

College hoops must look within before assigning blame elsewhere



Marc Isenberg

Warning: This column is about the dirty business of basketball. Definitely X-rated.

Speaking of which, former UCLA assistant coach Jack Hirsch's family reportedly made a fortune in pornography. Comparing porn to college basketball, Hirsch told *Sports Illustrated* in 1984, "(The porno business) is infinitely cleaner than recruiting." Infinitely? And that was back when top college hoops coaches only were paid a few hundred thousand dollars.

For those who follow my Money Players blog (www.moneyplayersblog.com), you know I devote a lot of words to the seamier side of basketball. The latest, not-so-greatest basketball situation involves Josh Nochimson and UConn, a story first reported by Yahoo! Sports writers Dan Wetzel and Adrian Wojnarowski. Quick recap: Nochimson reportedly embezzled \$1 million from former UConn and current Detroit Pistons star Rip Hamilton. In 2008, Nochimson voluntarily decertified himself as an NBPA agent rather than face a formal inquiry. Because Nochimson is a former UConn student basketball manager, he is considered a "representative of UConn's athletic interests" and, therefore, expressly prohibited by NCAA rules from recruiting players on behalf of UConn. Despite the fact that the allegation surfaced in 2008, UConn coaches, including Hall of Famer Jim Calhoun, continued to deal with Nochimson in their recruitment of Nate Miles.

Hamilton has taken legal action to recover his finan-

cial losses. Good luck. On the other hand, if any money Nochimson stole was diverted for the purpose of recruiting players to UConn, as is alleged, there is a good chance that UConn, or even Calhoun, could be on the hook to pay back the money that was stolen from Hamilton.

While sleazy, unscrupulous agents are nothing new, the involvement of a high-profile college program adds a new wrinkle. Last season, the NCAA and NBA created the Youth Basketball Initiative aimed at improving the culture of summer basketball, which many consider Ground Zero for all things wrong with elite basketball. The implication is that the NCAA can further spread its influence and improve youth basketball. But we should proceed with caution. As Ian O'Connor, writing in the *Bergen Record*, keenly observed of the UConn scandal: "So the dynamic of your garden-variety Division I scandal has been flipped upside down. The old passion play of agent corrupting athlete, with poor ol' coach in the role of naive victim, no longer carries the day in the theater of major college sports. Now the average coach isn't so gullible or innocent. He's become a business partner of the agent, an enabler chasing his own pot of gold."

The business of college basketball is about one thing—signing top players, which in turn helps programs win, fill seats and sell product. John Calipari will be paid \$32 million by Kentucky to *recruit* those thoroughbreds. Calhoun might not feel any obligation to pay a "dime back" of his multimillion annual salary.

Harry Edwards, sociology professor emeritus at California, speaking at an NCAA-sponsored panel at the Final Four, said, "No one pays a dime to watch Calhoun coach on the sidelines. But they pay billions to watch these young men, predominantly black, play basketball." No argument here.

Let's look at how the market for amateur players *actually* works, not how the NCAA would like it to work.

The NCAA and its members want its athletes to be amateurs, free from the supposed taint of professional sports. Wonderful concept. But by the time the best players reach college, they've already been bought and sold two, three, maybe four times.

And often to the highest bidder. Private or prep schools, AAU programs, shoe companies, college programs and agents all spend heavily to lure these players. The athletes don't receive the cold-hard cash—at least they are not supposed to—but they do receive soft benefits, such as shoes, apparel, travel, tuition (which can be enormously valuable, of course) and training. They also allegedly receive things they are not supposed to.

In other words, the very best players often (but not always) end up signing with the schools and agencies that spend the most money, through above-board recruit-

ing budgets and costly pipelines, which might or might not be within the bounds of NCAA rules.

As much as we would like to think the sanctity of amateur athletics is the be-all, end-all, the market for top players is driven by economics, not by rules. We can create prohibitions, but the marketplace steps in to fill whatever void that is artificially created. This happened in the 1920s with prohibition. It still happens with drugs and other undesirable activities. It also takes place with big-time college basketball.

Bless the NCAA and its members for wanting to keep amateurs pure and free from corrupting forces, but amateur regulations effectively have created a booming underground economy. As a respected sports writer told me, "Everybody knows everybody cheats. But there is great honor among thieves."

Consider economic reality. Amateur athletes have an artificial market value of zero, but they have real, tangible value to many others, including AAU programs, shoe companies, so-called runners, agents and especially college programs.

Then consider the actual chance of a college program getting caught violating NCAA rules, which I think is quite low.

Whether we would like to admit it or not, schools have a great economic self-interest to push the bounds, if not violate NCAA rules. This explains why cheating is rampant.

The problem of funneling players among summer programs, college basketball and then back to the agents is nothing new.

It is heightened with the NBA age restriction and the embracing of one-(or even two)-and-done. This is what happens when the NCAA and its members attempt to maintain the façade of amateurism, while everything about basketball at all levels has been commercialized ... whether we want to admit it or not.

As financial incentives increase among all the participants (players, coaches, agents) coupled with a more intertwined market among high school, college and pro basketball, the NCAA and its members must do more than attempt to reform this corrupt system from the outside. They can shift blame to the summer coaches, runners and agents, but ultimately we got to this sad point because coaches and boosters tango, too.

Certainly the NCAA-NBA partnership can do much to improve the situation, but it might want to look to Pogo, the old comic strip, for inspiration: "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

Lastly, it is worth nothing that since 1984, the porn industry has gone from the shadows of society to the mainstream.

Ah, progress.

Wouldn't it be nice if we could say the same about college basketball?

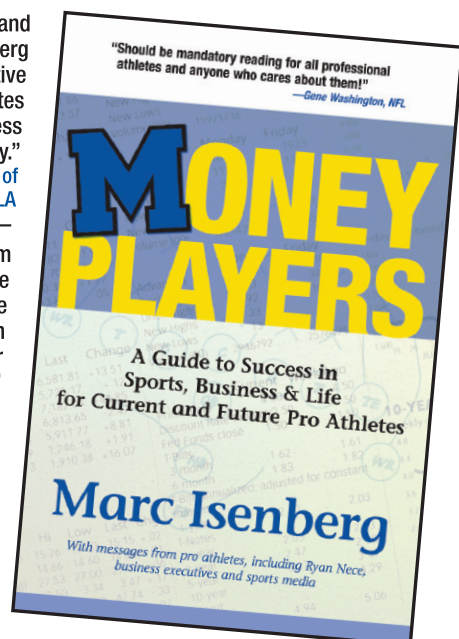
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