



## UNDERSTANDING SPORTS CONFLICT

Sport has been an important element of societies worldwide for centuries. Athletics impart valuable skills and meaningful experiences for everyone involved – on the field and in the stands. Sport teaches children and adults alike to cast aside differences to achieve a common goal. It gives us something to celebrate during troubled times, and it establishes real camaraderie in a world that has grown increasingly dependent upon technologically-facilitated interaction. Sport teaches us the value of hard work and goal-setting. It teaches us how to remain focused under pressure and to respond appropriately in challenging circumstances. It teaches us how to take great triumphs and devastating defeats in stride, to do our best and measure ourselves not against others but against our own potential.

Despite the many benefits of sport to society, the current climate of competitive sport is also riddled with costs. Destructive conflict has grown so commonplace that many athletes and supporters are willing to accept it as part of the game. We confuse competition with conflict, and many games are reduced from a societal benefit to an ego-driven fight to avoid defeat at all costs.

The purpose of this white paper, the first in a three-part series, is to outline the many types of conflict that emerge in sports, explore potential reasons that destructive conflict occurs, and illustrate the costs that destructive conflict imposes upon administrators, coaches, athletes and supporters. The subsequent white papers (*Preventing Sports Conflict* and *Resolving Sports Conflict*) build upon this foundation and recommend specific approaches to preventing and resolving conflict in sports.

The late NCAA President Myles Brand elevated discussion of sports conflict to a new level. He was not willing to accept the common notion that destructive conflict is an inevitable component of intercollegiate athletics. He understood that education and commercial sports could comfortably co-exist, even strengthen one another. Skeptics initially believed Brand was overly ambitious to challenge such a long-standing, pervasive issue to examine sports conflict at the most fundamental levels. Brand, however, saw the fundamentals as integral to the success of student-athletes and to sports as an industry:

*“It’s not all about winning. It’s also about the way the games are conducted and [how] the athletic program undertakes its activities. ...In college, winning is important but it’s more than that. It’s how you participate. ...How you conduct yourself and what values you’re representing. ...Learning attitudes and values and developing life plans are an important aspect of growing while in college. There are many ways to obtain that growth and development. I think none does it better than athletics.”*

## Case Studies

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- University of Oregon running back LeGarrette Blount will not be remembered for his season records, but for punching an opponent and a teammate before charging Boise State fans after a disappointing season-opener in 2009. Blount was suspended for the majority of the season. Losing the game to a lower-ranked team was embarrassing, but not nearly as degrading as the post-game media coverage that established Blount's infamous indiscretion as the "Punch Heard Round the World." Going into the season, Blount was a contender for the Walter Camp Award, which recognizes the college football player of the year. He was predicted to be a second-round NFL draft pick. Instead, he sat out most of his senior year and was entirely picked over in the draft.
- University of New Mexico's Elizabeth Lambert elevated 2009 fall coverage of intercollegiate women's soccer to unprecedented levels, not for skilled play but for an inappropriate use of force that went almost entirely unacknowledged by the referee or her coach. In footage of New Mexico's semifinal game against Brigham Young, Lambert can be seen punching an opponent in the back, kicking another during play, and pulling one player's hair so hard that her head snapped back as she was forced to the ground. Lambert received one yellow card during the final minutes of the game. New Mexico lost the match. After clips of Lambert's behavior on the field were broadcast around the world, she was suspended from participation in any team activities for the season.

Former Oregon State women's basketball coach LaVonda Wagner has faced much recent criticism for her actions in past years. According to *The Oregonian*, "Eight former players and four of their mothers say the coach aims to control players' lives, and puts the well-being of the women on her team at risk. They say Wagner, 45, pressures athletes to play through serious injuries, threw a chair during a locker room tirade, ordered players to attend Weight Watchers sessions and once was kicked off a plane in front of her team after refusing to hang up her cell phone. One mother says that her "demoralized" daughter later sought counseling after leaving Oregon State because Wagner inflicted such "mental damage." During Wagner's four years at OSU, the women's basketball team lost 15 players, four assistant coaches, and four members of the team's support staff. She was recently fired and has been replaced, but it remains uncertain whether OSU will have enough players left to piece together a team this fall.

- Three Duke lacrosse players were accused of kidnapping and raping an exotic dancer they hired for a party in 2006. Ryan McFayden wrote an e-mail after the party stating that he wanted to hire more strippers, and then "kill and skin" them. The North Carolina Attorney General spent more than a year on the investigation. Racial issues surrounding the case ignited tensions on campus and across Durham. Duke students were threatened with gang violence. Three-time Coach of the Year Mike Pressler lost his job and Duke cancelled the lacrosse season. Duke's President formed five separate committees to review issues surrounding the case. After the players were acquitted, they sued the Attorney General, the city of Durham, and the lab that processed their DNA tests. The University settled for an undisclosed amount. In 2008, 38 other players from the 2006 team filed a lawsuit against the University and the city for emotional and reputational damage associated with the trial.

### **Costs of Sports Conflict**

These scenarios transcend divisions of sport, gender, race, and age. They take place after a loss, during practice, on the field, and off the field. They are different, but they are also remarkably



alike. Blount, Wagner, Lambert, and the Duke Lacrosse players acted destructively, and their poor conflict resolution skills cost them, and countless others, a great deal during the season and for many seasons to come.

- After innumerable hours and dollars devoted to repairing the public relations nightmare imposed by Blount's behavior, UO administrators are still trying to mend the university's public image and ensure Nike executives that the athletic sponsor's association with Oregon football will not tarnish the brand. Duck fans are cautious about supporting a team with a reputation for unpredictable negative behavior off the field. Blount lost a shot at the draft and what could have been yet another record-breaking season. The UO Athletic Administration, which houses more than 30 employees, spent many weeks entirely focused upon the issue. The University President's office and the Communications Department also dedicated thousands of human resource hours to managing fallout from the incident. The single punch cost the university thousands of hours that would have otherwise been used toward program enhancement.

We do not know the exact cost of this incident, but we can speculate. If an assistant athletic director's annual salary at a school like UO averages \$75,000, and he or she spends four weeks managing the incident, his work alone cost the university near \$6,000. If we then expand our view to consider the other employees across campus and the time they dedicated to the incident, the figure grows exponentially. We cannot know the salaries of each individual involved, but we can create a conservative estimate:

- If 30 individuals who earn an annual salary of \$40,000 each spent four weeks managing the incident, it would have cost the institution \$100,000.
- If we also consider the salaries of the head football coach, athletic director, and the university president, we need to add more than \$160,000 to that amount.

In reality, there may have been more or fewer employees involved, they may have spent more or less time on the incident, and the university may be paying them more or less money. We do not know whether the University of Oregon spent more than \$360,000 in human resource dollars alone to address this incident, but this estimate is a probable figure that demonstrates the enormous opportunity cost, not to mention direct monetary costs and the loss of good will.

- The thousands of online posts ridiculing Lambert frequently refer to women's soccer as a "catfight," which comes as a devastating blow to the hard-fought battle for equal respect and opportunity for women in athletics. Lambert's coach was blasted for being unwilling to control his players' behavior on the field. Mountain West Conference officials spent months investigating the overall dynamic of the BYU match. The UNM team was sentenced to dozens of community service hours in an attempt to counteract the negative effect Lambert's actions have had upon girls' youth soccer.
- The remaining OSU women's basketball players may not have an opportunity to play during this year. Some will forfeit their final season of eligibility. Supporters will miss out on an entire season and potentially lose interest in the sport. The administration will take a financial loss on top of the \$1.2 million owed to Wagner for the duration of her contract. The university



could face Title IX discrimination charges or be required to make cuts to men's athletics if they are unable to reinstate the women's team.

- The state of North Carolina, the city of Durham, and Duke University spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on the original lawsuit and subsequent trials. University administration spent many thousands of hours trying to prevent race riots and address accusations of systemic racism and sexism across campus. The New Black Panthers protested near campus. Coach Mike Pressler sued the school for wrongful termination and then for disclosing the terms of the settlement. Two of the accused players, though acquitted, left school. The rest of the nationally ranked team missed out on an entire season. Duke was accused of abandoning its students in a time of need. Four years later, the men's lacrosse team is still associated with the accused rape and Duke maintains a permanent website dedicated to the incident. The university-owned house where the lacrosse players lived sat vacant for four years until the city demolished it in July 2010.

In May 2010, the Duke Men's Lacrosse team won the national championship. The players celebrated in tears, hoping that the victory will help them overcome the lingering association of Duke Lacrosse with "scandal and shame."

It is important to understand the cost of a single episode of conflict in relationship to winning, dollars, career development, etc. The overall cost of any of the above incidents is dispersed among a number of stakeholders.

The cost to each stakeholder group may include (but is not limited to):

- *Administrators*: Loss of revenue streams, loss of good will, brand damage, time, stress, liability, reputational damage, job termination
- *Coaches*: Team losses, financial losses, job termination, damage to future career opportunities, reputational damage
- *Athletes*: Sub-optimal on-field performance, suspension, premature end to athletic career, loss of scholarship, defamation, damage to future professional opportunities, damage to personal life, loss of product endorsements, criminal sentence
- *Supporters*: Loss of good will, dignity and spirit in connection with "their" team's performance or personal behavior; reputational damage

*"Who we are as Americans – our attitudes and ambitions, our beliefs and interests – are influenced by the role of sports in society. ...Given the relationship between sports and culture, it behooves us to get it right." - Myles Brand, 2006*

## **A Systemic Problem**

Negative conflict in sports is not new. Recent incidents, such as those involving LeGarrette Blount and Elizabeth Lambert, are mere continuations of a pattern of behavior that has persisted for decades. Coaches' and administrators' reaction to this behavior is also consistent. Despite the systemic nature of the problem, we continue to wait to address the issue of negative conflict in

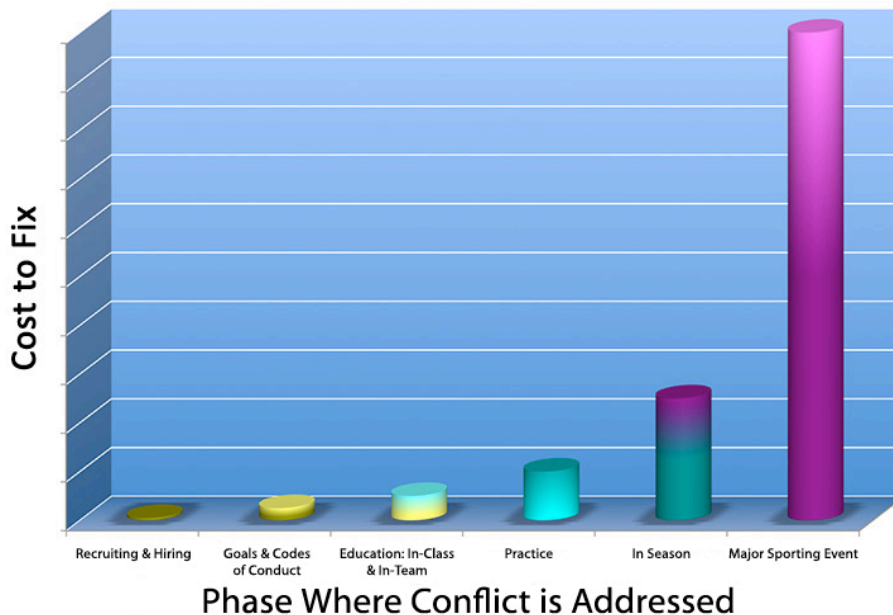


sports until after a damaging event occurs. We must assume a preventive approach to sports conflict in order to achieve lasting change and alleviate the costs to stakeholders at all levels.

These stories are not unique. They are a sampling of what takes place every day on the field, in the locker room, and from the sidelines. They occur in professional and intercollegiate athletics, as well as youth sports and recreational teams. Sport means many things to many people. It presents an opportunity to learn and practice valuable life skills, including: teamwork, communication, responsibility, goal-setting, and conflict resolution. It is a high-profile, multi-billion dollar industry. It has also become a hotbed of destructive conflict and poor role modeling. It has become an arena in which the divisive drama surrounding sport frequently overshadows the game—and the costs include surrendered victories, financial losses, and an erosion of goodwill. Myles Brand spoke about this systemic problem in 2004:

*“If the bright, shining idea of intercollegiate athletics – sports for sports sake, the participant as student and athlete, the coach as teacher and mentor – has been tarnished, it has not been from the single atrocity or the one, horrible unspeakable act. It is the cumulative effect of neglect and often denial that concerns me most.”*

The following chart illustrates the cost of destructive conflict when allowed to progress over time:



\* Adapted from *Managing Software Requirements: A Use Case Approach* by Leffingwell and Widrig (2003).

Conflict prevention and early intervention minimize the costs of destructive conflict. Ignoring or failing to identify early indications of a problem will yield progressively larger costs as the problem festers and grows. This model demonstrates the value of assuming a proactive, as opposed to reactive, approach to conflict.

If, for example, athletic administrators believe a candidate for a coaching position may be too invested in negatively disciplining players, they will save a great deal of time and money if they continue the search than if they hire the questionable coach and problems emerge down the line.



LeGarrette Blount indicated an unwillingness to cooperate with teammates and coaches during team meetings early in 2009. With the appropriate skills and resources, coaches may have been able to identify, intervene and resolve the problem before it escalated into a costly, internationally-televised stain on the university and the sport.

**Defining Conflict.** Conflict is an inevitable presence both inside and outside the realm of sport. Players, coaches, fans, and referees cannot reasonably be expected to always agree. Conflict, in its purest form, is a natural (at times, even beneficial) occurrence. When handled appropriately, conflict can facilitate collaboration and the sharing of information. It can enable parties to develop superior strategies that would not have been possible without a team approach.

This paper focuses specifically upon destructive conflict in sports. Unlike the conflict situations referenced in the paragraph above, negative or destructive conflict rarely yields positive outcomes. Many times, destructive conflict arises because the parties involved do not possess the skills to acknowledge and effectively resolve conflict in a constructive manner. The conflict escalates over time, finally resulting in costly clashes. With the appropriate tools, this type of destructive conflict can be prevented and constructively resolved.

### **Conflict Results in Sub-optimization**

If athletes and coaches are unable to grapple with conflict, their performance is stunted, teams become disintegrated, and personal behavior compromises professional achievement. It is a no-win situation for everyone: players, coaches, sponsors, administrators, and fans. Because conflict results in sub-optimization, conflict resolution skills are critical to achieving maximum potential both on and off the field.

Playing hard does not require that athletes play dirty or lose self-control. Coaches screaming from the sidelines inspire fear and frustration, but they don't make their players stronger. Perpetuating the image of the "live wire" athlete repeatedly burns the players and the industry.

**Defining "Compete."** The English word *compete* is derived from the Latin *competere*, 'to strive after (something) in company or together.' Early use of the word was related to competence: one's ability to perform optimally at a particular task. Currently, however, we tend to think about competing in terms of the comparative success model. Rather than aiming to achieve our highest potential, we seek only to perform marginally better than our opponents. We exert enough energy to win and no more. We often measure our own performance not in relation to our own potential but in comparison with others. This mentality leads to negative conflict and sub-optimization.

### **Origins of Rules & Goals**

Athletics maintain several layers of rules. The rules of the games themselves are well-established and generally accepted by all. Team rules and motivational goals, however, can present complications. In many cases, they are developed by well-intentioned coaching staff who, as team leaders, provide them as guidelines for team members to follow. While these goals and the plans to achieve them may be surefire strategies for success, they are not as successful as they could be due to one critical component: they were not developed in partnership with those they impact most. While coaches and players likely share the same goals and may even agree upon



the steps necessary to achieve them, a top-down approach prevents athletes from actively contributing to and taking ownership of these goals. The Association for Applied Sport Psychology states:

*It is important that athletes feel in control (self-determined) of their goals. Ensuring that athletes accept and internalize goals is one of the most important features of goal setting. If athletes set their own goals, they will most likely internalize them. Sometimes when coaches set goals for athletes, they aren't taken seriously.*

When administrators and coaching staff establish team goals and rules in isolation, student-athletes are relegated to pawns on the playing field. No one likes to be told what to do or what to care about. When people feel that their thoughts and feelings are not valued, they are likely to discredit even the most well-intentioned ideas because they feel they are being imposed upon them. This undermines accountability and reinforces a culture in which student-athletes are prone to rebellion and destructive behavior.

### **The Fallacy of the Angry Athlete**

Many coaches accept destructive behavior on and off the court because they believe that the underlying fire fuels a player's game. Fans, coaches, and commentators have difficulty distinguishing Rasheed Wallace's "combustible" nature from his remarkable performance on the court. When asked about his erratic behavior during a televised interview with teammate Alan Iverson, Wallace said, "...We were always winners and that's the bottom line... A lot of GMs say, "Oh, Wallace. He's an a-hole...but they would love to have me on their team because I'm a winner.""

Tiger Woods recently made a public statement that he was going to "try and obviously not get as hot when [he] play[s]." *The Wall Street Journal* then ran an article questioning whether a calmer Woods would still be able to perform at the same caliber. "Mr. Woods's anger has often been seen as evidence of his unmatched competitive drive, his singular focus and his demand for perfection from himself." In other words, if Woods doesn't get angry it means he's not trying as hard.

Boston Red Sox right fielder J.D. Drew is consistently criticized for being too calm, even unenthusiastic, and for sitting out games when injured. Despite what some consider all-star caliber stats, Drew is the frequent subject of degrading comments and homophobic remarks insulting his masculinity. Fans' overwhelming criticism is that he is boring because he never gloats or displays anger. Teammate Kevin Youkilis, on the other hand, is a favorite among fans. While his stats are similar to Drew's, Youkilis frequently erupts in violent episodes that involve breaking bats, punching water coolers, and throwing fists at both teammates and opponents.

What is the role of professional athletics in society? How might a cultural perception of professional sport as entertainment and athletes as entertainers contribute to conflict in sports?

### **Why is Conflict a Major Issue in Sports?**

A number of variables contribute to the high level of conflict in sports. Some of them include:



- **Winners & Losers.** Athletic matches result in clear winners and losers. This fact predisposes sports to conflict, but to a healthy form of conflict that can and should be maintained. This conflict is critically different from destructive conflict. Athletics are designed in such a way that the rules of each sport serve as operational codes of conduct through which to navigate and effectively resolve the win-lose conflict. It is resolved through healthy competition. While no one can be expected to enjoy losing, it is generally understood that the best-performing player or team has demonstrated a measurable superiority as determined by the rules of the game. Other types of conflict are rarely so cut and dry.

There are two ways to win an athletic match. One route is to strive to reach an optimum level of performance. The other is to force the other team to lose, therefore securing the win by default. Rainer Martens, founder of the American Sport Education Program, states, “The basic problem about this issue of worthiness is that athletes learn...to gauge their self-worth largely by whether they win or lose. The devastating result is that athletes can maintain their sense of self-worth only by making others feel unworthy.”

The win-lose dichotomy can be a source of negative conflict when players or teams fixate upon the zero-sum outcome. They aim to win, not by optimizing their own performance, but by attempting to undermine the performance of their competitors. In the short term, this tactical approach can help teams to win. In the long term, however, it places an artificial ceiling upon athletes’ and teams’ growth potential and prevents them from achieving optimal performance.

- **High Stakes.** Coaches and professional athletes currently receive higher salaries and more perks than during any other time in the history of sports. The continuation of such financial compensation is often contingent upon winning. This pressure can result in athletes and coaches taking drastic measures to enhance performance or secure a win.
- **High Visibility.** Athletes experience continuous surveillance of their personal and professional lives, which creates a great deal of pressure both on and off the field. Increased media coverage and technological developments enable constant public surveillance of players’ sports careers and private lives. Athletes can expect little privacy beyond the walls of their own homes. The battle for privacy is intensified for intercollegiate athletes who must balance a high-profile athletic occupation with a very public academic career.
- **Racial Issues.** Discrimination frequently incites conflict both inside and outside the realm of athletics. Race is a complicated issue in both intercollegiate and professional athletics, and one that athletic institutions cannot afford to ignore.

The student population at the University of Oregon in Spring 2009 was 85% white, non-Hispanic. The 337 African-American students enrolled during that period composed only 1.6% of the total 20,213-member student body. A disproportionate number of students included in that 1.6% were student-athletes: 48 African-American students composed nearly 50% of the football team, 10 made up 63% of the men’s basketball team, 6 composed 43% of the women’s basketball team, and dozens more were named to the rosters of other UO intercollegiate teams.



Casting aside all judgment about what the athletic rosters or student population should look like, these numbers deserve attention because they illustrate a demographic backdrop with potential for conflict. Student-athletes of every race and background experience difficulty assimilating with their non-athlete peers because of their demanding schedules and high visibility. For students of color recruited to play at overwhelmingly white universities, discrimination and minority status often compound that struggle. Student-athletes of color, widely considered to be representatives of their universities, may not feel a part of the very institutions for which they play.

- **Gender Issues.** Title IX, under-representation in the media, and societal expectations of women all contribute to gender-related sports conflict. While the number of females who participate in sports has grown tremendously over recent decades, female athletes still do not receive anything approaching a similar level of recognition. Title IX prohibits gender-based discrimination in education and athletics; however, the requirements can also be a source of conflict as institutions attempt to balance the number of men and women who participate in intercollegiate sports.

The evolving role of women in society also contributes to conflict in sports. Female athletes' athletic goals and achievements may frequently conflict with societal expectations of women. As a result, female athletes often receive very different attention than male athletes. For example, when male athletes fight on the field, we call it a brawl. When female athletes throw punches, we call it a catfight. Is the role or the path of the female athlete different from that of the male athlete? What is the relationship between sport, gender and sexuality?

- **The Role of Technology.** Technology has also ignited conflict during play as athletic commissioners grapple with whether and how to incorporate the instant replay into the game. Professional tennis has widely embraced Hawk-Eye technology, and players are allowed a regulated number of challenges to review line calls at every stadium that possesses the technology. Football referees frequently review footage of uncertain calls. Basketball referees generally only do so to consider game-defining three-point shots at the buzzer. Baseball uses cameras, but umpires cannot defer to the technology to determine even the most uncertain calls.

What is the role of technology in sports? Can it help to prevent or resolve conflict due to human error, or does it impede the flow and detract from the timeless tradition of sport? If it is used, with what frequency should it be employed? Some players and fans prefer that sports officials utilize technology to determine every call. Other fans believe human subjectivity is a critical element of human sport. Still others would lose interest if officials increase use of technology because frequent interruptions will lengthen game times.

As the world changes so, too, does sport. How do we determine which aspects should be preserved and which aspects should necessarily evolve?

### **The Role of Athletics in Academic Institutions**

Why do universities offer athletics? The relationship between athletics and education is a source of conflict within many universities. Advocates of sport believe that participation in athletics provides learning opportunities well beyond those that can be taught in the classroom. Others



argue that many college athletes have little or no academic ambition—they attend college merely because college sport is an avenue to the professional athletic arena, and administrators admit them because they increase revenues.

There seems to be a general lack of understanding and empathy from both the athletic and academic camps. Many academics believe student-athletes and athletic administrators are unfairly privileged. Many athletic advocates believe that academics are inflexible and overly critical. Student-athletes and non-athletes lead very different lives, and they too have difficulty empathizing with one another. This deeply entrenched athletic-academic divide can be witnessed every day on campuses across the country.

*Example:* The University of Oregon’s John E. Jaqua Academic Center for Student Athletes has been the subject of controversy since it opened its doors in January 2010. The building, a gift from Nike Founder Phil Knight, cost approximately \$1,100 per square foot, making it one of the most expensive buildings in the history of the country. Non-athletes on campus frequently refer to the Jaqua Center, with its surrounding moat and floor-to-ceiling windows, as “the Ice Cube” or “the Jock Box.” The first floor café is open to the public, but access to the upper floors is restricted to student-athletes and staff. The athletic department does, however, offer weekly guided tours for the public to view student-athletes enjoying the revolutionary technology and state-of-the-art architecture from behind the glass walls of the upper halls.

Some view the building, undoubtedly the most modern and luxurious building on campus, as symbol of privilege and excess. What does it mean that these resources are only available to student-athletes? On the other hand, what does it mean that the university finally offers an academic center for student-athletes that meets the caliber of its athletic facilities?

*Example:* University of Oregon instructors are explicitly barred from scheduling any additional activities during the last week of classes prior to exams; however, the biggest football game of the regular season (the “Civil War” game against archrival Oregon State University) is always scheduled for the Saturday before exam week.

What does it mean that instructors cannot schedule additional academic activities that might impede students’ preparation for finals, but the athletic department can schedule nationally televised athletic events? Does the game schedule send a message to student-athletes that their exams are not as important as athletics? Does it communicate that exam preparation is not as important for student-athletes as it is for other students who have a choice about whether to participate in game day events? Why does the school pay the average tenured full professor an annual salary of \$100,000 while paying football coach Chip Kelly more than \$1.82 million? Questions like these are the basis of much conflict on campuses across the nation.

*“Intercollegiate athletics has become an integral part of college life and culture. Given the educational value of participation in athletics, it is important to not sell this great enterprise short. But it is immoral to sell it out.” - Myles Brand, 2009*

### **Context is Key**

In order to effectively manage sports conflict, we must acknowledge its many forms and the contexts from which it emerges. Each sport maintains its own unique culture. As a result, conflict



manifests differently in different sports. Context also pertains to whether conflict occurs inside or outside the lines of play, the level of play, and any cultural factors that influence the surrounding climate.

Each sport maintains its own unique culture. The rules, etiquette, venue, dress, fan base, and structure all contribute to establish a distinct atmosphere surrounding the game, media coverage, and lifestyle. As a result, conflict manifests differently in different sports. Basketball and hockey are susceptible to conflict between team members because they require cooperation during play. Baseball may be most susceptible to conflict between players and umpires because there is such a narrow margin to define what is “in” vs. “out,” “ball” or “strike.” While it is perfectly commonplace for a spectator to jeer at a free throw shooter, it is grounds for dismissal to do so on the putting green. In order to effectively address conflict in sports, we must acknowledge its many forms and the contexts from which it emerges.

Context also pertains to whether conflict occurs inside or outside the lines of play, the level of play, and any cultural factors that influence the climate surrounding the sport. Some cultural factors may include: nationality, ethnicity, team culture, university culture, gender culture, and the goals of the athletic organization (e.g., to create unity, raise profit, have fun, etc.)

A surface scan of the sports-related conflict featured prominently in the media over the past six months revealed several common types of conflict both inside and outside the lines. The following highly publicized events indicate the existence of a deeply entrenched problem rooted well beneath the surface.

### **Inside the Lines**

Inside the lines refers to conflict that takes place during play between parties directly involved in the game. Examples may include:

- ***Intra team Conflict.*** Example: *Teammates B.J. Upton and Evan Longoria had to be physically separated after Upton apparently did not run hard enough for the ball when the Rays were losing 2-1 to the Diamondbacks.*

Conflict between members of the same team can arise from situations involving narcissistic behavior, favoritism, teammate mistakes, etc.

- ***Inter team Conflict.*** Example: *When Texas Tech’s Jordan Barncastle blatantly fouled Baylor’s Brittney Griner during a March 2010 basketball game, Griner responded by punching the Texas Tech player in the face.*

Conflict between a member (or members) of one team and a member (or members) of another team frequently escalates throughout a number of clashes on the court, resulting in a technical foul or other sport-appropriate conduct.

- ***Coach-Athlete Conflict.*** Example: *French striker Nicolas Anelka was sent home from South Africa after unleashing a tirade of expletives at his coach during a World Cup halftime. The conflict escalated when team members reacted to their star player’s dismissal by refusing to practice the following day.*

Conflict that occurs between a coach and a member (or members) of the same team generally builds over a long period of unresolved frustration.

- **Athlete-Fan Conflict.** *Example: Hamburg soccer player José Paolo Guerrero threw a water bottle at a fan who was apparently taunting him from the stands after Hamburg's 0-0 tie with Hannover in 2010. Paolo Guerrero was fined €50,000-100,000.*

Increased salaries and media coverage have contributed to the objectification of athletes. Athletes' celebrity status distances them from the public, and they are often verbally (and sometimes physically) assaulted by spectators. Ron Artest's climb into the stands to brawl with a Piston fan who threw a cup filled with liquid at his head during a 2004 NBA game ignited a mob scene infamously named "The Malice at the Palace." The next game the Pacers played in Detroit was delayed for one hour while the police investigated bomb threats in the Pacers' locker room.

- **Unwritten Rules.** *Example: Chicago White Sox relief pitcher Randy Williams hammered a Florida Marlins hitter, which instigated a brawl, because two Florida runners stole bases despite the Marlins' wide lead.*

Sports often maintain informal, but dutifully observed, rules of etiquette. Many athletes and coaches consider violation of these rules a sign of disrespect, and such instances often ignite conflict.

- **Cheating.** *Example: While recent NCAA statistics state that only 1% of intercollegiate athletes have tested positive for performance-enhancing drugs, former athletes admit that many intercollegiate athletes work around the ban by taking steroids during the summer.*
- **Officiating Conflict.** *Example: Although umpire Jim Joyce admitted to making a bad call that cost Detroit Tigers' pitcher Armando Galarraga his perfect game, Major League Baseball Commissioner Bud Selig says the call will stand.*

*Example: NBA referee Tim Donaghy recently served a prison term for deliberately miscalling games in conjunction with a large-scale gambling scheme. He is currently working as a freelance writer with Deadspin.com, where he presents post-game analysis of NBA officiating.*

## Outside the Lines

Outside the lines refers to conflict that occurs outside athletic play and may involve parties either directly or indirectly involved in the game. Examples may include:

- **Administrative Conflict.** *Example: Kansas University athletic department officials are under investigation for their "point-system" ticketing policy. Donors apparently received ticket points, not only for donations to the university, but for donating items such as new cars to athletic department staff and their spouses.*
- **Gender-Related Conflict.** *Example: While the number of females who participate in sports has grown tremendously over recent decades, media coverage of women's sports is in decline.*



*A recent study tracking the past twenty years of sports media found that men's sports received 96% of sports media coverage in 2009.*

*Example: Title IX mandates that schools report statistics reflecting equal opportunities for men and women; however, colleges have been known to fudge their numbers or eliminate popular men's programs to balance the scales. Connecticut's Quinnipiac University is attempting to cut the women's volleyball team in order to facilitate a competitive cheer team, which would include a larger number of women at a much lower cost.*

While female athletes have made great strides to establish themselves in the arena of sports, they remain the targets of abuse and discrimination on and off the field.

- **Domestic Violence.** *Example: One study of reported incidents of domestic violence at NCAA Division I schools found that, though male student-athletes composed only 3.3% of the overall population, they were responsible for 19% of the reported sexual assaults.*

According to the National Institute of Health, "One in four women has experienced domestic violence in her lifetime." A striking number of professional and intercollegiate athletes have been accused and/or found guilty of domestic abuse. Athletes are more frequently cited for domestic violence than any other crime. Athletic commissioners have consistently reprimanded players for substance abuse and derogatory remarks; however, they frequently look the other way in even the most public instances of domestic violence. While athletes may not be more likely than non-athletes to engage in acts of domestic violence, they are public figures and millions of youth look to them as role models.

- **Coach-Athlete Conflict.** *Example: Texas Tech Football Coach Mike Leach was fired in January because he ordered that wide receiver Adam James, who had been diagnosed with a concussion, be locked in a dark room and not be allowed to sit down. Leach said that the player's father Craig, an ESPN announcer, made the allegations out of bitterness over his son's lack of playing time.*
- **Athletic/Academic Conflict.** *Example: University of Oregon receivers Diante Jackson and Tyrece Gaines have been determined academically ineligible to compete during the 2010 football season after their first year at the university. Both players are expected to leave school.*

Student-athletes receive many conflicting messages about how to focus their time and energy. In most cases, college coaches are more interested in their players remaining academically eligible than they are in supporting their players' academic and career goals. Athletes are forced to choose courses that accommodate their rigorous practice schedules. Advisers frequently encourage student-athletes to enroll in less challenging courses to ensure they will make the necessary grades to stay on the field.

- **Public-Private Conflict.** *Example: Heisman contender and UO quarterback Jeremiah Masoli was kicked off the team after he broke into a fraternity house and was later charged with possession of marijuana.*



*Example: Three University of Tennessee football players armed with an air pistol attempted to rob a gas station in July 2010. The victim of the robbery has requested that the university be lenient with the players because he is such a fan of the team.*

The responsibility of professional and intercollegiate athletes extends well beyond the playing field. Athletes are role models—ambassadors for their teams, their schools, their regions. As a result, they are expected to refrain from taking any action in their private lives that could negatively impact their public image or their ability to perform on the field.

- **Sponsorship.** *Example: Athletic corporations invest many millions of dollars in intercollegiate athletics. The University of Oregon recently made public its eight-year, \$22.7-million contract with Nike. Nike CEO Phil Knight is also among the University's top donors. In 2007, the University of Michigan secured the most expensive intercollegiate sports contract in history when it signed an eight-year, \$60-million contract with Adidas. When destructive conflicts arise within these athletic programs, sponsors may assume significant risk.*

*Example: When the French World Cup soccer team went on strike during the middle of the tournament, French sponsors Credit Agricole and Quick Restaurants immediately pulled ad campaigns featuring the players.*

- **Athlete-Reporter Conflict.** *Example: Algerian soccer player Rafik Saifi slapped a reporter in the face after a loss to the U.S. during the World Cup matches in June. Saifi has apparently been angry with her since she leaked information about his marriage to a French woman to Algerian newspapers last year.*

The industry supports the press coverage of athletes and sporting events, offering locker room access and special press passes. Athletes, however, do not have the ability to restrict the personal information the press shares with the public, and this presents a conflict for many public figures.

- **Fan-Fan Conflict.** *Example: A Phillies fan intentionally vomited on a man and his 11-year-old daughter in the stands during an April 2010 baseball game.*

Conflict can emerge between fans of opposing teams and of the same team. Team loyalty is a powerful emotional influence. Fans take ownership of their teams and will sometimes take drastic measures to defend them. Some athletic venues sell alcohol, which has contributed to conflict in the stands in instances such as the 2004 Pacers incident and the example above.

## CONCLUSION

Destructive conflict in sports is a costly, systemic problem. Negative conflict results in sub-optimization and it inhibits the quality of true competition. By outlining the many contexts in which conflict arises and the reasons that it has become a prominent issue in sports, we can begin to understand the multitude of interwoven pieces that contribute to the larger problem. There are many, many examples and types of conflict in sports. The one element they share is a common cost. Some punches will be more costly than others; some disparaging comments will hit the press and others will remain unheard. Eventually, however, we will all continue to pay the price if the destructive conflict continues to occur.



## PREVENTING CONFLICT

Negative conflict is not inherent to sport. It can be prevented and resolved. The costs can be reduced or avoided altogether. Possible solutions are affordable and their benefits far outweigh the existing costs.

Myles Brand was not intimidated when he was appointed NCAA president in 2002 and had to face an institution notoriously resistant to change. Skeptics questioned his ability to achieve the widespread change he envisioned, but he was not deterred. He asked the questions necessary to understand the multitude of systemic challenges. He was remarkably adept at recognizing flaws in the system and outlining strategies to go about repairing it. He demonstrated that systematic change can be achieved and that, when the goal is a worthy one, even the skeptics will eventually join the fight.

It is time to continue the work of Myles Brand to reflect the talent, integrity and dedication of our players, teams, and coaches. Not simply because it's the right thing to do—it is a necessary action to continue the growth of the industry, optimize competitive performance, and protect the good will fundamental to sport.

*“Let us not permit our natural impulse to attend to problems and failures to hijack college sports. Let us freely admit and loudly proclaim that intercollegiate athletics has significant value. We should fix the problems, but we should not let them cast a pall over college sports.*

*“As a great American institution, intercollegiate athletics, too, is always in the act of becoming. Sometimes we fall short of our ambitions, but we must always be prepared to resume the full pursuit of them.” - Myles Brand, State of the Association, 2003*



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