

Gladiators of gridiron seek union

By Jim Nowlan

Northwestern University football players recently filed a petition with the National Labor Relations Board that seeks certification of the College Athletes Players Association as a union.

Players in elite football programs do deserve a larger share of the megabucks being generated solely because of their superb athleticism.

Programs such as Alabama, Texas and Ohio State each generate \$100-150 million a year and pay their coaches \$3-5 million each.

Players receive free tuition, a bounteous training table, and the distant hope of playing professional ball. Yet scholarships leave athletes without money for necessities, and only a small fraction of the athletes ever play professional ball, and then only for an average of two or three years.

And football-related medical expenses that might arise after a scholarship has run out are often the responsibility of the former athlete.

Star high school athletes are recruited by the top programs to play college football. Period. Getting an education is secondary, though the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has been pushing schools to increase graduation rates of football and basketball programs.

The top programs, the teams you see playing on Saturday afternoons on television, provide tutors as well as note-takers to sit in class when the players can't make it because of travel and game preparation.

But education is still secondary to the 40 hour a week job, almost year-round, of practicing, weight room training, team meetings, travel and playing.

A few years ago when I was teaching at the University of Illinois, I agreed to take in several football players in a couple of independent study courses. This was because the players couldn't find regular classes to fit into their busy schedules.

We met after their post-practice, early evening meal at the training table, located near the practice field. Having just burned up several thousand calories, the players were famished. Each appeared to wolf down a huge T-bone or two, half a chicken, and a couple of baked potatoes.

Then came study and discussion in my independent study class. Their minds weren't on studies, and the experience wasn't satisfactory.

Also some years ago, I attended a professional soccer match in Guadalajara, Mexico. Both teams in the match were affiliated with universities.

In my broken Spanish, I asked a couple of local policemen, who were also watching the match, if the players were paid? Yes, they said.

Did the players also attend the university? Some did; some didn't.

It made perfect sense to me.

That is not exactly what the Northwestern players want. They are not seeking to be paid, but to have health care after college days for sports related injuries. The players also want protections from unexpected termination of scholarships, which are controlled by the coaches.

In the political science department at Illinois we had a student adviser who was both a PhD and a Catholic nun. Sister Marie had the attitude that if the university and its sports programs took in academically underprepared athletes, we should help the young men navigate the university's educational programs.

I recall once that the athletic department had dropped the scholarship for one of its players because his eligibility on the playing field had run out before he had finished his degree.

This tough nun raised holy Hell with the athletic association and they restored his scholarship. Yet few players have an angel looking over them.

In a 2012 University of Wisconsin law review article, University of Illinois labor relations professor Michael LeRoy has proposed a limited form of collective bargaining that would focus on scholarship shortfalls, extended education benefits, and complete health and disability coverage for sports related injuries.

Another friend, sports lawyer Eldon Ham, has suggested that players be paid a small stipend, and that stars earn their own endorsement income, letting the market place determine their value.

Even if the efforts to unionize are unsuccessful, the present, highly publicized initiative may bring the NCAA to the table to discuss expanded considerations for players. It certainly should.

Big time football has become an awesome commercial spectacle that highlights these talented gladiators of the gridiron.

I think it only fair that the players share a bit more in the spoils of the industry.