing anything more than three meals a

day to scholarship athletes. On days when the student-athletes' classes or packed practice schedule prevented them from getting to the dining hall in time, they were out of luck. The NCAA allowed teams to provide a "training table" of limited snacks, such as nuts and bagels. But a bagel could not have cream cheese or peanut butter on it, or it would be considered an illegal fourth meal.



As a University of Connecticut basketball star, Shabazz Napier (now in the NBA) spoke of going to bed hungry. (BRUCE BENNETT/GETTY IMAGES)

The optics of athletes, who generate billions for the colleges and the NCAA, going to bed hungry could hardly have been worse. After being publicly shamed, did NCAA officials fundamentally rethink their punitive, withholding approach to all their revenue-generating serfs? Of course they didn't. They simply removed the three-meal cap. Cream cheese for everyone!

(For what it's worth, the NCAA says the rule change on meals had been going through its legislative process even before Napier's comments. It also began allowing student-athletes to receive some modest "cost of attendance" stipends for transportation and child care.)

The bottom line. promoter Sonny Vaccaro tells me. is "We're not talking about

student-athletes. We're talking about athletes."

Vaccaro ought to know. While working for Nike in 1977, he pioneered the tactic of paying college coaches, who were then lightly compensated, to get their players to wear Nike gear. A decade later, he devised the first "all-school" deal, negotiating with top college officials to get the brand's logoed gear on all of its teams and stacked high throughout the campus bookstore. "That was the genie in the bottle," Vaccaro tells me. "Now we owned the school."

Those all-school deals eventually spread to every big-time college athletic program and attracted every big-name sports apparel company. (In 2016, Under Armour hatched a record all-school [deal worth \\$280 million](#) with UCLA.) All that money sloshing around these high-profile programs helped fill college coffers and make lots of people rich, including coaches, athletic directors, agents, managers— everyone, of course, except the athletes.

Vaccaro would eventually become one of the NCAA's toughest critics. Irking him most is what he sees as the organization's cynical effort to hide behind the concepts of "education" and "amateurism" while aggressively protecting a status quo that exploits the laborers. "I'm against the hypocrisy of the system."

Nothing, he says, exposes the hypocrisy more than the NBA's "one-and-done" rule. Put in place in 2006, the rule forbids star high school players from following in the footsteps of LeBron James, Kobe Bryant, and Kevin Garnett, who all skipped college and went directly into the NBA. Instead, players are required to wait a full year after high school, typically playing in the NCAA.

Who benefits from this rule? If you guessed "everyone except the players," you've clearly been paying attention. The coaches get a steady flow of rent-a-stars to help them keep winning so they can keep collecting their [multimillion-dollar salaries](#) and endorsement deals. The NBA gets a free development league/finishing school. The colleges and the NCAA get all that broadcast money, while CBS and ESPN get a permanent pipeline of new stars to build up

and tear down breathlessly, ensuring a parallel pipeline of advertising dollars. Meanwhile, the players get to spend the year hoping they don't get injured or violate some NCAA rule, such as accepting a gift from all the agents and managers and handlers trying to ingratiate themselves with "the next LeBron." (Boston Celtics star Kyrie Irving, for example, suffered an injury that sidelined him for much of his one-and-done year playing at Duke, where Celtic Jayson Tatum also logged his college year.)

The 2016 documentary *One & Done*, which follows high school phenom Ben Simmons during his pit-stop year in college, beautifully captures this madness. He can barely walk anywhere on the Louisiana State campus without a student demanding a selfie with him, and his No. 25 jerseys are flying off the racks in the campus bookstore. When he skips too many classes to keep up with his punishing basketball and training schedule, his coach goes through the motions of benching him for a few minutes of one game.

"The NCAA is really [expletive] up," Simmons tells the camera at one point. "Everybody's making money . . . and the players get nothing. They say education, but if I'm here for a year, I can't get much education."

NCAA officials have long argued that there is no need to pay student-athletes because they already receive valuable compensation. "We provide them with remarkable opportunities to get an education at the finest universities on earth," NCAA president [Mark Emmert told *Frontline*](#). This form of compensation, they argue, can be especially transformative for the many student-athletes who come from underprivileged backgrounds.

But the one-and-done rule (which the NBA and its players' union are considering changing) calls that claim into serious question. These high-revenue-producing student-athletes aren't getting anything close to an education. They merely have to pass their first semester courses to be eligible to play that year for their college team, before bolting for the NBA draft. At least these marquee athletes eventually get a lucrative payday. The NCAA's own stats

show that [less than 2 percent](#) of college athletes go on to play professional sports. (Interestingly, only 2 percent of high school athletes go on to earn any kind of college athletic scholarship, so we're talking about tiny subsets of tiny subsets.)

The NCAA rightly boasts that college athletes graduate at higher percentages than the general student body, and it points to [increasing rates for black athletes](#) in particular over the last two decades. But a University of Southern California study exposes some troubling inequities behind that boast. The [analysis](#) focused on the student-athlete graduation rates in the five conferences that dominate Division I sports. Black men represent just about 2 percent of the undergraduates at these colleges but make up more than half of their football and basketball teams. Yet black male athletes' six-year graduation rate is 55 percent, compared with 60 percent for black male undergrads, and 76 percent for undergrads overall, at these schools.

Even athletes in big-time programs who do graduate often emerge with a less-than-rigorous education. After all, it's hard to swing a physics and neuroscience double major when you have to devote more than [40 hours a week](#) to your primary "job" on campus — the one attached to your athletic scholarship. Over the years, whistle-blowers at places including the University of Georgia and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill have exposed patterns of athletes being tracked into gut — or nonexistent — courses taught by compliant instructors.

Having devoted so much of their lives to their sport, many of these athletes leave college unprepared for much else. The most heartbreaking story in the recent

HBO documentary *Student Athlete* belongs to Shamar Graves. A receiver who graduated from Rutgers, Graves is shown shuttling from one exhausting, dead-end job to another, forever chasing the NFL dream, all while living out of his car.

Keep in mind that the huge money in college sports is basically confined to two sports. Football generated a profit of \$1.9 billion in the 2017-18 school year and

men's basketball \$341 million, while, for instance, women's basketball lost \$189 million and men's track \$71 million. (Overall, fewer than 1 in 8 Division I college athletic programs takes in more revenue than it spends.) Some reformers have long argued we could clean up the college game simply by paying football and basketball players. The Varsity Blues scandal, however, makes it clear the rot runs much deeper.

Because of what we see during March Madness and college bowl season, when we hear "Division I student-athlete," many of us probably picture a young man of color. But we now know that the sports implicated in the recent admissions scandal — water polo, squash, tennis, lacrosse, soccer, fencing, sailing — function largely as white-privilege-perpetuation machines.





Water polo loomed large in the recent college admissions scandal, but interest from spectators is often more modest, as at this UCLA win in the NCAA 2018 women's quarterfinals, held at USC. (KIRBY LEE/AP)

For all their faults and abuses, at least top college basketball and football programs deliver something important to the entire campus community by bringing in lots of dough and providing compelling entertainment around which to build school spirit. I had never even heard of the water polo team at USC until this scandal broke. I was surprised to learn that the man who coached both the men's and women's teams there had produced a string of national titles despite allegedly selling admissions slots to rich kids who didn't know the first thing about the sport. (Court documents reveal one clueless parent staged and had a designer Photoshop his kid sticking far out of the water, not knowing that water polo players actually swim during matches.) Despite USC's impressive record of water polo titles, the crowd that turned out to cheer on the women's team during the national championship against Stanford looked sparser than a regular-season swim meet crowd at Newton North High School.

Forget the photo fakery. Explain to me again the logic of giving even those students who are *legitimately* good at water polo, squash, or a similarly privileged niche sport a special fast-pass lane into a selective college. If these students are passionate about their sport and excel at it, great. Colleges should consider those achievements in the admissions process, in the same way they give credit to students for being the captain of the debate team or editor of the student newspaper or orchestra concertmaster.

To justify fast-pass admissions for athletes in these niche sports, you'd have to

to justify that pass admissions for athletes in these more sports, but athletes do demonstrate that they bring a benefit to the wider campus community that is more meaningful than the debater, the editor, or the violinist. While the evidence is strong that athletes in elite college basketball and football do that — and therefore should be treated differently — it's much more elusive in most other sports.

And this imbalance is hardly confined to Division I.

* * *

In their book *Reclaiming the Game*, William Bowen and Sarah Levin provided a revealing and sobering view of the influential role athletics play in college admissions decisions. Interestingly, they didn't focus their study on powerhouse Division I programs like Alabama, Michigan, and Ohio State. Instead, they zoomed in on many of the most selective institutions in the land: the Division I Ivy League (from Brown to Yale), the Division III New England Small College Athletic Conference, or NESCAC (from Amherst to Williams), the Division III University Athletic Association, or UAA (including Carnegie Mellon and the University of Chicago), and a smattering of other selective colleges from around the country.

What made their study especially valuable was the remarkable access Bowen and Levin were granted to admissions data and processes at each of these elite institutions. The fact that Bowen had been the president of Princeton University no doubt opened a few doors, and it probably helped that both he and Levin had

once been college athletes. The result of their study was real data to replace anecdotes, whispers, and conventional wisdom.

Overall, Bowen and Levin found that recruited athletes were as much as four times more likely to be admitted than non-athletes with similar academic credentials. (For instance, male recruited athletes in high-profile sports in the

Ivy League had average SAT scores 165 points lower than those of other accepted male students.) They also found that, while in college, recruited athletes tended to underperform academically to a surprising degree. They were substantially more likely to end up in the bottom third of their college class, and the grades they earned were significantly lower than their standardized test scores and high school transcripts would have predicted. Their underperformance persisted even during the offseason or when they were otherwise not playing.

The authors busted other conventional wisdom, such as the belief that athletes are an important source of racial diversity on campus: “Recruited athletes in the schools in our study are in general appreciably less likely than students at large to be from underrepresented minority groups.” Once again, high-profile men’s sports like basketball and football tend to skew people’s perceptions. But the authors found that at all the colleges they studied, in all the lower-profile sports, less than 10 percent of male recruited athletes, and less than 5 percent of female recruited athletes, were minorities. The truth is the fast-pass athlete’s lane into selective colleges disproportionately benefits white students.

Another eye-opening finding was that the percentage of college athletes in the student body was much, much higher at many academically selective Division III colleges than at the big D-I universities most of us think of when we hear “college sports.” At a powerhouse like the University of Michigan, the percentage of students on the roster of an intercollegiate team was under 5 percent, whereas at a small liberal arts college like Maine’s Colby, it was closer to 40 percent. As it turns out, a number of small D-III schools field teams in more sports than their giant D-I counterparts.

On the Duke campus, members of the basketball team are essentially uncompensated celebrity employees who exist on a separate plane while providing a service that is accessible to everyone on campus. In contrast, athletes on a small selective college campus are fellow students whom non-athletes are more likely to encounter regularly but who may seem undeserving of the special benefits they receive. The authors quote several faculty members

at one selective college saying the same thing: The “great divide” on campus is the one between athletes and non-athletes.

But why do selective Division III colleges feel the need not simply to offer a wide array of teams, but to aggressively recruit and offer admission preferences to try to ensure that they have winning teams, across the board? I won't pick on water polo again, so let's move on to squash. Beyond the benefit to the dozen players on a college squash roster, what measurable value does the overall student body derive from having a winning squash team?

I would argue the answer is close to zero. Yet squash coaches are allowed to submit to the admissions office a list of students they want to add to their squad. No campus employee is doing that kind of advocacy to recruit the next DJ of the college radio station or editor of the college newspaper — organizations that, on most campuses, reach more students and are blissfully free of adult interference.

So why are colleges giving this kind of disproportionate sway to what, in reality, are fairly obscure campus activities? Could it be for fund-raising purposes, with development officials hoping that a winning squash team might prompt a former squash player who is now crushing it as a hedge fund manager to pony up some cash?

It's something else, says McGregor Crowley, a former director of selection in the MIT admissions office who now works for the private counseling service IvyWise. “It's not a revenue question. It's a cachet question.” These highly selective institutions compare themselves only with other highly selective institutions. If one of their peers has a winning squash program, they want one, too. So they hire coaches who are judged by their athletic director based on how often their squad beats their peer institutions.

College officials regularly tell stressed-out high school students not to feel the need to be perfect. *You'll be fine*, they say soothingly. *Just be yourself*. They should take their own advice. *You'll be fine. Even if uour squash team never*

wins a match. Seriously. You won't even notice.

The pressure many students feel to obtain athletic scholarships has grown so intense that the fallout has spread to Division III colleges, which don't even offer them. I attended an information session at another selective D-III school where the admissions officer was careful to remind the audience of parents and prospective students of the policy against athletic scholarships. This prompted a mother to ask, "Then why do I see so many kids posting videos of themselves on social media signing letters and announcing that they just committed to play here?"

The admissions officer let out a long sigh before saying, "It's a fair question."

For some time, these signing ceremonies — where students, wearing school gear, theatrically sign the national letter of intent, officially accepting their athletic scholarships — have been standard fare for Division I and Division II athletes. But student-athletes at Division III schools (and non-scholarship D-I athletes) want their time in the limelight, too, even though there is nothing to sign because there is no athletic scholarship being offered. Not a problem. They can now stage a signing ceremony, and the colleges and the NCAA [go along with it](#), even providing tips and the letterhead stationery for the fake signing. Take a minute to absorb how inane that is.

Bowen and Levin published *Reclaiming the Game* in 2003. Bowen died in 2016, and Levin, who now goes by her married name, Sarah Taubman, and is a fellow at the National Bureau of Economic Research, has shifted her focus. So no one

has updated their findings. But most indicators suggest the problems in college athletics have only gotten worse in the last decade and a half. Internal documents at Harvard, which were made public as part of a recent admissions discrimination lawsuit, show that recruited athletes with strong academic rankings were admitted 83 percent of the time, more than five times higher than the 16 percent admit rate for non-athletes with comparable academic rankings.

We shouldn't overlook all the good that college sports have done: opening doors, building camaraderie and grit, strengthening minds as well as bodies. It's no accident that, for many alumni, athletics are at the center of their most cherished campus memories. We just need to get some balance back.

When I catch up with Taubman recently, she sums it up this way: "It seems to me that you could get many of the benefits of widespread participation in college sports on campus, such as teamwork and dedication, while offering a smaller advantage in admissions for student-athletes — or none at all."

* * *

The gleaming Wellesley Sports Center is a monument to our elevated expectations surrounding youth sports. When it opens this summer, the sprawling 130,000-square-foot facility will feature two NHL-regulation-size ice rinks, two swimming pools, an indoor turf field, a strength and conditioning center, a fitness/dance studio, and a track. Built largely to meet the athletic needs of young people, the complex sits on Route 9, on land previously occupied by the St. James the Great Church. That church opened in 1958, and the Boston Archdiocese sold it to the town of Wellesley for nearly \$4 million a half century later.

At a groundbreaking ceremony in 2017, one official [struck a reflective tone](#):

"For generations, this 8-acre site and St. James Church served the needs of the Catholic community here in Wellesley and the surrounding towns. For

generations to come, this site . . . will serve the recreational and athletic needs of thousands of residents of Wellesley and the surrounding towns."

That pretty much captures it. For many families, youth sports — and the inexorable chase for college athletic scholarships — is the new religion. During most of the 20th century, many families spent the bulk of their time together

most of the 20th century, many families spent the bulk of their time together outside of the home in church or with their religious community, while sports were something kids largely did on their own. Today, the pursuit of a child's sports "career" is the consuming family activity, with most weekends and even vacations being consumed by grueling travel-team schedules and out-of-state sports commitments.

I offer that simply as a fact, not a value judgment. After all, the archdiocese had to sell St. James and scores of other parish properties largely as a result of church leaders' colossal abuse of the trust that families had placed in them.



The new Wellesley Sports Center, on land where a Catholic church once sat, reminds us that the pursuit of athletic scholarships has become a new religion. (ARAM BOGHOSIAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE)

As college tuitions climb to extortionate levels, lots of low- and middle-income parents push to get their kids recruited based on the belief that an elusive athletic scholarship may be the only way they can afford college. Many affluent parents are looking for a return on all their time and emotional investment. An

parents are looking for a return on an ever-increasing and enormous investment. An ever-growing Sports-Industrial Complex has emerged to meet this boundless market need: swank facilities, expensive camps, pricey gear, endless tournaments and showcases, video services, companies that rate and rank the abilities of young athletes around the country, and platoons of specialists — from skills coaches and advisers to sports psychologists and physical therapists and even [light therapists](#). Many of these providers are legitimate professionals, but there are also plenty who seem only too eager to take money from panicked parents.

The panic is everywhere, and it's causing parents and coaches to lose perspective, says Alison Foley, who left Boston College in December after two decades coaching the women's soccer team. Take the early recruiting craze. In recent years, although the NCAA required prospective student-athletes to wait until their junior year of high school to make their first official college visits, at most elite women's soccer college programs, all the recruiting slots were already taken by then. That's because coaches were using an off-the-books process to secure "verbal commitments" from promising girls as young as seventh grade. [Foley says](#) all of this made her increasingly uneasy. I hear similar misgivings about the overall landscape from other coaches, though they're more reluctant to speak publicly.

As a sign perhaps of how much things have gotten carried away, some of the most interesting and persuasive calls for moderation and reform are now coming from inside the Sports-Industrial Complex itself.

At Edge Performance Systems, located upstairs from the Foxboro Sports Center and its three NHL-regulation-size rinks, the walls are covered with framed jerseys and photos of the likes of Rob Gronkowski and Wes Welker. They and a host of NFL, NHL, and other pro athletes sing the praises of EPS's strength and conditioning services. Owner Brian McDonough started out a quarter century ago as a middle school phys ed teacher in Boston, but his side work helping get a couple of New England Patriots into better shape soon flourished into a thriving business training elite athletes at every level. Today, he and his team run two

facilities where they have trained about 450 athletes in the pros, 3,000 in college, and 10,000 in high school.

When I visit his Foxboro center, one of the muscular high schoolers working out is the son of former Patriots tight end Christian Fauria. Staff members use state-of-the-art equipment and sophisticated technology to track their clients' movements and performance so they can optimize workouts while avoiding overuse.

McDonough says most of the parents he deals with are terrific, deferential to the expertise of the EPS staff. But when they advise the kids to take breaks from their sport or their training, some parents don't want to hear it. These parents are so desperate for their kids to get "looks" from Division I scouts that they insist on having them compete in showcase tournaments every weekend. Many of these showcases, McDonough says, are just moneymakers, peddling the fiction that lots of top scouts will be there. In reality, there are way more showcases taking place around the country each weekend than there are college scouts.

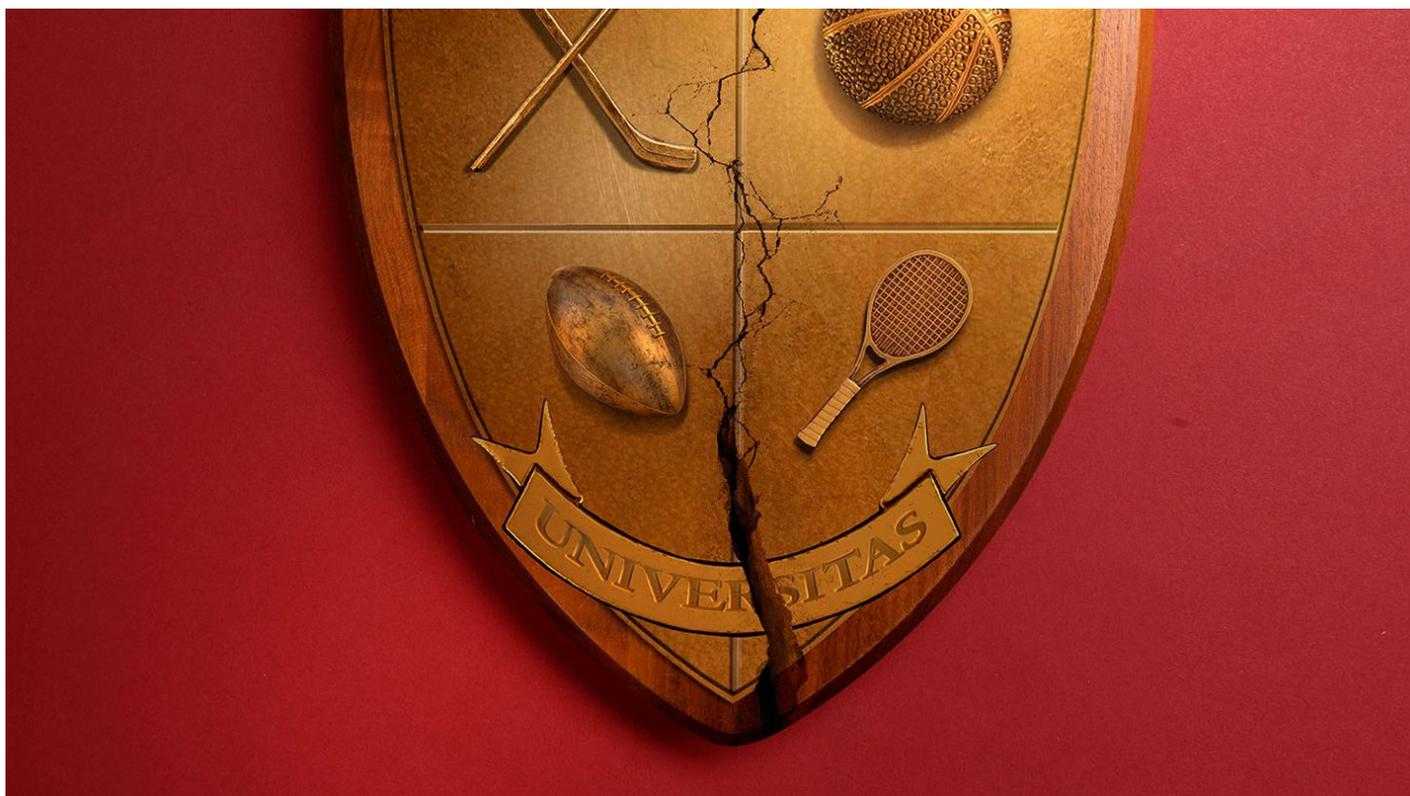
Korey Higgins, director of EPS's youth and high school program, says overuse injuries are the inevitable result of kids spending all that time, all year round, on the ice or the field or the court. Adolescent athletes are suffering repeat stress fractures and other chronic injuries that, until recently, were almost unheard of in school sports. While many parents push their children to specialize in one sport at an early age, to improve their odds of obtaining a college scholarship, Higgins says he and McDonough encourage kids to participate in multiple sports, at least until 15 or 16. Playing different sports works different muscles, helping to avoid overuse injuries. "And it's healthy not to always be the best player at a sport," Higgins says. "It gives you humility and keeps the fire in you."

Overuse is believed to be responsible for nearly half of the several million [sports-related injuries](#) suffered by athletes in middle and high schools each year. More alarming are the potential long-term consequences. For example.

...anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) knee surgeries used to be relatively rare in teenagers, but they are now common, given the rise in year-round competition. A recent study found that around 75 percent of people who underwent [ACL surgery](#) developed arthritis within 15 years. Could we someday face an epidemic of 30-year-old arthritics?

* * *





(PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY C.J. BURTON)

There's a reason reform has been elusive in college sports. So many powerful interests are invested in maintaining the status quo that it's almost impossible for one coach or one college to lead the change without suffering major consequences.

“This is a multidimensional chess game,” says Brian Mitchell, the former president of Bucknell University and coauthor of *How to Run a College*. The extravagant revenue generated by many football and basketball programs has helped create formidable power centers of athletic directors, trustees, and alumni while blurring the true picture that, overall, “athletics has become an unfed beast.”

The governing body that theoretically could effect real, across-the-board change — the NCAA — has, despite its lofty rhetoric, repeatedly proved itself to be not up to the challenge.

The NCAA, says spokeswoman Michelle Hosick, is continually working to improve the student-athlete experience. But she stresses that policy is set not by

NCAA executives but rather by the colleges in the organization. “We are a membership organization, and members make the decisions.”

For guidance, I turn to Robert W. Turner II, an assistant professor at the George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Science and author of the book *Not for Long*. Before that, he was a Division I scholarship athlete and a player in the NFL and other pro football leagues.

Turner says reform needs to start with transparency, eliminating the empty promises about giving athletes at top-tier programs a quality college education. “The universities and the NCAA need to stop lying to people and tell kids and parents the truth,” he says. “We are recruiting you so we can win. It’s a business, a moneymaking enterprise.”

Because of the chasm between money-generating and money-losing college sports programs, reform will need to be multipronged.

Let’s start with those professional-in-all-but-name D-I men’s basketball and football programs. “I believe that colleges have no business being in the business of sports,” Turner says. Yet the financial stakes are already absurdly high, and the big-time programs have invested heavily in the infrastructure needed to keep their teams winning and the dollars flowing. It’s unrealistic to expect them to walk away from all of that, right?

This is where Turner offers an idea that strikes me as ingenious: Have the colleges lease the rights to their brands, their team names, and their stadiums to for-profit professional sports operations that would serve as a feeder to the pros. (In Europe, top professional soccer teams like Manchester United manage their pipeline by running their own youth academies.) What if, instead of the university administration and athletic department at UNC-Chapel Hill overseeing the men’s basketball team there, a for-profit “Tar Heels Club” ran the operation, hiring both coaches and players, who would be compensated at

market rates. Similarly, at the University of Alabama, the football operation would be run by a for-profit “Crimson Tide Club.”

A leasing arrangement would allow rabid fans and alumni to continue to root for their beloved team, the university to receive substantial revenue, and the players to receive fair compensation. It would also end the charade that, at some schools, requires players to pretend to be students and administrators and faculty to pretend to provide a rigorous education. For these highest-profile sports programs, this arrangement would also cut out the middleman of the NCAA and all its rules and selective enforcement.

Profit and Loss in College Sports

Annual net income or loss for select Division I men’s (M) and women’s (W) athletic programs, for the 2017-2018 school year.

Big money generators

Football

\$1.9 billion

Men's basketball

\$340.6 million

Money losers

Women's basketball

-\$189.2 million

Women's track

-\$79.7 million

Men's track

-\$70.9 million

Baseball

-\$70.1 million

Softball

-\$69.1 million

Women's volleyball

-\$69.0 million

Women's soccer

-\$67.6 million

Women's swim/diving

-\$48.2 million

I like Turner's suggestion, and decide to run it by Taylor Branch, the civil rights historian. Branch (who was recruited by Georgia Tech to play football but opted to attend Chapel Hill on an academic scholarship) also likes the idea, but he suggests an important addition. The universities, in exchange for continuing to benefit from these players, would be required to offer each of them a full college scholarship that they can redeem at any point during their lifetime. The vast majority of the players would presumably enroll when they could benefit from it most: at the conclusion of their playing career. If a student couldn't meet the school's admissions requirements, mandated agreements between colleges would allow them to transfer the scholarship to a different one.

OK, but what about all the other, lower-profile Division I sports — the ones like water polo, squash, tennis, soccer, and crew, which were exposed in Varsity Blues for making a mockery of the admissions process? For this category, Turner says, “We have a perfectly good model for how to handle college sports: Division III.”

He argues that getting rid of athletic scholarships, which are currently available only at the Division I and II levels, would defuse the arms race that is distorting youth sports and college admissions. What about students for whom an athletic scholarship could be the difference between a free education and one that will saddle them with debt? Under the Division III model, they would get financial aid based on their need. Colleges might even be able to be a bit more generous if they took the savings from shrinking those bloated athletic budgets and plowed it into financial aid. Besides, families that spend a decade chasing the financial windfall of an athletic scholarship often discover the net gain is much smaller than they imagined, given all they’ve spent on clubs, camps, gear, and travel. And remember that most athletic scholarships are partial.

Still, the Division III approach to sports is not without serious problems, and it needs reforming, too. I’d argue that most selective D-III colleges already have a perfectly good model operating on their campuses. It’s called club sports. These teams attract competitive types who love their sports and honor the founding mantra of college athletics: *mens sana in corpore sano* — a sound mind in a sound body. Club teams play on the intercollegiate level, and the intensity is considerably higher than for intramurals. The students who fill club rosters tend to arrive on campus with long histories of competing in their sport. That record of participation and passion presumably worked in their favor during the admissions process, but what it didn’t do was give them access to a special fast-pass lane for recruited athletes. In other words, sports played exactly the role it should have in admissions.

To see what an athletics-affirming but recruitment-light culture might look like on a Division III campus, all we need to do is head over to that temple to

meritocracy on the Charles: MIT.

In their 2003 book, Bowen and Levin were struck by how much more sensibly MIT balanced athletics and admissions than most other highly selective colleges. While coaches there could submit names of prospective student-athletes to the admissions office, there were no “coach’s slots” and no special lane for athletes. One coach there told the authors she wasn’t sure it was even worth her time to submit names. MIT coaches knew that any successful applicant would have to have the same academic stuff as any non-athlete applicant.

That appears to be how sports continue to be treated at MIT. [McGreggor Crowley](#), the former admissions official, tells me that athlete applicants to MIT go through the same full-committee review process as any other applicant. “The MIT coaches would need to find kids who wanted academics and could deal with not having the certainty of a guaranteed slot.”

One coach at another selective Division III school tells me, “Nobody does it like MIT. If they don’t have a quarterback or a goalie one year, so be it.” Despite refusing to put a thumb on the scale for athlete applicants, MIT has produced a successful sports program that enhances, rather than detracts from, its academic reputation.

Wouldn’t it be great if every college could say the same?

Neil Swidey is the Globe Magazine’s staff writer. E-mail him at swidey@globe.com and follow him on Twitter [@neilswidey](https://twitter.com/neilswidey). Globe correspondent Matt Mahoney contributed to this report.

[Show 50 comments](#)

©2019 Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC