

Pay for play: the athletic scholarship debate

by Stephen Bindman and Howard Bloom
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The Canadian university athletic scene does not need a system of athletic scholarships such as exists south of the border. The American laissez-faire system, where each university controls its own scholarships and is free to engage in a price war and slave auction for athletes, would do more harm than good in Canada.

The arguments in favor of athletic scholarships are based on several false assumptions.

MYTH—Athletic scholarships will stem the "brawn drain" and keep many Canadian athletes at home.

While it is true that if offered money many athletes would stay here instead of heading south, there are other factors affecting the decision to attend university in the U.S. These include exposure to top level competition as well as excellent facilities, equipment and coaching. Some Canadian schools have very good swimming or basketball or wrestling programs, but they pale in comparison with those of the top 50 or 100 American schools.

In addition, the prestige of American schools is attractive to many athletes. Many want the chance, above all, to swim against Yale, wrestle against Oklahoma or play volleyball against UCLA.

The introduction of athletic scholarships won't prevent the brawn drain. If we want to keep more of our athletes home, we have to improve our facilities, equipment and coaching.

MYTH—Athletic scholarships will raise the level of play in Canadian intercollegiate athletics.

Some argue that players who are paid to play reach a higher standard of play. Scholarships may help a university in a remote area overcome obvious recruiting disadvantages.

But the calibre of the athletes is only part of the recipe for a successful athletic program. Other important ingredients include coaching, facilities and equipment—many of the things which attract Canadian athletes to American universities in the first place. Funds should be allocated in this direction instead of into the pockets of a select group of students.

MYTH—Artists, musicians and writers get grants, therefore so should athletes.

Some argue that athletics should be looked at like any other faculty of the performing arts. Just as a gifted piano player can be awarded financial aid, so should a gifted athlete. There is, however, a difference. Musicians and artists are pursuing a degree in their corresponding study area, football players aren't.

Perhaps one solution would be to give athletes a degree after four years on the team. The degree could be called, as one writer suggests, a BSc in human motor performance.

MYTH—Legalizing scholarships will eliminate under-the-table payments to athletes.

Putting all the cards on the table and making scholarships above ground doesn't necessarily remove wrongdoings. In the U.S., where athletic scholarships are legal, the list of reported abuses is long. There are stories of illegal payments to high school stars, of altering or forging mark transcripts to ensure acceptance into university, of waiving normal admission standards for jocks, of substitute exam writers for stars, of job offers to parents of prospective varsity players, of guarantees of summer or part-time jobs during the year, of lavish entertainment for recruits and their parents, of free cars from alumni or supplies of expensive tickets to sports events.

For every one offence caught, six or seven go undetected. Though some American schools are placed on probation and some athletics people forced to resign, most are not.

There are other good reasons why Canada should not allow athletic scholarships.

FACT—A system of athletic scholarships would favor some schools more than others.

Left entirely to their own resources to locate scholarship money, Canadian universities could find themselves in a financial war which would completely undermine the balance of competition.

Since smaller schools could never match larger schools in aid to athletes, the rich would get richer and the poor poorer. Larger, wealthier institutions would dominate athletics.

There is some evidence from across the border to support these fears. The scholarship war is one of the major reasons over 225 colleges have dropped their football and other programs since World War II. Today many sports are traditionally dominated by the same few wealthy schools.

In Canada, with only 40 thinly spread universities with varsity programs, the loss of even a small number of teams would be disastrous. Instead of opening up athletics to more Canadian athletes, it would shut the door even tighter.

FACT—Money is not bountiful in Canadian university athletics.

Moral and ethical considerations aside, there is the problem of money. As we know, these are times of financial restraint for universities. Several years ago, Carleton slashed

its intercollegiate program budget. The athletic department forecasts a deficit of over \$25,000 this year. When the financial axe falls, athletic programs are often closest to the blade.

Canadian universities are hard pressed to find sufficient funds for academic scholarships, let alone scholarships for a select group of student athletes. A Canadian study ten years ago estimated the cost of a scholarship program of forty awards a year at \$62,000. With a decade of inflation, that figure is probably double now.

With the current financial set up of Canadian university athletics, a scholarship program could result in bankruptcy.

SOLUTION—Despite all the preceding arguments, there is some need for financial aid to athletes. Varsity sports are time consuming and often athletes don't have time for part-time jobs.

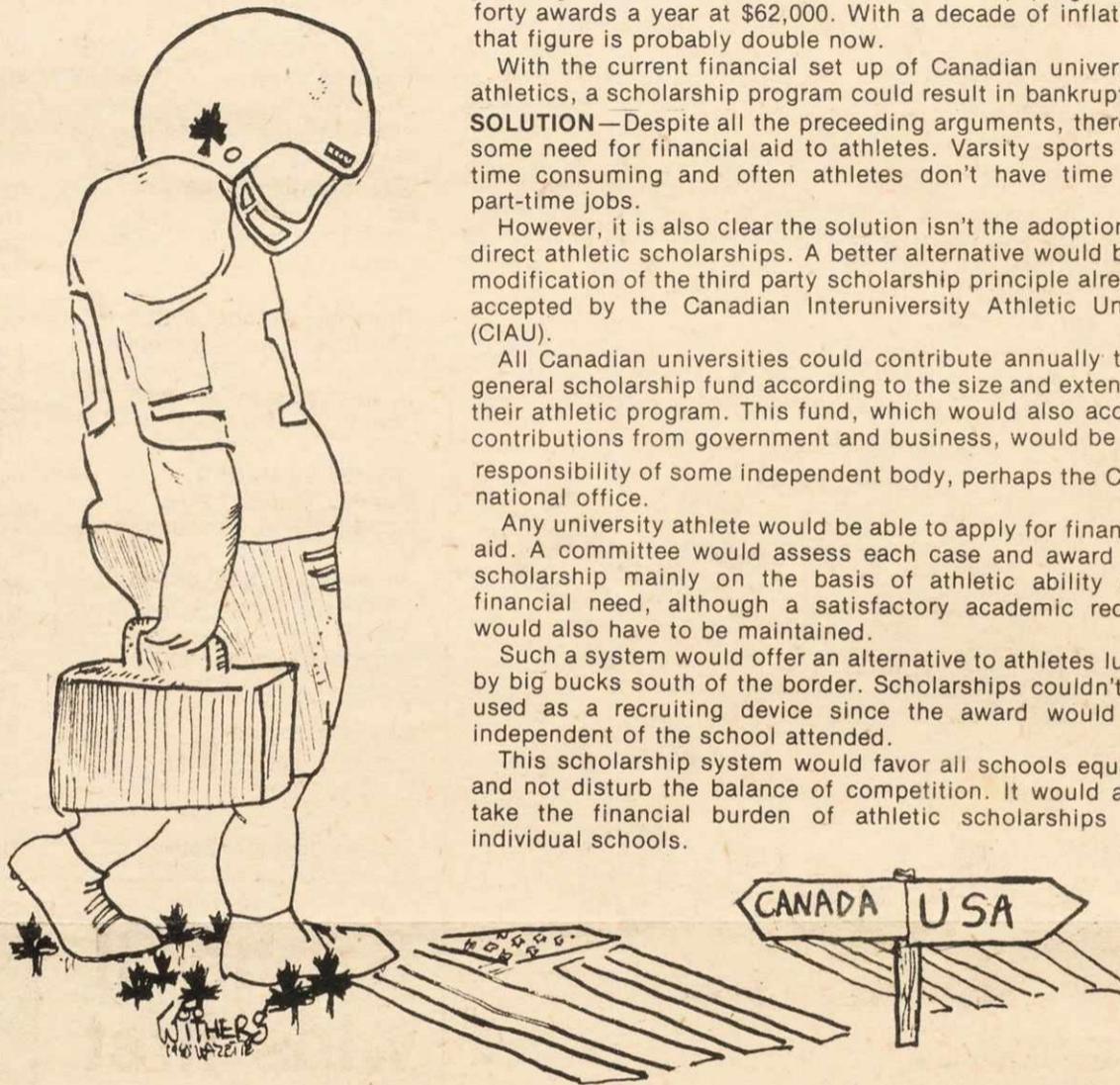
However, it is also clear the solution isn't the adoption of direct athletic scholarships. A better alternative would be a modification of the third party scholarship principle already accepted by the Canadian Interuniversity Athletic Union (CIAU).

All Canadian universities could contribute annually to a general scholarship fund according to the size and extent of their athletic program. This fund, which would also accept contributions from government and business, would be the responsibility of some independent body, perhaps the CIAU national office.

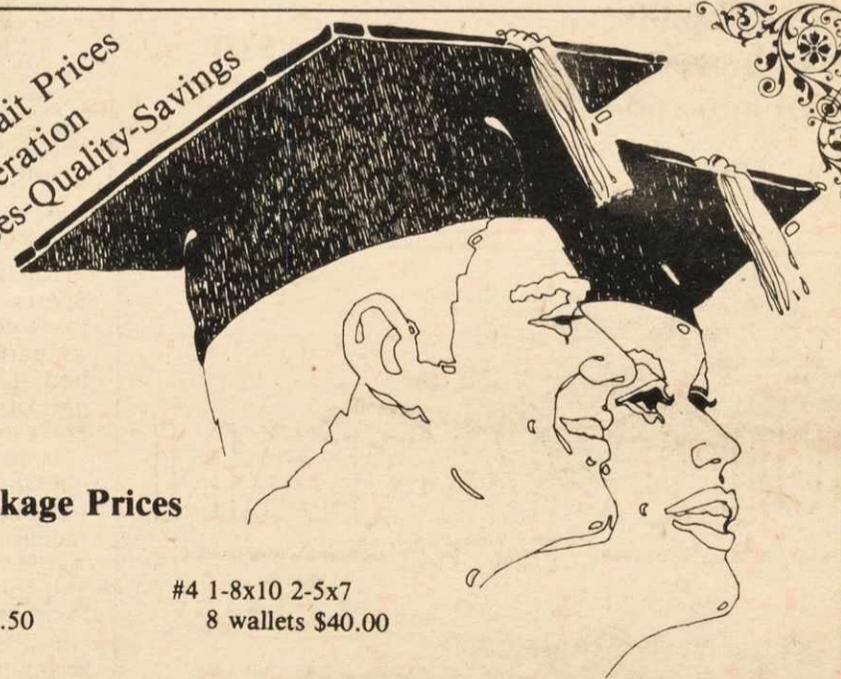
Any university athlete would be able to apply for financial aid. A committee would assess each case and award the scholarship mainly on the basis of athletic ability and financial need, although a satisfactory academic record would also have to be maintained.

Such a system would offer an alternative to athletes lured by big bucks south of the border. Scholarships couldn't be used as a recruiting device since the award would be independent of the school attended.

This scholarship system would favor all schools equally and not disturb the balance of competition. It would also take the financial burden of athletic scholarships off individual schools.



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