

Time is now for greater emphasis on higher education



ARNIE FIELKOW



OTIS BIRDSONG

There's no denying that the world of college athletics is changing dramatically. Champions are being determined differently. Television contracts are exploding. Rules are changing. People are asking questions, leaders are seeking answers, and there are opportunities for positive reform on the table like never before.

Recent headlines involving college athletics have been dominated by groundbreaking, game-changing off-field issues. The five major Division I conferences are seeking autonomy in several areas. Former UCLA basketball star Ed O'Bannon is deep into a lawsuit involving player licensing which, if successful, could alter the entire intercollegiate athletics landscape. And at one of our alma maters, Northwestern, football players are moving to form a labor union and become recognized as working employees.

While the issues of licensing and unionization are highly significant, the one common thread running through all these reform efforts is the demand that student athletes — both current and former — receive the best opportunity possible for a quality education and ultimately a degree. Toward this goal, the establishment of an educational trust fund to pursue degree attainment exists in every reform effort, and we at the National Basketball Retired Players Association wholeheartedly support these efforts. Indeed, the time is now.

In our positions with the NBRPA, the official alumni association for professional basketball, we interact with more than 650 former student athletes who no longer hear the roar of the crowd in their day-to-day lives. Our members, former NBA, ABA, Harlem Globetrotters and WNBA players, have entered that next phase of life, and many are doing so without being armed with the greatest key to success in the so-called real world: a college education and de-



The NCAA has an opportunity to implement the education trust fund to assist former athletes.

gree.

It is true our members went to college, but for whatever reason, be it opportunity at the next level, economic and family need, or perhaps irresponsibility at a young age, many of our members left their institutions of higher learning without graduating. During their time in college, even if short, these men and women played basketball at the best universities in the country and helped raise millions of dollars for their respective institutions through ticket and merchandise sales, sponsorships, and other revenue streams. Given what they contributed to their respective universities, haven't these men and women, even aside from the monetary return they provided, earned some equity from their institutions through the blood, sweat and tears they left on the court? Don't all universities have an obligation, even if only an ethical one, to fulfill their educational mission of helping its admitted students attain a degree? Education is the right currency to honor that obligation. The time is now.

We applaud the recent efforts of the five major Division I conferences, within their autonomy plan, to create an education trust fund for former student athletes who wish to return to school and attain their degree. Clearly, taking a portion of the revenue raised in college athletics and putting it toward educa-

tion of the very athletes (now former athletes) who helped raise those monies is the right thing to do. Taking it a step further, the NBRPA would encourage the NCAA, as part of its reform votes this spring and summer, to implement this education trust across the board in college athletics — from Division I to Division III. It is the right thing to do, and now is the time.

The transition from being a professional athlete to developing a successful career away from the playing court is a difficult one, and the lack of education and degree significantly contributes to this already formidable challenge. The lack of an undergraduate degree in today's world is a tremendous impediment for an individual trying to realize his or her professional goals and aspirations, and it's even more true in the world of professional basketball, where, based on our best estimates, less than 25 percent of former players have earned undergraduate degrees by the time their professional careers end. This is true for NBRPA members who played at the game's highest levels, and of even greater concern for players who toiled in developmental leagues without the opportunity to build a financial safety net from basketball.

Interestingly, basketball players are not alone in this area, as a Fox Sports 2012 survey found that only 4.3 percent of Major League Baseball players had

graduated from a four-year institution.

Big-time college athletics have always been about balance between education and revenue generation; this is a well-deserved point of pride for university leaders. Today, with change and reform in the air, it's time for those leaders in both college sports and pro sports to come together for the greater good of student athletes, both current and former. Attaining a college degree is a key to success in life after sports, and the resources surely exist at the intercollegiate and professional levels to make sure former athletes have the opportunity to finish their education on campus or online. In return for tuition, former athletes returning to complete their coursework can provide community or marketing services to the athletic departments they helped build — a win-win for all.

As the dollars get bigger and the scope of college athletics grows, change is inevitable. But as the world of intercollegiate sports evolves, it's important to remember the underlying educational values that have served universities for decades, and even more important is to take care of the men and women that helped fuel the growth of college sports. Today, we find ourselves looking at a once-in-a-generation reform opportunity, with education being the key to solving the puzzle. The time is now. ■

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IT'S YOUR TURN TO SPEAK OUT

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