

## “TUSCALOOSA, WE HAVE A PROBLEM”: COVID-19 AND COLLEGE ATHLETICS

As the nation’s athletic appetite soared in the 1950’s, the term “student-athlete” was coined, ostensibly to highlight the “amateur” status of collegians. Unquestionably, athletics teach **valuable life lessons**. People cherish key memories and formative experiences of their youth, many of which revolve around sports. In my **less than stellar** athletic career, I still recall the 5th grade basketball game in which I scored my very first “real” basket, ending with a grand total of **five points**. In baseball, I smashed a **rocket ground ball** off a pitcher who went on to play baseball for the Gophers, slipping it just past the 1B. Yet for that one at-bat, **I owned him!** That said, I am merely giving voice to what I have believed for some time— the major college athletic system is **broken**. It does not even remotely resemble what it was intended to be.

Would you be surprised to learn that according to an ESPN report, the cancellation of Division-I football in the most prestigious conferences (Big Ten, Big 12, Pac- 12, ACC, SEC) could result in a **\$4 billion loss**? Wrap your head around that number—if you had a **really** good pair of **shoes** and walked 1billion steps, you’d circumnavigate the **equator 15 times**. Division I football programs generate an average revenue to the tune of **\$31.9 million** per year, four times the next biggest sport, Men’s Basketball. For good or ill, it carries the others on its shoulders. The **average** major college head football coach earns **\$2.67 million** per year (the Gophers P.J. Fleck earns \$4.6M), with 16 of them making **more than \$5 million** annually. University of Alabama athletics grossed \$134 million, while Notre Dame averages \$76 million in annual **profit** from its athletic programs. Tuscaloosa and South Bend, we have a problem!

**Stanford University**, a top-five academic institution, will **eliminate 11 varsity sports** after this academic year. Considered “minor” sports, among them are rowing, fencing, synchronized swimming, men’s volleyball and wrestling. They certainly are **not minor sports** to those who participate. Athletes in those sports have won 27 Olympic medals while there. Saint Paul teaches: “Every athlete exercises discipline in every way. They do it to win a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one.” (1 Cor. 9:25) Are you familiar with the training regime for rowers and wrestlers? But here is where Stanford was on to something. In their announcement, they noted: “The financial model supporting 36 varsity sports is not sustainable.” Bingo! Predictably, the school **blamed it on Covid-19**. I’d probably do the same. But it begs the question of the **purpose of collegiate sports**. Maintaining athletic facilities for the health and well-being of the students is a no-brainer. Intramurals are a source of fellowship and healthy exercise.

However, the major sports are the **cash cow** and the colleges are drunk on their own success. With apologies to Auburn fans, for all intents and purposes the Crimson Tide serves as the **professional** team for the state of Alabama. How could one reasonably conclude anything else? The Stanford scenario is illustrative because that school truly attracts **highly talented student-athletes** in the best sense of the word. Their 850 Cardinal varsity student-athletes represent 12% of the undergraduate population, whereas the University of Minnesota’s 933 student-athletes mingle amongst an undergrad population of 34,633— just 2.6%. The pandemic might just demolish the *status quo* of college athletics out of necessity.

Anyone who **complains** should offer **solutions**. Here goes: (1) no coach may earn a salary higher than the University President— period; (2) eliminate exorbitant “seat licensing fees” which are nothing other than alumni/booster donations for the right to sit near the 50-yard line; (3) limit the players (i.e. expensive scholarships) on a football squad to a manageable number, two strings offense and defense plus special teams; (4) return to more regional play, cutting down on cross-country travel; (5) for heaven’s sake, eliminate the “one and done” rule allowing elite college basketball programs to be little more than the NBA **developmental league** for uncompensated celebrities. Surely, the NCAA will respond that student-athletes graduate at the same rate (68%) as the student body. But athletes receive **full tuition, room and board**, while many general population students drop out of financial necessity and do not have the benefit of dedicated tutors, etc. But for the most successful programs (e.g. NCAA Tournament basketball teams), the graduation rate is typically **significantly lower** than the school’s general population. Just 10 of the 64 schools in 2017 had higher team graduation rates than the general population.

**Only 2%** of high school athletes receive a college athletic scholarship and just 2% of **those athletes** become professionals. The NFL should **fund and operate** its own **minor league** system, as does baseball. In baseball, 5% of high school seniors play in NCAA programs, while just 0.5% are drafted (the most highly regarded players) and go directly into professional baseball. But **those** players are more highly regarded and have a better chance at the majors. Post-secondary education is delayed until their career ends. Football has no such direct route– the NFL merely benefits from the NCAA carrying its minor league water. Too many D-I athletes are merely being used to fill the coffers of schools that routinely boast huge endowments. **Stop the charade**—no one’s fooled anymore. Colleges need to reevaluate the entire “business” of sports and place primary emphasis on the education of its students.

- That’s my grandson! A 69-year-old woman posted a photo identifying **her own 18-year-old grandson** in a product review for the **protective vest** she purchased for him to use in the nightly Portland, OR protests. Later, he was captured on video hurling an incendiary device at the Federal Courthouse. Receiving it from another, he thought it was a strobe firework, not an explosive. Can’t make it up! Might be a bit awkward at Thanksgiving this year.
- Spare us, O Lord? Yet again, a **firebomb** damaged another masterpiece of Catholic art, **a 382-year-old** depiction of Jesus Christ crucified at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Managua, Nicaragua. Witnesses saw the suspect canvassing the church for twenty minutes before he set off the device. The Chapel in which the image stood was severely damaged as well.
- The Diocese of Spokane, WA ought to be commended for pivoting during the pandemic. They have turned a retreat center into a **quarantine medical facility** for individuals with the Coronavirus. Since they cannot offer group retreats, this way the building is being used for a noble purpose and serving a great need in the area.
- This past week saw the **infamous 75th anniversary** of the bombings at **Hiroshima and Nagasaki**, August 6 and 9 respectively in 1945. I cannot fathom the **weight on the shoulders** of those who made the decisions or carried them out, while fully appreciating the complexities involved. While many war historians posit that absent the atomic bombs a protracted war with the Japanese would have cost many thousands more lives– please God, **never again**.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,  
Rector