

College Athletes and Money

Elitism in the Name of Amateurism

The War of Secession showed how much nobler are strength of will, firmness of purpose, resolution to endure, and capacity for action, than are the qualities of the speechmaker and the fine writer, which the nation had once agreed chiefly to admire.

—Francis A. Walker (LL.D. 1883), 1893

When I hear, therefore, the cheering at our great games, . . . I cannot feel that the passion is excessive. Is there not some pent-up energy in us . . . ready to bring us into other arenas, in which, as in those of Greece, honour should come not only to strength, swiftness, and beauty, but to every high gift and inspiration?

—George Santayana, 1894

The bearded, bespectacled young dean of students in one of the Houses stopped me after a meeting of the Administrative Board. “Is it true,” he asked, “that they are trying to cut the number of athletes?” It was true; the *Crimson* had reported, correctly, that the presidents of Ivy League colleges were planning to reduce the ceiling on the number of football admittees in the freshman class to at most thirty, maybe twenty-five, from the current thirty-five. I was surprised he was interested; I didn’t recall having seen him at any games. “That would be terrible,” he continued. “They add so much to the House. They are the only people here who know how to lose.”



It was halftime at the football game, and a faculty colleague and I interrupted our conversation to glance out onto the field at the formations of the Harvard Band members. We have both passed the age where the band's jokes make sense to us.

"Pretty small turnout by the band today," I said, wondering if there was another important event out of town that had depleted its ranks. "Good thing they don't have to spell any words longer than three letters. They wouldn't have enough bodies to do it."

"Yes," replied my colleague. "And if the football team had to spell anything longer than three letters, they wouldn't know how."



About 20 percent of Harvard students participate in varsity athletics at some point during their college careers. Many fewer than that were recruited to play sports, and many more than that play on some kind of athletic team, including junior varsity, club, or intramural sports. It is rarely hard to get a ticket for a Harvard athletic event; even the largest contest, the annual Harvard-Yale football game, is not the occasion for campus unity that athletic rivalries spur at many colleges. There are so many different levels and kinds of sports that the athletes are as diverse as the student body at large. Both the dean's and the professor's stereotypes about the worth of athletics are extremes. And both miss a characteristic Harvard athletes share with their less athletic peers: They have many talents and are devoted to the pursuit of extraordinary excellence in at least one of them.

The troubles with college athletics

Big-time intercollegiate athletic programs have been plagued with dreadful scandals—minuscule graduation rates, use of prostitutes to recruit high school athletes, gang rapes by members of athletic teams, and point-shaving schemes. Such scandals in nationally televised athletic programs fuel anti-athletic sentiment as passionate as the loyalty with which alumni support their football and basketball teams. Boosters happily donate large sums so their schools can pay coaches more than professors. No similar horror stories have surfaced recently about any Ivy League

school. But as admission to selective colleges has grown more competitive, doubts about athletes' qualifications and the place of athletics have spread from nationally ranked programs to the Ivy League, where the number of beds is small and the proportion of athletes is large.

Harvard has no athletic celebrities. Most Harvard students, faculty, and deans could not name or recognize the quarterback of the football team. In 2004, Ryan Fitzpatrick captained the team during an undefeated season, and within six months of graduation, he was a quarterback for the St. Louis Rams; but while he was at Harvard, he was just another student to most of those who passed him in Harvard Yard.

For no other group at Harvard has the divergence between students and faculty, as both have evolved on their own paths toward excellence, been so consequential. Athletes are the last students for whom contempt and stereotyping are considered fair. A few years ago a field hockey player informed me that a professor had excluded her from his studio art course. He had students fill out a questionnaire listing their qualifications and other commitments, and, as he unapologetically explained, automatically excluded athletes on the basis that they would not be committed enough to his course work. I had the Faculty Handbook amended after this incident to caution against picking among students on nonacademic criteria, but the attitude behind the professor's selection method is not so easily eliminated.

Two facts about intercollegiate athletics are inescapable, and both trouble academics. First, athletics is about competition, about winning. Second, money matters. The history of college sports is a story of the interpretation and interconnection of these two facts.

Critics spin these two fundamental facts into anti-athletic edicts: Athletes care too much about winning when they should be playing just for fun; and athletes are too interested in making money and not interested enough in the life of the mind. The two distortions come together around the notion of athletic amateurism, sport played just for fun and not for money, the base on which the vast regulatory system of intercollegiate athletics is built.

Competition fuels everything at Ivy League schools. Yet only in athletics is excessive competitiveness viewed as a bad thing. As in other competitive domains, athletic success comes to those who are talented and experienced. Competition is an agent of improvement and, if the games are played at a high level, of excellence. In these ways athletic competitions are akin to the competitions in which scholars engage.

On the other hand, Ivy League athletic competitions, for all the work involved, are also a source of joy. Contests are exhilarating for those competing and entertaining for those who may be watching. Even the winners do not take much pleasure in lopsided competitions, because they have not been challenged to improve. Competition itself, not just victory, provides satisfaction.

The impulses to win and to enjoy are not inconsistent but should be in balance. In the Ivy League, athletes do not play *just* for fun, but—because all financial aid is based on need rather than on athletic participation—they can, if they wish, stop playing if playing is *no longer* fun. Some of the most interesting students are recruited athletes who excelled in something else after giving up their sport. One articulate president of the Black Students Association became active in campus politics after he parted ways with the football coach. A basketball player who preferred computer science to ball handling sold her first software company within five years of graduating. The saddest cases occur when athletes sustain injury and lose almost their whole identity. Harvard tries to impose a “broken leg test” when admitting athletes: If she breaks her leg, will she excel at something else? Of course, even athletes who remain healthy in college have nonathletic careers ahead of them—even if they play professionally for a while.

Athletic competitions differ from academic competitions in another important way: In athletics, there is no doubt who is the winner. The certainty and the undeniability of loss help explain why athletes tend to be mentally healthy and to help the mental health of those around them. They are used to sharing blame, not shifting it. They can lose but they are not victims. They are also used to thinking that teams, not individuals, accomplish great things.

Some professors scorn athletes because they care so much about practicing, perfecting, and winning. These same professors want their students to compete for academic honors, as they themselves have done. But—unless they were college athletes themselves—they do not see a connection between the games they have spent their lives winning and the athletic games their students are playing. In fact, they resent having their professional activities portrayed as competitions, even though they never turn down academic prizes when they win them. They are merely pursuing excellence, they believe, and occasionally being recognized for it. In fact, the two kinds of competition are more

similar than they think, except that athletic competitions acknowledge what they are, and winning is unambiguous.

The second academic distortion of the nature of athletics involves money. Money spent on coaching, training, equipment, and facilities makes athletes better. In spite of the obvious role money plays in the development of athletic skill, the entire structure of intercollegiate competition is based on the fiction that good sportsmanship, the amateur athletic ideal, requires that money be kept away from athletes.

In the Ivy League, there are few walk-ons in the sports of football, basketball, soccer, lacrosse, field hockey, and ice hockey. Most members of Ivy League teams played in high school and were successful enough to attract attention. Their talent was recognized by a college coach—perhaps by coaches of several different colleges, which then competed for the students' attention. Their skills were developed by good coaching before college, often in special after-school and summer programs as well as in schools known for their good athletic programs. Such coaching and camps and clinics can cost a lot of money.

But money is considered a bad thing in college sports. Athletes must not touch any of it or they will lose their amateur standing. The rules are complex, and inadvertent violations are easy to incur. Every college has a compliance officer whose job is to work with the NCAA (and the Ivy office, in the case of Ivy League schools) to report violations and to assess penalties. The technicalities of compliance can be ludicrous. While I was dean, Harvard had to apologize because a member of the cross-country ski team had parked overnight at the athletic complex since he was driving the team, which had no van of its own, to a practice early the next morning. This was improper because the one night's free parking constituted a benefit of tangible value given to an athlete but not to other students. This benefit was not exactly at the same level as the gift of a golden Cadillac, but it was a violation of the same rule.

Of course, the money donated to support the athletic program, as opposed to athletes personally, does not draw frowns. Outside the Ivy League, universities turn their football and basketball games into national public spectacles in the hope that they can make money (though few actually do). No Ivy League school expects athletics to be a profit center. But Ivy League schools all engage in massive athletic fundraising from their alumni.

Lurking underneath all the ambivalence Ivy League colleges display about athletics and athletes are old questions about character and

about social class. Even in the twenty-first century, anti-athletic sentiments are proxies for misgivings about deeper values. Academics and ordinary Americans view athletics very differently, and athletes get caught in the middle.

The standard theory of college athletics

In the early 2000s, William G. Bowen, president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and former president of Princeton University, published with coauthors two detailed studies of college athletics.* The books, entitled *The Game of Life* and *Reclaiming the Game*, call for restraint and reform in intercollegiate athletics at selective colleges. Both books are subtitled *College Sports and Educational Values*, and their basic thesis is that the one, as presently practiced, is out of whack with the other. The books received widespread praise—Louis Menand called *The Game of Life* “one of the most important books on higher education published in the last twenty years”—and precipitated self-scrutiny in many athletic leagues. In the aftermath of the books’ publication, the Ivy League instituted athletic cutbacks and stronger admissions restraints. Two critical reviews of *The Game of Life* published in a law journal were more detailed and more sophisticated but attracted less notice.

Bowen’s books hold the facts of college athletics against a theory of why sports belong in colleges at all. The theory is the one generally accepted in academic circles, so I call it the Standard Theory of College Athletics. The Standard Theory argues that sports are good for students, but not as good as athletes and their supporters would like to think, and good only as long as athletes don’t take the games too seriously. Bowen, for example, acknowledges that “by competing one learns ‘life lessons’: teamwork, discipline, resilience, perseverance, how to ‘play by the rules’ and accept outcomes one may not like.” But he then asserts that the goal should be “for regular students, who have come to highly selective colleges for the right reasons . . . to learn the lessons that sports can teach and to have fun in the process.” Students should not aspire to develop or to exercise athletic excellence, which in a *New York Times* opinion piece he treats as an innate and accidental characteristic: “With intellectual capital ever more important, how

*The books have different coauthors. For simplicity I use only Bowen’s name when referring to the authors of either book.

great a role should hand-eye coordination play in deciding who is given educational opportunity?”

The Standard Theory is attractively democratic. Inclusiveness is universally valued, and under the Standard Theory everyone could be an intercollegiate athlete. In addition, the admissions committees of all colleges would know exactly how much weight to put on athletic excellence: zero. This approach would save a great deal of expense (no need for coaches to recruit if they play anyone who shows up) and would also avoid balancing imponderables (no need to compare a quarterback to an oboist, for example, since being a good quarterback would be irrelevant).

The Standard Theory is also warmly nostalgic. Advocates of the theory rue the changes that have occurred over the years in college sports, conjuring memories of a time when they were not as competitive or prone to excess as they now are. In their preface, the authors of *The Game of Life* sketch themselves as sometime college athletes who were also regular students, unlike today's college athletes. We are led to imagine the climate of college athletics in their day as the state of innocence they wish to reclaim.

Appealing as it is, the Standard Theory has negative consequences. First, most people who are not professors don't subscribe to it. Americans love sports, Americans are loyal to their alma maters, and Americans want to see their college teams win. Not everyone feels this way, of course; every year there are righteous editorials written about the disgrace of colleges prioritizing athletic talent in their admissions practices. But most of the colleges' constituents, aside from the professional academics, don't accept the Standard Theory, and that is why few colleges adhere to it.

If the Standard Theory were merely an imaginary ideal, it would not matter. The damage comes because some professors, and some reformers, believe that it could be realized. When they observe variations from it, they disapprove and generalize, and all athletes become targets of the disapproval. The art professor with the exclusionary enrollment policy assumed that athletes wouldn't devote long hours to working in the studio along with other students. If athletes were adhering to the Standard Theory, they would be playing just for fun and their course work would always come first. The professor felt justified in excluding the student because he was confident the student would not adhere to the Standard Theory.

When an incident like this occurs, word gets around that professors don't like athletes, and athletes become reluctant to let anyone know

they are athletes. They stick together—they are inevitably together with their teammates for many hours anyway. They are then accused by adherents of the Standard Theory of not being real students, of having their own distinctive “jock culture.”

It doesn't matter who started this vicious cycle. Anything students do that betrays the consequences of their athletic status (fewer hours in the day to devote to course work, scheduling conflicts between academic and athletic obligations, nodding off in class due to physical exhaustion) gives faculty the opportunity to hold students in violation of the Standard Theory. Professors then feel they can respond to athletes' failure to be “regular students,” and athletes withdraw to protect themselves. Students may not even need to do anything to get this cycle started—their size alone may give them away.

The only way to repair relations between professors and students is for academic leaders to articulate, as though they truly believed it, that athletics have educational value and that athletes add something other than entertainment to the college community. It never happens at Harvard—only at alumni or athletic department gatherings does one hear of “teamwork, discipline, resilience, perseverance,” to use Bowen's list of the virtues of athletics. Athletes, never hearing anyone from the university administration talk of such values, are likely to think the worst of faculty dispositions. The Faculty, not hearing any language to the contrary, may lump together Harvard athletes with the inarticulate football players they see in televised bowl games on New Year's Day.

It is difficult to believe that anyone who knows anything about athletics really subscribes to the Standard Theory. Bowen has fair-minded intentions: “Students who excel in sports have done absolutely nothing wrong, and they certainly do not deserve to be ‘demonized.’” However, he elsewhere says—the emphasis is his:

Each recruited athlete who attends one of these schools has taken a spot away from another student who was, in all likelihood, more academically qualified—and probably more committed to taking full advantage of the educational resources available at these schools.

The professor reading this vivid image of an athlete snatching a spot in the classroom away from a more qualified and more committed student might be forgiven for demonizing the athlete.

Explaining a concern about the disproportion of athletes majoring in the social sciences and interested in business, Bowen states: “In an ideal world, we would suppose, schools would like to see a diversity of majors, values, and career choices among all subgroups of students.” This is the Standard Theory, extended beyond athletes to all categories of students—what might be called the Standard Theory of Everything. According to this theory, students who grew up in abject poverty should be no more interested in making money than students who grew up in comfortable circumstances. Students who grew up in Beijing should be no less interested in majoring in Afro-American studies than students who grew up in Chicago. And students from arts academies should be no less interested in playing football than students from public high schools in central Texas. Diversity, in the Standard Theory of Everything, would be an instrument of sameness.



The Standard Theory of Athletics is wrong. Indeed it is ridiculous. The idea that there was once a golden age when sports were played just for the love of the game, and winning was unimportant, is a persistent and damaging myth. According to the myth, sports became corrupted by excesses of competitiveness and by money, and colleges need to purify athletics by throwing out the harlots and moneychangers and restoring the purity to which athletics were born. Professional athletics evolved from amateur athletics, the myth says, just as professional baseball players started out as youngsters who played the sport for the love of it. That’s what the Latin *amator* means—someone who loves something.

According to the myth, amateur competition can be kept pure only by arresting its development. An impermeable barrier must be established between competitors and money, specialization, training, and other excesses of professional sports. Rules governing both the modern Olympic games and intercollegiate athletics were based on this philosophical foundation. The Olympic games started to relax the pretense of amateurism in the 1980s and dropped it altogether when the U.S. basketball team became an NBA spin-off. In intercollegiate sports, however, the amateurism rules still stand.

But they are built on a foundation of sand. The notion that sports used to be amateur is not just factually false. It was an intentional lie,

created in England in the nineteenth century to protect the hereditary aristocracy from having to play against members of the working class. And when carried across the Atlantic to American society, the lie lost much of its rationale. The attempt to preserve it in America has caused endless tension and confusion. Yet down to the present day, the highest authorities on intercollegiate athletics do not acknowledge the obvious fact that the price of staying within the rules of amateurism is vastly greater for people who have no money than it is for the well-to-do. Amateurism is an instrument of hierarchy, not of equality.

Greek athletics were never amateur, wishful thinking on the part of founders of the modern Olympics notwithstanding. The Greek word *athlon* means both a competition and a prize, and an athlete is someone who competes for a prize. The prizes in the Olympics and the other ancient Greek festivals were tangible and enormous, often the equivalent in olive oil of more than a year's earnings. Even when the prizes were crowns of laurels, more valuable rewards awaited the athletes after they returned to the cities that sponsored them. One authority calculates the lifetime earnings of one fifth century B.C.E athlete at more than \$44 million. So important were Olympic victories to the prestige of Greek cities that top athletes exercised free agency more than two millennia before Curt Flood challenged the major league baseball owners for the same right. After the runner Astylos placed first in races for the city of Croton in both the 488 and 484 B.C.E Olympics, the city of Syracuse made it attractive for him to switch teams. He won in his third Olympics running for his new franchise. The Greeks saw in athletic excellence a virtuous ideal that payment of money did not sully.

Amateurism did not originate in Greece but in England in the nineteenth century. Intercollegiate competitions between Oxford and Cambridge were well established before 1850, and the spirit of competitive athletics stayed with the graduates when they moved on to their appointed roles in aristocratic British society. The world into which they took their athletic spirit was rapidly becoming industrialized. For the first time in history, laborers had time for leisure. Reformers helped create parks, holidays, vacations, working-men's clubs, and other institutions designed for the betterment of working men.

When the university graduates took their brand of participatory sports into the outside world, they found laborers eager to compete alongside them. Not all welcomed the breach of the wall between the

social classes, and none welcomed it less than those who had most recently styled themselves gentlemen. As one contemporary account declared, “nearly all the members of the athletic clubs calling themselves ‘Gentlemen Amateurs,’ and who exclude tradesmen are, *in reality tradesmen’s sons*.” Worse, the manual laborers, being in better physical condition than the upper classes, sometimes won, thus undercutting the premise of innate superiority that legitimized the British class system.

Amateurism was the solution to the problem. Until the late nineteenth century, the word “amateur” described painters and sculptors. As a description of sportsmen it acquired a technical definition that was unapologetically elitist, shutting out the lower social classes from gentlemen’s athletic competitions. The British Amateur Athletic Union was formed in 1866 and two years later adopted this definition of an “amateur”:

Any person who has never competed in an open competition, or for public money, or for admission money, or with professionals for a prize, public money or admission money, and who has never, at any period of his life, taught or assisted in the pursuit of athletic exercises as a means of livelihood, or is a mechanic, artisan or labourer.

You could be born to a state of amateurism, if you were lucky enough to have a father who did not have to work with his hands. But if you lost your amateur status, then, like virginity, there was no getting it back. These sweeping definitions are the origin of the current NCAA warnings that if you are a prospective college athlete, you may not “Use your athletics skill for pay in any form” or “Participate on an amateur sports team and receive any salary, incentive payment, award, gratuity, educational expenses or expense allowances.”

By long association with the standards of gentlemanly behavior, amateurism became synonymous with good sportsmanship. But as practiced in intercollegiate athletics today, amateurism and sportsmanship have little to do with each other. Amateurism under the NCAA is simply a prohibition on athletes earning money or associating too closely with commercial activities. It enforces the Standard Theory, but now as in the past its strictures bind financially disadvantaged students very differently from students of more privileged backgrounds. And the rules do little to support the educational values college sports can represent.

Amateurism jumped the Atlantic and became doctrine in American colleges because academics longed to restore an athletic purity that never existed. As early as 1893, a Harvard alumni magazine wrote: “The question of purifying athletics is not new.” The history of sports in America, as seen through the lens of America’s oldest college, explains how the nation imported this legacy of the British aristocracy.



Harvard’s Puritan founding fathers were not fun-loving folk. To the extent they had anything positive to say about sports, it was that exercise might refresh students so they would work harder—literally, re-create them. A father sending his son off to Harvard around 1670 advised him to “break off” from his studies every now and then, suggesting that he “recreate your Self a little, and so to yur work afresh; let your recreation be such as may stir the Body chiefly, yet not violent, and whether such or sedentary, let it be never more than may Serve to make your Spirit the more free and lively in your Studies.”

Even Cotton Mather of the Harvard Class of 1678, son of Harvard’s sixth president and the minister at the center of the Salem witch trials, thought sports could serve a useful purpose, noting that “we suppose there are Diversions undoubtedly innocent, yea profitable and of use, to fit us for Service, by enlivening & fortifying our frail Nature, Invigorating the Animal Spirits, and brightening the Mind, when tired with a close Application to Business.” One can hear echoes of Mather’s melding of spiritual, physical, and mental refreshment in the advertisements for today’s yoga and fitness classes. Though it would be a long time before the Standard Theory was crystallized in words, some of its precursors were forming even in the seventeenth century.

Games and other recreations were allowed in the early days, but not encouraged. In 1781 it was among “the antient Customs of Harvard College” that “The Freshmen shall furnish Batts, Balls, and Foot-Balls, for the use of the students, to be kept at the Buttery.” The catastrophic riot of 1823 helped the Faculty realize that students needed nondestructive ways to let off steam. So in March 1826, just when Harvard was looking to Germany for modern learning, a German instructor, Charles Follen, was retained “for teaching a System of Gymnasticks to such members of the society as should choose to practise them.” The

drills proved to be just another unpopular regimentation, but Mr. Follen should be regarded as Harvard's first athletic director.

In 1839 a student was reprimanded for owning a boat, on the basis "that no student was allowed to keep a domestic animal except by permission of the Faculty, and that a boat was a domestic animal within the meaning of the statute." Rowing began at Harvard in 1844 as a British import—Oxford and Cambridge had been competing since 1829. But rowing at Harvard was curtailed within a few years. As a report written some twenty-five years later explained,

toward the close of 1850 one of the crews had an "unpleasantness" in Boston with the guardians of the peace, which proceeded from words to blows, and ended by the calling out of the fire department, a very jolly *roue*, and the incarceration of the crew. This made great trouble, boating was frowned upon, and new clubs were not allowed to organize.

Faculty disdain of athletics on the basis of what Bowen calls "jock culture" has deep roots at Harvard.

Though there are hints of earlier wrestling matches, the first clearly recorded competition was a football game between classes, already an annual ritual by 1827. A mock heroic poem, entitled "The Battle of the Delta" for the triangular piece of land on which the games were played, described the "shins unnumbered bruised" in the game, which was played less for exercise than for hazing the freshmen. Almost immediately after arriving in Cambridge, they had to face the sophomores, who had the advantage of knowing one another; in some years they had to face the juniors and then the seniors if they managed to win the earlier matches.

Though remembered fondly by the alumni, football games were very rough and eventually alarmed the Faculty. The last straw was when the president learned that "it was a growing custom of scholars preparing to enter college to take lessons in sparring and boxing, by way of qualification for the football match at the opening of the term." Thus when the 2005 Harvard football team arrived on campus August 24, almost a month before Harvard's first classes, the players were following a tradition of preseason practice almost a century and a half old.

President Felton declared in 1860 that "The annual game of football had degenerated into a fight between the Classes, in which serious

injuries were inflicted,” and on July 2 the Faculty banned the annual freshman-sophomore game. In protest the students staged a solemn funeral. A football dubbed “Foot Ball Fightum” was interred on the Delta in a casket, and the students mocked the Faculty’s paternalism. “Exult, ye Freshmen, and clap your hands! The wise men who make big laws around a little table have stretched out their arms to encircle you, and for this once, your eyes and ‘noses’ are protected.” The whole sophomore class then sang in unison, to the tune of “Auld Lang Syne,” “Against the Faculty, let not a word be said, / Though we cannot but speak our sorrow / With steadfastly gaze on the face of the dead, / And bitterly think on the morrow./” This was an early student protest against the kinds of athletic regulations that are still resented today. In 2004 a *Crimson* columnist mocked the Ivy League presidents as “the eight grim reapers of the Ivies” for the restrictions they placed on football, accusing them of “seek[ing] to make winning of minimal importance” and challenging his fellow students to “stop giving these presidents a pass.” The Faculty always had a different view of sports from the students. In 1860 the Faculty won the battle, but there were many more to come.

The first intercollegiate competition was in crew, not football. And the force that launched all of intercollegiate athletics was commerce. The very first intercollegiate contest would never have taken place had the amateurism rules existed at the time.

By 1849 it was possible to travel by rail from Boston to Alton Bay, New Hampshire, on the southern tip of Lake Winnepesaukee. From there passengers could take a grand side-wheeler owned by the railroad, *The Lady of the Lake*, to the developing resort communities around Winnepesaukee. The Boston, Concord, and Montreal Railroad Company was eager to stimulate interest in travel to the lake. While riding on the train near Lake Winnepesaukee, James Elkins, superintendent of the railroad, proposed to James Whiton of the Yale Class of 1853 that if he could arrange a race against a Harvard crew, the railroad would pay the full costs of both crews, travel and lodging, for the eight-day trip.

Yale issued the invitation only a few days before the beginning of summer vacation, and the race very nearly did not come off. Because the boating clubs had been banned, Harvard had no organized racing crew. President Eliot, who was an undergraduate at the time, later recalled that in those years, when a boat went out from Cambridge, two

or three members would act as what we would today call “designated drivers,” charged with “bringing home members of the crew who did not propose to return sober from an evening in Boston.” Nonetheless, eight able-bodied men were found to accept Yale’s challenge, and after several days of preparation, the race was held at Center Harbor on August 3, 1852, before a crowd of about a thousand spectators. Despite having practiced only three or four times before the race out of fear of raising blisters, the Harvard rowers won the two-mile race by four lengths, and American intercollegiate competition was born.

Was this first race an amateur competition, even in the informal sense—engaged in for the joy of the sport? The race was fun for the students and not a professional undertaking from their point of view. Nothing more than a pair of handsome oars was being awarded to the winner. Neither crew had a coach, and the training on both sides was minimal. Yet the entire enterprise was designed as a moneymaker for the railroad. From the beginning, the money involved, the public interest in athletic spectacles, and the less than gentlemanly behavior of the athletes made American intercollegiate athletics unlike anything in England.

Despite the success of this event, Harvard continued to limit the opportunities for racing. After a desultory showing in a race in 1857, the Harvard crew disbanded out of student indifference. Barely five years after America’s first intercollegiate competition, Harvard students asked, “Are we to regain our reputation, or has our glory departed, never to return?”

Boating survived because it became respectable. Eliot, who had graduated in 1853 and was by now a tutor, joined a Harvard boat club consisting of graduate students and university officers who rowed for recreation “without aspiring to any great excellence, or taking part in races.” Before disbanding, the 1857 crew had ordered on credit a six-oar shell, the first proper racing boat on the Charles River. When the boat arrived, four undergraduates recruited Eliot and Alexander Agassiz of the Class of 1853, later to take over for his father Louis as professor and head of the Museum of Comparative Zoology. In summer 1858 these six, quite likely the brainiest team Harvard ever assembled, rowed in two regattas. What Eliot called “a Boston City committee which had a large Irish element in it” organized the events. Among the opponents was “a crew of young Irish longshoremen called the ‘Fort Hill Boys.’”

In letters to his fiancée, Eliot first assured her that he planned to “row just as hard as I comfortably can, and not a bit harder,” though already after three days of practice his “fingers [felt] as stiff as any hod-carrier’s.” But after the race he acknowledged having gotten “tremendously excited” as “in the last half mile the people shouted and clapped, and cheered tremendously, which was a very nice thing to hear, which made us pull all the harder and better.” By prearrangement, Harvard split the prize money, \$100, with the Irish, and then used its share to pay off the debt on the boat. It was in these races that Harvard first donned red, a color selected by Eliot and one of his fellow oarsmen in preference to blue, orange, green, and yellow alternatives shown them by a Boston cloth merchant. The Chinese silk bandannas helped viewers on the shore to identify the Harvard men, and in the cascade of intercollegiate competitions that occurred during the subsequent decades, the color crimson became the Harvard standard.

Less than twenty years earlier, Harvard considered a boat to be something like a dog and prohibited students from “making or being present at any festive entertainment.” And now here were a Harvard faculty member of Beacon Hill pedigree and the son of Harvard’s greatest scientist, the one bragging to his girlfriend that his hands felt like those of a common laborer and the other observed from shore by his eminent father, both competing under the benevolent gaze of Boston politicians, exulting in their triumph over “great stout Irishmen, with awful muscles,” and grateful to have pocketed enough prize money to cover their crew’s debts.

America was changing. The idea was emerging that sports were good for one’s character and even good for one’s soul. There was something invigorating to spirit and body about athletic competition. What prompted this shift in attitude? Christianity had legitimized athletics.



In 1858 the Harvard-educated minister Thomas Wentworth Higginson published the manifesto of a new religious movement, Muscular Christianity. “Saints and Their Bodies” appeared a few months before Eliot’s races in Boston Harbor. Higginson set out to correct the “impression that physical vigor and spiritual sanctity are incompatible.” The Christians provided few good counterexamples, he said; one had

to go back to ancient Greece to find ideal types, such as Plato, who was a wrestler. “We distrust the achievements of every saint without a body; and really have hopes of the Cambridge Divinity School, since hearing that it has organized a boat-club.” Athletic pursuits were particularly important for young people, in Higginson’s view. He went as far as suggesting that if more sports meant less study, that might be a good thing.

Only keep a boy a pure and generous heart, and, whether he work or play, his time can scarcely be wasted. Should it prove, however, that the cultivation of active exercises diminishes the proportion of time given by children to study, we can only view it as an added advantage. Every year confirms us in the conviction, that our schools, public and private, systematically overtask the brains of the rising generation.

Higginson saw athletics as stress-reduction therapy for college students—Cotton Mather in a more progressive form. Higginson preferred contact sports, the red-meat sports. Football, boxing, and wrestling were better than gymnastics and especially walking, which, he said, was “to real exercise what vegetable food is to animal.”

Muscular Christianity was in part a reaction to the feminization of religion in the Victorian era. It was also a reaction to the fact that in late-nineteenth-century America, the growth of industry was accompanied by a growth in sedentary desk jobs in finance and administration. Higginson noted in another essay that

for an average American man, who leaves his place of business at nightfall with his head a mere furnace of red-hot brains and his body a pile of burnt-out cinders, utterly exhausted in the daily effort to put ten dollars more of distance between his posterity and the poor-house,—for such a one to kindle up afresh after office-hours for a complicated chess-problem seems much as if a wood-sawyer, worn out with his week’s work, should decide to order in his saw-horse on Saturday evening, and saw for fun.

Whether the risk was perceived as effeminacy or simple weakness, the reaction was, in the words of historian Clifford Putney, “a new model for manhood, one that stressed action rather than reflection

and aggression rather than gentility.” Theodore Roosevelt of the Harvard Class of 1880 came to symbolize America itself in what he described as a vigorous battle against the “general tendency among people of culture and education . . . to neglect and even look down on the rougher and manlier virtues.”

Muscular Christianity provided a moral justification for the growing interest in “manly sports”—including football, which Higginson described as “the most glorious of all games to those whose animal life is sufficiently vigorous to enjoy it.” The movement glorified regulated savagery, of which football was a natural exemplar. Higginson explained:

There is, or ought to be, in all of us a touch of untamed gypsy nature, which should be trained, not crushed. We need, in the very midst of civilization, something which gives a little of the zest of savage life; and athletic exercises furnish the means. . . . The animal energy cannot and ought not to be suppressed.

These sentiments aligned with a much broader antimodernist sentiment in America, a *fin-de-siècle* despair that post-Civil War prosperity had softened the well-to-do Anglo-Saxon Americans and left their lives empty of meaning. In the words of the historian Jackson Lears, “For the late-Victorian bourgeoisie, intense experience—whether physical or emotional—seemed a lost possibility. There was no longer the opportunity for bodily testing provided by rural life, no longer the swift alternation of despair and exhilaration which characterized the old-style Protestant conversion.” They “somehow had to choose between a life of authentic experience and the false comforts of modernity.” For the new caste of office workers and capitalists, athleticism tinted with primitivism promised a path to reinvigoration.

The rise of college athletics also served to accommodate aspects of American populism within academic institutions. In 1828, Andrew Jackson had been elected president of the United States. With the exception of George Washington, all of his predecessors had been college-educated—two at Harvard, two at William and Mary, and one at Princeton (then the College of New Jersey). But Jackson was an unschooled warrior and represented an ideal man of action, a “primitivist hero . . . who brought wisdom straight out of the forest,” as historian Richard Hofstadter put it. The type was prominent in American culture for decades, though the award of an honorary degree to Jackson outraged

the Harvard Faculty. Late-nineteenth-century Harvard students must have been pained by the dissonance between the rough and ready masculinity idolized in politics as well as in religion, and the urbane sophistication of their collegiate experience.

Not until Theodore Roosevelt was the gap bridged: A Harvard man, too, could be physically vigorous, and proud of his past as frontiersman, warrior—and athlete. Ever since, as Hofstadter noted, “The aspiring politician, suspected of having too gentle an upbringing, too much idealism, or too many intellectual interests, can pass muster if he can point to a record of active military service; if that is lacking, having made the football team may do.” The images in the 2004 presidential election of two Yalies, John Kerry giving a military salute to the Democratic convention and George Bush clearing brush in Texas, are tributes to the endurance of Roosevelt’s legacy.

Adherents of the Standard Theory argue that if athletic values ever had any relevance to the advancement of society, they do no longer. *The Game of Life* quotes a former business school admissions director asking, “Will the same marketing, team-oriented, structure-loving, athletic guy of the past function the same way in the nimble dot-com world?” Bowen suggests his answer to the question by noting that Bill Gates was not an athlete at Harvard. Indeed, Bill Gates’s favorite game in college was poker, the game of choice of many an inventive capitalist in days gone by. However, Microsoft’s CEO Steve Ballmer was a high school football star, managed the Harvard football team while he was in college, and deeply respects coach Joe Restic, under whom he served. If the games people play are related at all to the skills needed for success in business, the example of Microsoft makes the New Economy look a great deal like the Old.

Adherents to the Standard Theory argue against the value of athletics on the basis that the world of the future is the world of the mind, the world of “intellectual capital,” the “nimble dot-com world.” But the enormous popularity of intercollegiate sports was *caused by* the change of America from a rural, agrarian nation to an urban society of men whose “overtasked” brains were “a furnace of burnt-out cinders.” The unmet longings that caused athletics to become a vast social force in America are, if anything, stronger in the world of office workers staring at computer screens than they ever were before.



President Charles William Eliot, who played a key role in creating the research university, also played a key role in bringing amateurism to America. As president he struggled for forty years to set up lines preventing Harvard students from the kind of interclass competition in which he had engaged.

When the coffin containing Foot Ball Fightum was solemnly interred on the Delta in 1860, the headstone stated *Resurgat*, that is, *May it rise again*. And so it did. In early spring 1871, William R. Tyler, a sophomore from the Class of 1874, accompanied by a junior and a senior, “waited upon” President Eliot, as Tyler described it, to “ask permission to play football.” “As was natural, the request was met with some suspicion at first,” Tyler reported, “but when, on investigation, our good faith became manifest, the desired permission was graciously accorded.” By 1873 Harvard had a University Foot Ball Club—which was driven off Cambridge Common by complaint of some unsympathetic city residents.

Meanwhile, a different kind of football, more like soccer, was emerging at other colleges. Yale invited Harvard to a summit in New Haven where Harvard, Columbia, Rutgers, Princeton, and Yale were to come to a consensus about rules for intercollegiate competition. Counting the votes in advance, Harvard realized that its “Boston rules” version of the game would die if it joined the summit, and so, in a gesture of uncooperativeness repeated many times by colleges since then, politely declined to attend the meeting. The other schools met in frustration, knowing that Harvard would eventually have to be reckoned with regardless of the agreement they reached among themselves.

Instead, on March 14 and 15, 1874, Harvard played two games against McGill. The Delta was no longer available—the grand Memorial Hall had been built on it after the Civil War—so the games were played on Jarvis Field, where the Law School and the engineering buildings, including my office, now stand. About five hundred spectators paid fifty cents each to watch the game. After the second day, the teams went to Parker’s in Boston (now the Omni Parker House Hotel) and drank the gate receipts. Intercollegiate football at Harvard, like rowing, was from the beginning a commercial activity.

The first day’s game was played under “Boston rules,” but with eleven to a side. The second day’s contest was under rugby rules, but with ten to a side. An oblong rugby ball was used in place of the spherical ball of the Boston game, though Tyler doubted there were “three men in the college who had ever seen the egg-shaped ball.” After a re-

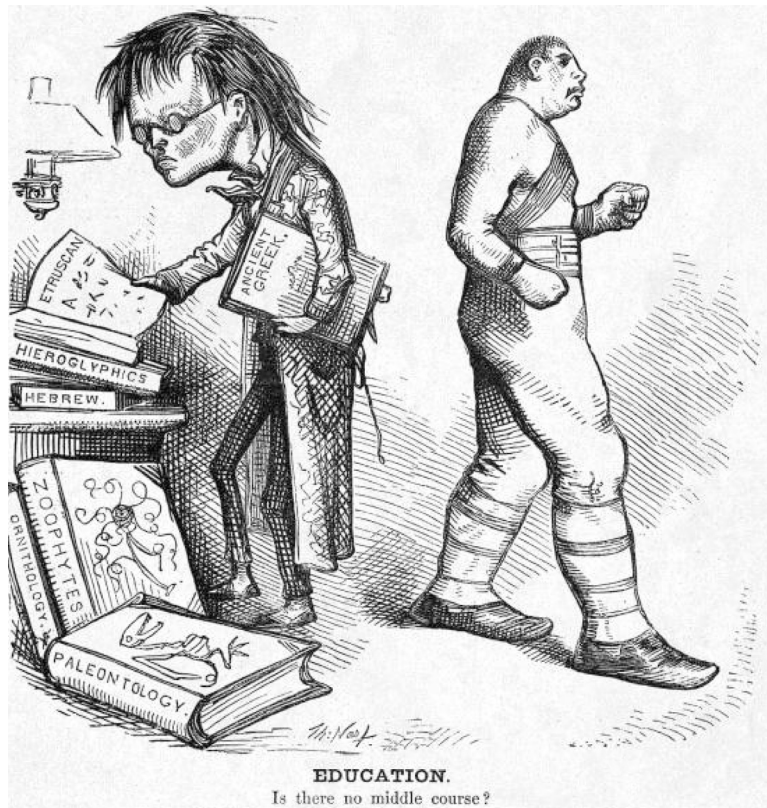


Figure 9.1 Thomas Nast's 1879 caricature of the scholar and the athlete.

turn engagement in Canada, Harvard concluded that the rugby rules were superior. Harvard's boycott of the 1873 convention gave rise to the basic parameters of the modern game of football.

Football grew rapidly and outstripped every effort to control it. In 1879, only a decade after the first intercollegiate football game, between Princeton and Rutgers, the divide between academic and athletic types of students was already so notorious that the great satirical draftsman Thomas Nast could caricature the two extremes in *Harper's Weekly* without explanation (Figure 9.1).

In the early 1880s, football games drew crowds of a few hundred and sometimes a few thousand people. A decade later the crowds were in the tens of thousands.

In 1882 the baseball team played twenty-eight games, including nineteen on the road, and a professor demanded to know “whether the members of the team could be said to be fulfilling the purpose for which they came to college.” The Faculty finally imposed its authority, decisively and permanently, creating what is known as the Faculty Committee on Athletic Sports. The first regulations prohibited games against professionals and restricted competitions to Saturdays (the latter regulation was soon relaxed). With this, as Eliot reported to the Board of Overseers, “the Faculty . . . assumed for the first time a direct responsibility for the character and extent” of athletic competition. Harvard simultaneously learned the lesson it had taught its peer institutions a decade earlier: Where intercollegiate competition is concerned, if all the contestants cannot agree on the rules, a college may be forced to choose between withdrawing from competition or competing at a disadvantage. In this case Yale, by then an athletic powerhouse, refused to accede to the rule prohibiting college teams from competing against professionals.

Thus Eliot began his crusade to prevent college sports from “losing that amateur quality which should always characterize the bodily exercises and sports of young men who are in training for intellectual pursuits.” A “professional standard of excellence” in athletics was for others who might not care so much if the games should “lose a large part of their charm” in the process. Yet the records of the time show clearly that football games were already so violent by the 1880s that they retained little of the “charm” Eliot hoped to preserve.

Along with banning competition against professionals, the Harvard committee also prohibited the hiring of athletic trainers or instructors without the written permission of the committee, which also voted to erect a fence around the athletic field to “protect the grounds and exclude objectionable persons.” In 1884 Harvard and other colleges agreed on more stringent regulations. Professional coaches would be banned entirely, on the premise that if one college did it, then “their opponents should have a similar advantage, or the terms would be unequal”—an early gesture against athletic arms races.

Eliot’s bottom line on sports was essentially the Standard Theory as we know it today. College sports are healthy recreations for regular students. Competition is good only insofar as it encourages physical exercise; beyond that it is bad. And even the scent of money taints college athletics, a warning he issued in 1882:

It is agreed on all hands that the increased attention given to physical exercise and athletic sports within the past twenty-five years has been, on the whole, of great advantage to the University; that the average physique of the mass of students has been sensibly improved, . . . and the ideal student has been transformed from a stooping, weak, and sickly youth into one well-formed, robust, and healthy. It is also agreed that athletic competitions, though necessary to the maintenance of a proper interest in the general subject, may easily run into excess, and on that account need to be kept within discreet limits; . . . the whole spirit of College sports and contest should be that of amateurs who are amusing themselves, and not that of professional players who are earning a living, and seeking a reputation for its pecuniary value.

Eliot's language grew sharper and more exasperated as athletics surged in popularity and wandered farther from his ideal. In 1888 he reported, "There are still many excesses and evils connected with athletic sports as intensified by intercollegiate competition," but he conceded that "effeminacy and luxury are even worse evils than brutality." In 1893, while praising the work of a reconstituted athletic committee, he complained of "an exaggeration of training and practice, which is caused in turn by an extreme and irrational competition"; of the "extravagant expenditure on athletic sports" at places like Harvard and Yale, which had "always put the things of the spirit above things of sense"; and of "an unwholesome desire for victory, by whatever means." Yet Harvard already honored the rule against professional coaches more in the breach than the observance. It paid its crew and baseball coaches, and the baseball coaches were often big-name major leaguers from the Boston Red Stockings.

Eliot was out of touch with America in his understanding of sports. In attacking football for its pointless dangers, he contrasted it with "other manly sports in which courage, presence of mind, and promptness of decision are to be cultivated, such as sailing, riding, climbing mountains, hunting, and the like"—sports to which few ordinary Americans could relate. He considered any form of deception unsportsmanlike. "To pitch a curved ball seemed to him to be a resort to a low form of cunning," according to Eliot biographer Henry James. Eliot was happy to see a student placed on probation and thereby removed from the baseball team, because "[t]hey boasted of his making

a feint to throw a ball in one direction and then *throwing it in ANOTHER!*” “The manly way to play football,” he believed, “would be to attack the strongest part of the opponents’ line.” After complaints about fans’ behavior toward the visiting team, Eliot seriously proposed that instead of “Three cheers for Harvard and Down with Yale,” Harvard students should chant “Three cheers for Harvard and *one* for Yale.” Even his grandchildren made fun of him for that.

In the meantime, the alumni were increasingly supporting athletics and were ever more persuaded of their virtues. On June 10, 1890, the great Boston philanthropist Henry Lee Higginson gave a large tract of land on the Boston side of the river in memory of six alumni who died for the Union during the Civil War. Higginson donated Soldier’s Field “without any condition or restriction whatever,” but he hoped “that the ground [would] be used for the present as a playground for the students, and that, in case [the Corporation] should need the ground by and for other purposes, another playground [would] be given to the students.” Higginson saw nobility in the pursuit of athletics and hoped that the field would remind those playing on it of the character of the men it commemorated. The lives of those heroes taught

the beauty and the holiness of work and of utter, unselfish, thoughtful devotion to the right cause, to our country, and to mankind . . . [and] my chief hope [for the field] is, that it will help to make you full-grown, well-developed men, able and ready to do good work of all kinds,—steadfastly, devotedly, thoughtfully; and that it will remind you of the reason for living, and of your own duties as men and citizens of the Republic.

When football games moved from Jarvis Field across the river to Soldier’s Field, both their popularity and their roughness continued to grow. The boom in football was a fruit of the big changes Eliot had made to Harvard, the growth in numbers of undergraduates, the deregulation of their studies, and the creation of a research graduate school. The games provided a unifying collegiate experience for students who had no unifying academic experience and were treated as inferior to graduate students. In a report published in 1896, an alumni committee gave a sober assessment of the College in stating that

the students do not meet; and the result is what may be expected. Unless a fellow comes from a large preparatory school, or has special advantages, he may never enjoy that good-fellowship which is one of the most important formative influences, as it is one of the dearest memories, of college life. Class feeling . . . is obsolete,—inevitably destroyed by the Elective System. . . . Will College feeling—will devotion to Harvard—go too?

This report laid the premise for another beneficence of Henry Lee Higginson, the Harvard Union, a clubhouse that would be called a student center if it were built today.* Higginson identified the social vacuum Eliot had created and tried to fill it.

By 1905 Eliot was fed up with football. He declared it “wholly unfit for colleges and schools” and “more brutalizing than prize-fighting, cock-fighting, or bull-fighting.” He announced that it should be banned.

But football was beyond Eliot’s control. The “mammoth new stadium” had opened on Soldier’s Field in 1903. It was built in less than six months with the aid of gifts from the Class of 1879 and labor from students of the Lawrence Scientific School. The second game played there, the Yale game of 1903, drew a crowd of 40,000, reportedly the largest ever to witness a football game. Yet Harvard did not score a point against Yale in 1902, 1903, or 1904. Even the athletics committee knew it had to follow Yale’s lead and hire a football coach. Abandoning with a vengeance its policy of no professional coaches, the committee offered \$3,500 to Harvard athletic hero Bill Reid of the Class of 1901, but it wasn’t enough. An alumni group threw in another \$3,500, and in early 1905 Reid became Harvard’s first paid football coach.

Reid’s \$7,000 salary was 30 percent more than the best-paid Harvard professor received and was comparable to Eliot’s salary after his almost forty years as president. Eliot’s personal financial condition had not been secure until he became president. He had been raised on Boston’s Beacon Hill in comfortable circumstances, but his father had been bankrupted while Eliot was an undergraduate. Eliot deeply respected the self-denial of the New Englanders who had built Harvard. The extravagant compensation of a coach only in his twenties, the cost of the vast stadium, and football’s violence all horrified him.

*After the Houses were built, this building became the Freshman Union and later the Barker Center for the Humanities. The original Varsity Club was contiguous, and the “HVC” logo is still visible over the door behind which literary scholars now work.

Harvard's hiring of a professional coach provoked criticism in the outside world as well. The sums of money involved in Harvard's arms race with Yale caused the same kind of public shock a century ago that athletic budgets cause today. *Life* magazine editorialized in 1905, "is it not something of a mistake to think of college football as primarily a game? Has it not come to be primarily a business proposition?"



Eliot's vision of "amateurs amusing themselves" was defeated in a rout. Bowen's hope to "reclaim the game" by returning it to regular students who are just playing for fun will fare no better in the long run. There is nothing to reclaim. There never was such a time as Eliot's and Bowen's purely amateur past when games were played merely for the fun of it.

Eliot wanted to create a purity that never existed in sports, even in the very first rowing and football competitions at Harvard. Racial and economic "purity" did once exist in America, though in days that were drawing to a close. The adoption of amateurism standards in America was an effort to protect the ruling classes, and the rules have had that effect ever since.

Eliot expressed his misgivings about social integration in muted language. In 1874, for example, only five years after he became president, he worried about Harvard students getting mixed up with the wrong sort of people.

While the Corporation have given the best possible evidence of their desire to foster the manly sports, they have felt compelled to discourage by every means in their power the association of students with the class of persons who make their living by practicing or exhibiting these games; to dissuade students from making athletic sports the main business, instead of one of the incidental pleasures, of their college lives; and to prohibit altogether the taking of money for admission to witness the sports upon the college play-grounds.

The same Eliot who at age twenty-four had penned such irrepressible excitement about his victory over the Irish longshoremen, at age forty would "discourage by every means" the association of students with *the class of persons* who competed professionally. Eliot recognized

that he himself might be considered a professional since money had been at stake in his race against the Irish. Yet it wasn't only professionals but anyone in the same "class" who should be avoided. The concept of amateurism, designed to protect the British upper classes from fraternization with manual laborers, had been translated to the social divisions of the New World.

It was Eliot's athletic director, Dudley Allen Sargent, who showed most clearly the thinking behind the amateur myth in America. Sargent was fiercely anticompetitive, a worthy heir to the legacy of gymnastics instructor Charles Follen. "Competition is to-day the arch-enemy of all true culture," Sargent declared, "mental as well as physical." In his management of Harvard's gymnasium, he avoided "appeal to the spirit of emulation and competition" to attract students to physical exercises, preferring "to appeal to a still higher motive,—the sense of duty which each man owes to himself to improve his physical condition and keep strong and well, that he may be able to bear his burdens in the world, and help to advance the condition of the rest of mankind by improving the stock and raising the average."

Sargent's views of physical education were based on racial theories that were widely accepted at the time. He felt that America's immigrants during the 1800s were not of the "pure stock" of the original settlers from the "higher social strata." The integrity of the American people had been diluted by this "large infusion of foreign blood of an inferior quality," and he thought athletic training would repair the damage. It was in the context of such thinking that Sargent's committees attempted to erect physical and statutory walls around Harvard athletics.

At the end of his presidency, Eliot made explicit his own thoughts on racial questions. "The Whites and the Negroes," he thought, "had better live beside each other in entire amity, but separate, under equal laws." He rejected the presumption, common, he said, among Southern Whites, "that political equality may lead to social admixture, at any rate, to an assertion on the part of Negroes of a right to social intercourse with white people." He further noted, "As to intermarriage between Whites and Blacks, all the best evidence seems to me to show that it is inexpedient." In 1912 Eliot joined many other prominent intellectuals in support of the eugenics movement, serving as vice president of the first International Congress of Eugenics in London.

The separation of the races, of the sexes, of the social classes, and of "amateur" and "professional" athletes were all widely accepted among

the American intelligentsia a century ago. In the early twenty-first century, we have moved past most but not all of these theories.



The humility and grace signified by athletic amateurism are far too dishonored today. But the amateur standard remains burdened by the aristocratic baggage with which it was born. Alongside the sin of competitiveness in the ideology of amateurism stands the sin of extreme proficiency. A second-rate classicist, E. N. Gardiner, built this theoretical foundation in the early twentieth century. According to Gardiner, “Before the end of the fifth century, the excessive prominence given to bodily excellence and athletic success had produced specialization and professionalism,” and then “sport, over-developed and over-specialized, . . . ceased to invigorate the national life.” Professionalism was not just the opposite of amateurism; it now meant excellence to excess. As the classicist David C. Young summarized, “*The amateur philosophy is essentially anti-athletic. . . . To be good in athletics is good. To be very good in athletics is bad.*”

The fantastical story about ancient Greek athletics is the ultimate source of the Standard Theory of College Athletics.* Today Bowen’s books lay claim to the same fictional Greek ideal. The dust jacket of *The Game of Life* shows a classical Olympic athlete, a Roman white-marble copy of the Greek *Discobolos* (discus thrower). The jacket of *Reclaiming the Game* features a white-plaster female *Torch Bearer* (by Chester Beach, ca. 1926). She resembles what a classical Greek female athlete would have looked like, had there been any, and had they, unlike the male athletes, worn clothes.

The Olympic movement used the amateur standard for exactly the purposes for which the British aristocracy had created it: to keep out undesirables. The most famous injustice done in the name of Olympic amateurism was to the American Indian Jim Thorpe. The toast of the

*Among the ironies in the use of ancient Greek athletics to justify the stratification of athletics by social class in Victorian England is that Greek athletics were a democratizing, not stratifying, social institution. Because competitors were nude (*gymnos*, as in “gymnasium”), the wealthy or well-born did not stand out, and victory went to the speedy or strong rather than to the influential. The classical scholar Stephen G. Miller attributes the fundamental democratic notion of equality before the law (*isonomia*) to the preeminence in Greece of the athletic ideal. Miller, *Ancient Greek Athletics* (Yale University Press, 2004), 232–234.

1912 Stockholm Olympics, Thorpe won both the pentathlon and the decathlon and was saluted by King Gustav V as “the greatest athlete in the world.” A month later he was charged with being a professional because he had been paid \$15 a week by a semiprofessional baseball team in North Carolina while in college. He was stripped of his gold medals, and repeated attempts to have them restored failed until long after his death.

Harvard students recognized early on that application of amateurism standards turned college athletics into an amusement of the well-to-do. In 1878 as a Harvard crew prepared to leave for Henley, the *Crimson* noted with scorn—and more than a little nationalistic provincialism—the British amateurism standard to which American boats might be held.

That it would be a bitter pill for an English crew, composed possibly of English blue blood, to be defeated by a crew of horny-fisted American carpenters, every one must see; still, as the English sporting motto is supposed to be “Let the best man win,” it would seem that our transatlantic cousins might suppress their aristocratic pride in the interest of “fair play,” of which we hear so much, but see so little.

And when Harvard adopted the American analogs of the British standards, the student writers exploded in contempt: “The ridiculous ideas of the Harvard faculty about gate-money and fences are well known,” wrote the *Crimson*. “Their idea is to cause all expense to be borne by the wealthier students, who can afford to subscribe to the maintenance of athletics. This for sooth brings about a spirit of democracy! Harvard democracy we had better call it.” By the 1920s Harvard was trying to enroll students of lesser means, some of whom did not match Harvard’s traditional clientele in ethnicity. Then, as now, athletic skill provided a route to a college education for students with neither lineage nor scholarship going for them. When times got tough in 1929, the opportunity to play for money was irresistible. My father-in-law, the son of an Irish fireman, was in exactly that situation. To keep Harvard clean, the dean insisted that Harvard ballplayers sign a pledge that they were not receiving any money, but he knew quite well they were being paid during the summer for playing Cape Cod League baseball.*

*Today Cape Cod League baseball operates within NCAA rules limiting the compensation of college players.



Amateurism is a technical concept that carries with it a good deal of conceptual baggage. In everyday usage, the term “amateur” can be merely descriptive (“she is an amateur photographer”), belittling (the great physicist James Clerk Maxwell was surprised that Bell’s telephone was “capable of being put together by an amateur”), insulting (“this place is being run by amateurs”), or laudatory, as it is most often meant when applied to athletics. As a term of praise, it has inherited a whole set of favorable secondary meanings from its years of association with gentlemen. Amateurs are good sports, humble in victory and gracious in defeat. Amateurs respect their opponents and behave accordingly. Amateurs take the long view of life and do not let short-term victories and defeats loom too large. Such worthy values, once fundamental to good breeding and reinforced in elite schools, are more elusive today. Popular culture does little to reinforce them, so the athlete, amateur or not, who exhibits these behavioral characteristics is honored as a symbol of human dignity.

“Athletic amateurism,” however, is a term with a specific definition, and the definition has to do with none of these values. The definition hinges entirely on the athlete’s motivations for playing the game. Amateur athletes don’t play for money, and they aren’t excessively competitive. The NCAA’s “principle of amateurism” is described as follows:

Student-athletes shall be amateurs in an intercollegiate sport, and their participation should be motivated primarily by education and by the physical, mental and social benefits to be derived. Student participation in intercollegiate athletics is an avocation, and student-athletes should be protected from exploitation by professional and commercial enterprises.

Unfortunately, this affirmative statement is obscured by a great deal of tedious detail about what athletes can’t do and by questionable application of principle to practice. The NCAA manual runs to 460 pages and the Ivy League manual adds another 178 pages. An absurd extreme of the NCAA’s regulation of amateurism occurred when the U.S. women’s hockey team won the 1998 Olympics, and a team photo appeared on a Wheaties box. The players who planned to return to college to play hockey, including five Harvard students, had to be omitted

from the photo. Their presence would have been considered a commercial endorsement—even though no money was changing hands—and they would have lost their eligibility.

None of the worthy values associated with amateurism in the popular imagination is out-of-date. They are needed more now than ever, inside and outside the athletic world. Yet the real values that amateurism might represent have been lost in the thickets of Ivy League and NCAA regulations. The ethical ambition of amateurism, as it is commonly understood, is important to preserve in college athletics, but the technical definition of amateurism does not achieve the goal. Instead, it means just two things: Amateurism means not playing for money. And amateurism means playing for the love of the sport and not for the competition. Neither conceit makes sense as an absolute. If they ever did, they do no longer. Certainly extremes should be avoided. Harvard should not hire Shaq for a million dollars to play on its basketball team, and the basketball team needs to know that losing is not the end of the world. But avoiding the extremes should not require putting unreasonable financial burdens on students or denigrating the excitement of competition or the joy of victory gained through training, teamwork, and skill.

The professional-amateur divide as codified in NCAA and Ivy League regulations misses the mark. It serves universities' business interests better than their educational interests, and serves the interests of students aiming to become professional athletes better than the interests of those lifting themselves to success in other arenas.

I have a few proposals for normalizing the experience of college athletes. They pertain to all of college athletics but are aimed particularly at leagues that are already making a strong effort to treat athletes as they do other students—in particular, those leagues that provide financial aid only in proportion to financial need.

For American universities, intercollegiate competitions plainly are, and always have been, commercial activities. The hockey players can't have their photos on the Wheaties box, but their university can feature players' photos on its home page. Almost every intercollegiate sporting venue has commercial advertisements on the boards of college hockey rinks, even in the Ivy League. Students can't accept travel money from a company, but the company can buy a corporate booth at the football stadium and be thanked for it over the loudspeaker at halftime. Students can't make money on the basis of their athletic skills, but their

university can put its athletic mascot on credit cards and earn a few cents each time an alum makes a purchase.

The hypocrisy of the dual standard in sports, with colleges trying to raise money however they can while holding the students to a white-as-the-driven-snow standard of financial disinterest, is rationally untenable. Many of the athletes in our colleges, though amateur by NCAA and Ivy standards, are professionals in the ordinary sense of the word. Their parents, if they were financially able, invested tens of thousands of dollars in them by sending them to sports camps every summer and to high schools with excellent coaching. Some college athletes were moved more than once between secondary schools in search of better or more supportive coaches. Some have had personal trainers. The massive level of family investment in development of athletic skill in high school students may be appalling from a public policy standpoint and may be unwise for the children it is supposed to advantage, but it is not against the rules of amateurism, and no rules to circumscribe it could ever be written. Why, then, is the athletically talented student with no such family resources prohibited from accepting modest rewards for athletic achievements? It cannot be because anyone seriously thinks that doing so will keep the preparation and training of all competitors at the same level.

The amateurism principle never made sense in America, but its endurance today is neither a vestige of imported snobbery nor evidence of high ideals for college athletes. Amateurism enables big-time athletic schools to control costs by forming a lawful cartel. Most Division I universities, except for members of the Ivy League, pay athletic grants-in-aid—athletic scholarships that are unrelated to financial need and are discontinued if athletic participation ends. Many students are paid more than is necessary to enable them to attend college. For all practical purposes, athletes receiving athletic scholarships are employees. By agreeing to a common cap on the level of their compensation, however, institutions avoid employment- and tax-law implications of larger payments and also limit their employee costs, albeit at a level far above what athletic revenues would justify if athletic programs were consistently considered as businesses. The limitation on payments to athletes from outside the colleges has no such rational economic justification; it is simply justified by the old idea of amateur purity.

Universities should certainly continue to regulate their athletic activities. In fact, they may be forced to do so more aggressively as it be-

comes more widely understood that the costs of their programs are being driven more by interinstitutional rivalries than by improvements to the athletic experience of their students or by the opportunity to make a profit. But out of fairness to the students, universities should relax their regulation of athletes. In the Ivy League, athletes in the major sports—football, basketball, ice hockey—are significantly more likely than students at large to be receiving financial aid. Especially as these universities strive to enroll more students of very modest means, the extremely rigid controls of athletes' compensation have discriminatory effects. The amateurism rules are supposed to prevent the unfair competition that would result if some college students were being trained and coached as professionals. But many of the unfair advantages the amateurism rules are supposed to preclude are available to students from wealthy families anyway. In practice, the amateurism rules affect the athletic development only of students whose families have little money.

An effective regulatory apparatus is already in place. Spectacular abuses in a few big-time athletic schools notwithstanding, the system holds athletes in the Ivy League and most other schools to the amateurism standard. To be fair to all students, the rules simply need to be adjusted. The devil would be in the details, of course, but proceeding down this path could reduce hardships, attenuate the endless concern about inconsequential violations of unimportant rules, and restore dignity, credibility, and idealism to the intercollegiate sports world.

There is every reason to let students, under controlled circumstances, earn something on the outside. Musicians who play in a student orchestra can earn pin money from performances outside college; students who form the college computer programming team can earn money from outside employers. There seems to be no intrinsic reason to treat athletes who earn small amounts of money over short time periods in a fundamentally different way. Fear of abuses should be countered by outlawing those abuses, not by preventing large numbers of students from earning small amounts of money in activities they enjoy. To prevent universities from dishonestly padding athletes' scholarships, neither colleges themselves nor their associated alumni should be allowed to pay athletes. Allowable athletic earnings should be capped at a few thousand dollars a year. (There is already a carefully regulated dollar limit of zero.) Students would have to report all their earnings if they wanted to retain eligibility. Schools could also limit the

level and duration of professional activity by students who aim to play in college, to lessen concern that college athletes might be receiving significant training or coaching from activities for which they have been paid. To address concerns about professional teams becoming feeders for colleges, or about students' academic seriousness, universities could require students who had played professionally to complete an academic year without playing a sport.

Ivy League colleges rightly award financial aid purely on the basis of financial need. Breaching that line to award scholarships on the basis of either academic or athletic merit would result in a cycle of competition for top students that would shift money from students who need it to students who do not. But if students gain athletic prizes or awards from outside sources, they should be treated as academic prizes and not cause a loss of eligibility for intercollegiate competition.

The Ivy League has a more stringent amateurism standard than the NCAA. In the Ivy League, unlike in the rest of the NCAA, participating professionally in one sport makes a student ineligible to participate as a college athlete in any sport. This regulation does not achieve its intended purpose of maintaining a "level playing field," given the extraordinary levels of private coaching available to students whose families are able to afford it. The Ivy League's stringent standard should therefore be relaxed to conform to the NCAA's. If a student plays a year or two of minor league baseball and wants to play college basketball, he should be allowed to do so. The conditioning the student might receive in A-level baseball would not put him at an unfair advantage over students whose families had paid for years of private trainers and athletic club memberships.

Relaxing such constraints would, of course, create temptations for both families and colleges. Some technical measures such as those already suggested could prevent colleges from enrolling students who had too much truly professional experience. The most important thing to ensure—or restore—is the sense that the athletes representing colleges on the field indeed deserve to be students. Because of their extraordinarily high admission standards, the Ivy League colleges most need to regulate the academic qualifications of their athletes in order to stay true to their mission.

Every athletic league should maintain or increase those controls that truly level the playing field between competing colleges and that express the institutional values in which they take pride. Cynics would

doubtless react to a relaxation of the amateurism standard for college athletes by protesting that colleges had become even more sports-crazy than they already are. Critics would likely claim that their suspicions about Ivy colleges having two separate student bodies, athletes and students, had been validated. Schools could refute such suspicions by demonstrating that their athletes were qualified and productive students.

The Ivy League already monitors the “representativeness” of intercollegiate athletes by means of the “academic index.” Coaches hate these “AI” controls, and alumni recall some great player of days gone by who today would be “kept out” by the AI. But admission standards have risen dramatically at all Ivy League colleges, the inevitable consequence of Harvard and Princeton and Yale becoming national institutions. The academic qualifications of Ivy athletes are higher than they once were, just as every part of the college class is now more qualified. Higher academic standards might change the nature of Ivy League sports but not necessarily. The draw of the Ivy League is very strong, and if there are academically talented quarterbacks and shortstops and midfielders anywhere in the world, some will want to enroll at an Ivy college. Likewise, the league’s regulations on the length of the competitive season, the intensity of the practice schedule, and time away from classes are more stringent than the NCAA’s.

Athletes and alumni sports advocates tend to resent the strictures that already exist. Indeed, some regulations are poorly drafted or imperfectly aimed, but they are not wrong in principle, and they could be maintained or strengthened while relaxing the amateurism rules. The regulations prohibiting athletes from accepting modest prizes from outside the university or being honored by a cereal company have no effect on the “level playing field” objective—they only disadvantage athletes personally, and they most disadvantage those athletes who have the least money.



The Standard Theory provides little rationale for the pursuit of intercollegiate athletics at a high level. If college sports are for regular students having fun, big stadiums and professional coaches should be unnecessary. Academics resent college athletics, whereas students and alumni enjoy them. Athletic reform movements are launched from the

premise that serious athletic competitions are a distraction from the educational mission of universities.

But intercollegiate athletics developed simultaneously with the research university itself. The modern research university with its football team is not a corruption of some earlier temple of the mind where students spent all their time studying. As soon as the principal mission of the university stopped being education of its undergraduates, the undergraduates began taking joy in athletics. The games were from the beginning a humanizing reaction to the large size of the university and to the retreat of the professors into their scholarly academic specialties.

The Harvard writings about athletics in the late nineteenth century almost all tend to one of two extremes. Either they are unrealistic in their indifference to the passion of competition, or they are overstated in their use of athletic victory as a metaphor for success in life or in war. Only the great Harvard philosopher George Santayana, in an 1894 article, managed a realistic assessment of the role of sports in institutions of higher learning that countered Eliot's nascent Standard Theory. When asked why he wasted his time sitting in the bleachers at baseball games, Santayana explained that sports "are a response to a natural impulse and exist only as an end in themselves. That is the reason why they have a kind of nobility which the public is quick to recognize." In athletics as in human intelligence, inequality must exist in order for excellence to exist; he noted that "men have different endowments, and only a few can do each thing as well as it is capable of being done."

Santayana identified a heritage that ties American athletics to English colleges—a heritage far deeper than the artifice of amateurism.

The English academic tradition, founded upon the clerical life of the middle ages, has always maintained a broad conception of education. . . . [S]chools and colleges . . . contained the student's whole life, and they allowed a free and just development to all his faculties. . . . To this system is due that beauty, individuality, and wealth of associations which make English colleges so beloved and venerable. They have a value which cannot be compensated or represented by any lists of courses or catalogues of libraries,—the value of a rounded and traditional life. But even in England this state of things is disappearing. . . . The real loss would come if a merely scientific and tech-

nical training were to pass for a human one, and a liberal education were conceived to be possible without leisure, or a generous life without any of those fruits of leisure of which athletics are one. . . .

[In athletics there is] a great and continuous endeavor, a representation of all the primitive virtues and fundamental gifts of man. The conditions alone are artificial, and when well combined are even better than any natural conditions for the enacting of this sort of physical drama, a drama in which all moral and emotional interests are in a manner involved.

The ancient Greek *athlon* means more than the game and the victory prize. An *athlon* is any great human struggle, including a struggle against one's own limitations: a struggle for honor, for transcendence, or against mortality itself. Athletic games have been exalted as preparation for the struggles of war and disparaged as distractions from winning the real game of life, but such analogies are too simple and too specific. Athletics are a universal metaphor for the pursuit of excellence. They grip the human spirit with a force that great colleges should inspire in the souls of all their students. A college should teach its students to develop and use their potential to the highest level of which they are capable.

In 1960, at the end of his tenure as Harvard's dean of Admissions and Financial Aid, W. J. Bender wrote a lengthy report distilling the wisdom of years of effort to nationalize the Harvard student body through a vast outreach program. He observed, prophetically, that Harvard was becoming so attractive that it had the prospect of being able to decide exactly what kind of student body it wanted. This power had to be used wisely. A student body composed entirely of the students with the best academic potential could be an unhealthy community, disastrous to the "welfare of the individual student" because of the "total effect on the whole person." Harvard, Bender noted, "can be a bad place for some very promising people at a particular stage in their development." This caution has given rise to the recognition that all students admitted to Harvard, even students unlikely to rank high in the class academically, should have achieved some form of excellence in which they can thrive and take pride—what dean of faculty Henry Rosovsky called "a special talent or spark." Bender's bottom-line question was this:

Should the ultimate goal of Harvard's admission effort be to come as close as possible to a student body all of whom would have outstanding academic ability, all of whom would be . . . in the top 1 per cent, or even better, the top half of 1 per cent, of American college students? . . . Or should we consciously aim for a student body with a somewhat broader range of academic ability, perhaps the top 5 per cent of American college students, a student body deliberately selected within this range of ability to include a variety of personalities, talents, backgrounds and career goals?

In the end, Bender advocated a diverse and pluralistic view of Harvard in which academic excellence was only one of the factors to be considered in choosing the class, specifying that

my prejudice is for a Harvard College with a certain range and mixture and diversity in its student body—a college with some snobs and some Scandinavian farm boys who skate beautifully and some bright Bronx pre-meds, with some students who care passionately if unwisely (but who knows) about editing the *Crimson* or beating Yale, or who have an ambition to run a business and make a million, or to get elected to public office, a college in which not all the students have looked on school just as preparation for college, college as preparation for graduate school and graduate school as preparation for they know not what. Won't even our top-one-percent be better men and better scholars for being part of such a college?

Jerome Karabel, in his recent book *The Chosen*, traces the origins of this kind of rhetoric to President Lowell's overtly anti-Semitic admissions policies. Geographic diversity and athletic preferences—as well as lineage “tips”—were, Karabel argues, ways of holding down the number of Jews at Harvard without resorting to Lowell's explicit Jewish quota. Phrases such as “bright Bronx pre-meds” can be interpreted as thinly disguised codes.

Still, Bender's agenda of diversity served larger goals. It spread the benefits of a Harvard education across society, and it connected Harvard to all of America. “Admissions is a zero-sum game,” a review of *The Chosen* summarized, “and any preferences—including affirmative action for African-Americans and other members of minority groups—make admissions criteria more stringent for everyone else.” From the

1930s to the 1950s, some Italians and Irish reaped the benefits of incorporating nonacademic criteria into admissions decisions; today the same tensions are fought out around blacks, Hispanics, and Asians.

Even as Harvard continues to shed its history as a college of the moneyed elite, the imperative for academic excellence keeps it at risk of being a college of an intellectual and largely urban elite. The tension between the “Scandinavian farm boys” and the “Bronx pre-meds,” the latter group already better educated and with higher test scores, reflects a mistrust between rural and urban America that dates to the nation’s founding. When nonacademic criteria figure into the admissions process, they help Harvard look more like America. They provide a passport into a world of learning for young people whose spirit and ambitions are high but whose environment has not nurtured the life of the mind.

Harvard is a college of the best high school students that society can produce, and Harvard will return these students to society when they graduate. We should not be alarmed if our athletes, having distinguished themselves in places where money was short and where athletic excellence was valued more than poetry-writing, wind up being somewhat more interested in making money and somewhat less interested in writing poetry than their classmates. The football team is not going to resemble the Putnam mathematics team anytime soon, because in Texas and western Pennsylvania, the ranching and blue-collar communities instill in children a love of football, not mathematics. We should not be concerned, as Bowen is, when athletes graduate somewhat below where they “should” be in class rank given their objective qualifications. After all, by restricting honors to the top half of the class and making identical all degrees to students in the bottom half, Harvard and several other Ivy universities have signaled in the clearest possible way that it is unimportant whether one graduates in the tenth, twentieth, thirtieth, or fortieth percentile of the class. So long as our athletes meet Harvard’s standards of personal probity and of academic achievement—which are not low by society’s standards—they deserve our honor, respect, and support.

The reduction in the Standard Theory of athleticism to inborn talent fails to recognize athletes’ ethos of self-sacrifice, perseverance, drive, endurance, determined pursuit of distant goals, and passionate ambition for perfection. Nor does the Standard Theory honor the analytical and spatial intelligence, the ability to strategize and to allocate

limited human resources that serious athletes consider essential to winning. These are the same traits that contribute to excellence in other arenas, even academic and artistic achievement at the highest levels. Like scholarship or mathematics or music, athletics at their best operate in a glorious parallel universe in which the lucky and the skilled can temporarily dwell and excel, detached from the banality of ordinary life. Competitive ambitions and financial rewards need corrupt sports no more than awards debase the value and purpose of learning or of art. The pursuit of excellence in any area can be more than entertainment—it can be a thing of beauty that brings profound satisfaction to the human spirit.