About Athletics

As in other realms—thousands of courses, hundreds of nonsports extracurriculars—Harvard offers undergraduates a cornucopia of athletic options: 42 varsity teams; nearly a million square feet of facilities in Allston (plus the boat houses, sailing center, and an equestrian venue), many buffed up courtesy of the Harvard Campaign. The Crimson sportsmen and -women are supported by scores of professional staff members, among them coaches with national reputations. Grateful graduates have endowed 28 positions (the athletics website lists 11 remaining opportunities).

This is a big sports program happily untainted by the defects of big-time collegiate sports. Crimson youth are not on athletic scholarships—which reduce many “student athletes” elsewhere to peonage. They do not enroll in junk classes and concentrations, with special tutors and free passes that constitute officially sanctioned cheating. They do not live in segregated dorms. Their coaches do not earn 10 or 20 times tenured professors’ pay.

All to the good. Nonetheless, the substantial athletic operation is a human enterprise, and so can find itself enmeshed in controversies. Harvard athletes are supposed to be students above all, so their experiences must be seen in the context of their educations. Both issues merit consideration.

Harvard athletics in recent years has been buffeted by the problems evident in the larger society. There was the 2016 Harvard Crimson exposé of the men’s soccer team “rating” their female peers in crudely sexual terms (the men’s season, and chance at NCAA play, was canceled), and the self-reporting of similar behavior by the male cross-country runners (they were put on athletic probation). In 2018, the department had to adjust coaches’ compensation, reflecting persistent pay disparities between men and women (see harvardmag.com/coach-pay-18). The introduction of an Ivy basketball tournament meant more postseason play—and the schedule highlighted the unequal exposure given the men’s and women’s teams (see harvardmag.com/ivy-scheduling-18). The enterprise is more commercial, with professional marketing and a proliferation of sponsor logos and tie-ins. The Crimson Pub in Dillon Lounge now serves alcohol. Although College admissions were not tainted by last spring’s Varsity Blues scandal, the dismissal of fencing coach Peter Brand this summer (News Briefs, September–October, page 33) was a sharp reminder that financial conflicts of interest remain ever-tempting.

Some of these traumas were self-inflicted. Sexist youngsters apparently still need to grow up, and to learn the hard way about expressing themselves in a “scouting report”—and because one-quarter of them age out each year, such learnin’ sometimes needs repeating. Senior managers ought not to need equal-compensation laws to do the right thing by their subordinates. And so on.

Compounding the problem: whatever has been learned as a result of these experiences has largely been kept in-house. The discovery of problems and resulting reforms are communicated and effected internally. The larger community hears about them after the fact and by email or official statement, if at all: the responsible authorities are rarely available to discuss their findings.

That seems unfortunate for an educational institution: a missed chance to model behavior for the athletes, and, de facto, a determination that what happens in (athletic) Allston, stays in Allston. And isolating what student-athletes experience and learn deprives fellow students of the benefits of those life lessons. The opportunities forgone loom large for both cohorts.

The stakes are considerable. About 1,200 undergraduates, one-fifth of those enrolled, participate in intercollegiate sports. Their practices, games, and travel (many weekends for many sports; and to California for the footballers, and Hawaii and China for the hoopsters of late) impose significant demands on their time during semesters and breaks. About 15 percent of courses, by some estimates, are automatically out of reach for at least some athletes given those obligations. Practices that run into the evening mean that during part of the year, the affected students aren’t sharing meals with peers in their Houses. And not a few athletes note that in a community that prizes research and education, they stand out, and apart, and even feel stereotyped as (dumb) jocks.

Of course, the athletes, like fellow undergraduates, choose how to spend their time. They are disciplined about their days; they learn from coaches who are important mentors; they develop close friendships and identities (as other students do in their extracurriculars); they internalize aspects of leadership; and they learn to absorb losses and rebound to compete again. For most, this is their last hurrah, and many athletes value their Harvard sports experiences very highly.

But in a community devoted to inclusion, dispelling some of those stereotypes and sharing some of those passions, emotions, and disciplines would seem to be reciprocally beneficial. A few “community” sports (night football; basketball and hockey contests) draw a crowd. But most don’t, so the athletes’ labors are often unheralded—and their schedules, in turn, prevent them from attending classmates’ plays and concerts.

Male athletes in the bigger sports apparently still skew toward economics and are underrepresented in other concentrations. (Those e.g. grads, whose teamwork and will to win appeal to Wall Street, often end up in finance—to Harvard’s philanthropic benefit.) Given the rules on unrecognized single-gender social organizations, some athletes will have to choose between being team captains or belonging to a final club.

Some of these differences are matters of taste. But the object of a residential college is to expose students to unfamiliar ideas, activities, and disciplines. Simply enabling high-school athletes, or actors, to pursue that talent at a higher level, without encountering the other riches on offer, undercuts the premise of the place. Given the number of athletes, their potential (and real) separateness, and the expense of sustaining them, there is an obligation here to make all students’ experience more genuinely inclusive (perhaps even having nonathletes take physical education), for their learning and growth.

A good beginning would be articulating a vision for Harvard athletics congruent with the College’s academic aims. Conceiving that vision would have to engage faculty members and students broadly, and include steps to effect the resulting plan through the whole College. The Faculty of Arts and Sciences’ review of athletics (see page 25) may evolve into what is needed. The new leaders of the faculty’s standing committee on athletic sports—Xander University Professor Douglas Melton and Coolidge professor of history Maya Jasanoff—may bring fresh perspective, and the respect of their academic colleagues, to the committee’s “general oversight of all the Faculty’s athletic programs.”

Why waste a new opportunity to enlarge Harvard’s vision? Time to play ball.

~john s. rosenberg, Editor