

## **March is Madness When You Realize that the Athlete is the Product**

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Title: “Counterfeit Amateurs: An Athlete’s Journey Through the Sixties to the Age of Academic Capitalism”

Author: Allen L. Sack

Publisher: The Pennsylvania State University Press

Length: 179

Price: \$29.95

Reading time: 5-6 hours

Reading rating: 9 (1 = very difficult; 10 = very easy)

Overall rating: 4 (1 = average; 4 = outstanding)

It’s fitting that I should be writing this review in the midst of *March Madness*. It comes as no surprise that, even as I write, billions of dollars are changing hands, while dozens of athletes compete for the most coveted prize in college basketball—the NCAA Division I Men’s Basketball Championship. It is during these three weeks of college basketball mayhem that casino giant, MGM Mirage, generates its largest amount of revenue (more than \$100 million) in the shortest period of time from gamblers hoping to “cover the point spread”. The NCAA picks up a cool \$548 million for the three-week event (which equates to more than 95% of their total annual revenue), while their corporate sponsors sit back and watch their companies’ name pop up all over the television screen; briefly muted by young men running up and down the court playing a game called ‘basketball’.

In his book *Counterfeit Amateurs*, Allen Sack tells his story of participating in college athletics in the 1960’s. Playing under legendary football coach Ara Parseghian at the University of Notre Dame, Allen was a member of the 1966 championship team, which participated in the “Game of the Century” against Michigan State (ending in a 10-10 tie). It was during the 1960’s, Sack realized that commercial interests were beginning to pervade college athletics.

The civil unrest of the 1960’s through the early 1970’s suggested that the rights of minority groups would be honored. However, on the educational front, college athletes saw their protections slipping away. It was during this time that, as a result of the NCAA’s growth in financial and political power, limits were placed on the “workers,” better known as “amateurs” or “student-athletes”. Strategic rule changes initiated by the NCAA included: the limitation athletic scholarships to one-year renewable contracts (which led to “pay-for-play” otherwise known as performance-based employment); the dissolution of freshman ineligibility; and, the lowering of academic standards for athletes’ admittance in institutions of higher education.

Throughout his book, Sack points out that there appears to be a moral disconnect between the actions of the NCAA leadership verses that of their stated mission (which is to integrate the athlete into the general student body and to protect the athlete from

commercial exploitation). In fact, Sack points out that a historical examination reveals an inverse correlation between the commercialization of college athletics and that of protecting the athlete as 'student'; namely that, as commercialization increases, the protections and/or focus on the athlete as 'student,' decreases.

Sack notes that the economic realities of college athletics have forced reform-minded groups and other concerned parties to pinpoint potential legal avenues to affect change, such as: anti-trust law suits (most notably, the U.S. Supreme Court's decision holding that "the NCAA's practices constitute a 'restraint of trade'" (see *NCAA v. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma*, 468 U.S. 85 (1984)), questioning the tax-exempt status of the NCAA, assessing member institutions' utilization of the Unrelated Business Income Tax (UBIT), and examining proposals to pay and/or unionize college athletes.

Allen Sack was a college athlete at one of the nation's premier institutions of higher learning; now, he protects current athletes by working to reform the system. According to Sack, the sad reality is just "how distorted the values of big-time college sports have become" (p. 118). For its "owners," big-time college athletics may, indeed, be a case of Capitalism at its finest; alas, for the "amateurs," it's a case of exploitation at the hands of the very entity 'charged' with protecting them.

Kadie Otto, Ph. D., is an associate professor and program director of the undergraduate sport management program in the College of Business at Western Carolina University. For previously reviewed books, visit our Web site at [www.wcu.edu/cob/](http://www.wcu.edu/cob/).