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Playing the Game: Inside Athletic Recruiting in the Ivy League

Chris Lincoln
Nomad Press (May 2004)
Unknown $16.95 (272pp)
978-0-9722026-6-4

For purveyors of college sports, athletic recruitment is like the weather: many complain, but few do anything about it. Scandals abound concerning young people (many of whom, based on their academic achievement, have no place in the halls of higher learning at all) who are wined and dined and in other ways seduced in an effort to persuade them to plight their troth to a particular school. Like a pebble tossed into a pond, the ripples of a single football linebacker can have an impact on a college's program for years to come. A good team equals increased revenue and prestige, so administrators are often willing to overlook some of these questionable tactics.

Ivy League schools face additional pressures, according to the author, a sportswriter who played varsity soccer and hockey for Middlebury College some thirty years ago. His book exposes the difficulties of serving disparate masters as the schools try to maintain the integrity of providing unstinting academic excellence while attempting to offer a competitive sports program.

The system conspires to work against the coaches, Lincoln notes. Unlike their counterparts, Ivy League schools do not demand a "letter of intent" with which a student makes a commitment to a particular college or university. These athletes have the coaches over a barrel as they seek the best "benefits package." The frustration of sports administrators is palpable as the author discusses the myriad problems they face. One coach expressed the skepticism of his brethren: "The part … that dismays me [is that] a lot of people would give their right arm to go to a place like this … and I just really feel for the coaches who have to go out and beg an eighteen-year-old in any way to consider coming."

The crux of this book revolves around the concept of the "academic index," a complex formula that includes SAT scores, GPA, class ranking, and other statistical considerations. Lincoln explains how this calculator is not always an accurate indication of a student's potential. A few points can mean the difference between acceptance and rejection, not to mention changing a teenager's life based on completion of a degree. Nor does it take into account the student's personality and make-up. These are teenagers, after all.

The "student athlete" has often been considered an oxymoron. Lincoln describes the near-shame of one of his contemporaries who confessed that he kept his role on the lacrosse team a secret, fearful that his credentials as a serious student would suffer.

Playing the Game proves the hold sports have in modern America. Academics and athletics have almost switched places: the class work has become the extra-curricular activity in the country's top schools. This situation is worth the attention paid by this revealing book.

RON KAPLAN (September / October 2004)

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