

CASE #3.1: GAMESMANSHP OF SPORTSMANSHP: ETHICS IN COLLEGE SPORTS

Introduction

Sports shape the values of millions of participants and spectators, influencing cultural expectations and moral norms. While sports can foster character, teamwork, and perseverance, a “win at all costs” mentality is increasingly dominating college athletics.

The ethical tension often lies between gamesmanship, where winning is everything, and sportsmanship, where competition is viewed as a path to honor, virtue, and personal growth. In sportsmanship, the goal is not only victory but victory with integrity.

The financial stakes amplify these tensions. The NCAA has a \$10.3 billion media rights deal (2011–2025) with CBS and Turner Broadcasting. Many head coaches earn millions of dollars annually, often becoming the highest-paid public employees in their respective states. As revenues rise, so does the pressure to prioritize winning over academics, fairness, and player welfare.

Scenario: College Sports in Practice

In the 2013–2014 season, the top-paid coach in U.S. college athletics earned over \$7.2 million, while the 20th earned \$3.2 million. Such sums raise questions about the mission of higher education and the allocation of public resources.

On-field ethical issues include deliberate intent to injure, retaliation, and the use of performance-enhancing drugs. Off-field issues include criminal conduct, substance abuse, and personal misconduct that reflect on athletes, schools, and society.

The case of Jameis Winston illustrates the problem. While leading Florida State University to championships and earning the Heisman Trophy, he was also linked to repeated off-field incidents—property damage, theft,

inappropriate public behavior, and an accusation of sexual assault. Despite these controversies, the consequences were minimal: a short suspension.

This raises a central question: to what extent should personal behavior—both on and off the field—impact eligibility to compete in intercollegiate sports?

Questions for Discussion

1. How should personal behavior (on-field and off-field) influence eligibility to play? What conduct should disqualify a student-athlete?
2. Should character education be integrated into intercollegiate sports? Which virtues should guide athletes both on the field and in life?
3. Are big-time college sports compatible with the academic mission of higher education? How should we justify the allocation of tax dollars to athletics amid other pressing needs?
4. Are college athletes exploited if they are not paid, or unfairly advantaged if given resources unavailable to other students (e.g., tutors, easy courses)?
5. What ethical concerns arise from performance-enhancing substances?
6. Repeated head injuries have been linked to chronic neurological disease in athletes, even at the high school level. What ethical obligations do colleges have to protect athletes' long-term health?

Closing Reflections

College athletics highlight the ongoing struggle between winning and integrity, between financial interests and student welfare. The ethical challenge is whether institutions, coaches, and athletes can embrace sportsmanship—victory with honor—rather than succumb to the pressures of gamesmanship.