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[College Basketball - Significa...](#)

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My initial involvement with Division I Men's Basketball began 50 years ago this coming fall when I enrolled at the University of Kansas as a hopeful walk-on student-athlete. I had been recruited to attend the Air Force Academy by then Assistant Coach Dean Smith (yes, that Dean Smith), and decided to be a cadet after I received an appointment to the Academy. However, four weeks before I was scheduled to matriculate at Colorado Springs I received a letter from the Surgeon General of the Air Force saying that a mistake had been made in my physical examination and that due to a vision defect they were taking away my appointment. Coach Smith, a former Kansas player, called his friend, Dick Harp, the Kansas coach and that's how I ended up at KU. As a player, my only contribution was in practice but my involvement with the Kansas program was the best thing that ever happened to me in terms of my future.

During all those years since 1958, I have been involved as a coach or administrator with basketball and it has been a source of great joy for me. Recently, however, I have started to worry about the future of the men's college game. Three newspaper stories in the past few days reveal just a few of the concerns that many close observers share with me. The first is the story out of the June 17 meeting of the Knight

Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics which has been concerned about academic under-achievement by student-athletes in men's basketball. According to the NCAA News, "The commission, meeting June 17 in Washington, D.C., heard from Georgia Tech men's coach Paul Hewitt, who said the season should start later in November to ease the academic pressures on student-athletes in the fall. Hewitt is a member of the NCAA Basketball Academic Enhancement Group formed this year to identify factors unique to basketball that affect the sport's standing at the low end of the Academic Progress Rate." According to the AP story on the meeting, Hewitt said, "he'd like to see basketball become a one-semester sport and that coaches overall would like to see a shorter schedule, but he admitted it's "not going to happen" because of the lucrative television money that comes from playing more games, even in early November." Out of this meeting the Knight Commission recommended that the NCAA shorten the season to reduce academic stress on the player. "The basketball season is too long, there are too many games and too many road trips, and the grades of these athletes show the consequences," said Brit Kirwan, Knight Commission co-chair and chancellor of the University System of Maryland. "Let's adopt a schedule that is in the best interests of the athletes, not the TV programmers," according to the AP story. My concern is that the real issue on schedule length is a financial one, not an academic one and, unfortunately, the demand to build bigger and better facilities and pay coaches bigger salaries makes it extremely unlikely that a significant reduction in the number of allowable games will occur because of the potential loss of gate and television revenue.

A second story that raises concerns came from the National Association of Basketball Coaches (NABC) in Kansas City a few days ago. Their Board of Directors announced, "that it strongly opposes 10th grade students and younger from making commitments to collegiate institutions for the purpose of playing men's basketball. Furthermore, the Board asks men's basketball coaches to refrain from offering or encouraging these young people to make such commitments. The Board of Directors' opposition is based on the fact that these students have not yet displayed sufficient academic credentials or, in the vast majority of cases, basketball maturity to accurately project them as admissible students to the institution or impact players on the basketball team." (NABC website) This action resulted from two recent high profile commitments from eighth-grader Michael Avery from Lake Sherwood, California and ninth-grader, Vincent Zollo, from Greenfield, Ohio to the University of Kentucky Men's Basketball program. The absurdity of such a commitment is that the eighth grader has yet to take a course in school that will be considered on his academic record for purposes of determining admission and initial eligibility. It makes a mockery of the notion that intercollegiate athletics is a legitimate part of the academic mission of the university if a prospective student athlete is offered a scholarship before the institution can determine his academic ability. One hopes the coaches will heed the request of the NABC Board.

Third, I read a column this morning by William C. Rhoden in the New York Times (June 23, 2008) about a young man from Los Angeles, Brandon Jennings, who has signed a letter of intent to play at Arizona but now is considering playing professionally in Europe next year. In doing so he will be avoiding the recent rule the NBA negotiated in its collective bargaining agreement with the player's union establishing an age limit of 19 and requiring that a player be out of high school for at least a year. The NCAA accepted the rule which many are now questioning. It has created the "one and done" mentality which, in my opinion, makes it even harder to speak about the academic legitimacy of our athletics programs. I'm opposed to forcing young people to go to school if they don't want to be there. Jennings, in speaking of the possibility of playing professionally in Europe is quoted in the Times, "I'll constantly be playing basketball 24-7; I don't have to worry about school and things like that." Rhoden opines, "On the surface that sounds troubling. In reality, forcing talented players who otherwise would be drafted to

spend a sham year in college does not advance higher education. The N.C.A.A., the N.B.A. and the union created a class of hired guns.” Some in the NCAA have advocated recently for changing the rule to two years out of high school before entering the NBA. I disagree; that might make the problem twice as bad. Again, let’s not make exceptionally talented basketball players go to college if they don’t want to be there. I have no problem with Brandon Jennings going to Europe if that’s what he wants to do. All those concerned with men’s basketball need to re-visit this “one and done” rule, in my opinion. It won’t be easily changed, however, because it’s part of the collective bargaining agreement between players and management.

These are just a few of the difficult issues surrounding intercollegiate men’s basketball and we’ve just scratched the surface. This collision between academic well being of student-athletes and the increasingly commercialized aspects of basketball and football programs need the undivided attention of CEOs, athletics administrators and faculty representatives. I tell my sport management graduate students all the time that the presence of big-time intercollegiate athletics programs in a higher education setting is unique in the world and it is not ideal, but it’s what we have and all of us must be committed to making it honest, academically legitimate and the best possible situation for the young people we are educating. I hope you agree.

Post Script. On a very personal note, I referred to the Knight Commission above and I wanted to say a word about its Executive Director, Amy Perko. Amy recently was elected to the COSIDA Academic All-America Hall of Fame, a great honor for this outstanding former student-athlete at Wake Forest. While at Wake, she was a three-time Academic All-America and a two-time All-ACC performer in women’s basketball. She graduated Phi Beta Kappa and summa cum laude from Wake Forest and then earned a Master’s degree in sports management at the University of Richmond. Amy was hired at the NCAA in Enforcement where she worked until I hired her as Associate AD and SWA at the University of Kansas, positions she served with distinction. Amy Perko was the consummate role model for student-athletes and I was extremely fortunate to have the opportunity to have served with her as a colleague at KU. Congratulations to Amy who will be inducted into the Hall of Fame on June 30 in Tampa, Florida!

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