

College sport

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Can We Get Rid of Sports on Campus Now?

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By Laurie Essig

A colleague sent me the Penn State scandal with the tagline, “can we get rid of sports on campus now?” The answer, of course, is no. We cannot. And not for the reasons usually espoused: Sports are good for us, sports produce productive people who will be successful in the world, playing sports makes better students, and sports will make a man out of you. These are, of course, ideological claims with very little evidence to back them up. But sports came into higher education as ideology in the first place and they ain’t leaving until the ideology is no longer useful.

Sports is an ideology in the sense that the ideas of the ruling class are everywhere the ruling ideas. And the ruling class of athletes that dominate college campuses, a group of men I like to refer to as the Brogeoisie, still represent the interests of other ruling classes, like the bourgeoisie, normative and heteronormative masculinity, and the “competitive spirit” that is so necessary for the market. As long as our politics and economy are so thoroughly dominated by this jock mentality, then there will be no room for getting rid of sports.

Of course the Penn State scandal represents a break in this dominant ideology. Storied Penn State coach Joe Paterno insisted that athletics and academic integrity could coexist, but now he’s being brought down by a sex abuse scandal that makes the Catholic Church look innocent in comparison. So far eight victims have been identified. The reason this particular scandal can rock the image of the student-athlete more thoroughly than scandals about athletes never going to class and passing anyway is because it fundamentally undermines the claims of Muscular Christianity that introduced sports to higher ed in the first place.

The Muscular Christianity movement, so beautifully embodied by Teddy Roosevelt and the YMCA, was central to the rise of the bourgeoisie. Middle-class men were able to distinguish themselves from both upper class and working class men through bodily discipline. This bodily discipline involved sexual discipline—no Oscar Wilde upper-class homos, but also no prostitutes, affairs, or sex outside of marriage. It also involved a disciplining of other appetites—no excess weight or excess drink allowed. And of course it involved the discipline of sports that were being introduced to institutions of higher education in the late 19th century as a way of making men who would one day work in the market first prove their “team spirit” and “bodily control” on the field.

And so football was born. As was the more general sense that sports were good for the academic project. Even today, after 150 years of feminist agitation, we have not gotten rid of sports but expanded them to include women students. On the Web site of my own college, we are told

Athletics are an essential part of the overall educational experience at Middlebury College.

Essential means “absolute necessary, indispensable.” That is a very strong claim, an ideological claim, that pervades higher education in the U.S. But even a long-dominant ideology like muscular Christianity, like middle-class bodies are highly disciplined bodies that deserve to lead the economy and polity, can experience a crisis that brings it down. Just look at what’s happened to the Catholic Church. In traditionally Catholic Ireland, the Vatican mission was closed this past week and the pews contain fewer and fewer believers and almost none who are not elderly. Or consider once uber Catholic Poland that saw the election of many members of a decidedly secular party that is now demanding the crucifix be removed from Parliament (and supporting the rights of trans and gay populations as well). If Poland and Ireland can force an end to the dominance of the Catholic Church—no doubt a partial response to the ideological holes that the sex abuse scandals opened up—can we get rid of sports on campus now? Maybe. If the Penn State scandal makes us question the sort of masculinity produced by sporting cultures and whether that masculinity is “essential” to the academic mission or in fact an historical artifact, like a crucifix in a parliament or an embassy to the Vatican.

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