

## Should College Athletes be Paid? Hold It!!!... Maybe There's A Better Way

With the ongoing increasing conversations pertaining to college student-athletes, of whether they should be paid as professionals, or remain amateurs, I thought it take a moment to sit down and jot down some of my thoughts.

I admit to being a little bit "old school" when it comes to implementing success strategies to keep our young people on track for success. As the author of a just completed book "Standing above the Crowd: "Execute Your Game Plan to Become the Best You Can Be", that keeps the focus on the tried-and-true traditions of hard work, goal setting, dedication and positive attitude, I feel that those things along with my own personal life experience of being a collegiate student- athlete help me to have a perspective from the many different points of view pertaining to this conversation.

### **My Beginning as a Student Athlete:**

Athletes are the prized and celebrated few of our society. From the time that most top-level athletes are in the fourth or fifth grade, they have already been identified as those that have a great opportunity in the world of sports. At that point they become coddled, pampered, and "taken care of" in ways that the average individual can only imagine. Many times athletes who are full of athletic potential don't have the same scholastic expectations placed upon them from the time they're in middle school and all the way through college. Is that fair? I guess I'd say it's fair only if it works out well for the athlete, his family and the university of their choice before heading on to the pros. Unfortunately, that is where we as a society place our values, instead of on the student who gets straight "A's". But, many times it doesn't work out that way for the "hot shot" athlete, and you only hear about the perhaps 10% of athletes who actually ascend to the top of the pyramid of the hundreds of thousands of scholar athletes throughout this country (middle school through collegiate sports). The vast majority of student-athletes will perhaps play on their high school varsity team, their collegiate athletic teams, and far fewer in the professional ranks. It's been said it's easier to become a brain surgeon than it is a professional athlete.

I was a late starter as a student-athlete, so I wasn't one of the pampered ones that were targeted for athletic success from middle school on. Matter of fact I didn't play my first organized basketball game until I was a senior in high school. So, I missed out on all the "wining and dining", "coddling and pampering", and, "wooing and recruitment" that goes on in trying to get the attention of our young athletes. That doesn't mean that I wasn't witness to those kinds of things as they went on around me having watched many of my peers go through all of those dynamics. I do remember even back in high school (mid 70's) in seeing some of the star football, basketball, baseball, track/field athletes being given special treatment as the recruiting wars heated up.

Coming from a family that emphasizes academics over athletics, I had the mindset from the beginning that my first reward from becoming a student-athlete would be my scholarship on to college. I was so excited about receiving my athletic scholarship to Washington State University, because I would be the very first person in my immediate family to be able to attend an institution of higher learning and earn a

college degree. I know that my family is probably not “the norm” when it comes to having a student-athlete that is full of potential and can possibly make it onto the pros. Most families “want it” (the athlete to make it to the pros) even more than the athlete him/herself. My family wasn't like that, and I was really blessed in the fact that they did place academics ahead of athletics.

### **The Social Impact of Athletes not Graduating:**

My major at Washington State University was in the areas of sociology/psychology. It was there that I begin to understand some of the social issues of the day (both historically and current) plus challenges that pertain to ethnic groups (such as African Americans like myself) in particular. I learned that so many African-American men fall through the cracks (become involved with the criminal justice system, drop out of school, become teenaged fathers, suffer higher unemployment rates, become involved with substance abuse such as alcohol, drugs, etc.) and we have the society and community need to do a better job of helping our young people along that precarious pathway that can lead them to success. Success that is not only measured on the athletic fields, but more importantly in the classroom, and then once they embark upon their respective career paths.

If you take a look at any collegiate or professional football/basketball team, you'll readily see that the vast majority of the young players are of African-American descent. At times it's been up to perhaps 90% in basketball and at the 70 to 80 percentile in football. Most of those players come from families that are single female-headed households (over 70% of African-American homes are single female-headed households in the United States), and the student-athlete themselves are the majority of the time, the very first generation in their families who have the opportunity to go on to college. We don't have to go too far back in history to realize the reasons why a lot of African-Americans were not allowed to attend school and become educated. So this is a relatively recent development in the fact that so many African-American student-athletes are now being given the opportunity to obtain degrees at every university across the United States. The shame of it all is the fact that very few of our African-American student-athletes actually walk away from a university after their athletic eligibility is up with a degree/diploma stating that he or she has completed the curriculum work and has earned a degree. That's the shame of it all and that has to be fixed!

Our student-athletes (no matter what ethnic background and culture they are from) cannot compete on a “level playing field” without a university degree with their student peers who are on campus at the same time with them. Even when a student-athlete does obtain his or her degree, they're still somewhat behind the rest of their graduating class because while the “regular” student has been attending classes everyday and gaining experience in implementing some of the skills they're learning, more often than not, the student-athlete is missing a large percentage of classes (even if it was made up by “study/tutor sessions”) and is missing out on the opportunity to implement some of the skills of their learning along the way as do “regular” students. Also, “regular” students have an opportunity to form a social network that many times becomes a pathway onto their business network that they will utilize in launching their careers. Student-athletes many times are isolated on campus from everyday campus life

because of the demands of the sport that they're playing, and trying to balance their academic load at the same time. Plus, when you're celebrated student-athlete on campus, it's difficult to be accepted as a normal everyday person and there's always someone who's willing to step up and "befriend you" for their own personal agenda such as "tickets, being a part of your inner circle, hoping to tag along with you on "the ride" to the professional ranks should you make it). The student-athlete has to be "extra careful" in who their friends are and that takes away from the campus experience too.

The small percentage of student-athletes who actually navigate their way successfully through this whole maze of "hangers ons", "friends and so-called friends", "groupies and posse'", "educators who want to be your friend" and the like are to be congratulated for making it through in the first place. Most likely they made it through because of their athletic talents, but also they had the good fortune of not going too far off track and ruining their opportunities for success. If you're a "lottery pick" or a "first-round pick ", more power to you, but keep in mind "to those whom much is given, much is expected ". I applaud them also, but that's not what this article is about. This article is about those "regular student-athletes" (like myself, who actually took going to school seriously and received my degree) who have the odds stacked against them to make it to the pros in first place.

### **What's Wrong with Paying College Athletes?**

The controversy and conversation swirling about in recent years is in regards to payment collegiate student-athletes a portion of the huge sums of revenue that they generate for collegiate sports. At last count, the revenue-generating collegiate sports of the NCAA generated about \$10 billion annually for the various schools and Universities that play the major revenue generating sports of football and basketball. That's a very large sum of money and it shows that college sports are more popular than ever. State-of-the-art football stadiums, basketball arenas, track and field venues, baseball fields and the like, have sprung up like dandelions in a meadow field over the last couple of decades. The recruiting war for student-athletes who can help you create a winning athletic program is fierce. Schools go all out to create state-of-the-art weight rooms, athletic dorms, dining halls and more in an effort to impress the student-athletes when he/she comes to visit the campus on a recruiting trip. There are also private planes, fancy hotels, money under the table (and money on top of the table), and new friends "to hook up with" that are thrown into boot. I wouldn't go so far as to say that any of these things are "wrong" as long as the Universities are abiding by the NCAA rules of recruitment, but you also have to keep in mind that the student-athletes are 17/18-year-old impressionable young people who have a tremendous amount of pressure put on them on all sides by coaches (both high school and college), families, friends, media and their peers. What 17/18-year-old is able to handle all of that?

The NCAA has been from its very beginning a venue for "amateur collegiate sports". For well over 100 years that is been its mission and purpose, and even though the mission and purpose is still in place, a lot of other dynamics (revenues for schools, television contracts, societal/alumni pressures to win, pride and prestige of winning a national championship titles, etc.) have changed especially over the last two or three decades. There've always been scandals throughout the history of the NCAA as far as somebody

bending the rules of little too far. But it's gotten to the point where the student-athletes are feeling as if they are the ones who have contributed more than their fair share to the overall success of the athletic programs. It's true, a winning program generates more revenue, and a losing program will be faced with having a half-full stadium and budget shortfalls for the athletic department. So the pressure's on. Which way do we go from here?

I feel that NCAA sports should continue to be "amateur" in nature, but because of the tremendous amount of revenues that are generated for the universities, a portion of that should be set aside for student-athletes who are helping to build the success of the programs. I'm not in favor of outright paying the student-athlete either a stipend or a regular paycheck, but here's what I am in favor of, and that is to set some of that money aside that the school generates off of the hard work and athletic promise of the student-athlete. Set some of that money aside and put it into a trust fund or an annuity (choice of the student-athlete) that will be waiting there for the student-athlete upon graduation.

### **What can be done?**

Traditionally, the "payment" that the student-athlete receives for being a scholarship athlete is a "full ride athletic scholarship that includes tuition, room and board". Most student-athletes also receive a monthly stipend that can range anywhere from \$500 - \$1,000 for basic expenses (food and gas money). The annual cost for scholarship at most major universities typically amount anywhere from \$10,000-\$50,000 a year. Back in my day, I felt that was a fair trade and I was more than happy to receive my full ride athletic scholarship. I realize times have changed and this is a whole different world that we live in nowadays.

So here's my suggestion; what if the university set that money aside in a trust fund or an annuity that would be waiting there for the student-athlete upon his or her graduation? We talked earlier about many times even if a student-athlete graduates with the rest of their graduating class, they're still behind the rest of their "regular" college peers because of the increased demands of doing double duty of being a student and athlete. I would think that creating a better win-win scenario in which both parties (the university and the student-athletes) have a vested interest, it would be better all the way around.

The university would still generate the tremendous amount of revenues that it does from its athletic programs and the participation of its student-athletes. The student-athlete would be compensated by given a "full ride athletic scholarship" (valued at perhaps \$10,000-\$50,000 per year), plus that amount of the scholarship would be placed in a trust fund or an annuity and would be there waiting for the student-athlete once that student-athlete graduates with a degree from the university.

I would even place additional onus on the university to commit as many years as is necessary to ensure that that student-athlete eventually walks away from the college campus with a degree in hand. Most student-athletes, if they are to graduate, graduate in about five years. If you have a scenario where it takes perhaps 10 years for student-athlete to complete all of his or her curriculum that ends up with a

degree, so be it, the university makes that commitment. The university will be receiving the interest payments that will be accruing on the trust fund accounts.

The responsibility placed upon the student-athlete would be in order for him or her to receive the monies that are awaiting them in the trust fund or annuity, they need to graduate. Perhaps you can add some stipulations where the funds will be guaranteed to be there as long as the student-athlete meets a few basic criteria (no felonies, no more than a lapse of five years of attending classes either on campus or online, etc.), and that perhaps the longer it takes for the student-athlete to eventually receive their degree, the less money that will be there for them. (i.e., if there is a \$100,000 trust fund awaiting the student-athlete once their athletic eligibility is used up, every year that it takes for them to actually obtain their degree, the amount of the trust fund decreases by 1 – 5%). That would ensure that there is an incentive for the student-athlete to continue pursuing their degree and not let a couple of decades go by before they decide that they want to resume pursuing their degree.

Here's an example:

Last year of eligibility	Decrease of 5% (\$5,000 per year)	Amount In Trust Fund
2015		\$100,000
2016	5%	\$95,000
2017	5%	\$90,000
2018	5%	\$85,000
2019	5%	\$80,000
2020	5%	\$75,000

In the example above, the original \$100,000 fund would be decreased by 5% for every year that it takes for the student-athlete to complete his or her curriculum and obtain their degree. I believe this would put a little pressure (student-athletes are very used to performing under pressure) on the student-athlete to eventually obtain their college degree.

What if a student-athlete doesn't have the wherewithal to pay for ongoing classes and tuition? Well then the university (or a neutral third party) would administer the trust fund (annuities have far too many tax consequences for early distribution of funds) and deduct the cost for classes/tuition and perhaps room and board from the trust fund. That would again, incentivize the student-athlete to finish up his/her degree and not draw down (or borrow against in the case of an annuity) too much on their trust fund.

This model would be beneficial and a number of ways. As already mentioned the university would still be able to field revenue generating athletic teams, reward student-athletes with athletic scholarships

and have a sum of money awaiting the student-athlete upon graduation. This model would also greatly increase the graduation rates of student-athletes, even if it takes 10 years to obtain a degree. It's not enough to say that you "went to" such and such university,... what the student-athlete wants to be able to say is that "I graduated from" such and such university. Also, this model somewhat "levels of playing field" and enables the student-athlete upon receiving the funds that have been set aside for them to "catch up" a little bit with their college campus peers who were not student-athletes when it comes to embarking upon their respective careers in "the real world". Besides, the "regular" college grad graduates with tremendous student loans to pay back (what's fair, you say?). There's a lot of things that one can do with a \$100,000 nest egg (invest, purchase a home, start a business, etc.), and I feel that this will be the win-win solution moving forward. If they throw their nest egg away on fancy cars and treating their posse to luxuries, well at least the former student-athlete now has their college degree in hand to get out there and "get a job" like the rest of society.

We tend to think of the "star" student-athletes when we think about student-athletes at all. But what about those student-athletes who are on athletic scholarships yet hardly ever get a chance to play? They're contributing in practice and maybe playing just a little bit during "garbage time", and perhaps they were realistic enough to know that the chances of becoming a professional were slim to none. They still dedicated themselves and made just as large of a commitment to the athletic program as a star players did. Many times the student-athlete who realizes that he or she will not become an integral part of the team that they're working so hard to be part of; will find themselves transferring to another university and perhaps even losing a year of eligibility and doing so. Is that fair? Coaches have been able to move from team to team and university to university without any kind of hindrance, but the student-athlete cannot. So a model as I've discussed in this article would be beneficial to the second and third string student-athletes also. Even if their athletic career didn't pan out as planned on the college campus, they still have a "nest egg" to get themselves started along their alternative career pathway once they're finished with collegiate athletics.

### **In Summary:**

I realize that we live in a world of "instant gratification" and "what have you done for me lately" mindsets. That is especially true in the world of athletics. Our young athletes get caught up in that mindset and dynamic all the time with either the expectations we place on them and/or the expectations that they place on themselves. As it is with becoming involved with criminal activity, substance abuse and the like, human nature is one that we all feel like "I'm the one that can handle it or that things only happen to those other people who don't know what they're doing". Bottom line is we don't know how our fate will play out in many situations. There've been dozens (if not hundreds) of "blue-chip" student-athletes who flamed out in college for various reasons and there've been student-athletes who came from absolutely nowhere and gone on to stardom in the professional ranks. Sometimes its fate and good fortune, sometimes injuries take their toll, sometime our young student-athletes fall off that pathway of success, sometimes the student-athlete is not able to adapt to life on a college campus, sometimes people can't handle failure (or success).

I for one am tired of seeing our young student-athletes walk away from a “golden opportunity” of being a student-athlete on a college campus in Anywhere, USA with little more than a few practice jerseys and maybe a trophy or two. It's a shame and there are so many places to point the finger of blame. Face it, the professional sports leagues could care less if the student-athlete has a degree or not. They just want to get the athlete under contract, pay him/her for services rendered, then move on to the next one once the athlete can no longer perform. But the two major entities involved in the scenario are the university and the student-athlete. Both can work together to create a win-win scenario for each other and which if properly managed and implemented can reap tremendous rewards for years down the road.

Article submitted by:

James Donaldson

Former collegiate athlete at Washington State University (1975 – 1979)

Former NBA All-Star professional athlete (1980 – 2000)

Owner and President of The Donaldson Clinic: Physical Therapy and Sports Rehabilitation

Author of Standing above the Crowd: Execute Your Game Plan to Become the Best You Can Be

[www.StandingAboveTheCrowd.com](http://www.StandingAboveTheCrowd.com)

[JamesD@StandingAboveTheCrowd.com](mailto:JamesD@StandingAboveTheCrowd.com)