

Character in Training – College Sports and the Student-Athlete

When I saw the call for papers, I realized how little I actually knew about Catholic colleges. As a student-athlete who has wanted to play lacrosse in college since sixth grade, I began to wonder if in fact there is any difference between Catholic colleges and other secular universities in the way college sports are integrated into the overall mission of the institution. With this year's conference topic – the identity of the Catholic university and the late Pope John Paul II's call for renewal – in mind, I thought it would be an interesting and enlightening endeavor to find out whether or not there are actual perceptible differences between athletic programs in Catholic universities and athletic programs in secular universities.

Given my own high school experiences at Montrose, a private school founded on Catholic principles of the education of the whole person I realize it is possible for schools to have a clearly defined mission statement regarding the role of athletics in the overall vision of the school. As articulated in my school's student handbook, "participation in interscholastic athletics is a privilege available to the student body...students must also demonstrate good school citizenship, satisfactory scholarship, discipline, and a willingness to abide by Montrose principles and standards." This approach taken by my school recognizes participation in sports as an activity that comes *after* academics, and throughout my high school years it has been understood that if an athlete faces difficulty in a course, it is their involvement in sports that needs to be realigned. Additionally, our coaches instill in us the value of good sportsmanship and the importance of doing one's personal best instead of being obsessed with winning.

Sports should provide a basis for the physical, social, and ethical development of a person. Catholic universities in particular should be aware of how athletic programs in college affect their student-athletes and provide a means for personal growth and development. To make the sports experience positive and worthwhile, athletes need to be in an environment that cultivates their own personal integrity and growth, and does not solely emphasize the competitive and economic aspects of college sports. The ideal athletic experience is, however, often marred by a business-like intensity; for example, some college tournaments and competitions can get as much media coverage as professional sporting events. Because of the increasing popularity of college sports, the complicated recruiting process of the student-athlete, and the desire of many high school athletes to further their athletic talents at the college level, the role of college athletics is very significant in universities and has become a kind of industry that affects everyone from coaches to students to members of the administration. During preliminary research for this topic, I found that there are position papers on both sides of the issue. In such books as *Beer and Circus*, Murray Sperber bemoans the consequences of big time sports. On the other hand Rev. William B. Neenan, long-time administrator of Boston College, expresses his belief that sports actually enhance the overall educational environment in his essay entitled "Sports and Jesuit Universities: A Winning Combination" that "sports are an integral part of the American higher education scene; on the whole their contribution is positive; and they have much to contribute to the Jesuit educational mission."¹

So if I wanted to go to a college that had the same perspective on sports as my high school I would need to research this topic. Therefore I am suggesting a sample study of some different universities, both Catholic and secular, in the Boston area and comparing such topics as: game, practice, and work-out scheduling, and the possibility offered for attending Sunday Mass; the role of the coach as a mentor to the students-athletes both on and off the field; and finally the relationship between academics and athletics. It would also be worthwhile to explore the value placed on the athletes as individuals and the benefit of participating in collegiate sports in the context of the athletes' futures.

¹ Neenan, Rev. William. "Sports and Jesuit Universities: A Winning Combination"
<http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/rvp/pubaf/02/sports_neenan.html