Debate of Monetary Compensation for NCAA Athletes

The Northwestern University football team unionization has reignited discussion on whether student-athletes deserve monetary compensation for their participation in NCAA sports programs.

“It’s an individual’s choice to play sports in college, no one forces them,” assistant director of Virginia Tech Recreational Sports, Alan Glick, said. “They know what they’re signing up for, and they know the dedication it’s going to require.”

The Northwestern football team’s decision to unionize was described as a “bomb to the heart of college football’s amateurism rules” by SB NATION columnist, Patrick Vint. Many believe the decision could lead to a significant change to college athletics in general.

One of the biggest arguments in favor of paying college athletes is that the players are the ones taking the risks and putting themselves – physically and mentally – on the line every day, but receiving no salary for their efforts.

However, the experience of playing on a college team itself is valuable, working much like internships for other students.

Many athletes argue that because of their participation in sports they are unable to get part-time jobs to support their expenses. According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association website, college athletes are already receiving scholarships that cover tuition, fees, room, board and textbooks. Universities should not be required to dole out even more finances in order to satisfy the extracurricular needs of their athletes.

While this type of scholarship is not offered to all college athletes, many still receive a considerably larger amount of financial aid than the average student. If universities started paying college athletes, it would be incredibly unfair to their peers who work hard just to make ends meet.

“I think it would have been nice to be paid but the thing is, where do you draw the line?” former Virginia Tech men’s basketball player, Marcus Travis, said. “If they decided to start paying [athletes], football players would obviously make the most money, but how would they decide how much to pay everyone else?”

Travis was a member of the Virginia Tech men’s Division I basketball team from 2005 to 2007. As a walk-on player he received no monetary compensation for playing.

“Even if they decided to pay us, the government would have to tax the money or monitor it in some way,” Travis said. “I just don’t think it’s realistic.”

Adding money into an already difficult, life-changing decision will not only complicate the college decision process, but also potentially sway student-athletes into making a collegiate choice based on pay rather than personal development or quality of education. A great deal of politics are involved in sports that the average 17-year-old and 18-year-old high school students may not fully comprehend when they are attempting to make such an important decision.

“For all intents and purposes, the majority of college athletic programs are essentially nonprofit,” Glick said. “All of the other small sports wouldn’t survive if it wasn’t for all the money being generated by bigger programs such as football and men’s and women’s basketball.”

According to the Radford University Highlanders Athletics website, the institution decided to discontinue four varsity sports programs – swimming and diving, field hockey, men’s indoor track and field, and men’s outdoor track and field – in order to fund the addition of a women’s lacrosse program.

In a statement given to WSLS10, Radford University Director of Athletics Robert Lineburg stated that in order to remain competitive in the Big South Conference the university was encouraged to add the women’s lacrosse team.

If universities were to start paying college athletes, it would broaden the gap between small and large university athletic teams even more. Large schools with more revenue such as the University of Alabama would essentially be able to “buy” the best players for their teams, putting smaller universities at a greater disadvantage. According to the ESPN College Athletics Revenues and Expenses report from 2008, the Alabama Crimson Tide football program brought in total revenues of $123.8 million. The Radford University Highlanders football program was not even ranked among the 120 teams.

NCAA college sports programs and the athletes who choose to participate in them should not revolve around money. Athletes should focus on their passion for whatever sport they play, and be grateful they receive the aid they do.

“Unfortunately, college athletics are almost becoming as distasteful as the pros,” Virginia Tech senior and avid college football follower, Marshall Beyer, said.

By providing college athletes monetary compensation for playing sports for their university, not only does it create a divide between students and student-athletes, but runs contrary to the values of higher education and ideals and values of amateur athletics.