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The Price They Pay

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POETINIS: DRINK IN THE TRUTH

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The Human Cost of Collegiate Athletics



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Memorial Stadium Newman Field

William Bassett sits in a black office chair in the training room in the Graham Athletic Center moving and clicking a mouse across a desktop computer. The sophomore lacrosse player is taking his fifth imPACT concussion assessment test. His

curly black hair, still slick with sweat from practice, gets in his eyes and he wonders if that's what is slowing him down. When the test is over, he looks over at the trainers and heads to the locker room to change before he gets his results. It's slow Friday afternoon in the training room — only about 15 athletes had signed in.

College athletics have long provided “physical fitness, leadership skills, discipline, recreation and entertainment to student-athletes and others, often at a relatively low cost,” writes Forbes reporter Richard Vedder in March, 2018 article *The Three Reasons College Sports Is An Ugly Business*. The article discusses how athletes at major schools generate millions of dollars in revenue for the institutions but are often treated badly in the process.

These Division 1 athletes don't get a share of the money they make and there are numerous examples of colleges purposely dumbing down college classes for their athletes to keep them on the courts and away from the classroom. Vedder lists many occasions, but this one stuck out: “In North Carolina, thousands of students, many of them athletes, took phantom courses that made a mockery of academic integrity and the NCAA did nothing substantively.”

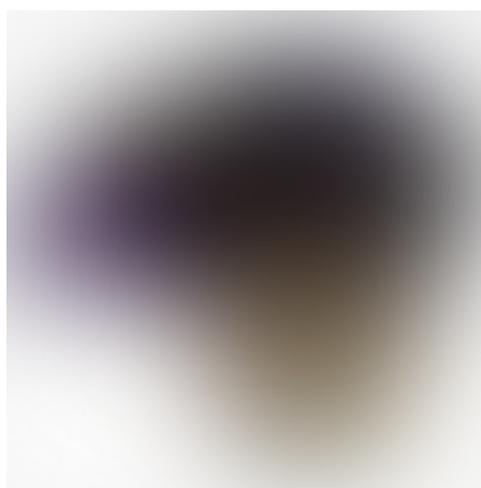
Just because collegiate athletics are a bargain asset for campuses and their extended communities, though, doesn't mean it doesn't come with a cost. Especially for the scholar-athletes who put in thousands of hours of practice and make sacrifices for the chance to play in college. According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association, the governing body overseeing collegiate athletics, fewer than two percent of college athletes will have a professional career. For most, this is the peak of competition.

Athletics at Whittier College became prominent in the 1920s. Back then, the school competed against national powerhouses such as USC and UCLA. The struggling football team has a storied history, not the least of which is because former president, Richard M. Nixon, was a benchwarmer.

Currently, the school offers a wide variety of Division III sports for student-athletes, including football, basketball, cross country, soccer, swimming and diving, tennis, track and field, lacrosse, water polo, golf, women's softball and volleyball, and men's

baseball. We compete in the Southern California Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (SCIAC), against eight other area schools including Chapman, Occidental, La Verne and other similarly situated schools.

The Whittier Poets take their athletics seriously. The student body consists of 30.2 percent athletes according to [the Whittier College website](#). Walking around campus, it's easy to spot the athletes with their Under Armor-sponsored gear, backpacks, hoodies, t-shirts, pants, shoes, etc. Every athlete gets a custom set of apparel each season, as long as you can pay. In Division III, you don't get scholarships and the athletic department does not pay for the apparel and gear for most sports. Gearing up can range from \$150-\$300 out of pocket.



Even on our small campus, it takes two hands to count the number of people on crutches or riding those leg scooters. Most are athletes. It may be hard now to imagine a future prices to pay for playing college sports, [but a 2017 *Sports Illustrated* article looking at Division 1 athletes](#) noted that two-thirds sustained major injuries and half of those became chronic. College athletes are 2.5 times more likely to suffer from chronic injuries than non athletes.

Old injuries are no joke. Studies cited in the *SI* article indicate that health problems associated with injuries sustained playing college sports grow over time as the injuries limit former athletes' abilities to exercise — leading to increased risk for cardiovascular disease. According to the article, one study showed former college athletes perform worse in physical fitness tests than non athletes later in life. “You get a physical on the way in,” says Paul Weinacht, a former offensive lineman at Stanford University who is

quoted in the article. “But there isn’t a physical on the way out. No one asks about your injuries when you leave.”

. . .

“I remember this shooting pain and I knew I had a concussion, but it was also my fifth. You’re not supposed to play after a fifth, so I didn’t get off the field initially.”

Bassett relaxes in his dorm room five out of the seven days during the week, his woodsman-esqe black beard creeping into his mustache. His concussion happened during a practice just days before the start of the spring semester. He attempted to duck a shot ball, but it hit the back of his head. The helmet helped with the impact, but a lacrosse ball is as hard as a rock and college players shoot at around 100 mph.

“I remember this shooting pain and I knew I had a concussion, but it was also my fifth. You’re not supposed to play after a fifth, so I didn’t get off the field initially...I didn’t want to stop playing. I still don’t.”

Bassett eventually waved to the trainer on hand, Keith Candelaria, who is also the head athletic trainer. They carted him back to the trainer’s room and took the concussion test. Will’s memory stats were a few points lower than average. His 2019 season was over.

After his concussion, Bassett had to drop all but two classes, but the school’s disabilities services was able to keep him enrolled with just six credits. “Lacrosse has so much structure to my life and it really helped me organize stuff,” he added, “having that cut out of my life made it really difficult to fill the rest of my time.”

Will is not the only athlete to experience this traumatic loss of purpose. Water polo player Sawyer Belville recently transferred to Whittier College from USC but broke her ankle in January and missed preseason. At first glance, Belville, who is from Chino, looks like she belongs with the hippies in Laguna with her wild blonde hair and floral everything. Windows rolled down and wind racing through our hair, she recently took a break from her busy schedule to speed to the only hotspot in town, Chillin, where she walked in with no shoes and ordered an almond milk tea.

Belville says it killed her to not be able to play while she was injured. Sipping her drink, she recalls how she tripped while running. “I just didn’t see the pinecone, but it saw me,” she laughs, “and I ate it so hard.”

Bellville left USC, the reigning Division 1 national women’s water polo champs and current top seed in the NCAA tournament, for financial reasons. Her old coach, the legendary Jovan Vavic was recently arrested in the college admissions scandal, which hasn’t put USC athletics in the best of light.

When I asked why she wanted to play Division III water polo when she could be doing something else, she said, “Without it, I would totally get fatter, but also I’ve been doing this my whole life. I wouldn’t know what else to do with my time.” Things seems to be working out, though. Bellville made it back from her injury to play this season and was twice named SCIAC athlete of the week. She was recently made All-SCIAC.

“I’ve been doing this my whole life. I wouldn’t know what else to do with my time.”

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Payton Bosque plays for Division 1 University of Hawaii’s women’s water polo. We recently spoke over facetime as he sat in her dorm room memorizing player rotations and plays for an upcoming game against UC Davis. Bosque is a biology major

who juggles practice, studying, and a busy social life. She recently popped a shoulder out during practice and had to sit out the second half on the season.

“It was frustrating to sit on the bench and watch. Getting back in was even worse because I don’t play the same,” she says, talking quickly with her eyes glued to her paper most the time. Even though she’s not playing, she’s still committed to her assignments from the coach.

Her perfect tan and sun-bleached brown bob cut give away that she’s been getting in the pool regularly even with her injury. When I tell her about how college athletes often perform worse later in life, she says, “Yeah, I get that. People could burn out after playing at a collegiate level and not pay so much attention to their physical well-being.”

I asked her if she was worried about this for herself.

“I’ll be fine. I’ve always been active.”

“I’m sure that’s what all athletes think when they’re younger,” I respond.

“Well are you worried? You play in college, too, remember?”

This catches me off guard, but when I thought about it, I realized that I have tendonitis in both elbows and I sprained my knee last season. Water polo players are known to have really messed up knees and hips later on in life.

I tell Bosque that I’m worried I won’t be able to walk right when I’m old. She nods in agreement and relays that her teammate had to get knee surgery because of water polo.

We sit in silence contemplating whether it was worth all the trouble. Or, at least I do. Soon, Bosque picks up her notebook and throws it in her back pack, saying she needs to go to the library to study or print out more paper work from her coach.

Bosque hangs up, leaving me thinking about my future and why I worked so hard to play a sport I would never be able to play again after college. Was it for the memories? The lifelong friends I could make? The satisfaction of living a healthy active lifestyle?

Was it worth the medical bills in my future?

I close my laptop and get ready for practice, pulling out my knee sleeve.

It's counter-attack Monday.

Thanks to Joe Donnelly (show).

Whittier College

Athletics

Concussions

Sports