

Poor sports

by [Mark Toulouse](#) in the [October 18, 2003](#) issue

Reclaiming the Game: College Sports and Educational Values. By William G. Bowen and Sarah A. Levin. Princeton University Press, 490 pp., \$27.95.

I love the discipline, the focus, the grace associated with nearly all sports. I'm probably one of the few professors in a theological school or religion department who can list "sports photographer" on his résumé. My wife and I have had season tickets for every sport played at Texas Christian University during the past 18 years. I must also admit that I have benefited financially from college athletics. My daughter is on a Division I athletic scholarship, playing soccer. And, yes, we try to make all her games, even when she's on the road.

This love of sports made my heart heavy as I watched recent developments at Baylor University. As the investigation into the murder of a basketball player, allegedly by one of his teammates, unfolded, NCAA violations surfaced. Though coach Dave Bliss denied allegations, a university committee discovered that he had personally arranged for the tuition payments of two players. Bliss and the athletic director resigned. A week later tapes surfaced proving Bliss had attempted to cover up his abuses by shifting blame to the deceased player. Using players and coaches, he tried to create the impression that the player had covered his own tuition by dealing drugs. The racial implications of the white basketball coach trying to blame the dead black youth by portraying him as a high-rolling drug dealer has not been lost on local media.

The Baylor case reveals just how ugly abuses in Division I athletics can be. The scandal at this conservative Baptist university has caused people to wonder how bad the abuses at other schools might be. While violations in college athletics have increasingly come to light, most people assume we've only seen the tip of the iceberg.

A recent study makes clear that problems associated with college athletics are not limited to big-time programs. Intercollegiate athletics have had an adverse effect on educational values even where no athletic scholarships are in play. William G.

Bowen, former president of Princeton University (1972-1988), and Sarah A. Levin, president (since 1988) of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and an All-American athlete while a Harvard undergraduate, enjoy sports and believe college athletics should be able to enhance the educational experience of all students.

Their book, to which Martin A. Kurzweil contributed, argues that the traditional values associated with college sports, even at the best schools in the country, are "threatened by the emergence of a growing 'divide'" between athletics and the academic missions of these schools.

Reclaiming the Game analyzes athletics at the eight Ivy League universities, the 11 schools associated with the New England Small College Athletic Conference (NESCAC), four of the universities connected to the University Athletic Association (UAA-schools like the University of Chicago and Emory University), three women's colleges (Bryn Mawr, Smith and Wellesley) and seven coed liberal arts schools (such as Oberlin and Swarthmore). On average, some 43 percent of men and 32 percent of women participate in athletics at the NESCAC colleges. At the Ivies, 20 to 30 percent of first-year students are athletes. These figures compare with under 5 percent at big schools like the University of Michigan. In other words, the athletic culture can affect the campus ethos at these smaller, "academically rigorous liberal arts colleges" more powerfully than it does at the bigger schools, especially where educational values are concerned.

This book is data-driven. Each of the 33 schools provided detailed records for the cohort of students entering college in the fall of 1995. The book tracks 27,811 students throughout their college careers and distinguishes between recruited athletes, walk-ons and students at large. Bowen and Levin analyzed demographic and pre-collegiate information (gender, race and SAT scores), followed activities in all intercollegiate athletics (both "high profile" and "lower profile" sports) and tracked college grades, fields of studies, graduation status and graduation dates.

The good news is that graduation rates for athletes at these schools are high (generally over 90 percent in the Ivies and over 80 percent in NESCAC schools). In contrast, Division I schools graduated only 43 percent of men's basketball players in this cohort. But that comparison hardly seems fair, since men's basketball programs have so few entering students in any given year. Bowen and Levin would have been on safer ground if they had compared their figures to a section of the NCAA report they do not mention: Division I schools graduated 60 percent of the athletes who

entered school in '95 across all sports, the highest percentage since the NCAA started tracking rates in 1984. This is 2 percent higher than the percentage of graduates among all students in Division I schools.

There is plenty of bad news for the schools in this study. Bowen and Levin show that SAT scores for "recruited" high profile athletes (football, basketball and hockey) are between 119 and 165 points below the average of students at large. In addition to the SAT gap, a recruited athlete, particularly at the Ivies, is four times more likely to be admitted than a nonathlete with similar credentials. This "affirmative action for athletes" causes many otherwise talented applicants to receive rejection notices. Contrary to the conclusions one might draw from the spate of recent court cases challenging affirmative action, athletic affirmative action is much more a factor in the admissions process than race-based admissions has ever been.

The study verifies that there is significant "underperformance" on the part of these recruited athletes--and the divide is widening. Their grades are below the expectations based upon their pre-college achievements (81 percent of recruited athletes at NESCAC schools and 64 percent at the Ivies were in the bottom third of their classes). Recruits also perform much more poorly in the classroom than do their walk-on fellow athletes. These comparisons and others indicate that the time commitments associated with athletics are not the main cause of underperformance.

The only exceptions to these negative trends are found in the four UAA schools. These schools receive a fairly clean bill of health in this study (there is some modest stress in football). The authors attribute the difference to less formalized recruitment processes, the absence of strong sports rivalries, strong presidential control over athletics and careful monitoring of academic performance. UAA guidelines also mandate that "student athletes shall be measured against the same standards as other students in admissions, financial aid and academic programs," and the schools, for the most part, abide by this principle. While the Ivies work with a similar statement, its controlling influence has diminished.

The book offers recommendations for reform, largely patterned on the strengths of the UAA. In addition, it urges schools to reduce the number of their recruited athletes and to raise standards for those who are recruited. Bowen and Levin want schools to encourage walk-ons and reduce the time commitments required of athletes. Finally, they stress the need for a new national organizational structure for intercollegiate athletics, preferably in the form of a new division within the NCAA,

which would establish clear principles in line with these reforms. Would it work? It might help. But the book leaves me thinking that principles alone can only go so far. After all, the strong principles of the Ivies have slipped during the past 15 years, resulting in a rather negative athletic culture.

The UAA's success with athletics highlights the importance of strong presidential leadership. In each UAA school, the president controls the athletic shop. The recent unilateral action taken by Vanderbilt University might represent the quickest route to reform. In September, Chancellor E. Gordon Gee, acting in response to the revelations at Baylor and other schools, completely dissolved the athletic department and placed athletics under the direct control of the Division of Student Life and University Affairs. Presidents of the Ivies and other non-UAA schools included in this study, all of whom commissioned and supported this work in the hope that changes can be made, would do well to pay as much attention to developments at Vanderbilt as to the recommendations in this book.