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Commentary

College athletes are already getting paid

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By [Mchelle Voepel](#) / *ESPN.com*

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This spring, with troubles churning in the football program like a developing hurricane, Ohio State took time to honor one of its biggest athletic legends. A bronze statue of him was unveiled outside the stadium that bears his name.

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*AP Photo*Jesse Owens became globally famous for his performance at the 1936 Berlin Games. But his hopes of turning his talent into a job forced him out of the amateur competitions.

This athlete's decision to go to Ohio State was conditional on the school helping his father find work in the Columbus area. But the athlete himself didn't get a scholarship. While competing as a Buckeye, he worked to support himself and help his father take care of the family.

So you can imagine that Jesse Owens, who became an Olympic track and field legend 75 years ago, likely would have some strong opinions on the topics of amateurism and "pay for play" that are swirling around college athletics today.

But ... what exactly would they be? Owens died in March 1980. Not long before his death, he had publicly stated his disappointment about the United States' intention to boycott the Moscow Games later that year. Owens had reverence for the Olympics, even if he was a kind of economic "victim" of the amateur requirements that were in place during his athletic prime.

He became globally famous for his four-Gold performance at the 1936 Berlin Games. But his hopes of turning his talent into a bills-paying job actually forced him out of the amateur competitions that provided the greatest spotlight. He ended up participating in contrived races that some saw as exploitative.

Owens was trapped by an ideology. He was a "professional" elite track and field athlete in an era when that just didn't pay well. There is a link to that long-held -- and likely misplaced -- reverence for amateurism and today's debate about "pay-for-play." Inevitably, in the discussion about paying college athletes, someone will make an argument about sustaining the "purity" of amateur competition. As if that's succinctly defined -- or has always meant the same thing.

"The social 'class' element at the turn of the 20th century was very much in play with athletics," said Dr. Ellen Staurowsky, a professor in sport management at Ithaca College, author and former athletic director and coach. "The whole notion was that amateur sport was for the economic class that could afford it. Part of the rationale for not paying those athletes had to do with the dividing line between the elite classes versus the working classes.

“

What college sports did was take that amateur concept, which was so class-based, and broaden and democratize it. But they ultimately still made it favorable to the power-elite people who are running colleges and universities. It's created an exploitative system.

” -- *Dr. Ellen Staurowsky*

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it. But they ultimately still made it favorable to the power-elite people who are running colleges and universities. It's created an exploitative system."

Indeed, most do trace the American concept of amateur athletics back to roots in Great Britain, where protection of so-called "gentleman's" competitions was the impetus behind the initial insistence on amateurism.

And events such as the modern Olympics, launched in 1896, may have been deemed "amateur-only," but even then, that was a complex idea.

Pierre Fredy, Baron de Coubertin, was a French aristocrat who is considered the patriarch of the modern Olympics. He is generally described as a staunch advocate of amateurism. And, indeed, he preferred the concept of athletic competition contributing to a stronger moral fabric of society rather than being for monetary gain.

However, he didn't like the idea of worthy competitors being excluded simply because they were of the working class. Coubertin's ideas about "amateurism" in fact broadened and evolved during his lifetime, and it was his wish that the topic would continue to do so. And that is what's happened.

When the NCAA had its first convention in 1906, the organization castigated the practice we now call recruiting, and also frowned on any type of financial incentive, such as an athletic scholarship, to entice student-athletes to attend a university. That said, there was no "enforcement" arm of the NCAA at that time to actually try to police these things. Colleges were essentially on the honor system.

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*Danny Moloshok/Getty Images*As long as fans are packing the Big House, people will be asking whether athletes should be paid.

And you can imagine that worked about as well then as it would today. Inevitably, college athletics moved into the realm we are now, where athletes aren't considered "employees," yet essentially are given financial rewards (scholarships, room/board, clothing, equipment, meals) for their athletic performance.

"The rules have been set up in such a way to avoid a public understanding that athletes are already paid. It's just a matter of whether they are paid their value," said Staurowsky, who in 1998 co-authored the book, "College Athletes for Hire: The Evolution and Legacy of the NCAA's Amateur Myth," with Allen L. Sack.

"This issue will not go away," she said. "Over the years, there's been this message that anything like 'pay-for-play' would take the 'college' part out of college sports. I'm not persuaded that's true. What sells college sport is the loyalty that fans have to those teams. If they were paid what they were worth in terms of revenue generation, I doubt that loyalty would go away."

A parallel can be made to the Olympics. During the reign of Avery Brundage as International Olympic Committee president from 1952 to 1972, the Olympics were actually in what we can now clearly see as a progression toward professionalism. But Brundage hindered that progress, as he was adamantly in favor of the

Summer and Winter Games remaining "amateur-only" even though there was no way to unilaterally achieve that aim.

Nations where athletes were fully state-supported were still regarded as amateurs even though they were, in any real definition of the word, professional. The dichotomy between what was truly amateur and what was allowed as amateur became an untenable situation for even the notoriously compartmentalizing IOC to maintain.

By the early 1990s, amateurism had essentially taken its last bow in the Olympics, with no more ostentatious example than the U.S. men's basketball "Dream Team" of NBA superstars competing in the 1992 Barcelona Games.

Tennis maintained its amateurs-only rules for the four "Grand Slam" events until the open era began in 1968. The amateur restrictions meant that for several decades, some of the best athletes in tennis and various Olympic sports really were denied several years of their prime in terms of competing at the most high-profile events.

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Hogshead-Makar competed in just one Olympics because of amateurism rules.

Have the Olympics become any less popular because they became, essentially, professional? Of course not.

Olympic gold medalist Nancy Hogshead-Makar, born in 1962, competed in only one Summer Games -- Los Angeles in 1984. Had she been born 20 years later, the odds are she'd likely have been in three Olympics.

Part of this was political circumstance; the U.S. boycott of the 1980 Summer Games cost her a trip to the Olympics as a standout 18-year-old. She won four medals at the L.A. Games, three of them gold, but then retired. She was only 26 by the 1988 Seoul Games, but was already out of the sport.

"The true 'amateur' as it was originally defined -- you weren't even supposed to train. Or have a coach," Hogshead-Makar said. "Then you go to, say, Johnny Weissmuller ... he trained hard for the [1924] Olympics for eight weeks. I trained a decade before I went to the Olympics.

"So by 1984, we had come so far from that initial concept of amateurism. The only part that remained was getting money for what you were doing. Would I have gone on and continued my swimming career if I could have done that? No doubt about it. But I was completely funded by mom and dad. I needed to finish my

education and make a living," she said.

"The truth is some really great -- I mean great with a capital 'G' -- athletes didn't get to compete because they couldn't afford it. In 1984, I knew people who were training for the Olympics and were on food stamps."

Still Hogshead-Makar, a Georgetown Law graduate and now on the faculty at Florida Coastal School of Law, doesn't think the professionalism of the Olympics is argument for making pay-for-play a workable answer in collegiate athletics. She points out that the very student-athletes whom advocates say should be paid -- those in revenue-producing programs in football and men's basketball -- are already pretty well taken care of for the time they're in school.

And pay-for-play would be going away from the educational model that collegiate athletes supposedly are built upon.

"If they are going to break from that, then that is the professional model," Hogshead-Makar said. "The whole premise of intercollegiate athletics is still supposed to be about making them better kids. That we are using our tax dollars to support that, to invest in our future."

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