

00:05

In college sports, American universities are exploiting, disproportionately, Black athletes for billions of dollars, while diminishing their education, health and safety. Let me start with a bit of history. In November 1984, an undersized quarterback from Boston College named Doug Flutie threw a game-winning touchdown pass against the defending national champions, University of Miami. As the Hail Mary pass floated through the fall air in front of a packed stadium, millions more watched with excitement on TV. After the dramatic win, undergraduate application rates at Boston College shot up by 30 percent, revealing to universities the enormous marketing value of building high-profile sports programs.

00:52

That same year, the United States Supreme Court heard a case in which the Universities of Georgia and Oklahoma challenged rules that limited the number of football games they could play on TV. Those schools saw the opportunity to not only make money by televising their games, but to also market their universities to the world. The Supreme Court agreed that the broadcasting restrictions were illegal and schools began to negotiate TV deals worth millions. That case opened the floodgates to money in college athletics, and with it, ever-growing conflicts of interest that prioritize sports over education, promote wins over health and safety and reinforce the disturbing racial and economic inequities in our country.

01:36

Since then, the growth in college sports has been extraordinary and schools have earned record revenues year after year. The spending during that same time period has increased at almost the same dramatic pace, as universities engage in an arms race to the top of the rankings. Massive expenditures on new stadiums, bigger staffs and record salaries have made it appear, on the books at least, that athletic departments are losing money, while they build lavish facilities and make multimillionaires out of coaches and administrators. In fact, in 40 out of 50 states, the highest-paid public employee is now a college football or basketball coach. Meanwhile, college athletes, whose elite talents generate these massive revenues, are not only denied the ability to share in the riches they create, too many of them are not given the education they're promised, either.

02:34

Today, college athletes are exploited to the tune of almost 15 billion dollars. That's how much money is generated by college sports each year. And I'm all too familiar with the exploitation, because I used to be responsible for enforcing it. Following my own college baseball career at the University of Dayton, I went on to law school before becoming an investigator at the National Collegiate Athletic Association. I traveled to college campuses across the country and

helped enforce a 400-page rule book that denies athletes the right to get paid for their performance or even profit from their own name.

03:11

For instance: unlike the music student who, in addition to their scholarship, can get paid to record a song, or the English student who, in addition to their scholarship, can get paid to write a book, college athletes cannot profit from their talents or even take a free meal without being ruled ineligible and risking their scholarship.

03:32

During my time as an investigator, I questioned hundreds of athletes and their families about their financial transactions, dug through their personal bank and phone records and scrutinized their relationships to a humiliating degree, all for the possibility that someone gave them something beyond a scholarship, no matter how petty.

03:52

In one case, I questioned Ohio State football players who received free tattoos and cash in exchange for memorabilia. The case received national attention and became known as "Tattoo Gate," as if it were a scandal on par with political espionage. The players were suspended and had to repay the cash as well as the value of the tattoos. In effect, unpaid athletes were fined by a billion-dollar organization that gets paid by sponsors to decorate the athletes in corporate logos. I was told my job was to promote fairness, but there was nothing fair about that. Shortly thereafter, I left the NCAA and started fighting for the athletes. It became increasingly clear to me that rules supposedly designed to prevent exploitation instead allow a collection of universities and their wealthy corporate sponsors to profit off the athletes, who are promised an education and lured by a chance at the pros but who too often end up with nothing.

04:53

Now, some people believe college athletes get a free ride. However, there is nothing free about risking health and safety while working 40 to 50 hours per week as you fight to keep your scholarship. In football alone, there are over 20,000 injuries a year, including 4,000 knee injuries and 1,000 spinal injuries. Since 2000, forty players have died. Beyond football, a recent study revealed that an estimated 60 percent of Division 1 college athletes suffer a major injury in their career, and over half of them endure chronic conditions that last well beyond their playing days. There is nothing free about that, especially as the NCAA refuses to enforce health and safety standards and has denied in court it even has that responsibility.

05:44

And about that education they're promised -- according to the College Sports Research Institute, Black football and basketball players in the top five conferences graduate at 22 and 37 percent lower than the undergraduate population. Those who do graduate are often shuffled into majors with watered-down courses that conform to their athletic schedules to simply keep them eligible. The time demands and required focus on sports makes it challenging for even the most well-intentioned athlete to get a meaningful education. This is unacceptable for a 15 dollar billion industry run by institutions whose mission is to educate young people.

06:26

Although plenty of athletes succeed, their achievements don't require rules that deny pay or a system that limits educational opportunities or neglects health and safety. The fact is, American universities oversee a multibillion-dollar entertainment industry that denies fundamental rights to its essential workers, a disproportionate number of whom are Black, while making millionaires of largely white coaches and administrators. This dynamic has not only deprived many young people of a meaningful education, it has shifted generations of wealth away from mostly Black families and represents the systemic inequities plaguing our society.

07:10

The good news is that people are starting to see the truth. The NCAA's own public polling has revealed that a staggering 79 percent of the public believe that colleges put money ahead of their athletes. State and federal lawmakers, both Republican and Democrat, have also taken notice and started to act. Several US senators have rightly described the problems in college sports as a civil rights issue. Meanwhile, college athletes from across the country have started to stand up to demand greater health and safety protections, representation rights, attention to racial and social justice issues and economic fairness. Those who think the players should just stick to sports fail to recognize how rarely college athletes speak up and ignore the great personal risk they take in confronting a powerful industry, especially without any representation. More importantly, critics fail to acknowledge that college athletes are simply seeking rights that are afforded to virtually everyone else in this country and basic protections that shouldn't even be in question. I agree that college sports should be an enjoyable distraction, but not when they're distracting us from the very injustice they enable.

08:27

In his retirement, the NCAA's first and longest-serving executive director, Walter Byers, described college sports as "the plantation mentality resurrected and blessed by today's campus executives." This is a telling quote from the man who designed this system and the one who knew it best. But you don't have to be an insider to recognize the exploitation of young people.

You don't have to be a Republican or a Democrat to be troubled by the irresponsible spending or the disregard for values at our universities. You don't even have to be a sports fan. You just have to believe in basic ideas of fairness and the values of higher education.

09:11

So let's require that all college athletes are given a chance at a meaningful education. Let's demand responsible spending by our universities and fairly allocate the billions of dollars being generated. Let's create robust health and safety standards to protect those who entertain us with their bodies and enforce those standards. Let's provide college athletes with a representative body so they have recourse when things go wrong and a voice about how to make things right. Finally, let's rise to the challenge of our time and once and for all correct the persistent racial and economic inequities that apply to college sports and beyond. Change is long overdue, but there has never been a better time than now.