Give Athletes Their Names Back

Chris Foley

Johnny Manziel, quarterback at Texas A&M since 2012, could have quoted John Proctor from *The Crucible* in the wake of last summer’s autograph scandal: “I have given you my soul; leave me my name!” Manziel’s case sparked increased scrutiny of the NCAA’s amateurism policy, which not only prohibits paying student-athletes, but also bars them from profiting off of their own names through the sale of autographs or endorsements.

Despite high profile cases like Manziel’s, the majority of student-athletes are more than sufficiently compensated in terms of scholarships, athletic gear, and other perks. So, should all student athletes receive further compensation in the form of payment from their University? Absolutely not. Should a select few be allowed to profit off of their own names? Absolutely. Only superstar athletes provide more value to their university and the NCAA than they receive. Allowing players to sell autographs and receive a percentage of royalties on jersey sales would create a market solution to address the inequality of NCAA’s current amateurism policies. Essentially, student athletes who create excess value should be permitted to profit directly while not being paid salaries by their universities.

Very few NCAA athletes have the marketability to profit off their own name. I am a Division I NCAA athlete who, like most, has benefitted enormously at the expense of my university and the NCAA. A full athletic scholarship covers tuition, books, housing, and a meal plan. I also receive practice and competition gear, which the University of Virginia also washes for me, and an allowance of $250 per semester to spend on casual clothes. I get priority registration for classes and access to an athlete-only dining hall. At no cost to myself, I have traveled to cities including Seattle, San Francisco, and Boston for competitions. Similar descriptions would apply to almost every college athlete. They receive incredible benefits in exchange for playing the sport they love.

NCAA amateurism is an entrenched notion aimed at maintaining the purity of sport. The policies surrounding this ideal are reasonable for almost every athlete in the NCAA. However, for elite football and basketball teams, which at times resemble more of a business than a part-time competition, this policy is laughable. Top college football and basketball programs rake in millions of dollars annually; the value top players provide their school and the NCAA far exceeds the value of a full scholarship. The college football and basketball industry has exploded in recent years. Last year there were 76 Division I football coaches earning at least $1 million. Legendary Alabama coach Nick Saban tops the list at $5.65 million. In 2013, UVA paid Mike London $2.6 million to lead the Cavaliers to a 2-10 season. Colleges and universities believe these coaches provide value and pay them accordingly. Athletic departments clearly have no problem paying for on-field success—except in the case of actual athletes.

Athletic programs in major conferences also receive millions of dollars in television broadcasting contracts. According to ESPN, schools in the largest conferences—the ACC, Big Ten, Big 12,

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PAC-12, and SEC—currently receive between $200 and $250 million from their conference television deals. This television revenue is driven in large part by fans who want to see star athletes play. The result is that athletes with celebrity status, like Manziel, create huge profits for the NCAA and their respective universities, but make nothing themselves.

Jersey sales are an even more concrete example of the NCAA exploiting the popularity of its well-known athletes. The organization’s flimsy dodge is that jerseys do not represent specific individuals because they do not have specific names on the back. Sportswriter Jay Bilas recently used the NCAA’s own website to debunk this argument. A search of “Johnny Manziel” returned Texas A&M #2 (Manziel’s number) jerseys in several colors, sales of which are obviously driven by Manziel’s performance as the star quarterback. Giving players a percentage of profits from the sale of their own jersey seems natural. If a school does not want to share profits, they could sell jerseys with no number or a generic #1.

The NCAA’s blanket amateurism policies need to adapt to the realities of present-day college football and basketball. Athletes like Johnny Manziel are worth far more than the benefits afforded to the average student-athlete. Allowing athletes to sell autographs and earn royalties off of jersey sales and endorsements would address some of the inequity of a system in which millions of dollars are generated from the likeness of individuals who can’t sell their own autograph for fifty bucks. Relaxing this part of the amateurism policy would allow a free market of jersey and autograph sales to determine a player’s value. College athletes don’t need salaries. Just give them back their names.

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