BY RICHARD E. LAPCHICK

PROPOSITION 48

FAIR OR FOUL

One of the biggest stories about the start of the new college sports season has been the number of freshmen athletes declared ineligible. Nearly 500 football and basketball players will sit out this year since they did not qualify under the newly imposed NCAA academic standards known as Proposition 48. More than 70 percent of those ineligible are black.

Proposition 48 is one of the measures the NCAA passed to attempt to stop the highly-publicized demise of the integrity of collegiate sports in America. The recruiting scandals, illegal payoffs, drug use, gambling, exploitation of black athletes, and the national graduation rate of 30 percent in revenue sports all shock the country no matter how often we read about them.

However, with all of the media coverage focused on the collegiate level, all-too-few see where the problems begin. Those athletes who didn't meet the new standards aren't eligible because of their high school records. We stop expecting academic achievement of athletes when they are in their early teens, not just when they reach their twenties.

What is necessary is legislation mandating higher minimum academic requirements for athletes (and everyone in all extracurricular activities) to be eligible to participate. First-of-its-kind, state-wide legislation was passed in Texas two years ago.

Patrick Ewing and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar

That legislation goes to the heart of the issue. The dream of the pro career begins in the early teen-age years. Stressing eligibility and not the development of real academic skills, by the time the senior year of high school rolls around the student athlete has already become simply the athlete. The worst fall-out is on the black athlete. The myth that sports is the way out of poverty has been repeated so often in the media and by coaches that a disproportionate number of black families believe it and buy into the dream.

For all of the reporting on how much Kareem Abdul-Jabbar or Patrick Ewing might earn, they beat the 12,000 to 1 odds that a high school athlete faces by trying to make the pros. Twenty-nine out of 30 high school players won't even play in college and only two percent will get an athletic scholarship. The odds are actually better for a black high school athlete to become a doctor or an attorney than to be a pro athlete. Only 14 percent of black college athletes graduate in 4 years, 31 percent in 6 years (vs. 53 percent of white athletes in all sports).

That is why the Texas law was so far-sighted. Other states are considering such standards. A small percentage, many of them in California, of the nation's 16,000 school districts have minimum standards. If we don't require our high school and even middle school students to achieve at least a "C" average, then how can we be surprised by the estimates that up to 15 percent of black college athletes are reportedly illiterate. It reflects the 30 percent of all (black and white) high school football and basketball players who are reportedly illiterate. That is nearly triple the rate of high school students in general.

Yet it is certainly not exclusively a racial problem. If college-level figures of 30 percent graduation rates for **all** athletes vs. 20 percent for blacks hold at the high school level, then many white high school students will also see their future crumble after they toss their last pass.

Approximately 150 college players make the NFL and NBA each year. Fifty thousand (only 25,000 on scholarship) play in college each year. More than 1,500,000 play on high school teams while up to 20,000,000 play in youth sport leagues.

Proposition 48 is a partial answer. It will require entering college freshmen at Division I universities to have had, among other criteria, a "C" in high school in order to be eligible to play in their freshman year of college. While this part of 48 is surely a step in the right direction (another, more controversial requirement, is a minimum score on either the SAT (700) or ACT(15), standardized tests widely believed to be culturally biased), 48 will have no effect whatsoever on the 98 percent of high school athletes who won't ever play in college.

For years the NCAA denied the overwhelming nature of the problem of the uneducated athlete. It took the active involvement of the presidents to override the votes of athletic directors, most of whom have otherwise done little. Likewise, it came as no surprise that there was scant support for a minimum "C" average for high school students emanating from the annual convention of the National Federation of State High School Associations.

What is needed at the high school level is an active involvement of school superintendants, principals, teachers, coaches and, especially, parents so that athletes cannot remain eligible to compete with 5 D's or D+'s as is now the case almost everywhere in the country.

The glamour of college sports has spotlighted the inadequacies of the educational system at that level. However, eligibility is not education, whether it be in college, high school or junior high school. Other states and localities must now follow the lead of Texas if we are to truly educate all our athletes. ■

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