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Descent into March Madness

ROBERT LIPSYTE

EDITOR'S NOTE: In this piece originally published on [TomDispatch](#), Robert Lipsyte gives a lesson in Hoopla 101, and the way the NCAA taints athletes and the schools for which they play.

1. Opening Shot

"Success is a Choice." -- Rick Pitino of Louisville (seeded #6 in the South region for this year's March Madness), first coach to lead three different teams to the Final Four.

This is the mud season of the sports calendar. While we await blessed baseball and its promise of renewal, here comes the National Collegiate Athletic Association Men's Division I Basketball Championship--the Big Dance for sportswriters, the Bracket Racket for gamblers, a frat-rat party, a racist entertainment, and a subversion of higher education, perhaps democracy as well.

Calling it March Madness slaps lipstick on a pig.

But we'll call it March Madness, too and get down in the mud.

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Robert Lipsyte takes a shot at the corruption, exploitation and hypocrisy of the NCAA championships.

about

ROBERT LIPSYTE

Robert Lipsyte, a former sports and city columnist of the *New York Times*, was a finalist for the 1992 Pulitzer Prize in commentary. He won an Emmy as host of *The Eleventh Hour*, a nightly public affairs show on WNET. He is most recently author of the young adult novel, *Raiders Night*.

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2. Beyond a Foul Line

"What do they know of cricket who only cricket know?" -- C.L.R. James

Fifty years in the biz and I can almost remember the college basketball games I've covered, there were so few of them. High school games seem authentic (although that's changing). Professional games are performance art. But there is something so bogus about the selling of Division I games as the pure passion of an adolescent school spirit that I begin to think of sneaker sweatshops and the boy soldiers of Sierra Leone; and, next thing you know, I'm clicking around for *Law and Order*. It's my problem and I should know better.

After all, I was born and raised in New York City in the time of the ur-scandal--when stars of the 1951 City College team were indicted for "shaving" points, taking money from gangster gamblers to win games by narrower margins than the betting lines. That they could do it so well was a testament to the dominant way they controlled their games. They were that good.

My Dad, who had graduated from City in 1927, felt betrayed. Like many children of immigrants in New York, City College had been his launching pad and, at 100, he was still talking about classes he had taken there.

CONTINUED

The City College scandal was one of the few events that C.L.R. James, the great Trinidadian historian and social analyst, could not grasp. In his classic book on cricket and the world, *Beyond a Boundary*, he wondered how these young men could betray their universities unless "they had no loyalties to anything."

I found that ingenuous, a word he asked me to delete from the introduction to his book I wrote years later. I did, of course. Long after that, I heard something I wish I could have shared with him. One of the former City players, Norm Mager, told me: "You're talking about kids, kids who were busting their humps while the school was making a ton of

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money. And everybody else was doing it. It could get messy out there when the other team was shaving, too. We'd know when we purposely threw away a pass, and we'd get it right back."

I went to Columbia in the 1950s, a school with a determinedly dowdy sports tradition that made us proud. One of my classmates, 5-foot 7-inch Chet Forte, was not only a consensus all-American, but as a senior was voted college player of the year, beating out the 7-foot Wilt Chamberlain of Kansas (#1 East this year). But the best part for us nerdy sons of Lionel Trilling and Jacques Barzun had come a year earlier when Chet the Jet was suspended from the team toward the end of the season for academic shortcomings. It probably cost Columbia the Ivy title. But our school's priorities were clear. Then.

In 2002, when I finally got to my first Final Four, I was amazed by the extravaganza. I had expected the usual painted yobs in the stands and the normal adolescent excess, not a corporate audience at a series of networking parties thrown by major sponsors. The Big Dance was a Super Bowl! Coaches looked for jobs; university presidents trolled for sportswriters who looked for drinks. What's the difference, I wondered, between a university that pours Pepsi and wears Nike and a NASCAR team that pumps Bud Lite and wears Drakkar Noir cologne? I wished I hadn't sworn off the word "hypocrisy" as too easy, too banal.

3. Boy Soldier

"New York's most salable human export traditionally has been its annual crop of... game-busting black forwards and centers who could do everything with a basketball except read its label." -- Robert Lipsyte in SportsWorld: An American Dreamland

The liveliest reading during March Madness are the stories about players who were homeless or clinically depressed or delinquent until hoops saved them; the kid with eighteen siblings because his father is a polygamist, the kid who a dozen years ago was barefoot in Africa, or just got back from a Mormon mission. Among the coaches is a former repo man.

This is not my famous imagination at work; these are current media shards. I'm not being snarky. Covering college basketball is a journalistic problem. Are these teens at play, future pros, hometown heroes, betting chips? Fuzzy features or exposés or straight game detail are okay, but you can't weave the systemic corruption, commercialization, and racism into every story--and yet once you stop the stories aren't true anymore. How many times can you write that 56 percent of varsity basketball players are black compared to 7 percent of the student bodies of the schools they represent? Those numbers are from the last time I wrote it, in the early 1990s. Watching games now, I often see eight black players on the floor being cheered by a sea of white (often painted) faces.

My first exposure to college basketball took place on May 4, 1965, when Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, then known as Ferdinand Lewis Alcindor, Jr., barely eighteen years old and

slightly taller than seven feet, held his first press conference in the gym of his Catholic high school, Power Memorial, in Manhattan. Several hundred journalists were there to hear him announce his choice of college: U.C.L.A. (#2 West).

We didn't know much about Lew. His high-school coach had never allowed him to be interviewed. He was just a black guy expected to dominate in college the way he had in high school. We didn't know he came from Trinidadian landowners, that his father, a transit cop, was a Juilliard graduate who couldn't get work as an orchestra conductor. It was assumed that part of Lew's admission package was a job for his young white coach. It would be years before we learned that Lew despised him; the coach had used the racial slur to motivate him in a game.

As it turned out, he seemed like a sweet, thoughtful young man. I cringed when a colleague asked, "Are there any liabilities in being tall in basketball?"--and kindly, without irony, Lew replied, "None that I can think of." And I was delighted--after a few of us stayed on to talk with him--to learn that he was sports editor of a neighborhood newspaper and was considering a career in journalism. We urged him to take as many courses in television as he could. He thanked us politely and excused himself to go to his Russian history class.

He would more than fulfill his promise: UCLA would win the national championship three times with him at center. The next time I saw Lew was three years later, before his first game on his return to New York. Courteous and cool, he stared back at about fifty of us in a hotel banquet room. Someone asked if he was still planning to be a sportswriter. I thought I saw a flicker of coldness in his eyes when he answered, "I'm majoring in history now. I'm no longer interested in journalism."

Had he started reading us?

4. The Grown-ups

"I want my classroom back." -- Jon Ericson, founder of the Drake Group.

College basketball coaches tend to be big guys with the confident patter of televangelists; just the kind of mouthy jocks who were allowed to dominate the dorks in high school because their personal goals, winning games to advance their careers, complemented the principal's goal, putting the school on the happy map.

Now, as coaches, they dominate their institutions because their goals are the same as their presidents'--raising money and visibility. Because they are without tenure, they can easily be fired when they start losing, which is why they will do anything to win. Because one or two players can turn a losing basketball team into a winner, coaches are tempted to recruit the illiterate, the felonious, and the "one-and-dones" (who will spend only a season at college en route to the pros).

Coach Bob Knight told the Associated Press recently that the new NBA rule prohibiting

high-school players from going directly to the pros is "the worst thing that's happened to college basketball since I've been coaching, because now you can have a kid come to school for a year and play basketball and he doesn't even have to go to class. He certainly doesn't have to go to class the second semester. That, I think, has a tremendous effect on the integrity of college sports."

Coach Knight's issue has never been about rulebook NCAA integrity, which mostly involves recruitment, under-the-table payment, and eligibility violations. The rap on Knight was rudeness. On his way to three national championships at Indiana (#7 West), he cussed, threw chairs, choked players, and caused international incidents. Still, his players actually graduated at far higher rates than the national average for big-time athletes and few of them complained about their treatment. He was fired as an embarrassment after 29 years--but only after that winning touch seemed to desert him. Myles Brand, the president of Indiana University who fired him, after many years as his enabler, is now president of the NCAA.

Bob Knight was never the problem, just a symptom, the kind of Coach Bully who can flourish in college--he's made a comeback at Texas Tech (#10 East)--because players are short-term and fungible. Myles Brand has always been the problem. He was the pragmatic fundraiser in college; now, he's the head of a trade association whose main functions are to generate TV income and keep a lid on corruption so it won't escalate into a ruinous arms race, with schools in sky's-the-limit bidding wars for teenage giant prodigies.

And what does higher education have to do with this?

My Designated Devil, Sonny Vaccaro, told me that in 1977, when he first tempted Jerry Tarkanian of the University of Nevada at Las Vegas (#7 Midwest), Lefty Driesell of Maryland (#4 Midwest), and a half-dozen other celebrity basketball coaches with money from Nike, he hoped that they would tell him to go to hell. Fallen angels are so conflicted. But no such luck.

Among the righteous who became Nike millionaires were John Thompson of Georgetown (#2 East) and Mike Krzyzewski of Duke (#6 West). While college presidents tend to be "ignorant through bliss or arrogance" about athletic matters, Vaccaro said, they do understand that shoe companies subsidize coaches the colleges otherwise couldn't afford. Vaccaro, who worked for Nike, addidas, and Reebok, ran meat-market summer camps in which college coaches paid to look over the best high-school juniors. He befriended such teen phenoms as Tracy McGrady and Kobe Bryant (both of whom skipped college, accelerating the trend of that moment.). It was Sonny who talked Nike into putting the young Michael Jordan into their lead shoe. But even as Sonny pushed sneakers, he managed to talk like an angry reformer.

"Millions are being made and the kids get nothing," he shouted at me ten years ago. "They are turned into gladiators and tossed aside when they get hurt. When something goes

wrong they are stigmatized for life, they suffer every punishment there is under the auspices of corporate America.

"They take a few dollars for some clothes they need, to go home and see a sick mother, to take a girl out, thank you, and they are the bad guys. The NCAA, which makes the rules to protect the schools and coaches from the kids, goes on. And the coaches go on and the schools go on and we put our shoes on someone else's feet."

We'd been talking for three days in his Pacific Palisades condo before I finally said, "Why don't you step away if all of this is so bad? You helped start it; you help perpetuate this. You sound like an arms dealer who says there should be world peace but still sells nuclear warheads."

He never really answered that question although he seemed to enjoy it. I thought he was going to hug me. "Go ask coaches why they don't refuse to take our money. Ask college presidents why they don't stop big-time sports. It didn't hurt the University of Chicago. Nike is the big dark cloud that's going to envelop everything, poison the minds of kids, and ruin the game. Now we're paying high-school coaches so we can tie up their kids, so we can capture the minds and souls of the people."

No matter who you think causes the problems here--fans, players, boosters, coaches, presidents, or shoe salespeople -- the only group that could begin to solve them are the faculty of the schools in question, at once victims and accomplices when it comes to sports. They are intimidated by the jock bullies, easily bought off by them, and protective of their own little campus deals--why risk blowing the whistle on the altered or eased grades of athletes when someone could knock off your summer-in-Prague Kafka scam?

The combination of Jon Ericson, a professor of rhetoric and communication studies as well as former provost of Drake University in Des Moines, and Linda Bensel-Meyers, a professor of rhetoric at the University of Tennessee (#5 South), helped create the Drake Group, one of the most promising reform organizations in college sports.

Bensel-Meyers was run out of Tennessee when she tried to correct a system in which tutors she was supposedly supervising in a remedial program were actually writing papers for athletes. She thought the athletes were being cheated out of an education. She is now at the University of Denver. She sees "the endemic problem" as this: "The values of a commercialized and professionalized playing field, not the values of the university, have become dominant. They become our national values. Might makes right. Scapegoat women. Win at any cost."

Of course she's right, and so are the other Drakes, even the ones who narrow the problem to a specific issue such as hazing, gambling, coaches' salaries, the NCAA's non-profit status, the lack of healthcare and welfare for athletes, the licensing of rights for which the athletes receive nothing directly, and so on.

For Ericson, however, there is only one key to reform and that is "disclosure": revealing athletes' test scores, grades, and courses, and the names of the professors who waived them through the eligibility process. This March, when the rest of the Drakes refused to rally around the disclosure issue as the way to make the faculty responsible and change the "closed society of college sports," Ericson regretfully left the group. Soon afterward, Bruce Svare, a neuroscientist at SUNY-Albany (#13 South) and Director of the National Institute for Sports Reform (NISR), also left, saying, "We need to focus only upon academic integrity and Jon is right when he says that emphasizing disclosure is our most effective method for ensuring that everyone (athletes and non-athletes) is getting the kind of education that they deserve."

I tend to agree with them; let other groups go after racism, commercialism, sexism. The Drakes are brothers and sisters of the jock-sniffing professors who travel with the teams, drink with the coaches, sit and cheer in VIP seats in their free caps and jerseys in return for keeping the boys eligible as long as they are needed.

Disclosure is currently banned by federal law. I'm less interested in athletes who manage to pass, say, the sociology of gym at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas for a year or two than those who were graduated from Duke, Stanford (#11 South), Indiana, and other schools held up as models of the student-athlete ideal. Did they take the same courses as everyday students, attend them, turn in the same papers, and actually write them? How could they--why should they--exhausted from practices, traveling, and absorbing the pressures from the full-time job of entertaining us?

And if they couldn't, why can't we give them a break--honestly--and also pay them?

5. The Bracket Racket

"#2 seeds are 80-4 in the first round; but #2s are only 16-14 in the second round vs. #10 seeds." -- R.J. Bell, About.Com's sports gambling authority.

According to shaky numbers published in all manner of platforms, some \$3 billion--second only to the Super Bowl--will be bet by 30 million Americans, on-line and in Vegas and in office pools, which are illegal but encouraged by all manner of platforms. I have absolutely no moral position on this. I do wonder, though, how TV viewership would fare without gambling.

And I wonder what's going to happen when The Little Dance begins, the inevitable national tournament of high school teams.

6. Last Shot

"College basketball is genuine." -- Duke Coach Mike Krzyzewski to Jeremy Schaap of ESPN

Six years ago, Sonny Vaccaro said to me, "The kids these days know what's going on. They

also know they're the only ones not getting big dough. If the kids had a plan, they could cut themselves in. All you need is one kid who can rouse the posse."

That seemed like an invitation to tell him my longtime Final Four fantasy: Just before the title game, the opposing captains demand \$50,000 per player from the TV producer. No cash, no game.

The devil chortled at my innocence.

"Almost been there," he said. "Some years ago, one of the Final Four teams had T-shirts and statements ready. The team leader was a terrific spokesman -- he's playing pro now--but they were upset in the semifinals. But that's their story to tell, not mine."

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