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PLAYING THE GAME: INSIDE ATHLETIC RECRUITING IN THE IVY LEAGUE

Chris Lincoln

[White River Junction, VT: The Nomad Press, 2004]

257 Pages

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When one thinks of the college arms race, recruiting scandals, and National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) infractions, the Ivy League is usually not the first thing that comes to mind. Ivy League schools and the athletes they recruit are normally thought to be “above” this type of behavior, demonstrating the highest degree of moral and ethical responsibility. These Ivy schools are thought to perceive athletics as merely a spoke in the educational wheel, not the wheel itself. In “Playing the Game,” Chris Lincoln attempts to argue that the entire Ivy recruiting process is flawed, resulting in less deserving athletes gaining admission over other more deserving students, athletes lying to schools, schools misrepresenting themselves to athletes and to each other, and endowment sizes determining which teams are most successful. Although Lincoln makes valid and coherent arguments identifying many of these issues, he seems to overstate the extent of these concerns. He presents them as creating a “broken system” with “no end in sight” instead of a necessary by-product of a league with incredibly high academic standards that places its athletics in context with the rest of a student’s education.

Lincoln begins by introducing the Academic Index (AI), which Ivy League schools use to monitor and regulate the admission of every Ivy athlete. The AI is comprised of a mathematical formula that takes into account an incoming applicant’s test score (66 percent of the “weight”) and either his or her class rank or G.P.A. (the other 33 percent). AI scores range from a score of 240, which would represent perfect board scores and a 4.0 G.P.A., to 171, the League imposed “floor” under which schools cannot even consider an applicant for admission.

One contention that Lincoln had with the system was the use of academic “boosters” used in hockey and basketball. Because league rules required that each incoming class of hockey and basketball players were to have an AI average within one standard deviation of the mean of the rest of the incoming student body, coaches would find kids who listed hockey or basketball participation on their application and who had already been admitted, and while they had no chance of actually playing, would raise that incoming class’

AI. However, in 2003 these boosters were virtually eliminated by a new formula that lumps hockey and basketball in a large “cohort” with every other Ivy sport, which must also have an average AI that falls within one standard deviation of the mean AI of the incoming student body as a whole.

Ivy football teams have attempted to eliminate the problem by placing recruits in “bands,” which are basically just different standard deviation measurements declining from the school’s mean AI. Therefore, a school can have two recruits from the bottom band, which will be the recruits closest to the AI floor, eight players from the next highest band, twelve players from the next highest band, and so on. Because the bands are based on each individual institution’s mean AI, the bands for each program vary. Lincoln insists that the bands are fatally flawed and that the system needs to be reconstructed. However, Lincoln himself argues that the problem is not that Ivy schools are admitting less deserving athletes who are then underperforming in the classroom, as some pundits have asserted. Lincoln waxes on about the numerous success stories involving Ivy athletes and puts forth statistics showing that athletes with lower AIs actually outperform their fellow athletes with higher AIs. Although it is possible that an athlete with a relatively low AI might get the nod over a fellow student with a higher AI, this admission preference is also given to gifted musicians, legacies, and minority students. The lower AI is likely a by-product of the time spent by the student honing his or her talent, and usually has no correlation to the potential of that student to succeed in the classroom.

So then, what is the problem with the AI? Lincoln argues that football coaches should not be forced to take a certain number of kids in the higher AI bands because it is likely that many of these players will quit the team before graduating. By eliminating these bands but keeping the AI floor, Lincoln contends that coaches will recruit according to their football needs and get recruits who can actually play. These recruits will be more likely to stay on the team, and coaches can spend more time looking for players instead of trying to pigeonhole recruits into AI bands. Although this theory has some validity, the crux of this “crisis” is that Ivy League football teams are marginally less talented than they could be without the bands (although all are affected equally, since they all play under the same rules), and that the ten or fifteen players who are admitted as athletes but later quit the team could be replaced by ten or fifteen students in the general admission pool. As Lincoln points out, these general admission athletes will likely perform at a similar academic level to the athletes who quit anyway. Again, just how big of a problem is this?

Lincoln also takes issue with the inequity of the financial aid packages given by Ivy schools. Until 1991, the Ivy schools had an agreement on the

maximum amount of financial aid that could be given to students. However, the Justice Department found that this agreement violated federal antitrust law, and the eight Ivy schools were forced to sign a consent decree agreeing not to talk about their financial aid policies, except to discuss publicly announced policies that have already been adopted. Because there are no athletic scholarships given in the Ivy League, schools with the biggest endowments could then award the most need-based aid. Princeton University has even eliminated need-based loans altogether and only gives grants. Although this theoretically creates a certain degree of inequity, there seems to be a large amount of parity among Ivy League teams when they are examined across the board. Although there are particular programs that dominate certain sports (such as University of Pennsylvania and Princeton basketball), this seems to be more of a function of the history and tradition of these programs, not their financial aid packages. This is true of programs in conferences across the country and is not normally perceived as a problem in need of a solution.

When a student decides to attend an Ivy League institution to play a sport, he or she is not forced to sign a letter of intent. Lincoln argues that this allows recruits to verbally commit to one school while visiting additional institutions and possibly backing out of his or her verbal commitment. While the potential for this type of abuse of the system is present, most coaches that Lincoln interviewed stated that because of the type of character-driven athletes that they recruit, this has only happened to them a handful of times throughout their entire coaching careers. While theoretically this could present a problem for Ivy coaches, in practice it only affects a few each year.

Despite the doomsday scenario that Lincoln attempts to portray, in reality the Ivy League consists of student-athletes who not only succeed in the classroom at similar rates as their non-athlete peers, but who also go on to prestigious careers in a wide array of fields. Although problems persist with the lack of letters of intent and the varying endowments among the Ivies, these are relatively minor issues compared with those faced by other conferences around the country. Certain programs will go on to dominate certain sports, and a handful of athletes each year will continue to lie about where they intend to go to school. While Lincoln portrays these problems as pieces of a “flawed” system with “no end in sight,” I believe they are small and relatively unimportant concerns in a league that in most respects should be put on a pedestal and emulated by other conferences throughout the NCAA.

David J. Espin

