SEARCHING FOR HEROES
IN THE NEW MEDIA WORLD
In the fall of 2012, while I was thinking about how to write this chapter, two personal events crystallized the comparison between Canadian and American university sports. The first occurred in early September at a political science conference at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon. While walking to the hotel after dinner, I passed the football stadium, and it was clear from the lights, crowd, and noise that a major event was occurring. The next morning, I read that the University of Saskatchewan Huskies and the University of Regina Rams had set a Canada West University Athletic Association (CWUAA) regular-season attendance record with around nine thousand people. A month later, I was enjoying a long weekend with my wife in Missoula, Montana, and decided to attend a football game between the University of Montana Grizzlies and the Southern Utah University Thunderbirds on a Saturday afternoon. This game was sold out, with twenty-six thousand fans in attendance.

I couldn’t help but make some initial comparisons. The quality of the football was just a bit higher in the Montana–Southern Utah game. The University of Montana plays in the Big Sky Conference, which is part of the Football Championship Subdivision of Division I of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). This is the second tier of Division I, just below the Football Bowl Subdivision, to which the football teams of largest US universities belong. Canadian Interuniversity
Sport (CIS) football is roughly the equivalent of the next rung down: NCAA Division II. For example, when Simon Fraser University left the CIS to join the NCAA in 2012, it entered Division II.

The most striking difference, however, lay in the scale of the two events. Saskatoon has a considerably larger population than Missoula—250,000 versus 100,000. In addition, the Saskatchewan–Regina game involved two fierce intraprovincial rivals, whereas the Montana–Southern Utah event was just another game in the Big Sky Conference. All the same, the Grizzlies game was a much bigger spectacle, with massive tailgate parties that involved music, plenty of barbequed food, and copious amounts of beer. Almost every store in town had Grizzlies swag for sale, and many spectators made a weekend out of it, whether they stayed in an RV or frequented Missoula’s hotels, bars, and restaurants. Of course, Missoula is a college town without a professional sports team in the state, whereas Saskatoon is not only home to the Huskies but has many fans of a well-known professional team, the Saskatchewan Roughriders, which plays down the road in Regina. All the same, it is difficult to imagine any Canadian college football game generating a comparable degree of excitement. These two football games, less than a month apart, revealed many of the similarities and differences between Canadian and American university sports.

Canadian university athletes often feel a little envious of the relatively high status of university athletics in the United States. They emphasize the superior quality of the athletes and the facilities, as well as the spectacle that surrounds university games. What athlete would not want to play in front of eighty thousand spectators, with millions more watching on television, as opposed to just friends and family? What fan would not prefer to attend a game that is also a form of entertainment, with tailgate parties and beer drinking, pep rallies and cheerleaders? In this chapter, however, I discuss the significant downsides to the American university sport model. I argue that the American system is not better than the Canadian one; the two are simply different, each with its own advantages and disadvantages.

THE MAJOR DIFFERENCES

While many people would naturally focus on the differences between Canadian and American university sport systems, there are, in fact, a number of similarities. First is the basic fact that university students in both countries compete in many of the same team sports, such as football, basketball, hockey, and volleyball, as well as in some of the same individual sports such as track and field and swimming. Most sports have both men’s and women’s divisions, but a few are specific to one gender.
(football for men, field hockey for women). The CIS sanctions twelve sports, and the NCAA, twenty-two. Second, both countries have national governing bodies: the CIS and the NCAA. The CIS has fifty-four schools under its umbrella, and the NCAA has over a thousand. Within both the CIS and the NCAA, there are regional conferences, which may sanction additional sports.

While a few similarities do exist between Canadian and American university sports, it is the differences that are quite striking. These differences can be classified into two overarching categories: the athletic experience and the spectacle. The athletic experience includes the number of athletic scholarships, the number and quality of coaches and support staff, the quality of the athletic facilities, and the quality of play.

The Athletic Experience
Athletes in NCAA Divisions I and II receive athletic scholarships, but Division III (and the Ivy League schools) only offers academic scholarships and need-based financial aid. Athletic scholarships can include free tuition and fees, room and board, and required course-related books. There are restrictions on the number of athletic scholarships that schools can provide. The allotment of athletic scholarships is based on division, sport, and gender. Table 5.1 shows that football at Division I Bowl Subdivision has the highest number—eighty-five at any one time—while smaller sports have much fewer, such as men’s rifle at 3.6. Contrary to widespread belief, some financial aid is available for athletes at CIS schools. Athletic scholarships equivalent to tuition and compulsory fees are allowed for returning players, not new players, if they maintain a certain grade-point average. Demand for richer athletic scholarships with looser academic requirements has been divisive within the CIS, pitting some large schools (such as Laval University, the University of Calgary, and the University of British Columbia) against Ontario universities and smaller schools.

At Canadian universities, only a few sports have a full-time head coach, and football is the only sport with full-time assistants (usually two). For the most part, coaches are either part-time or jointly appointed to an academic unit within the university. The situation is strikingly different at American universities, where all teams have large full-time coaching staffs, many of whom are extremely well paid. The average annual salary for an NCAA Division I football head coach is now over $2 million. For top basketball coaches, “annual contracts now exceed $4 million, augmented by assorted bonuses, endorsements, country-club memberships, the occasional private plane, and in some cases a negotiated percentage of ticket receipts.” The possibility of becoming a top NCAA coach keeps a large number of
Table 5.1 Allotment of NCAA athletic scholarships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th></th>
<th>Women</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Division I</td>
<td>Division II</td>
<td>Division I</td>
<td>Division II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archery</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Badminton</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseball</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basketball</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bowling</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross country</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equestrian</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fencing</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field hockey</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Football</td>
<td>85 (Bowl); 63 (Championship)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Golf</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gymnastics</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hockey</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lacrosse</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rowing</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rifle</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rugby</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skiing</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Softball</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Squash</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swimming/diving</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team handball</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennis</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volleyball</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water polo</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrestling</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

quality coaches in the sports pipeline. It also ensures that American coaches, either established or aspiring, can focus on coaching and stay on the cutting edge of new techniques and tactics so that they can reach, or stay at, the highest coaching levels. Canadian schools cannot compete, and as a result, we see many Canadian coaches moving to the NCAA for the money and opportunities. For example, Shannon Miller, who coached the Canadian women’s hockey team at the 1998 Olympics, left the national team program months after the Games for a job coaching at the University of Minnesota-Duluth, and Gary Gait, one of Canada’s greatest lacrosse players, is the head coach of the women’s lacrosse team at Syracuse University.

American universities have substantially better athletic facilities than do schools in Canada. The stadiums and arenas are larger, with bigger dressing rooms and many other amenities, and support facilities such as weight rooms and practice facilities are also fancier. Canadian university athletic facilities pale in comparison. In Canada, football stadiums, except for those schools that share facilities with Canadian Football League (CFL) teams, often seat only a few thousand spectators, not the hundred thousand that can fit into “The Big House” at the University of Michigan; hockey teams play in rinks that seat one to two thousand, not the eleven thousand who can attend games at the University of North Dakota’s Ralph Engelstad Arena; and basketball teams play in gyms that accommodate one thousand, compared to the twenty-one thousand at the Dean Smith Centre at the University of North Carolina. Weight rooms are often shared with the regular student population. Specialized video rooms and other training areas, if they exist, lack the space and the state-of-the-art technology that are standard at many NCAA schools.

These aspects of the athletic experience mean that the quality of play is much better in the NCAA than in the CIS. The evidence for this is manifold. First, CIS football is roughly equivalent to NCAA Division II, as shown by Simon Fraser’s decision to leave the CIS and join NCAA Division II in 2012. Second, even though the CFL has a quota for Canadian-trained players, a good percentage of these Canadians were trained at American schools. As table 5.2 shows, even though hundreds more Canadians are playing CIS football than NCAA football, the number of players drafted into the CFL in the first round has been about equal. Only in the later rounds have CIS athletes dominated, but that domination reflects the quantity of Canadians, not their quality. This trend is continuing: the CFL Scouting Bureau, in preparation for the 2013 draft, identified the top fifteen Canadian prospects, and only seven of them were from CIS schools. This quality gap is accentuated when we separate players into the so-called skill positions of quarterback, running back, receiver, linebacker, and defensive back versus the non-skill positions.
of offensive lineman, defensive lineman, fullback, safety, and kicker. Table 5.3, which is based on the 2012 CFL rosters, compares the number of skilled and non-skilled players from NCAA and CIS schools. The bottom row shows the handful of players who graduated from the Canadian Junior Football League. Since CFL individual team rosters allow nineteen imports (Americans), twenty non-imports (Canadians), and three quarterbacks (almost always Americans), I have only counted the Canadians. As the table indicates, the majority of CIS players in the CFL are in non-skill positions.

**Table 5.2** CFL draft, 1992–2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st round</th>
<th>All rounds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NCAA 85</td>
<td>CIS 87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCAA 417</td>
<td>CIS 873</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Table 5.3** Canadian CFL players by position, 2012 season

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Skill positions</th>
<th>Non-skill positions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NBA</td>
<td>QB, RB, R, LB, DB</td>
<td>OL, DL, FB, S, P/K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCAA</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIS</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canadian Junior Football</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Third, an examination of the rosters of Canadian national team sports shows a quality gap between the CIS and the NCAA. The 2012 training camp roster for the Canadian senior men’s national basketball team had twenty-six of thirty players from NCAA schools and only four players from CIS schools. The 2014 Canadian senior men’s field lacrosse team, which won the world championship, had all twenty-three players with NCAA experience, and the entire coaching staff was actively coaching in the NCAA. The Canadian women’s soccer team that won bronze at the 2012 London Olympics had sixteen of eighteen players from the NCAA and only two players from CIS schools.
The only exception to this gap in quality is in hockey. CIS teams regularly compete against, and often beat, some of the top NCAA teams in exhibition play. However, hockey is the exception that proves the rule. Hockey is unique for a number of reasons. First, Canada’s national winter sport has a very high number of participants, high-quality coaching expertise, and substantial financial resources. Second, the different eligibility requirements between the NCAA and the CIS means that, on average, CIS teams have older players: they are often in their early to mid-twenties, as opposed to nineteen or twenty. In the NCAA, after players turn twenty-one, they lose a year of eligibility for every year that they compete in an organized sport when they are not studying in university full-time. In the CIS, the average player has already completed his major junior eligibility, and sometimes a year or two of minor pro, before starting a CIS career. In some cases, ex-NHLers compete in the CIS: for example, Mike Danton played for St. Mary’s University after playing for the St. Louis Blues. In women’s hockey, Hayley Wickenheiser, who is in her mid-thirties and is widely considered to be the best women’s hockey player in the world, played for the University of Calgary.

The Spectacle
The spectacle includes the attendance, media coverage, and overall atmosphere that accompany sporting events. For the most part, CIS athletes play in front of hundreds or, at most, a few thousand, although there are exceptions within certain sports (e.g., football at Laval), schools (e.g., New Brunswick or Acadia), and national championships (e.g., football, basketball, and hockey). In many cases, this means playing in front of little more than friends and family. In contrast, the glamorous NCAA sports routinely draw sellout crowds of sixty to ninety thousand for football and fifteen to twenty thousand for men’s basketball. Other NCAA sports such as hockey, baseball, and soccer outdraw their Canadian counterparts by a wide margin. For example, in a special hockey match in January 2016 called the Crowchild Classic, the Mount Royal University Cougars played the University of Calgary Dinos at the Calgary Saddledome in games where tickets were given away. They drew over five thousand for the women’s game, and over thirteen thousand for the men’s. Both games set CIS attendance records. Meanwhile, an ordinary regular-season men’s hockey game at the University of North Dakota, a perennial NCAA power, typically sells out its 11,889-seat arena.

NCAA sports are also saturated with media coverage. This can be measured in billion-dollar contracts for TV rights, millions of viewers for regular-season televised games, the amount of coverage in national and local media, and the focus of
bidding (legal and otherwise) on high-profile football bowl games and, especially, the March Madness brackets of the national basketball tournament brackets. It is a media event when President Barack Obama selects his annual basketball bracket. I cannot imagine former Prime Minister Stephen Harper, a well-known hockey fan, being asked his opinion on CIS hockey.

NCAA sports are big business. In 2010, the NCAA signed a fourteen-year $10.8 billion contract with CBS for the television rights for its men's basketball national tournament. In 2010, both the Big Ten Conference and the Southeastern Conference hit a billion dollars in athletic receipts (ticket sales, concession sales, merchandise, licensing fees, television contracts, etc.). Ohio State outsourced its sports merchandise to IMG College, a sports marketing firm, for a guaranteed $11 million a year. EA Sports paid more than $35 million in 2010 in royalties for NCAA-based video games. Revenue is one side of the equation; the other is spending. Overall, at public universities, Division I athletic programs spent $6 billion in 2010.

In contrast, CIS sports operate more like a local pizza parlour. They struggle to get games televised on sports cable stations like TSN or The Score. Even when they do, the CIS, or a regional division like the Ontario University Athletics (OUA), often have to pay to get their games on the air, and then sell advertising themselves. Although there are exceptions, tickets to games at many universities are often given away. Merchandise sales of university sports paraphernalia are minute.

The overall atmosphere at American university games provides additional entertainment and excitement. There are tailgate parties, cheerleaders, marching bands, and pep rallies. If you are a spectator looking for entertainment beyond the actual game, you cannot beat an American university sporting event. Even professional sports in Canada or the United States cannot compete with the atmosphere at a big-time college game. As Taylor Branch notes, fans who lack tickets to a game are often perfectly content to participate in the tailgate festivities and then watch the game on television in their RV in the stadium parking lot.

EXPLAINING THE DIFFERENCES

What explains these differences in the athletic experience and spectacle of Canadian and American university sports? There are several key factors: private universities, a national sport system, the location of universities, and liquor laws. In Canada, most universities are publicly funded. Provincial governments, which have responsibility for post-secondary education, and university presidents would find it difficult to justify allocating scarce financial resources away from classrooms, laboratories, and
libraries and toward stadiums, weight rooms, high-paid coaches, and large athletic support staffs. The situation is different in the United States, where a private university system parallels the public one. Private schools such as Duke, Notre Dame, and Princeton (and in earlier years, Harvard and Yale) use winning teams and the spectacle around university sports to attract students and to get alumni to donate money. Public schools, because they have to compete with the private schools, often follow suit. As David Schmidly, former president of the University of New Mexico, commented: “One of the most effective ways to market your university nationally is to have a really quality athletic program. It helps recruit faculty, students, and donors. It helps with the image of the whole university.” Even public universities, especially in an era of government austerity with regard to post-secondary education, often have to fundraise for most of their revenue.

A second explanation for the differences between the CIS and the NCAA is that Canada and the United States have very different sport systems. Although in recent years, there has been some melding of the systems in both countries, youth sports are generally governed through a club system in Canada and through the school system in the United States. In Canada, if a child wants to play hockey, soccer, or lacrosse, he or she joins a local club that is unconnected to the school system. The coaches and administrators are volunteers, not teachers and principals. In the United States, sports revolve around the elementary, junior high, or high school. Little League and American Legion baseball in the United States are notable exceptions, but this could be explained by the fact that baseball is a summer sport, with much of it taking place when school is not in session.

Canadian children move through this system as they age, hitting the junior ranks in their late teenage years. In Canada, hockey is governed by the Major Junior A (the Canadian Hockey League) and the provincial Junior A, Junior B, and Junior C leagues throughout the country. Soccer, baseball, and lacrosse also have junior club leagues, of different tiers, for those aged seventeen to twenty-one. High school sports are often considered second rate for athletic development and level of competition. Even football, which is a major high school sport, has three junior club leagues spanning the country. In the United States, high school sports remain king. The example of football at Permian High School in Odessa, Texas, which was immortalized in the film and TV series *Friday Night Lights*, is the norm across much of the country. Many high school football teams draw over ten thousand spectators for a game, and many football and basketball games are on radio or television. As a pathway to professional sport, the Canadian club system, especially for hockey, is dominant. Even in football, where the CIS is the major feeder to the
CFL, the competing Canadian Junior Football League still is able to place fourteen of its alumni in the CFL. In the United States, the NCAA is the farm system for the NFL, NBA, and NHL. Very few American players make it to the professional ranks without first apprenticing in the NCAA. This contrast between sport systems is starkest when it comes to hockey. North American players drafted into the NHL come either from the Canadian Hockey League (CHL), in Canada (not the CIS), or the NCAA (not junior hockey), in the United States. European players come from Europe or, increasingly for some of the top players, from Major Junior A in Canada. Table 5.4 illustrates this by categorizing all of the players taken in drafts from 2007–2012. Players drafted from Canada overwhelmingly come from Major Junior A, with a sprinkling of provincial Junior A players. No players were drafted from the CIS. Although the US Hockey League (USHL) has experienced dramatic growth, the majority of American prospects still compete in either the NCAA or the US high school system. In addition, in contrast to the CHL, playing in the USHL does not preclude a player from subsequently playing in the NCAA: “Almost 25% of the players in NCAA Division I hockey are USHL alumni.”

Table 5.4 Player location in NHL drafts, 2007–12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHL</th>
<th>CIS</th>
<th>NCAA</th>
<th>US High School</th>
<th>US Junior Hockey</th>
<th>Europe</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>516</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


A third explanation for the differences between Canadian and American university sport is the location of the universities. In Canada, most of our universities are in major cities. For example, Toronto has the University of Toronto, York, and Ryerson; Montréal has McGill, Concordia, the University of Montréal, and the University of Québec at Montréal; and Vancouver has the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University. In these cities, professional sports provide plenty of competition, whether it is the NHL, CFL, MLB, or NBA. It is tough for university sports to gain an audience. In fact, it is the universities in smaller communities that tend to have the greatest support in Canada. This can be seen with Queen’s in Kingston, Ontario; Western in London, Ontario; Acadia in Wolfville, Nova Scotia; the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton; or the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon. Further illustrating this point is the fact that the Laval University football program did not take off in Québec City until the Québec Nordiques moved to
become the Colorado Avalanche in 1996. A group of businesses that had supported the NHL team were now left without this marketing resource, and in the breach, Laval started a football program with unprecedented financial support.  

The situation is different in the United States. There are, of course, universities in the major cities, but for the most part, the universities in cities like New York (Columbia, Fordham, or New York University) or Chicago (University of Chicago or Northwestern) are not leading sports schools. The top NCAA schools are outside the major cities. For example, the University of Michigan is in Ann Arbor; Notre Dame is in South Bend, Indiana; the University of Alabama is in Tuscaloosa; the University of Florida is in Gainesville; and Duke University is in Durham, North Carolina. The University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA) and the University of Southern California are two of the exceptions that prove the rule.

The propensity for major US universities to be in college towns or small cities goes back to the *Morrill Land-Grant College Act* for state universities in 1862. The grant, originally designed for education in agriculture and the mechanical arts, was a major boost to higher education in the United States. It provided free federal land for states to establish universities, with the number of grants determined by the number of representatives and senators per state. Although some private universities benefited (e.g., Cornell and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology), the act mostly led to the expansion of public universities. These new schools included Iowa State University, the University of Maryland–College Park, the University of California system, and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. The act also ensured that universities were located in remote parts of the states and led to the creation of college towns supporting the public universities.

A final explanation for US-Canada differences is the fact that liquor laws are more liberal in the United States. While it is true that the drinking age is lower in Canada—eighteen or nineteen, depending on the province, versus twenty-one in all US states—American laws are much more tolerant to drinking in public, which is a staple of the large tailgate parties that are often at the heart of the NCAA sport experience. Many spectators go to NCAA events not for the actual game but for the party atmosphere surrounding the games. US liquor laws are a contributing factor in this atmosphere.

**Reflections on These Differences**

A common perception, on the part of both Canadians and Americans, is that the NCAA system is somehow superior to the CIS one. As a result, many star Canadian
athletes not only want to go to US schools but are encouraged to do so. Canadian national sports organizations often celebrate the athletes who sign with NCAA schools and consider such signings a mark of their own success. Canada Basketball's website has a regular feature celebrating Canadian athletes competing in the NCAA. As mentioned earlier, with the notable exception of hockey, Canadian sport has delegated its high-performance athlete development to the NCAA. Of course, Canada is not alone in this: many countries rely on the NCAA to train their athletes. For example, Auburn University, located in Alabama, sent twenty-seven Olympians to the 2012 London Games, but twenty-four of them were non-Americans.

Besides the athletic experience and the spectacle of the game, this desire to attend US schools is fed by the widespread belief that all NCAA athletes receive a “full-ride” scholarship in the United States. In fact, however, such a scholarship is available only in Division I, and only to a few chosen students in a few high-profile sports. Division II has only partial scholarships and Division III schools have no athletic scholarships. Moreover, even in Division I, it is a common practice to divide scholarships across several players. As table 5.1 shows, there are fewer scholarships than rostered players. For example, a men's hockey team will have about twenty-five players but only eighteen scholarships. It is also untrue that these are four-year scholarships: they have to be renewed on a year-by-year basis, and poor athletic performance can result in a scholarship being revoked. Athletes and parents who may be blinded by the allure of a “free education” also forget that tuition at Canadian universities can be thousands of dollars a year less than at American universities. This gap is even larger when out-of-state and/or international fees are included. This means that if a student gets only a partial athletic scholarship in the United States (which is most common), it is still often cheaper to attend a Canadian university. This is especially true when the Canadian dollar is worth much less than the US dollar. For example, in February 2016 the Canadian dollar was worth only 73 cents against the American dollar.

Also ignored is the fact that, whereas academic standards tend to be roughly the same across all Canadian schools at the undergraduate level, in the United States, the quality of post-secondary education varies widely. Although the United States has some of the world’s best universities, some of them private (such as the Ivy League colleges, as well as schools like Stanford and Duke), and some public (such as the University of Michigan and the University of California at Berkeley), academic standards at many schools are far weaker. This means that graduates from some US schools will have received a substandard education in comparison to the education they would have received in Canada. Clearly, it is “buyer beware” for athletes and parents in the United States.
Another issue is the amount of money spent on NCAA athletics, which raises questions about institutional priorities. Does athletic spending come at the expense of academic spending? A study released in 2013 comparing the spending of US public universities on athletics versus academics found that per-capita athletic costs at the top-tier NCAA Division I schools was $92,000 a year, but academic spending was only $14,000. This gap even exists, albeit more narrowly, at lower-rung Division I schools, with athletic spending at $37,000 and academic spending at $11,800. And the gap between athletic and academic spending is growing: among Division I public institutions, athletic spending increased twice as much as academic spending between 2005 and 2010. Terry Hartle, a senior vice-president at the American Council of Education, said that the report “confirms what a lot of college presidents have long feared: that intercollegiate athletics has become a financial arms race. . . . Sooner or later, the increases will be unsustainable.” Although many university presidents would like to reduce athletic spending, “taking significant steps in that direction would cost them their job, because the constituencies for increasing spending are numerous and powerful, and the counterpressures are few and relatively powerless.”

There is a widespread belief that successful athletic programs generate large profits. After all, look at the large number of tickets sold, as well as the revenue generated by the sale of merchandise and by television contracts. Yet it has been repeatedly proven that few universities make money from their teams. Of the 119 NCAA Division I Bowl subdivision universities, only twenty-five of them ran an athletic department surplus in 2007. A majority of football programs, the alleged big moneymaker of university sports, failed to cover operating costs from 2004 to 2006. If capital costs and university overhead were included, these financial results would be even worse. This means that universities have to allocate budgetary resources away from academic programs to athletic teams. The median athletic subsidy for all sports at Division I schools is between $20,000 and $30,000 per player. Proponents argue that winning teams bring more donations to the school, but studies have shown that these donations are often directed toward the athletic programs and not for general academic use.

Concerns about the poor academic performance of many NCAA athletes seem to go hand in hand with complaints about the allocation of funds. Evidence abounds of the lack of attention to academics at many NCAA schools. One notorious example is Dexter Manley, a star defensive lineman with Oklahoma State University and later a professional player in the NFL, who testified before Congress in 1989 that throughout his four years of university studies, he was functionally
illiterate. Another, which also dates to the 1980s, is a statement made by Hale Almand, the attorney called upon to defend the University of Georgia after an untenured English instructor sued the university, arguing that she had been fired because she would not inflate grades for athletes in her remedial English classes. During the court case, Almand said, astonishingly: “We may not make a university student out of him, but if we can teach him to read and write, maybe he can work at the post office rather than as a garbage man when he gets through with his athletic career.” Or, as an Ohio State quarterback memorably tweeted in the fall of 2012: “Why should we have to go to class if we came here to play FOOTBALL, we ain’t come to play SCHOOL classes are POINTLESS.”

The NCAA claims that “student-athletes annually outperform their student-body counterparts in graduation rates, and in almost all demographic categories.” However, the methodology used to come to that conclusion has been disputed by many academics because the NCAA includes part-time students (who have higher dropout rates and do not include athletes) and counts athletes who transfer in good academic standing as graduates. Using the adjusted graduation gap (AGG), a model that factors out part-time students, shows that “in most athletic conferences, athletes graduate at rates lower than non-athletes.” This gap is widest among male football and basketball players at NCAA Division I Bowl Series conferences. For example, football players in the Pacific 12 Conference “graduated at rates 27 percentage points lower (in other words, an AGG of -27) compared to full-time male students at those institutions in the 2004–10 cohort.” Richard Southall, an associate professor of sport administration at the University of North Carolina, led the AGG study and found that the gap was highest among black football players. Referring to the NCAA Division I Bowl Subdivision conferences, Southall said, “It’s three times more likely that black football players . . . don’t graduate at the same rate as black non-athletes.” This gap also exists in men’s basketball, where the number of black players who do not graduate is double that of white players. Gerald S. Gurney, an assistant professor of higher education at the University of Oklahoma, argues that the NCAA and its member schools are manipulating graduation rates through “major clustering [of athletes in certain majors] and devalued degrees.” NCAA athletes are more likely to be enrolled in physical education, sport management, or sport journalism programs than in other academic areas.

Andrew Zimbalist, a prominent sports economist, has even argued that the concept of a “student-athlete” was designed to help the NCAA in its “fight against workmen’s compensation insurance claims for injured football players.” This was a defence that was crafted in the wake of the lawsuits following the death of Ray
Dennison, a football player for the Fort Lewis A&M Aggies in the 1950s. “Student-athlete” is also a deliberately vague phrase. As Taylor Branch points out, being a student-athlete meant that college players were not students at play (which might understate their athletic obligations), nor were they just athletes in college (which might imply they were professionals). That they were high-performance athletes meant they could be forgiven for not meeting the academic standards of their peers; that they were students meant they did not have to be compensated, ever, for anything more than the cost of their studies.36

Another development that tends to be overlooked is the segregation of athletes. The claim is often made that participation in athletics helps to provide a broader educational experience. This is a good thing. However, we often see athletes living in special athletic dorms, enrolling in only a few programs (physical education or communication, not engineering or English), taking courses reserved for athletes, attending athletes-only study sessions with special tutors, and socializing only with teammates. Everything is team-oriented: the games, the practices, the academics, and even the living arrangements. In contrast, Canadian universities do not have athletic dorms and their students take a much broader range of courses. There is much more intermingling with the rest of the student population.

Yet, despite compelling evidence that the NCAA model is not without some fairly alarming consequences, Canadian schools seem eager to emulate the American model. The most extreme example is Simon Fraser University’s decision, in 2012, to abandon the CIS in favour of the NCAA. Other schools, such as the University of British Columbia, have also flirted with the idea of leaving the CIS. Some schools have instead imported the commercial approach to college athletics. Consider Laval University’s Rouge et Or football team, the biggest and most high-profile sports program in Canada.37 It has a $2 million budget—four to five times higher than the average in Canada—which allows it to hire five full-time coaches (most schools have two or three), establish a more sophisticated weight room, and run a spring training camp in Florida. The team is run at arm’s length from the university by a nonprofit board. The board chair is Jacques Tanguay, a prominent Québec businessman and Laval alumnus who has owned several minor league professional sports teams. The investment has paid off. Between 1999 and 2015, Laval has won eight Vanier Cups as the top university football team in Canada. The University of Regina football team, the Rams, has a similar story. In 1999, the Rams, one of the most successful junior football programs in Canada, began to compete
in the CIS through a community partnership agreement according to which the team “remains financially independent of the University and must pursue a broad range of fundraising projects and activities in order to keep the program running.” This arrangement also allowed the team to keep the nickname “Rams”: all other University of Regina teams go by “the Cougars.” Like the Laval Rouge et Or, the Regina Rams program has invested in first-class training facilities. The Carleton University football team, the Ravens, having returned to competition in 2013 after a fifteen-year absence, is following the model of Laval and Regina.

While this new, more commercial model may seem attractive, it is important to remember that money tends to breed corruption. Athletic scandals do, of course, occur within the CIS. For example, the University of Waterloo football program was shut down in 2010 because of a steroid scandal that implicated nine players. However, the frequency and severity of NCAA scandals is exponentially greater, and the vast majority of them are directly related to money. Here is just a short sample of some of the more infamous ones. In 2010, the NCAA stripped the University of Southern California of its 2004 national football title and Reggie Bush had to return his 2005 Heisman Trophy as top collegiate football player because Bush and his family had received “free airfare, limousine rides, a car, and a rent-free home in San Diego from sports agents who wanted Bush as a client.” Many players at the University of Miami Hurricanes, the dominant college football team of the 1980s, were widely suspected of being paid by rap artist Luther Campbell for big plays. Southern Methodist University’s football program was given the “death penalty” by the NCAA—meaning it could not play for the 1987 and 1988 seasons—because SMU boosters had for years been paying players under the table.

Non-football sports have also faced significant controversies. In the 1950s, there was a major point-shaving scandal, whereby players would ensure that they won the game but by less points than the point spread established by gamblers. The scandal involved the City College of New York basketball team, five other New York-area universities, and the University of Kentucky. The NCAA penalized the University of Michigan basketball program because a booster was loaning hundreds of thousands of dollars to star players in the 1990s. The Syracuse Orangemen lacrosse team was stripped of its 1990 national title because the head coach’s wife had co-signed a car loan for star player Paul Gait.

These financial scandals reveal a related problem. While star university athletes bring in plenty of dollars to their school and the NCAA, they receive nothing more than free tuition, accommodations, and books. This is all in the name of amateur sport. “You see everybody getting richer and richer,” commented Desmond Howard,
the 1991 Heisman Trophy winner from the Michigan Wolverines. “And you walk around and you can’t put gas in your car? You can’t fly home to see your parents?” Dale Brown, a former basketball coach at Louisiana State University, made the same point even more emphatically: “Look at the money we make off predominantly poor black kids. We’re the whoremasters.” This has led many commentators to argue that NCAA athletes should be paid. Ellen Staurowsky, a professor of sport management at Drexel University, estimates that football players in the NCAA Division I Bowl subdivision have an average market value of $121,048. She argues that we are well “past the time when we fall for the NCAA party line that suggests that a ‘free education’ is adequate compensation for college athletes who generate billions of dollars in revenue for corporate marketing and media partners.”

**Conclusion**

Clearly, the Canadian and American university sport systems are fundamentally different. Many people in both Canada and the United States assert that the American system is better. However, an examination of the effects of the different sport systems on the athlete, the fan, the community, and the university reveals that while the systems are different, one is not better than the other.

Under the American model, more resources (better facilities and larger coaching staffs) are devoted to sports, which significantly raises the quality of play. Therefore, in terms of the athletic experience, the American system is better. This is recognized throughout Canada by Canadian athletes and national sporting organizations. However, the point of university athletics is to develop the student-athlete. On the student side, there is growing criticism of the American system, whose defects are not nearly as profound in Canada. In particular, many critics agree that in too many sports and at too many schools, the educational experience has been watered down to ensure that athletes focus on their sport. While CIS schools have many student-athletes, NCAA schools have too many athlete-athletes.

The American system provides fans with much more extensive opportunities to follow their favourite sport. Compared to the NCAA experience, the ability to follow CIS sports through television and other media coverage, websites, and gambling is almost nonexistent. Moreover, the spectacle around the game—pep rallies, tailgate parties, marching bands, mascots, cheerleaders, and team apparel—is a big part of the NCAA experience. Almost all of this fanfare is missing in Canadian universities.

The effect of university sport on the community is greater in the United States, where university sport is often a rallying point for people who live in the university...
town or state. While town-gown conflict is often an issue at many small-town universities in both Canada and the United States, the appeal of student athletics helps to mitigate it. Locals become attached to the university even if they are not students, alumni, professors, or other employees. Given the greater spectacle of American university sports, there is a greater role for the surrounding community in the United States.

The effect of sports on the university has been both positive and negative. University sports can build spirit among the student body. Attending the Saturday game should be just as much a part of university life as the classroom, library, dorm room, or even the campus pub. For example, several American universities (Georgia State University, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, and Mercer University) recently decided to start an NCAA Division I football program in order “to enhance their reputation and spirit of community on campus.”48 University spirit is often lacking at Canadian universities, and this can be explained, in large part, by the absence of the athletic spectacle. However, this emphasis on athletics in the United States also has a downside. Scarce resources are diverted from academic priorities to athletic programs. Coaches are the best-paid people on campus, and successful ones can become more powerful than university administrators. Professors feel undervalued compared to a winning football team, and ordinary students feel that the star athletes on campus are given special treatment.

University sports is yet another area in which the United States, with its entrepreneurial ethic, differs from other countries. No other country matches the emphasis found in the United States on university athletics as a form of profiteering. Largely by an accident of geography, however, Canadians are more intimately linked to the United States, both culturally and economically, than are people elsewhere. Canadians follow American university sports on television and often attend live events. Canada also sends more athletes to the United States, as a percentage of all foreign athletes in that country, than any other country. At the same time, a comparison between Europe and Canada would reveal many similarities in the structure of university sports, as distinct from the NCAA system. Soccer academies in Europe are, for example, very similar to the hockey clubs in Canada. Countries in Europe, as in Canada, have traditionally viewed universities as academic institutions and have pursued athletics through outside organizations. Before we choose to abandon the sporting traditions that have evolved here in Canada in order to embrace the American system, perhaps we should pause to consider the differences.


3 Ibid.


5 Statistics for basketball were derived from information at Canada Basketball, 2011, http://www.basketball.ca/senior-men-s15141.

6 Statistics for lacrosse derived from information at Canadian Lacrosse Association, 2015, http://cla.pointstreaksites.com/view/cla/senior-men-field-1/roster-560. To be fair, field lacrosse is not one of CIS’s sanctioned sports, but there is a good club league in Ontario and Québec, and Simon Fraser University plays in an American university league. There is also the Maritime University Field Lacrosse League, but it is of very poor quality.


11 Branch, “Shame of College Sports.”

12 There are a few privately funded universities in Canada, such as Royal Roads or Quest, but they are very small.


14 For example, the United States Hockey League (USHL), a junior league outside of the auspices of the NCAA, had six players drafted in the first round of the 2012 NHL draft. Meanwhile, in Canada, the athletic sophistication of some high school football, basketball, volleyball, and soccer programs are now at levels far greater than competing club programs.

NCAA has determined that it is a professional league and thus ineligible to play NCAA sports.

16 Mark Cardwell, “Laval’s Field of Dreams,” University Affairs, 9 November 2009.
20 Desrochers, “Academic Spending Versus Athletic Spending.”
22 Getz and Siegfried, What Does Intercollegiate Athletics Do, 4.
23 Desrochers, “Academic Spending Versus Athletic Spending.”
24 For a literature review on the correlations between winning teams and donations to the university, see Getz and Siegfried, What Does Intercollegiate Athletics Do, 6–13.
26 Quoted in ibid.
31 Grasgreen, “Gaps in Grad Rates for Athletes.”
32 Quoted in ibid.
33 Grasgreen, “Division I Basketball Players Graduate at Lower Rates than Non-Athletes.”
34 Quoted in Grasgreen, “Gaps in Grad Rates for Athletes” (insertion in original).
35 Quoted in Branch, “Shame of College Sports.”
36 Branch, “Shame of College Sports.”
37 Cardwell, “Laval’s Field of Dreams.”
40 Branch, “Shame of College Sports.”
41 The U, directed by Billy Corben, 30 for 30 documentary series (Bristol, CT: ESPN Films, 2009).
44 The Fab Five, directed by Jason Hehir, 30 for 30 documentary series (Bristol, CT: ESPN Films, 2011).
46 Quoted in Branch, “Shame of College Sports.”