

## **COVID-19 unmask the NCAA's collegiate model myth**

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The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) positions itself as an institution primarily dedicated to the health and betterment of “student-athletes” across the country, but in reality it is not so virtuous. This paper will show how decisions made during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 undermine the stated purpose of the current intercollegiate sports model in the United States. It will begin by presenting the claimed goals and values of the NCAA. Then, it will show how many decisions made during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 are incompatible with these goals. In doing so, it will illustrate that there is one purpose that is far more in line with decisions during the 2020 pandemic: revenue generation through mass entertainment. Even for those who have long bought into the NCAA’s noble rhetoric, COVID-19 is mask off for the NCAA’s “collegiate model” myth.

Keywords: COVID-19; NCAA; college sports; exploitation; higher education

### **Section 1 – Introduction**

“COMMITTED TO WELL-BEING” was the headline that popped up when visiting the homepage for the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) during the Fall semester of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. It was overlaid onto a picture of what appeared to be a victorious Indoor Track and Field relay team—a sport that has seen teams slashed across the country allegedly due to the pandemic. Below this picture, a banner invited you to click for more information on COVID-19, all while schools prepared for tens of thousands of in-person fans at their home football games.

If we were to trust the NCAA’s advertising, grand pronouncements, and explicit statements of purpose, we would think that college athletics in the US are primarily for the health

and betterment of “student-athletes” across the country. But even the most stalwart defender of the status quo must recognize how decisions made during this age of COVID-19 clearly undermine the stated purpose of the current intercollegiate model in the US. Quite simply, COVID-19 has been mask off for the NCAA’s “collegiate model.”

This paper will start by presenting the purported goals and values of the NCAA and some of the more powerful member institutions. It will then go on to make clear how college sports’ actions during COVID-19 undermine these alleged goals and values. In Sections 3 and 4 we’ll look at how athlete well-being was largely ignored so that certain competitions would continue. In Section 5 we’ll look at the claim that athletes are students first and treated as such. In Section 6 we’ll look at a commitment distinct from any that the NCAA claims to explain the collegiate sport behavior during COVID-19. And in Section 7 we’ll see under the mask.

A discussion of possible solutions or alternative models is far outside the scope of this paper, but in pulling the mask off of the collegiate model, we can take a first step towards a less unjust, less hypocritical system of college sport in the US.

## **Section 2 – The NCAA’s “collegiate model”**

The NCAA is the major governing body for college sport in the United States. There are over 1,000 schools that participate in NCAA sports, divided among dozens of conferences and three divisions. While the NCAA itself is largely a governing body that also runs some national championships, the term “NCAA” is often used to include not only the NCAA national office but also conference and member institution leadership and decision-makers (NCAA 2021c). We will follow such usage in this paper. Throughout the years, the NCAA has faced a wide range of

criticism yet has remained incredibly powerful not just in the world of sport but in American society overall. The use of grand rhetoric about commitment to athletes has long helped defend the NCAA, but as we shall see the current NCAA rhetoric around the “collegiate model” serves only to obscure the realities of college sport in the US.

Before the “collegiate model,” the NCAA’s favorite term had long been “amateurism.” This is roughly the idea that college athletes are students first who are simply taking part in an optional extracurricular activity and who are certainly not workers or employees. This term has long been used by the NCAA to defend the status quo: from arguing against any grant-in-aid scholarships until reversing course in 1956, to attempting to defend itself from anti-trust violations in the last several years, to currently arguing against athletes’ ability to freely profit off their own name (Muenzen 2003). As argued by Derek Van Rheenen (2012, 6),

defining college athletes as amateurs serves multiple purposes for educational institutions: (a) it maximizes profits for the schools; (b) as amateurs, these athletes are not considered employees and thus receive no workers’ compensation or other benefits; (c) viewing college athletes as non-employees means that the NCAA escapes scrutiny as an illegal business cartel; and (d) none of the money generated by amateur athletes for the NCAA and its member institutions is taxable because it is part of an educational program.

Despite being a useful term for the NCAA to use when defending the status quo, the term “amateurism” is not particularly enlightening about the nature of college sport. According to respected sportswriter Dan Wolken, “amateurism is a word with no inherent meaning other than whatever the NCAA proclaims it to be.” Historian Taylor Branch, in his now famous 2011 *Atlantic* article, takes an even stronger stance, arguing that “[t]here is no such thing. ... No legal definition of amateur exists, and any attempt to create one in enforceable law would expose its repulsive and unconstitutional nature—a bill of attainder, stripping from college athletes the rights of American citizenship.”

It's no surprise that the NCAA has moved to a new favorite term to serve their purposes, turning to "collegiate model." Unfortunately, the term "collegiate model" is not much clearer or ideologically better defended. Despite NCAA and member institution officials using the term, there is no simple explicit statement of what the collegiate model is. As Southall and Staurowsky put it, it "is a relatively new term in the NCAA national office lexicon that has received *spontaneous consent* from the NCAA association, member universities, and other college-sport constituents including administrators, coaches, athletes, reporters and journalists, and college-sport fans," and the use of this new term has been an "effective use of propaganda in an attempt to quell critical examination or dissent" (Southall and Staurowsky 2013).

That said, the official 2020 NCAA Division I Manual lays out nine commitments in a section entitled "Commitments to the Division I Collegiate Model." These stated commitments are as follows:

- The Commitment to Value-Based Legislation
- The Commitment to Amateurism
- The Commitment to Fair Competition
- The Commitment to Integrity and Sportsmanship
- The Commitment to Institutional Control and Compliance
- The Commitment to Student-Athlete Well-Being
- The Commitment to Sound Academic Standards
- The Commitment to Responsible Recruiting Standards
- The Commitment to Diversity and Inclusion

In a similar vein, NCAA's website highlights "Academics," "Well-Being," and "Fairness" as their three "priorities" on their main "About the NCAA" page. And on their "Frequently Asked Questions" page they stress that "[t]he association's belief in student-athletes as students first is a foundational principle."

While it would take additional books to thoroughly examine the NCAA's actual commitment to all of these claims, athlete well-being and athletes as students first seem most central to what the NCAA claims to care most about, both in their official manual and in how officials talk about college sports.

In one of his first major interviews after becoming the NCAA's president, Mark Emmert spent considerable time stressing that college athletes are students first, not professional athletes, and that schools shouldn't have sports primarily for financial reasons, saying

And in our case, what amateurism really means, again, is this preprofessional notion that these young men and women are students; they've come to our institutions to gain an education and to develop their skills as an athlete and to compete at the very highest level they're capable of. And for them, that's a very attractive proposition.

...

I don't think it would be appropriate for an institution to decide it's going to embark on an athletic program solely for the purpose of trying to improve its bottom line at the Division I level (PBS 2011).

According to Michael Schill, Pac-12 CEO Group Chair and University of Oregon President, "[t]he health and safety of our student-athletes and all those connected to Pac-12 sports remains our guiding light and number one priority" (Cal Athletics 2020). This statement was given in support of the Pac-12's decision to continue competing in fall 2020.

Rick George, athletic director at the University of Colorado Boulder, more explicitly contrasted professional and collegiate sport in a CU Athletic Department press release on September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020:

In professional sports, an organization's decision-making behavior is driven almost exclusively by how much revenue that result of that decision will produce or consume. On the contrary, in intercollegiate athletics, while programs must maintain financial solvency to function, every decision we make and action we undertake should always intrinsically connect back to whether it furthers the goal of providing a world-

class experience for each and every student-athlete on our campus. We have committed ourselves to their long-term well-being, and that means that when it comes to prioritizing what we do on a daily basis, the outcomes of our choices should always create a significant and measurable benefit for the student-athlete.

It is worth reminding ourselves that the NCAA has a long history of controlling language for the benefit of the status quo even beyond “amateurism.” Perhaps most famously, the term “student-athlete” was introduced by Walter Byers, the first NCAA Executive Director, for the purpose of controlling the narrative to deny workers’ compensation and related rights to college athletes. As Byers (1995, 69) himself put it,

We crafted the term “student-athlete”, and soon it was embedded in all NCAA rules and interpretations as a mandated substitute for such words as players and athletes. We told college publicists to speak of “college teams”, not football or basketball “clubs”, a word common to the pros.

With this background in hand, we will now turn our attention to college sports' actions during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Section 3 – Caring about athlete well-being?**

On March 12<sup>th</sup>, the NCAA cancelled all winter and spring championships. Athletes were already on site for the Indoor Track & Field Championships to begin the next day, but NCAA officials realized that there was a harmful virus rapidly spreading throughout the country, and that it would be wrong to put the well-being of athletes and the broader community at risk for sport. They did this even knowing that the vast majority of their \$1 billion in annual revenue comes from the “March Madness” men’s basketball tournament they cancelled for 2020.

There were many twists and turns on the road back to college sports in the fall of 2020—detailed in depth across the media landscape from more niche publications such as *Sapiens* to

industry stalwarts such as *Sports Illustrated* and the *New York Times*—but the NCAA’s commitment to safety from the virus did not last long (Canada 2020; Rosenberg 2020; Schoenfeld 2020). The NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS)—the highest tier of NCAA football—saw 127 teams compete in the fall of 2020. There are a total of 130 schools in the FBS.

The cancelling of all fall national championships by the NCAA had no direct impact on the FBS. The postseason for the FBS is comprised of independently run bowl games, giving the NCAA no power to directly cancel those. Nonetheless, individual conferences had the power to disallow any competitions, trainings, or other athletic activities due to the pandemic. And at first that is what happened.

On August 11<sup>th</sup>, the Big Ten Conference announced they were cancelling the fall football season. Later that day, the Pac-12 Conference followed suit. But the next month both the Big Ten and the Pac-12 reversed course. When all was said and done, 97% of FBS teams competed during the heart of the pandemic.

As college football came back at the start of September, there were well over 6 million cases and nearly 200,000 deaths in the US from the virus that we were learning spread largely through aerosols in close contact (Young et al 2020). Coaches, athletic directors, and university presidents all had this information, yet allowed athletes to practice and play football, a sport where teammates literally huddle together in close contact before plays in which athletes on opposing sides grapple one another. Unsurprisingly, athletes got infected.

On August 1<sup>st</sup>, an official in the Southeastern Conference was caught on tape telling athletes that “There are going to be outbreaks. We’re going to have positive cases on every single team in the SEC. That’s a given. And we can’t prevent it” (Klemko and Giambalvo 2020).

Four days later, *Sports Illustrated* ran a story with college athletes describing their experiences with the virus, from losing significant weight to barely being able to breathe (Dellenger 2020a). And while the seasons and school years had yet to officially start, schools from the University of North Carolina to Rutgers to Illinois to Vanderbilt announced outbreaks among their teams (Cobb 2020b; Cobb 2020a; Ryan 2020; WKRN Staff 2020). All would play football in the fall.

Not only did these reckless actions harm athletes (and their friends and families with whom they had contact), but allowing fans into stadiums exacerbated the spread of the virus among others in the community. By mid-season, nearly 30 schools had home games with over 10,000 people in attendance (Caron and Akabas 2020). Even when there were policies that fans had to wear masks and stay in their designated seats, many campuses were unable or unwilling to seriously enforce these safety standards (Schrotenboer 2020a). While many saw the situation as problematic, not all agreed on the problem. For some like Dan Mullen, coach of the University of Florida football team, the problem was that there were too few fans (Joseph 2020). One might think that a coach of college athletes—someone who is in a leadership and development role at an educational institution—would have the health and safety of their team and community as a higher priority than the atmosphere at home games.

Combined with college activities overall, it is no wonder that the pandemic was exacerbated in communities around college towns come the fall (Ivory, Gebeloff, and Mervosh 2020). Even in mid-September, when many students were just getting back to campus, counties that included Power 5 institutions had twice the rate of COVID-19 infections as the US average (Sergent 2020).

Had athlete well-being been the major concern of the decision-makers in college sports, the first time a team cancelled a game due to too many COVID-19 cases they would have

simply canceled the season and encouraged other teams to do so. Instead, teams cancelling or postponing became a normal part of the season. And some coaches couldn't even fathom changing plans for athlete well-being.

When a Clemson player tested positive for COVID-19 during a trip to play Florida State, Florida State made the decision to cancel the game. Instead of praising Florida State for caring about athletes' well-being, Clemson's famed coach Dabo Swinney attacked Florida State's integrity, saying that "[t]his game was not canceled because of COVID. COVID was just an excuse to cancel the game" (Bromberg 2020).

A standard refrain in response to concerns about athlete well-being was that college athletes are healthier than most and were very unlikely to die from the virus. That seems plausible. But in addition to knowing that athletes could spread the virus to others, we know that there are other harms from this virus than death.

By early August, college sports administrators were publicly grappling with the dangers of myocarditis—an inflammation of the heart muscle—in college athletes (Lavigne and Schlabach 2020). An early study of college athletes who had recovered from COVID-19 without needing to be hospitalized or have antiviral therapy found 15% “had CMR findings suggestive of myocarditis” and another 30% had findings “suggestive of prior myocardial injury” (Rajpal et al. 2020). Researchers, noting that cardiovascular risks from COVID-19 are not solely located in the heart, stressed that “the heart is not the only system needing screened. Examination for myocardial injury and myocarditis are mandatory” (Ibarrola and Dávalos 2020).

This wasn't a secret to NCAA decision-makers. Wayne Sebastianelli, Penn State's Director of Athletic Medicine, admitted at the start of September that 30 to 35 percent of COVID-positive athletes showed signs of myocarditis, irrespective of whether they were

symptomatic for COVID-19 (Camera 2020). Yet their football team played nine games after this statement.

Once competitions were already well underway in late October, research came out suggesting that more research needed to be done and that the risk of heart damage to athletes might not be as high as previously thought (Kim et al. 2020). Critics of COVID-19 health & safety protocols aimed at protecting athletes from possible cardiac injuries latched onto those researchers' claims that the risk of cardiac injury due to COVID-19 "should not constitute a primary justification for the cancellation or postponement of sports" in an effort to get players back on the field faster (Dellenger 2020b). Unsurprisingly, they did not latch onto claims in the same paragraph of the study that "this decision [to cancel a season] should be driven by the need to limit viral spread." So, with under-researched information and some conflicting guidance on the risk of heart damage in athletes from COVID-19, those in decision-making positions decided to err on the side of more competitions rather than err on the side of athlete health.

Then on December 12<sup>th</sup>, Keyontae Johnson, Florida's star forward and the preseason player of the year for the Southeastern Conference, collapsed in the middle of a basketball game and had to be carried off in a stretcher before hospitalization (Associated Press 2020). It was reported that he had acute myocarditis and had to be put in a medically induced coma before he was released from the hospital after slightly less than two weeks (Cash 2020).

On its "Well-Being" page, the NCAA makes sure to stress the importance of heart health: Sudden death from a heart condition remains the leading medical cause of death in college athletes. To combat this, the NCAA Sport Science Institute is collaborating with the most respected medical and sports organizations in the country to promote research, education and best practices around cardiac health. Yet dozens of games were played in the brief time while Johnson was in the hospital.

While a full look at the 2020-2021 NCAA basketball season is beyond the scope of a 2020-focused paper, it's worth noting some highlights of the season. Over 90% of the Division I basketball teams for both men and women competed during the season; the only Division I conference to cancel their seasons was the Ivy League, which announced the cancellation of all winter sports on November 12<sup>th</sup>. In addition to teams forfeiting due to COVID-19 throughout the regular season, teams also had to forfeit both during conference and national tournaments due to COVID-19 infections (Forde 2021; Dotson 2021). At least one college student died of COVID-19 complications shortly after attending a game during the men's national tournament (Hopkins 2021). With the wide range of potential consequences of the virus on everybody's mind one year into the pandemic, it is perhaps no surprise that some of those who cover college sports focused on the possibility of gamblers beating oddsmakers as they bet on the NCAA tournaments (Peter 2021). Forbes estimated that over \$8.5 million was wagered on the 2021 men's tournament (Yakowicz 2021). While we could likely learn even more about the NCAA from looking at the college sport landscape after one year of the pandemic, we can learn enough by keeping the scope of this paper to 2020.

As the *New York Times* reported before December 2020 was even half over, “[m]ore than 6,600 college athletes, coaches and staff members have tested positive for the coronavirus.” But the *Times* recognized that even this number was certainly far too low, as they were “able to gather complete data for just 78 of the 130 universities in the National Collegiate Athletic Association's Football Bowl Subdivision.” Further, they noted that “the Big Ten Conference, which required its athletes and coaches to submit to daily testing, had the most known cases of any top league and saw some of the worst outbreaks in college sports” (Blinder, Higgins, and Guggenheim 2020). Whit Babcock, athletic director at Virginia Tech, “estimated about three-

quarters of the team contracted the virus since March” (Adelson 2020). One might reasonably think that there is no way to have large gatherings of athletes vigorously exercising in close quarters that is safe from a highly contagious virus that spreads through respiratory droplets.

Before we move on to look at those athletes who did not have their well-being so clearly sacrificed, it’s worth addressing an important factor not yet addressed in the narrative given in this section: the desires of the players. Right as the Big Ten was first cancelling its season, many football athletes voiced their desires to play in the #WeWantToPlay movement, spearheaded by Trevor Lawrence (Kosko 2020). Many of their parents also began exerting pressure on the conference (Rittenberg 2020). While a full telling of the causes that led to the Big Ten to reverse its decision not to play football in the fall of 2020 is beyond the scope of this paper—but fortunately is the subject of another chapter of this book—there’s no denying that many athletes wanted to play. But we shouldn’t conclude from the fact that the Big Ten reversed their decision that the NCAA simply responds to the voices of the athletes.

Across the country from the Big Ten, football players in the Pac-12 were collectively making their voices heard in the #WeAreUnited campaign. Among their demands were better safety protocols, reducing coach & administrator pay to protect all sports, fighting for racial justice through both new athlete-led groups and revenue distribution for the Black community, and “Economic Freedom and Equality” to include basic rights such as freedom of speech and direct compensation for their work (Pac-12 Football Athletes 2020). These demands were not met.

In both the #WeWantToPlay and the #WeAreUnited movements, athletes voiced their concerns about what they desired. However, it was only the demands that fit with the status quo and that worked in favor of NCAA decision-makers that were met. If the NCAA had been

genuinely committed to the well-being of the athletes, they would have ruled against the demands of the #WeWantToPlay movement by claiming that they were just trying to protect the athletes, much like they actually reject the rights of athletes to be compensated for their work by arguing that they're trying to protect athletes from "commercial exploitation" (NCAA 2021b). While those in positions of power should listen to players, it would be disingenuous to defend the decision to go ahead with FBS football in the fall on the basis that this is what the athletes wanted given that the NCAA ignored the #WeAreUnited demands as well as many other demands throughout the years.

But while some athletes had their well-being sacrificed so that they could continue to play in the fall of 2020, many did not. It is informative to look at those athletes whose well-being was taken more seriously.

#### **Section 4 – Caring about athlete well-being**

Like football, soccer is a fall sport that takes place outdoors with 22 athletes on the field at a time. Unlike football, these 22 players typically keep significant distance between themselves, something that should be very relevant when determining which (if any) sports were safe during a viral pandemic. However, despite a traditional August start to the soccer season, only 19 of the 206 Division I men's teams and 55 of the 344 Division I women's teams had competed as of January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the further we get from the sports with the highest profile and most revenue—Division I Football and Basketball—the more likely it was that teams didn't compete.

As discussed above, 127 of 130 FBS football teams competed in Fall 2020. For the lower of the two Division I subdivisions, the Football Championship Subdivision (FCS), only 17 out of 127 teams competed in Fall 2020. (However, most FCS conferences had plans to play a season starting in late February or early March if conditions improved, and ultimately most did compete in Spring 2021.) Out of the 162 Division II schools, only 10 played. For DIII, it was 6 of 250. More “minor” sports also saw much less participation than football and basketball in Fall 2020. In field hockey, 8 of 79 Division I teams competed. In women’s volleyball, it was 49 out of 334. All told, while over 90% of Division I basketball (both men’s and women’s) and FBS football teams played in their typical 2020 season, other core fall sports and divisions had between 2% and 16% of their teams compete.

Perhaps the most powerful example of a team opting out of a season is Duke’s women’s basketball team, a team that has advanced far into the NCAA national tournament nearly every year this century. As announced on Christmas Day 2020, the Duke women’s basketball team and coach Kara Lawson—herself a WNBA and Olympic Champion—decided to cancel the season due to concerns over COVID-19 (Brassil 2020). The Duke men’s team continued to plan to play, although competitions kept being cancelled or postponed. On January 1<sup>st</sup> 2021, famous head coach Mike Krzyzewski was forced to quarantine (Thompson 2021). On January 6<sup>th</sup> 2021, the athletes were back on the court competing against Boston College while Coach Krzyzewski was quarantining due to COVID-19 (Associated Press 2021).

It should now be clear that the NCAA’s claimed commitment to the well-being of athletes is not actually one of their guiding principles. For some individuals, such as coach Lawson, it very well might be. But as an institution, the NCAA clearly does not value athlete well-being as a guiding principle.

We will now move on to look at the claim that athletes are really students first, as opposed to professional or semi-professional athletes who deserve special treatment and compensation. Just as we saw with regards to the claim that athlete well-being is a priority, we'll see that COVID-19 has not been kind to the NCAA's claim that college athletes are students first.

### **Section 5 – Students first?**

According to the NCAA, “student-athletes as students first is a foundational principle” (NCAA 2021). College athletes are not allowed special treatment relative to their overall student body, and athletes have been sanctioned for such things as eating too much food at a banquet and getting help transporting furniture from a coach. (Greene 2015; Mattioli 2014). Yet treating some athletes—most notably football and basketball players—differently from non-athlete students seemed to be the norm in Fall 2020, undermining this “foundational principle” of the collegiate model.

Just a week into their semester, the University of North Carolina announced that all classes for Fall 2020 would move online (Quintana 2020). The football team, however, continued to practice and play, both at home and away (Blinder 2020). Fans, albeit in limited numbers, were allowed to attend games in the latter portion of the season (WTVD 2020).

New Mexico teams took it much further. The University of New Mexico moved their football team to Las Vegas, Nevada, spending \$70,000 a week to get away from state restrictions so that they could practice and play football (Davis 2020). Their men's and women's basketball teams went the other direction, relocating to Lubbock and Amarillo, Texas, respectively

(Coleman 2020). In-state rival, New Mexico State, also went out of state; their men's and women's basketball teams relocated to Phoenix and Tucson, Arizona, respectively (Schrotenboer 2020b). Even Stanford, allegedly one of the most academically rigorous and focused institutions in the world, had their football team practice out of state to get around local public health protocols (Schrotenboer 2020c).

It was not just individual teams making these decisions to treat athletes as something other than students. Local jurisdictions too made special exceptions for college athletes. When Washtenaw County, home of the University of Michigan, announced a shelter-in-place order in October, including limiting exercise to groups of two or less, there was one glaring exception: "Students who are associated with intercollegiate varsity sports may attend practices and competitions provided that athletic medical staff is present during the entire process" (Booker 2020).

Also, despite testing still being very limited in the US during Fall 2020, college athletes often had regular COVID-19 testing even when their fellow students did not (Kelderman 2020). They also had far more regular testing than many front-line healthcare workers (Wamsley 2020).

Had the NCAA believed that athletes are students first, they would have given significant criticisms and sanctions to teams that accepted such special treatment. No such criticisms or sanctions were given.

Skepticism about the claim that college athletes, especially in higher profile sports and schools, are students first is nothing new. In 2015, the Pac-12 itself conducted a study that found athletes spent an average of 50 hours per week on their sport and that this was interfering with their sleep and studying. (Penn Schoen Berland 2015). The NCAA basketball season is notorious for causing athletes to miss significant portions of their academic term. It is estimated that over

10,000 classes were missed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> week of March 2016 for men's Division I conference games alone (Lemire 2016). And most famously, for nearly two decades athletes at the University of North Carolina regularly took fraudulent classes that never met (Smith & Willingham 2015). But until COVID-19, schools didn't bar regular students from on-campus activities while hosting home football games.

By observing the state of college sport during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, we can be reasonably comfortable rejecting the NCAA's claim that college sports are primarily about athlete well-being and athletes as students first. We now turn to a much more plausible guiding principle: revenue generation through mass entertainment.

## **Section 6 – What it's all about**

College sports are a multi-billion-dollar industry. As interesting as the historical explanations for this might be, this cannot be viewed as simply a byproduct of student-focused extra-curricular activities. Revenue generation through mass entertainment is the guiding principle of contemporary American college sport, at the very least when it comes to NCAA Division I sport.

The NCAA front office alone brings in around one billion dollars a year, the vast majority of it from the NCAA March Madness men's basketball tournament. Cancelling the tournament in 2020 led to a loss of hundreds of millions of dollars for the NCAA front office alone, which in turn led to a dramatic loss of distributed revenue to NCAA member institutions (Blasai 2020). As the virus was killing over 1,000 people a day in the USA that summer, powerful voices in NCAA sport were vocal about the financial need for the NCAA to host March

Madness in 2021. This included Coach Krzyzewski, who said that "[w]e need to have the tournament. We can't have it where two years in a row you don't have the NCAA tournament" (Medcalf 2020).

Understanding the scale of revenue generation is necessary to understand why coaches, athletic directors, and other NCAA administrators made the decisions they did. The Power 5 Conferences regularly distribute tens of millions of dollars per member institution from their own yearly revenue of nearly \$3 billion (Berkowitz 2020b). Forty schools generated over \$100 million apiece of their own revenue in the 2018 – 2019 fiscal year, with three of those over \$200 million (USA Today 2021b). For list-topping Texas, about 2/3<sup>rd</sup> of their over \$200 million in revenue came from football (Berkowitz 2019b).

Eddie Nunez, athletic director for the University of New Mexico, explained why he allowed his teams to move out of state to practice and compete explicitly in terms of revenue generation. "If I'm going to spend \$300,000 to put our team in Las Vegas, but I know that at the end of the day, I'm going to get \$3.7 million or zero (to not play at all), I think I'd go for 3.7" (Davis 2020).

While athletes are not allowed to be paid, the coaches, athletic directors, and conference commissioners certainly are. Note, however, that athletes can get special perks in some post-season events. The Oregon and Iowa State football teams, for example, were all given highly sought-after video game consoles for their participation in the Playstation Fiesta Bowl (Wade 2020). In 40 states, the highest paid public employee is a football or men's basketball coach (Duffley 2019). As of November 17<sup>th</sup> 2020, eighty-two football head coaches were making \$1 million or more per year, with 16 of those making \$5 million or more (USA Today 2021c). For men's basketball, as of March 9<sup>th</sup> 2021, at least 70 coaches were making over \$1million with 26

over \$3 million (USA Today 2021d). But it is not just head coaches who have lucrative contracts. Twenty-four assistant football coaches make over \$1million, with nearly 500 making over \$200,000 (USA Today 2021a). Additionally, coaches can get bonuses based on athlete performance in the range of hundreds of thousands of dollars (Berkowitz 2020a).

At the conference level, each Power 5 conference commissioner was making over \$2 million per year as of 2019 (Harp 2019). Four people at the NCAA front office, including NCAA president Mark Emmert, make over \$1 million (Berkowitz 2019a).

Even those who are fired are raking in the money. Texas fired head football coach Tom Herman at the end of December 2020, yet Herman will still be paid another \$15 million from Texas, with it costing Texas another \$9 million to pay off his coaching staff who were also fired (Berreman 2021). *USA Today's* Steve Berkowitz calculated that public schools are on the hook for over \$100 million for fired head FBS football coaches for the 2020 season alone (Berkowitz 2021).

Athletic departments' decisions aren't made solely about how they'll impact revenue or results that year; coaches and athletic departments also look to get recruiting advantages to help their results in future years. The *Denver Post*, regional paper for University of Colorado, ran an entire article about the recruiting benefits from getting into a post-season bowl game, a feat they rarely achieved in the decade before COVID-19 (Howell 2020). One might reasonably conclude that future results and future revenue appear more important than athlete well-being for many in positions of power within the college sports industry.

The 2020 pandemic activities of the NCAA and member institutions make it hard to believe that the NCAA's commitment to college sport is primarily about athlete well-being

and/or athletes as students first. Rather, it's clearer than ever that the real commitment is to making money, whatever the cost to health or integrity.

## **Section 7 – Mask off**

The NCAA claims that it is committed to the collegiate model. This is supposed to be understood as a commitment to athlete well-being, amateurism, and athletes as students first. However, the actions of the NCAA during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic undermine this claim.

The NCAA claims that protecting athlete well-being is central to the collegiate model. If this were true, no or very few teams would have competed in the second half of 2020. Or, if they had, they would have been in very controlled “bubble” situations, which would have further undermined the claim that this was not professional sport. Instead, hundreds of teams competed.

The NCAA claims that amateurism is central to the collegiate model. If this were true, there would be little to no correlation between the revenue-generation of teams that competed and those that did not. Instead, nearly all the FBS Football and DI Basketball teams competed while very few of the teams outside of those high-revenue generating leagues competed.

The NCAA claims that treating athletes as students first is central to the collegiate model. If this were true, athletes would follow roughly the same safety protocols that other students followed. Instead, athletes were able to be on campus when other students were not, had significantly better access to COVID-19 tests than the general population, and in some cases were even moved across state or county lines to continue their extracurricular sporting activities.

The decisions during the second half of 2020 do not fit the claimed guiding principles of the NCAA's collegiate model. However, they do fit a very different guiding principle: revenue generation through mass entertainment.

For many of those who pay close attention to the world of US college sports, none of what was said here will be terribly surprising. But for those who previously did not understand that the NCAA is basically a cartel for profiting off unpaid athlete labor and at times has even attempted to justify their actions by appeal to the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment's allowance of slavery for those convicted of a crime, then COVID-19 was certainly mask off for the NCAA's collegiate model myth (Sanderson and. Siegfried 2018; Mills 2020).

But COVID-19 isn't just a mask off moment for the NCAA. It is also mask off for all those who are complicit in the NCAA's operations.

Millions and millions of fans tuned in each week to watch unpaid college athletes compete under the cloud of a viral pandemic (Sports Media Watch 2021). Some weeks even saw numbers rise from the pre-pandemic times (Doughty 2020). Further, tens of thousands of fans bought tickets to watch games in the stadiums (Dixon 2020). In addition, untold masses consumed college sports media, from highlights on TV to social media coverage and everything in between. For those who financially supported this system of American collegiate sport, COVID-19 was mask off for their belief that their entertainment trumps athlete exploitation.

No one fan was the sufficient cause of all the suffering and exploitation of college athletes during COVID-19, but that doesn't mean individual fans are not blameworthy. Someone can be somewhat to blame if they take part in something clearly unjustified. As George Tyler (2021) puts it with regards to football and all the long-term cognitive damage that goes along with it, "since their consumption is the economic basis of sports' profitability ... fans have a

forward-looking collective responsibility (FLCR) to alter their consumption patterns and encourage reforms.” It straightforwardly follows that those who spend money directly supporting the status quo of the money-driven, exploitative practice of American collegiate sport (or at least the “big-time” of Division I football and basketball) have an obligation to immediately stop such behavior. But it is not only the financially invested fans who have an obligation to change their behavior now that the mask has fallen off the NCAA’s collegiate model myth.

College presidents, members of boards of regents, or otherwise powerful administrators, are some of the few individuals who individually have significant power to change conditions, at least for athletes on their campuses. They should consider radically changing how college sports are conducted on their campuses, although what exactly college sports should look like is far beyond the scope of this paper.

Those who teach on college campuses do not have so much power individually, but may nonetheless be in a position to act within their campus capacities. At a minimum, there is ample opportunity to teach current students—many of whom currently and/or in the future financially support college sport—about the myriad injustices connected to contemporary college sport. Those who teach classes on labor or economics can address how athletes, especially in the “revenue sports” of football and men’s basketball, are grossly exploited (Garthwaite et al. 2020). Those who teach classes on race in the US can address how athletes in “revenue sports” are disproportionately Black men yet those who benefit—both economically and with regards to campus entertainment—from their labor are disproportionately White (Harper 2018). Those who teach classes on autonomy or human well-being can address the harms of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) that is present in a significantly large percentage of former football

players—players who will not have the lifelong healthcare costs paid for by the institutions that profited off the harm to their bodies (Mez et al. 2017).

Neither college sports nor any particular individuals will ever be perfect, and there are far too many injustices in the world for any one person to act on all of them, but that doesn't give us carte blanche to ignore the horrors we see when we unmask the NCAA's collegiate model myth. When COVID-19 finally goes away, we must not simply find a new, better mask. We must change what we have underneath, and stop being complicit in so much injustice.

### **Acknowledgments**

This paper is dedicated to all college athletes fighting for their rights. No paper, book, or academic can do for you what you, collectively, can do for yourselves; nonetheless, I hope that this paper can be one tiny bit of help in your struggle towards justice. This paper itself is better off thanks to helpful feedback from Bret Donnelly, Jake Wojtowicz, Colin Smith, and Garrett Bredeson, and it would not have existed if it weren't for Jeff Fry and Andrew Edgar.

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