

EQUALITY ON THE GRIDIRON,
OPPORTUNITY ON THE COURT

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In our land today there has arisen a great cry for equality of opportunity. This holds for admission to college, opportunities in business or other careers, even opportunities in sports.

It is the duty of university faculties to devote what time and strength they can spare from the arduous duties of their craft toward improving the circumstances of the land. Society expects this of them; it pays them salaries to sit and think. We should all, intellectual and subintellectual alike, do all we can to make this fair land a better place in which to live, and even in which to leave our carcasses when we are through with them. And in this drive toward the grail, nothing is more important than furthering equality of opportunity.

To this I have devoted much thought, like other professors near and far, and, if I may say so modestly, with some progress. In this earnest endeavor, this search for the truth and the light, my thoughts have worked out improvements even in fields some might think outside my specialty, namely football and basketball. But the reader should know that I made the basketball team in high school (barely), and even played football in a random and amateur way. Nature, however, did not build me in the heroic mold required for genuine proficiency in gridiron gladiation.

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Why should not the cry for equality of opportunity, for justice in the land, apply to football as well as jobs and housing? I have long been appalled at the gross disparity between a line made up of 250-pound batterers and the chances of the ordinary man. Somehow, something must be done so that a 150-pound tackle can with equanimity, yea even with anticipation, face these 250-pound mastodons.

One thought I have had, as a possible remedy for this gross injustice, is to supply each underweight lineman with a battery-operated battering ram. It should be compensatory in weight, 100 pounds of battering to help the 150-pound guard or tackle, and could be known as the vice-batterer or assistant-batterer. Care should of course be taken to limit its power to compensation for the weight of the massive opponent. After all, it is equality of opportunity we are seeking, not annihilation.

While an electric battering ram of offsetting weight is a rather attractive solution, another alternative would be a companion goat, and I may settle on this. For every 150-pound tackle faced by a 250-pound one, there should be stationed faithfully by his side a 100-pound goat full of oats and school spirit. The goats' names could be printed on the program as Assistant Tackles and so on.

All in all, this would definitely improve football, both in equality of opportunity and in spectacularity. This spectator sport would become more spectacular particularly if the goats were equipped with baskets and allowed to carry the ball.

The school-spirited goats, like the other players, should of course be adequately nourished and trained, to keep them effective as equalizers of opportunity. Doubtless the lovers of football, mostly alumni and local businessmen, would underwrite the goat-keep if football scholarships were already straining the university's funds. The goats would need to be well-roofed, well-fed, and possibly supplied with deodorant money, among their other athletic stipends, as an equivalent to the more traditional laundry money. They would profit from a training table and spring practice just like the other players. It would not, of course, be necessary for friendly businessmen to raise any tuition money per goat, since in their case no pretense is made of scholarship.

Before I leave football and outline some advanced ideas for equality of opportunity in basketball, there is one other comment I should make: Football prevents Communism. I had not thought of this until I went to a chapter meeting of a subversive organization of professors in which I somehow got involved. The chapter meets about once a month, and on this evening we had as guest of honor and speaker for the occasion the then chief football coach of our university. This professor of football--the coaches are all members of the faculty so that what they do may be kept noncommercial--made it a central point in his oration that no football player had ever become a Communist, therefore the sport is a prime preventive. I had not realized before, when wondering how we should grapple with Marxism-Leninism-Maoism, that football is the answer. This information alone was worth the price of my annual dues.

The coach also had a great deal to say about the virtues of "body contact" as one of the benefits and fine features of the game. This seemed somehow to be of great moment to him, though perhaps not greater than its preventing Communism. But somehow his paeans to body contact left me cold. I was younger then and still feeling my oats and thought body contact should be differently channeled.

A decades-long feature of my university's information system which I find quite helpful, and which applies to both football and basketball as well as some other things, is frequent messages sent through the Registrar's office informing the faculty of students who are so busy meeting basketball or football commitments, perhaps in Honolulu or places like that, that they will be unable to attend class or take exams. In reality these messages issue from the Athletic Office, but it facilitates the forwarding and adds to their official quality when they come via a central administrative office.

Any faculty tends to accumulate some undesirable characters--eternal trouble-makers and askers of questions, for instance. At a faculty meeting I heard one of these aberrants wonder aloud why the messages shouldn't go in the other direction. He maintained that since a university is an institution of higher learning, that should come first, and the message flow should be from him (and other historians, economists, and the like) to the Professors of Strenuous Sports, informing them that due to a scheduled class or examination, student Waldor Thorinski would be unable to accompany the team to Miami or Seattle.

The trouble with this professor (and I predict that he will not last long) is that he is out of touch with the real world. He seems not to remember that said Thorinski and fellows are scholarship-holders, pursuing what their scholarships are for. They are busy defending the university's honor and insuring its funding and progress. How many dollars has this cynical professor ever raised for the university?

One advantage of the present system, with the polite notifications flowing from Athletic Office to teacher rather than vice versa, is that it helps to keep professors modest and cognizant of their secondary position in the educational enterprise. It is well known that if the world were turned over to intellectuals it would be surely ruined. Better by far that the ultimate decisions be made by practical people like coaches and businessmen. To keep the university going (and the world full of progress too) gaining victories and gaining bucks are the summum bonum, than which nothing nothing is more bonum.

Now for equality of opportunity in basketball. We must not lose sight, amidst all the philosophizing into which this paper has degenerated, of how much basketball can contribute to that all-American ideal, equality of opportunity. An obvious flaw of the game now is the great premium on stilt-style height, whereby institutions of

higher learning recruit scholarship-holders by the yard instead of by any other measure that might seem appropriate for ferreting out scholarship quality. Obviously, for equality of opportunity, the players ought all to be the same height or else there should be some opportunity adjuster.

My first thought for a remedy was a Procrustean gate, somewhere between dressing rooms and basketball court. The gate is equipped to stretch or chop to uniform stature. But this might be against the law, and I therefore moved on to a less heroic second choice, the adjustable basket.

The basket, in place of its present fixed mounting in plain frustration of equality of opportunity, should be mounted on well-greased vertical slides, with electronic activator for instantaneous adjustment. If a giant approaches it, it shoots up two feet; if a pygmy, the basket drops toward the floor. The uncanny basket would have radar reconnaissance to follow the ball all the time, and its all-seeing eye would always know the height of the scholar by whom the ball was projected. Whether the weaving, leaping scholarship-holders were lanky or stubs, the brains in the basket would see all, know all, and provide equality of opportunity.

The idea of an all-seeing eye in the wall, with heat-sensing and all sorts of other supersleuthing abilities, suggests other possible campus uses. Why could it not (in a subordinate way, of course) take roll in the classroom, scanning the rows once the bell has rung to see whether seat 77 is warm? If so, a scholar is there, or at least a human, and the holder is counted present. If this automatic roll-taking machine could be further refined to report any warmth in the cranial region, so much the better.

I have heard a few faculty members, fortunately not many, argue that football and basketball at citadels of higher learning are not really sports any more, if by that is meant doing it for fun, like children at their play. Rather, such cynics

say, these enterprises have become business, and rather big business at that. One cynical pedagogue harbored by my campus, who has forgotten how these sports build character, build bodies, and hold down Communism, argues that what they do instead is break bones, disrupt education, and sometimes rake in shekels. As for the argument that these manly doings, fortified by much winning, increase not only the flow of cash but the flow of students, the aforesaid professor quotes an obscure economist named Thorstein Veblen, to the effect that such school-spirited student accessions "who seek the university as a means of respectability and dissipation . . . serve the advancement of the higher learning only as fire, flood and pestilence serve the needs of the husbandman. . . ."

But was Veblen successful? No. Did he ever get promoted to full professor? No. Did universities bid eagerly for him, and offer him the headship of a department? Again, no. There is reason to believe that he was not only against football, but that he was even against business. Surely Heaven has recorded both these facts against him. Perhaps he had an unhealthy mind.

At any rate we have now shown quite clearly that university basketball and football, though makers of men and money, still unfortunately lack one thing: they are deficient in providing equality of opportunity. But, as shown so clearly in this paper, there are ways of molding them to the American dream, so that no man, no matter how humble or small, will be denied an equal chance.