The Controversy About Athletic Scholarships in Canadian Universities: A Historical Perspective

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Canadian universities have long resisted giving athletic scholarships to their students. The 1967 bylaws of the Ontario-Quebec University Athletic Association (O-QUAA) enunciated its historic policy:

A student shall not be eligible to compete in any association contest who is receiving an athletic scholarship or subsidy from the University or College he represents, or from any other organization under the jurisdiction of his University or College. Athletic scholarships can generally be defined as the method by which money, goods or services are provided the student in return for/or anticipating his services as an athlete.¹

This policy is related to a longstanding, sharp differentiation between amateur and professional, a British public-school tradition of the student-athlete, and a fear that Canadian universities would suffer the same abuses as do competitive intercollegiate athletics in large American universities. It remains part of a desire to maintain Canadian autonomy against American influences on Canadian culture. Twenty-five years ago, Bruce Kidd warned that American influence on Canada through the commercialization of sport, which subordinates sport to economic ends, was part of a colonization of Canadian society.²

Forty years ago the newly-established Canadian Intercollegiate Athletic Union’s bylaws acknowledged only academic scholarships. Prohibition of both external and internal athletic awards was made explicit in 1964 and 1966, respectively.³ From the CIAU’s formation, however, there has been a serious regional division in Canada with the West and, at first, the Atlantic provinces pitted against Ontario, which has adamantly resisted

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The last thirty years have witnessed an erosion of the original stance of "no scholarships of any kind" to an acceptance of government (third party) scholarships and scholarships for continuing students. The last bastion of defense has been the prohibition of institutional scholarships for entering students. This paper will examine the historical roots of the controversy, how compromises have been made, and the arguments of both sides, in order to see where we stand today.

The recent debate about scholarships constitutes a contemporary version of a long-standing concern in Canada about separation of amateur from professional sport. When the CIAUC, the predecessor of the CIAU, was founded in 1906, it allowed only amateurs to compete in university sport. It defined an amateur as follows:

A person who has not competed in any competition for a stake bet, monies, private or public, or gate receipts, or competed with or against a professional for a prize or where gate receipts are charged; who has never taught or assisted in the pursuit of any athletic exercise or sport as a means of livelihood; who has never, directly or indirectly, received any bonus or payment or consideration whatever for any service as an athlete.⁴

A principal purpose of the organization was to preserve amateurism in intercollegiate athletics at a time when hired guns (non-students) were added to bolster teams’ chances in key games. The "base [of strict amateurism] was Toronto where British loyalties were strong, the faculty were British trained, and the population was sufficiently large to ensure a vibrant sporting culture without athletes having to be imported from outside." The Montreal Athletic Association had voted to allow amateurs to play with and against professionals but had to relent.⁵ Although university athletics were student-initiated, they became an integrated but subordinate part of the academic scene, with faculty supervising and coaching teams.⁶ Canadian universities were then elitist institutions, and some historians have criticized defenses of amateurism as class snobbery,⁷ but the principle of amateurism in university athletics was firmly established.

The popularity of sport after the First World War increased attention to intercollegiate athletics. The early winners of the Grey Cup in football and the Stanley Cup in hockey were intercollegiate teams, which received wide press attention and competed with professional teams. This blurring of amateur and professional status led to renewed debates. Both Alberta and Saskatchewan proposed amendments loosening distinctions. R. S. Stronach of Banff argued at the 1927 meeting of the Amateur Association Union of Canada: "Canada is a vast country and what is suitable for conditions in the east might not be suitable for the west."⁸ But in the same year the Carnegie Foundation praised the situation in Canada as "vastly