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June 10, 2007

## Are Maricopa colleges giving athletes legitimate passing grades, or is this a grand sham?

By Ryan Gabrielson  
Tribune



*PLAY BALL: Members of the SCC baseball team have been regular members of coaching classes. But players say the classes are easy rides to retain eligibility. Here, the team plays in the first round of divisional playoffs last month.*

*Thomas Boggan Tribune*

Two years ago, Mesa Community College pitcher Paul Schmidt enrolled in a class at his coach's request that ran foul of the line between higher education and sports. Class work consisted of fielding drills and pre-game stretches. There was no homework, no textbook, no final exam. In fact, there was no class - it met during baseball practice, and the teacher was Schmidt's baseball coach.

"We didn't have to do anything, like class work-wise, because we were on the team and we already had to be at practice," said Schmidt, now 21 and a player for UCLA where he's majoring in statistics.

At colleges throughout the Maricopa County Community College District, coaches enroll their players in classes on athletic coaching that are often just team meetings or are even scheduled for the same time as regular season games. Sometimes, they don't even meet at all, a Tribune investigation found.

These classes violate national ethical standards for intercollegiate sports and, at four-year schools, many would be considered academic fraud. They leave community college athletes - often the weakest students - unprepared for the universities they transfer to. And a study commissioned by the Tribune found nearly half of the athletes who go on to major college teams never graduate from those schools.

The classes - called "Methods of Coaching" and "Theory of Coaching" - count as much toward a student's grade point average as an English or math course. Almost everyone gets an A. Mesa, Scottsdale, Glendale and South Mountain community colleges have coaching classes that boost grades for athletes on almost all their teams.

And coaches, who teach nearly all these classes, have a vested interest in keeping their players in good academic standing - they can give grades that ensure the athletes remain academically eligible. Even the athletic directors at the Scottsdale and Mesa colleges run academic departments and hire their coaches to teach classes for team members.

The Tribune provided MCCCDC Chancellor Rufus Glasper its findings last week. In response, Glasper ordered an inquiry

into the colleges' coaching classes.

"The district is concerned about issues that have been raised regarding athletic coaching classes, instructor assignment to these classes and enrollments, especially of student athletes, in some of these classes," Steven Helfgot, vice chancellor of student and community affairs, said in a written statement.

Most of MCCC'D's coaching classes violate ethical guidelines set by the Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics, which works to reform college sports.

"In cases where an instructor-coach has grading authority over an athlete, conflict of interest is very clear," the coalition's principles say.

Yet the National Junior College Athletic Association, which governs sports at two-year-schools like MCCC'D's, does not have a single regulation concerning academic fraud by college employees. Scottsdale Community College's athletic director, Art Becker, is president of the NJCAA.

The NCAA, which regulates four-year-schools, forbids university officials from "involvement in arranging for fraudulent academic credit."

In 2003, the NCAA penalized the University of Georgia men's basketball team when an assistant coach taught a Methods of Coaching basketball class filled with athletes. The class' final exam famously included a question asking how many points a three-point basket is worth.

Universities' athletic programs have closely linked themselves to junior colleges, where many students enroll when their grades aren't good enough and NCAA standards block them from suiting up at a four-year school.

At junior colleges, athletes must only be high school graduates, or have passed a high school equivalency test.

So a gifted football player who might otherwise play at a school such as Ohio State University instead joins the SCC Artichokes.

These athletes, labeled "non-qualifiers," are expected to move on to universities after repairing their academic records. Nearly all athletes at Maricopa colleges ultimately transfer to NCAA schools.

But the Maricopa colleges' coaching classes do not help prepare the players.

"The fact that they're not getting those skills takes away from their future, quite directly," said Nathan Tublitz, chairman of the Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics. "Because then they get admitted to four-year schools and can't do the work."

An analysis of student transcripts shows that, nationwide, junior college athletes who transfer to universities fare poorly.

Athletes who played major sports - football and basketball - only graduated with a bachelor's degree 53.5 percent of the time, despite being halfway done when they arrived at a university. That compares to a 60 percent graduation rate for nonathletes who transferred from a junior college.

Cliff Adelman, a senior associate at the Institute for Higher Education Policy, conducted the analysis for the Tribune. Adelman built and analyzed national databases for the U.S. Department of Education for 26 years.

In the course of its investigation, the Tribune interviewed dozens of past and current athletes and coaches. A reporter attempted to attend numerous coaching classes but found only one meeting at its scheduled time and place. The newspaper also reviewed course outlines and other material from coaching classes offered this school year.

During the 2004-05 and 2005-06 school years, MCCC'D data shows almost 1,000 athletes enrolled in 64 coaching classes at the Mesa, Scottsdale, South Mountain and Glendale colleges. Thirty of those classes contained only players.

Athletes made up 75 percent of all students who took coaching classes, the data shows.

"A lot of them aren't going to be coaches, but they're taking it because they enjoy that class," said Amy Goff, head of SCC's physical education department.

They also get good grades.

Ninety-nine percent of the athletes who completed coaching classes got passing grades. That means 951 students passed

and only four failed, the data shows.

In all health and P.E. classes, only 88 percent of the athletes passed.

Maria Harper-Marinick, the district's vice chancellor for academic affairs, said there is nothing wrong with a coach running a class as a team practice so long as the required material is covered. The required material for the coaching classes is generic she noted, saying mainly that students must learn how to produce a "motivated team." The district refused a Tribune records request for copies of written exams from coaching classes held last school year. Pete Kushibab, MCCC's general counsel, said the release of past tests would undermine the integrity of future coaching classes.

If a coach chooses to teach using the same on-field techniques for class as he would for practice, "that is considered teaching methodology," Harper-Marinick said. "In our system, it's up to the instructor to decide for that period of time, that was the best use of time to convey information, to elicit learning."

### **ACADEMICS LACKING**

The Maricopa colleges have a coaching class for every team sport, even the minor ones such as wrestling, swimming and track and field.

The coaching classes' curriculum, which the district governing board approved in 1988, says students are supposed to gain an understanding of how to organize and run a team.

"Methods of Coaching" deals with game strategy and the rules that regulate team sports. "Theory of Coaching" focuses on sports psychology. The classes are supposed to be taught like any other academic class, with regular lectures and written exams.

But former athletes said most of their coaching classes lacked class work. At Mesa and Scottsdale, the courses have often involved team activities or were little more than semester-long conversations about sports the athletes have spent years playing.

"There really wasn't any curriculum involved," said Tom Johnson, a former MCC pitcher who played with Schmidt and took a baseball coaching class. For baseball players in the "methods" class in 2005, their class was team practice.

Coach Anthony Cirelli never asked players to do any class work, Schmidt and Johnson said. Cirelli told the players they received a grade and credit hours for team participation.

A few nonathletes - slightly older men who want to coach baseball - also enrolled in the class, Johnson said. "They just watched practice and took notes and they could ask questions."

Cirelli was often busy with his players, Johnson said, so the older students would ask players why the team was running through a particular exercise.

Cirelli's syllabus for a coaching class last fall says the students had to take lecture notes, diagram drills and pass a final exam. Johnson and Schmidt said they didn't have to do any of those things, and both received an A.

"I don't think he probably gave anybody lower than an A," Johnson said. "I really don't know, even if they quit the team, if he would have given them anything below an A."

Cirelli, who still coaches baseball at MCC, did not respond to repeated calls for comment.

The MCC baseball team's Web site quotes Cirelli touting his program's ability to develop good high school players into professional athletes. "We also stress academics," Cirelli says on the Web site, "and our team (grade point average) has never been below 2.9."

### **'NON-QUALIFIERS'**

Community colleges are a stopover for most student athletes, not a destination.

Players typically lack either the ability to compete at a four-year school right out of high school, or their grades and test scores are so bad that the NCAA does not allow universities to put them on a team.

Colleges call the latter "non-qualifiers."

To become NCAA eligible, these students must receive an associate's degree from a junior college and complete 48 credit hours toward their bachelor's degrees.

Athletes at the Maricopa colleges regularly end up at universities, recruited to play for major sports programs across the country. Football players at the Scottsdale college, for instance, have been at the center of fierce recruiting battles involving the University of Southern California, a perennial powerhouse.

Junior colleges are supposed to teach athletes how to succeed at a university by introducing them to college-level work. Athletes must take 12 credit hours a semester and maintain a C average.

Colleges sometimes give athletes credit for being on a team, but those classes typically are just one credit hour and have little impact on players' eligibility.

MCCCD's coaching classes, however, count for three credit hours, the same as other classes such as English, math or psychology. If a player takes a coaching theory class in the fall semester and then a coaching methods class in the spring, that's one quarter of his annual GPA - and the grades are given by his coach.

### **NO SEPARATION**

At four-year schools, athletics and academics don't mix. Athletic directors run the sports teams, managing everything from a team's performance to its uniforms. Academic directors run the academic programs, making sure athletes take appropriate classes and that the classes meet strict standards for integrity and curriculum.

But there is no line separating sports and academics at the Scottsdale and Mesa colleges.

Athletic directors have run the physical education departments, sometimes called exercise science, that in turn provide coaching classes. Coaches are hired to teach those classes to their own teams.

College officials insist that athletic directors are not creating classes simply to keep their players eligible.

"Let me make it very clear. Exercise science is an academic program," said Ann Stine, chairwoman of MCC's exercise science department. "Athletics is student services. They're separate. Not the same."

But a review of several college programs shows that isn't always the case.

Until 2003, Allen Benedict spent nine years as both MCC athletic director and chairman of the exercise science department.

Benedict could not be reached for comment.

He retired from the college in December. Larry Christiansen, former president of the Mesa college, said he forced Benedict out of the athletic director's post after an internal auditor found Benedict had grossly mismanaged the athletic department.

At SCC, Art Becker has long worked as both athletic director for men's sports and chairman of the physical education department. A prolific scorer and rebounder for the Arizona State University basketball team in the early 1960s, the 6-foot-6-inch forward was also one of ASU's first academic All-Americans. He is now responsible for the P.E. department's afternoon and evening classes.

As athletic director, Becker needs to run successful sports programs. As an academic chairman, he must organize class schedules and safeguard academic integrity.

Becker says he keeps the jobs separate by doing one during one part of the day, the other at another time. He says, for instance, he never works on class schedules when he's going over team budgets.

"The dual roles occur," Becker said. "If there was an issue, and the people who I report to indicated an issue, then that would have been addressed at that point of time."

The Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics, which works with the NCAA and other groups to toughen rules for college sports, has not addressed what role athletic directors should play in academics.

But Nathan Tublitz, the coalition's chairman and a neuroscience professor at the University of Oregon, said he'd never seen an athletic director decide what happened in a classroom.

Told of the structure at MCC and SCC, he said: "Wow. I'm shocked. The best way I think I can say this is, there could be a potential conflict of interest."

"How's that for being generously subtle?"

Becker sees no conflict.

"Conflict of interest has to have result; there has to be a result there," Becker said.

This spring, the Scottsdale college had two baseball coaching classes scheduled at the same time and, in many cases, at the same location as the baseball team's games. Most players were also enrolled in the coaching class.

Becker schedules both the coaching classes and the game times.

He's also expected to make sure coaches are teaching coaching skills during class, and not just coaching the game.

Marcus Clapp, SCC's pitching coach, and Ben Taylor, the hitting coach, each taught one of the methods of coaching baseball courses. The college arranged for those classes to meet at 3 p.m. Monday through Thursday.

Twenty-one of the team's regular season games took place when the coaches were supposed to be teaching class.

Taylor and Clapp said they made up all class time missed due to games. But they couldn't say when or where the make-up classes were held, even though those make-up classes would have been just the week before.

Taylor said the meeting time and location for his class changed every week.

There was no prearranged way to inform students of those changes. "We talk to them, we call them, we e-mail them, we see them on campus, we meet with them," Taylor said.

The coaches' syllabuses include only the vaguest details about what students can expect to learn.

Outlines for most college classes include a schedule of when the instructor will teach particular subjects and what assignments the students must complete.

The SCC baseball classes' syllabuses provide nothing of the sort.

They fail to mention that class times would change every week, yet set out this grading policy: "Your grade will be determined by your attendance and participation."

Clapp and Taylor said they give their players homework packets to complete for each class. One packet, which the coaches provided the Tribune, asked students to explain the purpose of basic baseball plays, including base stealing. Another assignment asks the players to "detail a performance of yours on the field that you would consider outstanding and/or exceptional."

Daniel Strawn, who pitched for SCC and in 2003 took baseball coaching classes, said there was nothing academic about the classes. "It was really one of those classes, I felt, to keep people eligible," Strawn said.

Methods of Coaching was a team meeting or weight training, he said. Theory of Coaching did meet in a classroom, but "was not a difficult class."

Strawn, who transferred to Colorado State, said he received A's in both.

Brandon Pullen, a pitcher for the Scottsdale college in 2005, took one of the coaching classes. Pullen said he liked the class, but added it was more about how to play than how to coach. He said he learned a lot about team drills and scouting.

"We talked about the swing or the pitching delivery or things like that," Pullen said. For a class project, Pullen presented a pitching drill to improve delivery. His teammates were also his classmates, he said.

Pullen transferred to San Diego State University and pitches for the baseball team.

### **OVERWHELMING SHORTCOMINGS**

In three decades at Scottsdale's college, Ken Giovando has been a football coach as well as a professor who taught numerous classes in health and physical education.

Many of his players were also his students and he found their academic shortcomings overwhelming.

"They come out of high school with no reading skills and no writing skills and we try to fix it," he said.

Giovando, who was fired as head football coach two years ago, views himself as a college professor first, a football coach second.

He says he encouraged his players to sit in the front row for every class and to use their physical gifts to gain a well-rounded education.

But Giovando also enrolled football players in coaching classes. Class schedules from as recent as last school year show that Giovando's methods class was open only to members of the football team.

The longtime coach said it was necessary to exclude other students because he wanted to teach his players more complex game strategies and formations, like the wishbone or wing-T. He also ran his players through full-contact drills, wearing pads.

"I didn't call it practice. They were coming there for a grade," Giovando said.

He balked when asked about the academic value of teaching his players these subjects. "Now you're questioning my academic freedom," Giovando said.

Other coaches also excluded students who weren't on their teams. Schedules from 2002 and 2003 show that Darcel Coco, now women's athletic director at the Scottsdale college, required that any student enrolling in the class had to be on the tennis team.

Four-year universities must count classes that exclude nonathletes as a team activity, not a class, said Stacey Osburn, an NCAA spokeswoman. The NJCAA also considers classes restricted to members of a team to be practice.

Athletes are permitted to enroll in classes taught by their coaches under NJCAA rules, as long as the course is open to all students and the class times are made public.

MCCCD's coaching class times are published online, but frequently change after the semester begins.

Both the NCAA and the junior college association regulate how much teams can practice and how many games they can play.

Coaching classes are supposed to be completely separate from the teams, said Goff, head of SCC's physical education department. She was elected as chairwoman of the department in 2003 and said she built a wall between team work and class work.

"There are a lot of things that have been changed over the last four years and that's one of them," Goff said.

However, even when the classes are open to all students, coaches will sometimes require students to get an instructor's signature before they can sign up.

Regina Mannix, SCC's volleyball coach, said she requires a signature to ensure nonathletes understand the class involves a lot of physical activity and a strong grasp of the sport.

The signature requirement has not prevented nonathletes from joining the classes, she said, but protects students from wasting their time in a class they aren't prepared for.

"I explain to them, 'This is the situation you're going to be in. Are you still comfortable?'" Mannix said.

During team practice, Mannix said she would simply instruct her players how to respond to particular game scenarios. In class, she also explains to them why they should respond that way.

In April, a Tribune reporter visited Mannix's coaching class and, at the scheduled start time, found a half-dozen young female students in practice clothes and kneepads. Each of the students said they were on the college volleyball team.

## **PHANTOM CLASSES**

More than a dozen times in the past two months, the Tribune showed up for coaching classes at Scottsdale, Mesa, South Mountain and Glendale colleges.

Only once were students and an instructor present at the scheduled times and places. That was the SCC volleyball class.

Typically, the classrooms were empty, the lights off.

At South Mountain, the room for a scheduled basketball coaching class was locked one Friday afternoon. An employee in the college's training room said the coaches are never on campus at that time.

Stine, MCC's exercise science chairwoman, said she couldn't account for why Mesa baseball players such as Paul Schmidt and Tom Johnson received coaching credit for attending team practice. The players the Tribune interviewed took the class in 2005.

Stine hasn't observed the baseball coaching classes since fall 2004. "Unless something comes up, I usually go by student evaluations," she said.

Similarly, neither of the Scottsdale college's physical education chairpersons, Becker and Goff, observed baseball coaching classes this spring to ensure they met.

### **NO REASON TO TAKE THEM**

The only degree program that requires a coaching class is the recreation and hospitality program at the Scottsdale college. To earn that degree, students need two golf coaching classes.

But South Mountain - not Scottsdale - is the only college that offers a golf coaching class. District records show that last year, the only students to take the coaching class were South Mountain athletes.

High school or youth coaches working to earn the state's athletic coaching certification - not a degree program - have to complete Methods of Coaching. Last year, the Arizona Department of Education issued only 11 of the certifications statewide, said Amy Rezzonico, an agency spokeswoman.

Theory of Coaching classes are not required for any degree or certification, but accounted for 46 of the 80 coaching classes held the past two school years.

Phoenix College, the district's oldest campus, hasn't offered a coaching class in about seven years because there has been too little interest, said Scott Geddis, the college's athletic director.

Chandler-Gilbert Community College offers one methods of coaching class a semester, the only one that uses a textbook, and one of the very few not taught by an active coach. Cherri Mankenberg began teaching Chandler-Gilbert's coaching class about two years ago after retiring to Arizona following two decades as a women's basketball coach and assistant athletic director at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Mankenberg said coaches at the Omaha university had to teach courses. But her teaching was not connected to her team.

"When I had to teach, I taught beginning golf," Mankenberg said. "We had to teach in the actual curriculum of the physical education department. We didn't teach our (team)."



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