

DOUBLE VISION

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When was the last time a college history professor made it her business to find out the names and schools of the best high school history students in the United States?

When was the last time a college basketball coach sat in his office and waited for the admissions office to deliver a good crop of recruits for the team?

When was the last time a high school history teacher got scores of phone calls and dozens of visits from college professors when he had an unusually promising history student?

When was the last time a high school athlete who was unusually productive in a major sport heard from no one at the college level?

Not one of these things happens, for some good reasons and some not-so-good reasons.

Before you think of the reasons however, we should be aware that sometimes the high school coach who is besieged with interest from the colleges is the same person who is ignored by colleges as a teacher. And sometimes the athlete who gets a number of offers from college coaches is the same person who, as an outstanding student, draws no interest at all. Not only do they observe this demonstration of our placing a higher value on athletics than on academics at the high school level, but their peers, both faculty and student, see it as well, and it teaches them a lesson.

Now it is obvious that if college coaches don't scramble for the best high school athletes they can find, they may start to lose games, and, before long, perhaps their jobs as well.

College professors wait for the admissions office to deliver their students to them, and, while they may then complain about the ignorance of those students, and their inability to read or write well, they feel no need to search for high school students who are working hard and doing well in their field. Their jobs do not depend, they imagine, on finding good students to come to their college.

It is difficult to estimate the number of high school athletes who are contacted by college coaches each year, but if there are 3,400 colleges and for example 16 varsity sports, all of them needing players, and if only 16 athletes are contacted at

each of the 20,000 high schools in the U.S. (a very conservative estimate), then 320,000 student athletes get contacted by colleges each year.

It is important to remember that National Merit Scholars are selected on the basis of their NMSQT scores, not on any achievement in history, physics, literature, or math. The equivalent process for athletics would be that scholarships were awarded on the basis of a physical fitness test, with no regard for the athlete's specific achievement in basketball, track, football, baseball, gymnastics, etc.

Not only do coaches make it their business to know who are the best high school athletes they are likely to be able to attract, they know a lot about them. If they are recruiting a basketball player, not only do they know if he is hard-working and scores a lot, they also know the stats on his average minutes of play, blocks, free throws, steals, assists, fouls, field goals, three-point shots, and perhaps other things.

College professors not only do not know who the best high school students are, they also know nothing about their specific academic accomplishments.

College Admissions officers are routinely nagged by coaches on the one hand, to admit good prospects, but on the other hand they can almost never find any professor to take the slightest interest in the college freshman class they are trying to assemble for the coming year.

Anti-academic messages do not come from colleges alone. The Boston Globe has about 100 pages of coverage each year on high school sports, and also three seasonal 16-page supplement sections on local all-scholastic athletes, with pictures, data, a few interviews, etc. For all practical purposes, their coverage of high school academic achievement of any kind is non-existent.

Alumni of colleges also take an interest in good high school athletes, and the word "elitist" never occurs to them (or anyone else) in this context. When Lew Alcindor [Karim Abdul Jabbar] was a tall high school senior, not only did he get pursued by the head coach at every major basketball program in the country, but he got personal letters from Ralph Bunche (at the United Nations) and from Jackie Robinson (integrated baseball), urging him to go to UCLA and play basketball, which he did.

Why is this "double vision" important to high school teachers and students? During these times of great public concern over the level of academic achievement of our high school graduates, a double message is regularly and reliably being sent: "Athletics matter; Academics do not." Both high school teachers, even those who are not coaches, and high school students, even those who are not athletes, get this message in the clear.

We should remember to be thankful for those students and teachers who continue to take high school academics seriously anyway.