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# The Amateur Ideal

By **DAVID BROOKS**

The 1910s and 1920s were the golden age of the amateur ideal. On the golf courses, Bobby Jones, the greatest amateur golfer of all time, won a string of major championships.

He served as a moral exemplar as well. In the 1925 [U.S. Open](#), he accidentally nudged his ball while setting up for a shot. He asked the marshals and members of the gallery if they had noticed. None had. Nevertheless, he assigned himself a two-stroke penalty, which cost him the tournament as he lost by one stroke. When complimented for his sense of fairness, Jones replied, "You may as well praise a man for not robbing a bank."

At Princeton, Hobey Baker was the glittering star of college sports, dominating in both football and hockey. He was also famous for his sportsmanship. He had only one penalty called on him his entire college hockey career. After each game, he went to the opposing locker room to thank his opponents for a good match. He was acutely modest when people spoke of his triumphs.

There were two sides to the amateur ideal. On the one hand, it was meant to serve as a restraint on some of the more brutal forces of the day. Social Darwinism was in full flower, with its emphasis on ruthless competition and survival of the fittest. Capitalism was rough and raw. The amateur ideal was a restraining code that emphasized fair play and honor. It held that those blessed with special gifts have a special responsibility to hew to a chivalric code. The idea was to make sport a part of the nation's moral education.

On the other hand, the amateur code was elitist. It was designed to separate the affluent sports from the working-class sports, to create a refined arena that only the well-bred and well-born could enter.

Today's left-leaning historians generally excoriate the amateur ideal for its snobbery and the hypocrisy it engendered. The movie "Chariots of Fire" popularized their critique. In the film, the upholders of the amateur ideal are snobbish, anti-Semitic reactionaries. The heroes are unabashedly commercial and practical. Modern and free-thinking, they pay people so they

can win.

Thus did the left-wing critique welcome the corporate domination of sport.

Over the decades, the word amateur changed its meaning. It used to convey a moral sensibility, but now it conveys an economic one: not getting paid. As many universities have lost confidence in their ability to instill character, the moral mission of the university has withered.

Commercialism and professionalism have filled the void. Taylor Branch's superb cover article in the current issue of *The Atlantic*, "[The Shame of College Sports](#)," shows how financial concerns have come to dominate college athletics. Everybody makes money except the players. College football coaches at public universities make more than \$2 million on average, according to the article, and even assistant coaches sometimes make nearly \$1 million.

Quarterback Cam Newton was investigated for violating the amateur rules. Meanwhile, there were at least 15 corporate logos on the uniform he wore every week. A.J. Green, a wide receiver, was punished for selling his jersey. While he was serving his suspension, the school continued selling replicas of his No. 8 jersey for \$39.95 and up.

Branch shows the brutal ways the [N.C.A.A.](#) and its member schools protect and advance their financial interests. For example, one of the reasons schools fight to keep the student-athlete tag on their players is to keep from having to pay workman's compensation if they get hurt. Kent Waldrep, a running back, was paralyzed while playing for Texas Christian. He sued to get some compensation for his sacrifice for the university. T.C.U. fought him in court and won.

Branch concludes that it is time to give up on the amateur code entirely. Pay the players and get over it. At this late date, he may be right, but there are two concerns.

The first is practical. How exactly would you pay them? Would the stars get millions while the rest get hardly nothing? Would you pay the wrestling team, or any of the female athletes? Only 7 percent of Division I athletic programs make money, according to the [N.C.A.A.](#); where would the salary dollars come from?

The other is moral and cultural. A competitive society requires a set of social institutions that restrain naked self-interest and shortsighted greed. The amateur ideal, though faded and worn, still imposes some restraints. It forces athletes, seduced by Michael Jordan

fantasies, to at least think of themselves partially as students. It forces coaches, an obsessively competitive group, to pay homage to academic pursuits. College basketball is more thrilling than pro basketball because the game is still animated by amateur passions, not coldly calculating professional interests.

The commercial spirit is strong these days. But people seem to do best when they have to wrestle between commercial interests and value systems that counteract them. The lingering vestiges of the amateur ideal are worth preserving.