College Athlete Equity

By Jon Bradley

English 387 Advanced News Writing: Spring 2009

Somewhere, in football country, USA, there is an athlete. This athlete works his hardest every offseason to fulfill his dream of making it to the NFL. As his senior high school season winds down, he notices that the attention he has been getting from the local media and college coaches has intensified. The time has come for him to make a decision on his future. The college that earns his services has much to gain.

The Conversation

His list has been narrowed down to four schools:

Notre Dame, University of Southern California, Penn State University and finally the University of Florida, which has been recruiting him since he was a sophomore in high school.

His parents like Notre Dame. They say it’s because of the school’s academic reputation and how impressive a degree from such a dignified school would benefit him in the future.

They stressed having a backup plan because football doesn’t last forever, but knowledge does.

Both parents agreed that the athletic scholarship would be a great opportunity for him to pursue an NFL career while gaining a world-class education. So it was important that he attended an institution that provided that.

It also doesn’t hurt that his father is a native of South Bend, Ind., and has loved the Irish since he was a kid.

But Notre Dame, nonetheless, would prepare him mentally and provide him with the tools to succeed in the real world outside of football.

The coaches at USC, Penn State, and UF might have a different opinion on that, though.

It’s two weeks before signing day and the athlete is pondering his decision and analyzing what each school has to offer.
USC and UF, both coming off impressive bowl wins, said that with the proper work ethic, he could come in and start immediately. Playing for competitive teams like these would give him the exposure and experience that he would need to succeed on the next level. Not to mention, both schools are fully capable of providing their students with a satisfactory education.

Penn State has two upperclassmen at the running back spot so he would have to either switch to the other side of the ball, wait it out, or serve his time on special teams to see any playing time his freshman year. But Coach Paterno’s “school tradition” recruitment pitch really struck a chord and encouraged him to think of the team’s success as opposed to his own.

And the Fighting Irish were simply on his list to please his parents. He preferred to play in more of a physical balanced offense and wasn’t keen on the idea of playing for Charlie Weis. But for his parents’ sake, he kept them on the list the entire time.

After weeks of debating, he has finally reached a decision.

He will be a Florida Gator in the fall.

The call is brief.

“Hello coach?” says the athlete.

“Hey! How ya doin’?” says the coach.

“Doing great coach! Just called to let you know that I would be happy to join your team in the fall.” says the athlete.

“Well that’s great! We are going to mail you the letter of intent so look for that,” says the coach. “We’re excited to have a player like you in the program!

“Camp starts in early August but we are going to need you down here for summer workouts starting the week after your graduation. I’m going to have your position coach call you to sort out the details.

“Again, excited to have you and I look forward to the summer,” says the coach.

“OK, thanks coach. Have a good one!”

They both hang up.
**The Pros**

Collegiate athletics are as fundamental to athletes as college is to students. The way the college's business program prepares its students to run and start companies, the athletic program is preparing its players to advance to the next level.

The college athlete is exposed to higher competition and therefore is honing his skills against the best college athletics has to offer. Those players are the ones who are usually most successful at the professional level.

While bolstering his football resume, the college athlete also gets a rare opportunity to attend college for free. Up to four years of free education. The University of Florida will cost the average college freshman approximately $33,350 a year. So in four years, the average UF student could potentially pay $133,400 in total.

The athlete, on the other hand, has the luxury of being able to graduate from college having paid a grand total of $0 over four years and has the chance to earn millions if he is talented enough to play at the professional level.

This particular athlete hopes to follow a long line of Florida Gators to follow a successful college career with an even more successful professional career.

He will benefit from having some of the best coaches in college football and has the opportunity to gain experience early as a freshman.

This is a promising situation for a college athlete – a free education while playing the game that you love.

**The Con**

He has great speed and is very physical for a running back his size, the coaches note, and his competitive attitude could bring a lot of fire to the locker room.

He could have an impact early and could help bolster the program.

But the athlete's actions on the field not only impact the program, but they impact the program's wallet as well.

The NCAA says that whatever the athlete provides for the school is paid back by an education.

With that being said, the athletic program's earnings from that player's services would have to be around the $133,400 that we discussed earlier.
Florida plays five or six home games a year and their stadium holds over 100,000 people. That adds up to about 500,000 to 600,000 people per year. If the average ticket costs $10 (just a cheap estimation) the gate works out to around $5 million to $6 million a year.

And that is only scratching the surface of the athletic department’s annual revenue.

Throw in radio and television contracts and the school has enough to pay the athletes.

In a 2007 Fortune magazine report, senior editor Brian O'Keefe calls Florida the “most admired corporation in college sports.”

In the article, O'Keefe reports that in 2006, the University of Florida athletic department had revenue of $82.4 million – that’s No. 1 in the SEC and No. 5 in the country.

Ohio State University came in at the top spot with an astonishing $104.7 million in revenue.

In Florida’s case, the boosters play a large role in producing revenue. The better the team is playing, the more money the boosters are willing to dish out.

The Griffin family, in particular, has been especially generous over the years.

In the 1980s, citrus and cattle baron Ben Hill Griffin Jr. donated $20 million to the university and made his family name synonymous with Florida Gator athletics. This began an era of major giving among boosters.

A little over 20 years later, Ben Hill Griffin III donated $2 million to triple the size of the weight room his father built for the school.

Aside from the substantial support from the boosters, schools also receive revenue from sponsors. Shoe contracts are an especially popular source of income at most major colleges but most schools will not reveal how much they earn from shoe contracts. However, in an ESPN story, it was reported that the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, has a five-year, $7.1 million contract with Nike.

Colleges also earn big paydays from playing in primetime games. Last year, the payouts for football teams playing in bowl games ranged from $750,000 to $13 million.

Two years ago, the NCAA cut a new deal with CBS for TV rights fees to air exclusive broadcasts of all NCAA men’s basketball tournament games. That contract is worth $6.2 billion and has been extended to the year 2013.

And none of this revenue goes to the student.
Ashley Leopold, a junior economics major at Spelman, initially sided with the schools and NCAA.

“They get a free college education when many people their age don’t have the opportunity to go or cannot afford to pay $30,000 a year,” Leopold said.

But when I presented her with the facts on how much these large schools bring in a year, she quickly changed her mind.

“I didn’t think of them being exploited until you brought it up,” Leopold said. “If schools can make money from the players wearing a particular brand of shoes, the athletes should be equally compensated.”

The reason these players cannot benefit monetarily from this form of revenue is because the NCAA prohibits college athletes from earning money based on their status as amateurs.

Before 1999, the NCAA had prohibited players from working jobs during the school year because it was considered a violation of the aforementioned rule on earning money. But after much debate, the NCAA overturned the rule and allowed players to earn up to $2,000 during the school year working part-time jobs.

In principle, it is a step in the right direction, but in reality, it is implausible.

An athlete’s time is distributed between school and their sport or choice. Asking athletes to complete 20 hours a week at a part-time job is impractical because the hours they would spend working a job are spoken for as an athlete.

Usually, an athlete will spend that much time at team meetings, practices and travelling to out-of-town games. And the demands in the offseason aren’t very different.

Isiejah Allen, a junior communications major at Fordham University, says that money problems don’t help alleviate the stresses of school and football.

“School is like a full-time job already,” Allen said. “So when you add football in it’s like you have a day job which is school, and a job on the nights and weekend which is football.

“It can get overwhelming because sometimes you just want to be a regular student and go to parties and stuff, but either you have an away game, offseason workouts, or just don’t have the money to do anything.”

Most can see how this can lead to trouble.
Some student-athletes revert to secretly taking money from agents and boosters because there are numerous things they need that the school doesn’t provide to them. Whether it is an on-campus job that they never have to go to, or helping the athlete get a car loan approved, players are finding it harder to turn down these illegal gifts.

NCAA investigators have been examining allegations involving Heisman Trophy-winning running back Reggie Bush and NBA lottery pick O.J. Mayo. Bush, a former USC Trojan and current New Orleans Saint, is accused of accepting thousands in cash for his family because they failed to pay rent on a home owned by a supposed sports agent. Mayo, also a former Trojan and current member of the Memphis Grizzlies, is accused of accepting cash and other benefits from a middleman associated with a sports agency before and during the one season he played.

This is becoming more and more of a problem in collegiate athletics and the issue must be resolved before the illegal gift giving gets uncontrollable.

**The Solution**

The only way to officially stop illegal gift giving is to make it legal.

Not gifts per se, but allow athletes to be compensated in some form along with the scholarship they receive from the college.

Some recommend that the best alternative would be a stipend, perhaps monthly, that would be made part of the awarded scholarship. Since they don’t have time to work, it is the only way they can receive money without breaking any NCAA rules. With a stipend in place, coaches and athletic administrators don’t have to worry about potential abuses by school boosters or sports agents.

It’s the only fair thing to do, especially for those athletes who come from low-income families.

“My mom works two jobs because I have two little brothers at home, so she really doesn’t have much to send to me,” Allen said. “But I manage and she sends me whatever she has, whenever she has it.”

College officials should recognize the flaws in the system and start giving back to those who help make the institutions NCAA powerhouses. These athletes deserve some financial consideration for helping build this multi-million dollar industry we know as college athletics.