

THE OPINION PAGES | OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

# Student Athletes Shouldn't Unionize

By PATRICK T. HARKER APRIL 1, 2014

NEWARK, Del. — LAST week's ruling by a regional director of the National Labor Relations Board that players on Northwestern University's football team were school employees, and thus eligible to unionize, has been celebrated by those who believe that it will benefit student athletes everywhere.

It won't. Player unions would be a disaster for universities, for college sports fans and, most important, for student athletes themselves. The prospect of college football players bargaining to exchange scholarships for salaries is still remote, but if it comes about, even the most valuable athletes would be worse off.

Turning student athletes into salaried employees would endanger the existence of varsity sports on many college campuses. Only about 10 percent of Division I college sports programs turn a profit, and most of them, like our \$28 million athletic program at the University of Delaware, lose money. Changing scholarship dollars into salary would almost certainly increase the amount schools have to spend on sports, since earnings are taxed and scholarships are not. In order just to match the value of a scholarship, the university would have to spend more.

We are among the many schools that have already had to trim varsity sports in recent years. Should costs increase, we and many other schools would face pressure to cut back further.

Without question, some big schools have lost their way. On some campuses the pursuit of athletic dominance has eroded the ideal of the

student athlete. Players at these schools have every right to complain, particularly when the demands of competition effectively prevent them from being students. But the answer is not to organize and essentially turn pro. This would only further lessen the priority on learning. If scholarship athletes already find it hard to balance schoolwork with team commitments, under arrangements that obligate educational opportunity, think how much harder it would be if they were being paid to play.

The answer for young athletes who want to be paid to play is not to target universities, which have a different mission, but professional sports leagues like the National Basketball Association and the National Football League, which still bar high school athletes from turning pro. If players are good enough to earn a living at that age, I say, let them. Very few, however, are that good. At the college level, even the highest-ranked teams field relatively few players who will ever play a day of professional sports.

Strong athletic departments do two things well. They afford young athletes the chance to reach their full potential, and they prepare them for life when the cheering stops. For the vast majority of student athletes, that life begins at graduation. For the exceptional ones who make it to the pros, post-sport life begins soon enough. The average length of a pro football career is only about three years.

Valuing education doesn't have to compromise an athlete's potential. Here at the University of Delaware, Elena Delle Donne played women's basketball from 2009 to 2013, earning top collegiate honors and helping the team become one of the best in the nation. She was a top pick in the Women's National Basketball Association draft and was later named rookie of the year. In college, she maintained a 3.6 G.P.A., earning a degree in human services.

My own experience as a student athlete was more typical. I was a good student in high school, and a good football player. My options at graduation were greatly multiplied by my success as an athlete. I accepted financial help to play at the University of Pennsylvania, where I majored in engineering. An injury in my junior year brought my football career to an

end. Then I discovered my passion for research, went on to earn a Ph.D. in engineering and embarked on a path that has taken me places I never imagined when playing on a defensive line.

This is the reality for most college athletes, even in the five major conferences. If the football players at Northwestern think they will do better for themselves by collecting a salary in college, they're wrong.

My advice, even to those talented enough to turn pro straight out of high school, is the same: **Play ball but be smart. Earn a degree.**

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