

NCAA Football and the Attack on Self-Ownership



Send him mail. [f](#) [t](#)

"The Self Owner" is an original column appearing every Wednesday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Spencer W. Morgan. Spencer is a husband and father, and has studied History and Philosophy at the University of Utah. Archived columns can be found [here](#). OVP-only RSS feed available [here](#).

Normally my column is devoted to deeper philosophy and general principles, rather than commentary on news and current events. Every so often, however, an issue in the news comes up which is so illustrative of the philosophical ideas I am articulating in an area of my own personal interest, that it presents an irresistible opportunity to apply these ideas.

Over the past year or so the controversy over the restrictions and practices of collegiate football players, and the NCAA's regulations preventing them from profiting from their role as highly-visible "student-athletes" has grown to a steady chorus of regular arguments among sports commentators and sports talk radio call-in segments.

The controversy began to grow when legendary coach Steve Spurrier raised the issue in the 2012 spring meetings of the South Eastern Conference, suggesting that players should get some sort of pay for their efforts. Though his proposals were modest, suggesting stipends of \$3,500 – \$4,000 per year, they have served to raise the larger issue and brought into question the core principle of whether a player competing at such a high level of athletic performance and profitable entertainment should be entitled to benefit monetarily from their efforts.

More recently, star Texas A&M quarterback, and Heisman Trophy winner Johnny Manziel has come under suspicion of soliciting cash payments in exchange for autographs. This is yet another example of the NCAA and our larger culture's attack on the application of a basic principle: the idea that a player should be able to profit from the value created by his own abilities and reputation.

Spurrier's exact terminology when questioned by reporters is very illustrative of the deeper problem:

"We as coaches believe they're entitled to a little more than room,

books, board and tuition,” Spurrier said. “Again, we as coaches would be willing to pay it if they were to approve it to where our guys could get approximately three-, four-thousand bucks a year. It wouldn’t be that much, but enough to allow them to live like normal student-athletes. We think they need more and deserve more. It’s as simple as that.” (Edward Aschoff, ESPN.com)

What this statement seems to accept as a presumption, is that the argument for players being paid must be *need-based*. Instead of accepting the anti-profit presumption inherent to such an argument, the second part of Spurrier’s statement should be asserted and examined.

They deserve more, it’s as simple as that. Or at least they, like any of the rest of us does, deserve to choose to sell their efforts as a player to a buyer whose willingness to compensate them monetarily is *not* restrained by regulations and misguided altruistic notions. It’s not that they “deserve” it because of their need, but because they are creating value for which millions of people pay, and from which universities make millions in revenue every year.

Right now, players choose to make this exchange, to varying degrees, based merely on a promise of compensation with education in areas other than athletics, and the potential for a future career as a professional. This is because the NCAA functions in cooperation with National Football League regulations to operate essentially as a monopoly. As Robert Barro pointed out in his 2005 list of most effective monopolies in the US, the NCAA is uniquely effective at maintaining their monopoly because of the cultural presumptions and moral stigma they utilize toward doing so.

“The NCAA is impressive partly because its limitations on scholarships and other payments to athletes boost the profitability of college sports programs. But even more impressive is the NCAA’s ability to maintain the moral high ground. ...the athletic association has managed to convince most people that the evildoers are the schools that violate the rules by attempting to pay athletes rather than the cartel enforcers who keep the student-athletes from getting paid.”

They provide the only sanctioned and accessible path to a career as a professional football

player, and thus distort the terms of the exchange any college football player is making in return for his efforts.

The NCAA system, and the outdated “student-athlete” tradition is attempting to preserve, requires players to participate in what is (to varying degrees based on the individual player) often a farce of pretending to be a “student athlete” playing the sport on the side while primarily being devoted to a full schedule of University academics. Many of these athletes excel at academics, and this is to be expected because they tend to be the type of individuals who push themselves for excellence in everything that they do. However, for many players this is an annoyance and a diversion from their focus on the career they would like, and are actively pursuing.

They are the ones taking the risk of injuries to their bodies, and perfecting their craft with intense work and focus to reach the amazing levels of ability for which we pay to enjoy to the tune of billions per year. It is a deep and fundamental injustice that they should be the only participants in that industry not entitled to bargain for monetary compensation.