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NCAA athletics: a guilty pleasure?

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Quad 136

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NCAA Athletics: A Guilty Pleasure?



Photo: Sean Donohue '16

Even non-sports fans likely know something special is going on this month and for those who pay any attention to college athletics, this is an exciting time of year. It is March Madness, when for three weeks NCAA student-athletes take center stage in the sports world as the Division I men's and women's basketball tournaments unfold.

The emphasis during March Madness is much more on the athlete part and less on the student part, which often brings out critics of the DI model for college sports and maybe even some slight misgivings on the part of the average fan. The most common criticism is that many DI athletes end up getting shortchanged in the education part of the scholarship-for-play bargain. The less-than-ideal educational

outcomes many athletes receive are largely a function of the pressure on coaches to produce winning programs with the money that is part of major NCAA sports, primarily football and basketball. This model often leads to extra-curricular participation in varsity athletics becoming something approaching a full-time job.

Even in non-money sports the demands on scholarship athletes can be onerous. I had two recent conversations, one with a male DI golfer and a second with a female DI soccer player, about being DI athletes. Both acknowledged that they did not fully understand the trade-offs they would be required to make as scholarship athletes. Each also said that as much as they loved their sports, they felt like they had missed out on some important things in their college experience, both academically and outside the classroom, and were not sure if they would make the same choice if they had to do it over again. The conversations left me feeling a little sad for these two young people. Though both had gotten degrees from good universities (partially paid for with scholarship dollars – neither got a full ride), it was troubling that graduates should have regrets even as they were walking off the commencement stage.



Photo: Richard Larkin McLay '17

Fortunately, it is not that way for every college athlete. As most know, the Division III model is quite different than that in DI and DII. The first difference is money, or lack thereof. There are no scholarships available to student-athletes at the hundreds of schools that make up the NCAA's DIII. This division is the largest in terms of number of schools and student-athletes (40% of NCAA schools are DIII vs. 32% Division I). Students truly participate “for love of the game,” to use the NCAA tag line. There are no scholarships for any athletes, as per NCAA rules. The only funding is the merit-based and need-based aid available to all students.

The second major difference flows from the first. The time requirements and the expectations of coaches are quite different in DIII. Though the competitive spirit can be just as strong, seasons are shorter, the number of contests are fewer and coaches know that they need to make the experience work within the context of their student-athletes' other commitments, primarily academics. If coaches fail to provide a program that works for students, they will simply cease to participate. There are no golden handcuffs, nor any financial incentives whatsoever, that tie DIII athletes to their athletic commitments. If athletics gets in the way of pursuing a degree, the choice is generally an easy one.

This results in academic outcomes at Saint John's University and the College of Saint Benedict for athletes and non-athlete that are virtually identical. (I strongly suspect this is true at the vast majority of DIII programs—I just do not have the data to confirm this.) Admissions standards are the same, retention is sometimes even higher for athletes due to the relationships they build on their teams, choices of majors identical and graduation rates are indistinguishable.

When examining the data for athletes and non-athletes recently, we discovered an interesting fact about one aspect of academic performance. At SJU and CSB, our athletes have higher GPAs than our non-athletes. The differences are not huge—non-athlete Johnnies have an average GPA of 3.00 and athletes a 3.11—but this outcome certainly supports the notion that being a DIII athlete does not result in any compromise in the student academic experience.

As an aside, when athletes are asked what might explain this outcome, they tell me that they often do better academically

when they are in season because they are better at managing their time when they have a more fixed schedule. This outcome might serve as a new angle in our recruiting efforts for the 1/3 of our students who are also varsity athletes: “Come to Saint John’s and Saint Ben’s for exceptional DIII athletics and higher GPAs to boot.”

So, if you’re enjoying March Madness but feeling some pangs about the academic experience of your favorite team’s players, remember that you can cheer for DIII student-athletes guilt free. And you might also want to hire them!

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | March 24th, 2016 | Categories: [Higher Education](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).