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## In College Classrooms, the Problem Is High-School Athletics



*Michael Morgenstern for The Chronicle*

*By Steven Conn*

If we learned anything from college sports in the past year, it is that no scandal, however large or grotesque, will derail the runaway locomotive of big-time athletics. Not the Great Tattoo Coverup at Ohio State. Not the shenanigans at Miami. Not even the horrors of the Penn State locker room.

Desperate for a feel-good sports story amid the cascade of corruption, the news media found Yale's star quarterback, Patrick Witt, and his coach, Tom Williams. Witt, you will recall, made the difficult and, to many, admirable choice to play his last Harvard-Yale game, thus forgoing his interview for a Rhodes Scholarship. He was counseled in that decision by Coach Williams, who had done something similar while a player at Stanford. Both halves of that tear-jerking tale, of course, turned out to be untrue.

What I noticed about the Witt story as it went bad was a point buried below the revelations about the Rhodes: Patrick and his older brother, Jeff, had repeatedly transferred from high school to high school (and from Atlanta to Dallas) to find the right football match. We have become numbingly accustomed to college athletes' treating their campuses as minor-league training grounds before jumping to the NFL or the NBA. Witt, or his parents, treated his high-school education in exactly the same way, shopping around for the best "program" to hone and highlight his football-throwing skills.

The Witt brothers' trajectory is unusual, no doubt. So, too, is the new football stadium built during 2011 in Allen, Tex.—complete with a two-tiered press box and a monster video scoreboard in high

def. At 18,000 seats, it isn't even the largest high-school stadium in Texas, although its \$60-million price tag is certainly Texas-sized.

Still, Witt's story—and the construction of the bloated Allen High stadium—reveals an athletics trickle-down process. As professional sports grew into a multibillion-dollar enterprise, colleges followed suit. Small programs grew big; big programs grew huge, all chasing ESPN glory and cash. So, in turn, high-school athletics programs grow, emulating their big siblings on campuses.

There is a widespread consensus that our public-education systems are in serious trouble. But amid the conflicting diagnoses of the problem—teacher training, standardized testing, socioeconomic conditions—we have missed this obvious one: The growth of high-school athletics over the past generation has necessarily meant fewer resources devoted to academics, especially in the zero-sum budgetary environment of so many school districts. How many other educational systems pay for sports out of their education funds?

The issue isn't simply money. Perhaps more important, the growth of high-school athletics has resulted in more time than ever spent by students in practicing and competing. Basketball games played on school nights (with travel time, if they're away games), swimming and gymnastics "invitationals" that draw kids from hundreds of miles and last all weekend. And the proliferation of summer sports camps. In one of his pleadings as president of the NCAA, even the late Myles Brand complained to *The New York Times*, "The youth sports culture is overly aggressive."

American higher education bears some measure of the responsibility for that. There are doubtless a number of reasons that high-school sports follows the lead of college sports in becoming more professionalized. Chief among them, however, is that kids and their parents increasingly believe that accumulating varsity letters is a better way to get to college—and certainly a better way to pay for college—than academic achievement.

They aren't necessarily wrong. The number of athletics scholarships has remained largely flat over the past 20 years, although the dollar amount—about \$2-billion in athletically related financial aid is awarded each year in Divisions I and II, according to the NCAA—has grown a good bit faster than inflation. But as William Bowen and his colleagues have demonstrated in several books, athletics programs have distorted the admissions process even at selective colleges and universities that do not offer athletics scholarships. Looking at a group of such institutions, the authors found that recruited athletes are as much as four times more likely to gain admission than are other applicants with similar academic credentials. No wonder high-school students and their parents pursue sports.

After *annus horribilis* 2011, no one can deny with a straight face the corrupting effect of our athletics-business complex on higher education. We need to reckon, however, with the toll that college athletics and all its trappings take on high-school education as well.

In a nifty bit of euphemizing, school administrators don't call sports "extracurricular" anymore. They call them "cocurricular," semantically on par with math and music. Texas high-schoolers already receive academic credit for athletics "classes" offered during the school day—credit, that is, for watching game film or studying the playbook.

A fair bit of research has been conducted to determine the relationship between participating in high-school sports and academic performance, and the results are inconclusive. Some studies have found that athletes do marginally better in their classes, others that they do a bit worse.

But those studies are not asking the larger questions: To balance the time necessary for sports with academic demands, how many students are opting for easier classes? How many districts are not offering a more rigorous curriculum because there is not enough student demand for AP calc but plenty for JV football? To what extent has the growth in seriousness of high-school athletics contributed to the general dumbing down of public education?

Recently, American school reformers have been flocking to Finland to discover what makes their primary and secondary education so good. However, as my Ohio State colleague Kenneth Kolson wrote recently in a letter to *The New York Review of Books*, most of them fail to acknowledge that Finnish schools "offer no team sports, which means no 'student-athlete' hypocrisy, no cheerleaders, no pep rallies, and no architectural shrines devoted to the cult of youthful athletic prowess." He is under no illusion that the Finnish model can be replicated here.

Which is too bad—because many faculty see the results in our classes. We tend to blame the academic performance of our underprepared, underperforming students vaguely on the declining standards of public schools.

Maybe, though, we should take part of the blame.

I do a magic trick on the first day of class whenever I teach a big introductory survey. I point to a student at random and predict: "I can guess the first name of your high-school history teacher." Fingers on temples, brow furrowed, I announce: "Coach." I haven't been wrong yet.

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