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Myth of exploited, impoverished athletes

By Pat Forde | ESPN.com

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For everyone shouting about the desperate need to pay the poor, exploited, impoverished, trod-up college athletes, I present Allan Guei.

He is going to be a freshman at Cal State-Northridge, and you might have heard of him. Recently, Guei relinquished \$40,000 in prize money he won in a free throw shooting contest at Compton (Calif.) High School, where he graduated.



Cal State Northridge coach Bobby Braswell's recruit Allan Guei knows the value of a scholarship.

Why? Because he had earned a full scholarship to play basketball at Northridge.

"I feel like I was well taken care of to go to school and play the game I love for free," Guei said. "The position I was in was different from a lot of good kids who needed it more than I did."

Imagine that -- an athlete who doesn't think he's being treated like a sweatshop employee. A scholarship athlete who actually feels fortunate to have a scholarship.

It's true that Northridge basketball is not exactly Kentucky or North Carolina when it comes to producing revenue and exposure for the school. But it's also true that those bluebloods are in the extreme minority. Most revenue-producing football and basketball programs are largely populated with guys like Guei -- guys who are unlikely to make a long-term living playing professional sports and understand the value of a cost-free education.

Pay For Service

There are three Division I schools that pay the players. They are the service academies -- Army, Navy and Air Force.

Air Force football coach Troy Calhoun estimated that, after expenses like paying for their uniforms, freshman cadets make about \$200 a month. That grows to about \$450 as sophomores, \$600 as juniors and \$750 as seniors.



Calhoun

Calhoun likes the stipend for his players, especially since so many come from out of state and it helps defray their travel costs going home. He'd like to see the NCAA come up with a little more money for athletes, but mostly he'd tie it to a lump sum given to them when -- and only when -- they graduate.

Of course, there is a catch at Air Force, Annapolis and West Point. They also pay the regular students the same amount. - Pat Forde

Guei's remarkable gesture runs counter to the mythology that has taken hold with increasing fervor in the past 20 years. The basic gist is that college athletes are the most mistreated individuals on campus, worked like dogs and barely scraping by while the adults who coach them get rich.

I date the increased popularity of this narrative to the early 1990s, when Fab Fiver Chris Webber whined to author Mitch Albom about not having enough money for a cheeseburger while the school was selling his jersey for a handsome profit.

The part Webber left out was that he was on the take at that time for thousands of dollars from booster Ed Martin. Oops.

Despite the audacity of that lie, the idea took root: Overworked athletes can barely afford to survive. "Can't afford a cheeseburger" or "Can't afford to go to the movies" became accepted truths instead of wild exaggerations. "Can't afford Dr. Dre headphones" or "Can't afford the latest 4G iPhone" might be a more realistic lament -- although I see plenty of college athletes who can indeed afford those.

For those who feel compelled to monetize everything in college athletics, don't forget to factor in the cost of four years of schooling. At a lot of places, that will run about \$200,000. Most students emerge from college saddled with debt that will take years to pay off, but scholarship athletes are exempt from that burden.

What never is factored in anymore is what an athlete can do with four years of free schooling once he is finished -- the knowledge and background to earn a living for a lifetime. If they don't take advantage of that incredible opportunity to earn a degree -- made all the more attainable by the extensive academic support systems created to serve them at most schools -- shame on them.

Even that reckoning still ignores the nonmonetized benefits of college -- maturation, socialization, enculturation, life lessons, friendships made, spouses met, and an allegiance to a place that can last a lifetime.

And don't forget this: Most college sports fans identify more with the school than the players. They root for the place they attended, or grew up with -- the old front-of-the-jersey cliché. If that weren't the case, minor league football and basketball would be more popular.

"Why do we like them or cheer for them?" NCAA president Mark Emmert asked rhetorically in May. The answer, of course, is because of allegiance to the colleges. It has far less to do with the players in the jerseys than the jerseys themselves.

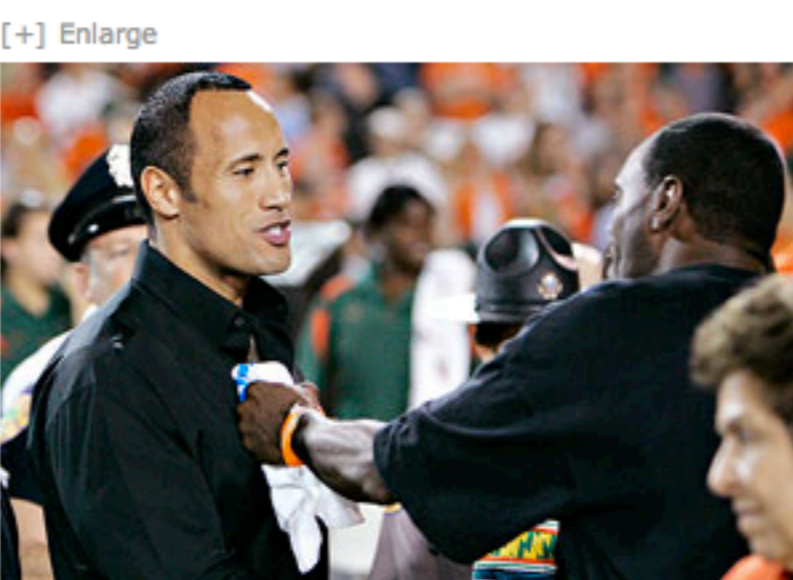
If playing for room, board and books were such a colossal injustice, there is a readily available alternative for basketball players intent on a professional career: the NBA Developmental League. Yet almost none of them choose it, despite the fact that the players are paid and there is no academic requirement at all.

Why? Because they know they've got a better gig as a poor, exploited, unpaid serf in college. They've got access to top-flight coaching, top-flight facilities, medical professionals, a strength and conditioning staff, maximum exposure and all the adulation they can handle. The alternative is earning more spending money in a minor league system playing games in second-rate arenas in front of nobody, with older teammates and less-proven coaches.



Chris Webber's complaints sparked the myth of the exploited athlete.

College football offers the same: palatial facilities, excellent coaching and the chance to showcase your skills on national television to those who do the hiring (NFL teams, companies looking for endorsers). Compare the benefits to being a low-level college intern at a huge company, where the CEO makes tens of millions. It's really not as bad a gig as it's often made out to be.



Each Saturday, former athletes relive their glory days on the sidelines of their alma maters.

What might be the most problematic aspect of paying the players is the risk of further separating the athletic experience from the college experience. It would widen the gap between the athlete and the regular students who cheer them on -- and then come back as adults to donate money and build even nicer facilities for the next generation of young studs. And if college is not part of college sports, then move the enterprise off campus and create semipro teams: the Ann Arbor Angels, Tuscaloosa Titans and Norman Conquests. See how that goes over.

It would go over about as well as any plan that calls for paying the football and men's basketball players but stifling the nonrevenue athletes. If Title IX doesn't squash that notion, campus politics and simple fairness would. And then there is the question of exactly how many universities could balance the books while committing to a significant payment structure for all athletes.

Better to commit to providing a real educational opportunity to incoming athletes. Most of whom are like myth buster Allan Guei -- holding out hope for a pro career, but well aware that a college education is a priceless gift.

"I'm probably not the smartest kid, but I'm going to do what I have to do to graduate," Guei said. "If my basketball doesn't earn me a living, I'm going to fall back on that degree."

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