The Future Of Athletics At Rice

"Should Rice de-emphasize its intercollegiate athletics program and withdraw from the Southwest Conference?"—From the Thresher poll

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It is, of course, pointless to discuss the theoretical position of athletics at Rice, for as long as the monument to Jess Neely stands on the western extremity of the campus, there will be intercollegiate athletics on a large scale at Rice.

The alumni wouldn't stand for de-emphasis; chances are that as long as 73,000 are willing to pay to see Rice meet Texas, the University Powers would hesitate to eliminate that source of revenue. But any thinking person must ask himself the question, "Depressurized intercollegiate athletics have a place at a school of this caliber?" The answer to that question at the University of Chicago was No. It was No at Harvard, Yale, Columbia, and all the Ivy League schools; it was No at Vanderbilt and Tulane; it was No at Stanford.

What one must ultimately decide is whether big-time athletics are incompatible with the image of a university which Rice hopes to create.

Athletes May Damage Student Morale

There are generally two charges levied against the athletes: they hurt the curriculum and they hurt the college system. It is also claimed by some that they hurt student morale: their diploma and their senior ring is representative of Rice University; other graduates suffer because athletes on the whole are less representative of Rice graduates than the rest of the student body.

The last charge is not nearly so valid as are the first two. The reputation of the University is not dependent upon the conduct of a small group of graduates, especially their non-professional behavior.

The other half of the student morale charge is that one would rather go watch his roommate or his good buddy play football than watch a group of hirelings who have only the name of the school in common play a group of hirelings from another university.

For one thing, a large percentage of the football players at Rice (We use football as the example because football, of course, is the major source of revenue and alumni support) are not physical education or commerce majors. Nine of the eleven who started against SMU last October fell into this non-P.E. major category.

Furthermore, we are convinced that the great majority of Rice students would rather watch Joe Jock beat hell out of some Orange Ogre from Texas than watch dear old roommate give his all against Alvin Junior College. Football in the Southwest is popular, whether one attends Rice, Texas, or Lamar Tech; people like football and like to watch good football, especially when they can identify themselves—even if in name only—with one of the teams.

There is no doubt, on the other hand, that athletes hurt the curriculum. Courses like Political Science 210 could be valuable if they were not oriented toward the athletes. And there are many others.

Continued Hypocrisy Is No Solution

The only possible course for the University to follow, if the Powers intend to keep big-time football at Rice and still raise the educational standards of the University, is to offer separate courses for athletes.

If any athlete wishes to take the normal course load, fine; let him be an academic major. But to lower the level of difficulty in academic courses simply to accommodate the athletes is absurd.

The charge has been levelled that the establishment of separate courses would be hypocritical. Quite to the contrary: this is the honest means of treating big-time athletics. To water down courses and claim that these are regular academic programs is the hypocritical method.

The problem of the athletes and the college system has appeared on the Thresher editorial pages before. There are many who believe that the athletes and the college system are incompatible.

If this is true, then there is only one answer, again. That answer is not the construction of an athletic dorm; this would arouse student antagonism and
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produce the morale problem which we feel does not currently exist.

The solution is already being tried in some of the men’s colleges: the privilege of college residence is concurrent with the acceptance of responsibility of college citizenship; those who fail to accept the responsibility must be denied the privilege. This goes for academic, engineering, or physical education students.

We feel that if the colleges require that the athletes, whatever their major, conform to college requirements and attempt to be an asset to the college, there is a place for them at Rice.

The athletic department can help by carefully selecting their recruits. The colleges must do their part in being absolutely stringent in extending their privilege of residence. And the University must revamp the curriculum.

“Frankly, Rice has tried too long to include disinterested athletes in its plans for a great university and a mature college system.” the Rice Thresher, February 2, 1962.

Wrong. If the maturity of the college system and the plans for a great university can’t find a place for the athletes, then we’ll admit that there is indeed no place. But neither has even been tried.—P. B.