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Keep 'pro' out of college sports

By R. Gerald Turner
and Clifton R. Wharton Jr.

March Madness is about to reach its finale. Without a doubt, the tournament is America's favorite amateur sports event.

CBS pays the NCAA roughly half a billion dollars a year for the right to broadcast the tournament, and it knows what it needs for that investment to pay off: "If we (CBS) do not embrace amateurism, we will not have a product that people want to watch," Vice President Mike Aresco told the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics in 2004. "I think in the end these are kids and people want to watch a kind of pure competition that they don't see at the pro level. If we lose that, we're all in trouble."

We need to heed that advice. Americans by a 2-1 margin believe that college sports are more like professional sports than amateur sports, according to a recent poll conducted for the commission by Widmeyer Research & Polling. Moreover, 59 percent of all Americans — and the same percentage of those who self-identify as college sports fans — agree with the statement: "College athletes are exploited by corporate advertisers."

The National Collegiate Athletic Association and its member schools need to accelerate efforts to distinguish clearly intercollegiate athletics from professional sports. We are concerned that recent actions and pressures are moving the

enterprise in the wrong direction.

Shortly after the Knight Commission's poll was conducted, Myles Brand, president of the NCAA, defended its efforts to carry out commercial activity on behalf of its members with the goal of maximizing revenue from broadcast media contracts. He emphasized that "amateur" defines the participants, not the enterprise" and that the enterprise should not be criticized for working hard to generate revenue.



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We agree that the enterprise does have important and necessary business activities in which it must engage. However, the NCAA board of directors, staff and member institutions must always consider first the impact of their decisions on the students who participate. We believe recent proposals and actions are not fully considering that impact and are sending inconsistent messages to both the public and the participants.

First, the NCAA allowed General Motors to show images of identifiable collegiate athletes in its promotional features — a practice heretofore forbidden by NCAA amateurism rules. Appropriately, the NCAA Division I board of directors expressed serious concern about this change and will review this measure at its next meeting.

Second, the NCAA membership is considering a proposal that would encourage basketball teams to play four more



MICHAEL CONROY / Associated Press

AMATEURS, NOT PROS: CBS announcers Billy Packer (left) and Jim Nantz take a break during the final game in the Big Ten Conference tournament in Indianapolis March 12. CBS, the NCAA's broadcasting partner, is on record as embracing amateurism in the sport.

games every season. Current NCAA rules restrict the number of times (twice every four years) teams may play in early-season tournaments like the National Invitation Tournament and the Maui Invitational. Now that the NCAA owns the NIT, it is considering a rules change to allow participation in such events every year. The new proposal would take players out of class and away from campus more often, even though many college presidents and faculty believe there are too many games in the season already.

As vice chairmen of the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, a group committed to assuring a proper balance for college sports in higher education, we believe any move to allow commercial sponsors to use collegiate athletes in advertisements is seriously misguided. To do so would treat them no differently from professional players — assets to be used to enhance sponsorship deals.

Furthermore, we believe any increase in the permissible number of basketball games sends an inconsistent message to both the students who play the games and to the public. The graduation rates of NCAA Division I basketball teams are the lowest of all NCAA teams in any sport. Increasing the number of games will only make a bad situation worse.

Higher education's fundamental mission demands that athletes be treated as students — and the public agrees. Colleges and universities must continue to be diligent to ensure that the academic values they are entrusted to uphold are always reflected in how their athletes are treated and their programs are managed. Maintaining the distinction between professional and amateur in intercollegiate sports is crucial to the academic mission of our institutions and the health of our programs.

★ Turner and Wharton serve as vice chairs of the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics.