of jobs in Oaxaca, and this practice wouldn’t exist if there were greater job opportunities. But it has created many problems. Today, the majority of teachers are professionals, but sometimes a teacher may not be very well prepared or may not have been trained in a normal school.”

The Oaxacan teachers have battled successive state administrations for years. In 2006, a Sección 22 strike became a virtual insurrection, and the national government sent in heavily armed police to suppress the rebellion. In its wake, the left-wing Democratic Revolutionary Party and the right-wing National Action Party organized an unwieldy coalition and defeated the PRI in the 2010 state election for the first time. Heavily supported by Sección 22, former Oaxaca City Mayor Gabino Cué became governor, opening the door for the PTEO.

In 2012, however, the PRI regained the national presidency. In Mexico, the federal government controls education policy and funding. “The PTEO has to be evaluated by the federal government,” says Rendon. “A great deal of our resources comes from them, so if we don’t agree with their policy, it gets very complicated. Hopefully, we’ll be able to find points in common.”

“It is a very viable proposal,” he adds. “We still have to work on it, but it’s a dynamic process. We’re asking teachers to develop their abilities to form collectives and help them actually change the school. All that takes training. And any change in the system requires money.”

When Cué came into office, he signed an initial agreement with Sección 22 to begin implementing the PTEO, which began in 280 schools last May and June. Each had to set up a collective, analyze the needs of students and the community, and come up with an education plan.

In February, however, just before Gordillo’s arrest, Claudio González went to Oaxaca and warned Governor Cué that he had to “break the hijacking of education by Sección 22”; he also called the teachers “tyrants.” That was too much even for the state’s school director, Manuel Iturribarria Bolaños, who accused González of having come to the state to provoke a fight. Teachers picketed the Mexicanos Primero press conference, and González fled back to Mexico City.

Meanwhile, teachers deal with day-to-day problems. “I teach biology at the Escuela Secundaria General José María Bradomín, in a poor community at the edge of the city,” Torres explains. “To convince students to take an interest, I use music and computers. We leave the classroom and look at leaves on the trees. People who teach in a traditional way ask what I think I’m doing. They want a very ordered room with everyone in their assigned seat. I want my students to learn to work together.”

Migration from Oaxaca to the United States has risen sharply in the last twenty-five years. While the reform debate goes on, Oaxacan students still leave school every year and head north. Rendon coordinates programs to track them as they migrate with their parents in search of work. One sends Oaxacan teachers to the United States to help those students. Another brings California and Oregon teachers to Oaxaca, to better understand the culture of these migrant children.

That’s a more complicated picture than the one presented by ¡De Panzazo! and Mexicanos Primero, promoted by USAID and the OECD. “Today our challenges are very difficult, because we’re living in a globalized world,” Torres concludes. “We can’t be separate from it. We can’t just tell a student, ‘You succeeded because you went to school.’ The child must be prepared for life. The challenge for me is to give students in school the tools they can use to resolve their life problems once they leave it.”

The Shame of the NCAA

March Madness generates a tidal wave of revenue—but the players don’t see a dime of it.

by DAVE ZIRIN

It’s time for that period of breathless college-hoops hysteria known as March Madness. It’s time for bracketology, Final Four predictions, office pools and the gambling of billions of dollars, legal and illegal. What will go largely unnoted is the fact that kids, ranging in age from 18 to 22 and branded with corporate logos, are producing this tidal wave of revenue—and they’re not receiving a dime of it.

Welcome to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in the twenty-first century, about as corrupt and mangled an institution as exists in the United States. At palatial college stadiums across the country, players are covered in more ads than stock cars and generate billions of dollars, all to the roar of millions of fans for whom college sports are tantamount to religion. One problem cannot be tackled without the other: the same system that spends so much on revenue-generating sports and is the stage of the sports world’s most egregious scandals, from Notre Dame to Penn State, also exploits athletes to a degree that renders such scandals inevitable.

A constant refrain by the yipping heads of the sports world is that the NCAA is on a toboggan ride toward change, which is being driven by financial pressures. In 2010, only twenty-two of the 120 football bowl subdivision schools made money from campus athletics, up from only fourteen the previous year. In a time of austerity,
public universities preach, with a catch in their throat, that the revenue just isn’t there. So schools are realigning into different mega-conferences with the hope that this will provide enough money to maintain the status quo. But even the revenue-producing sport of football loses money.

If you look at top salaries, though, it’s hard to see much austerity. The numbers are mind-boggling: according to USA Today, salaries of new head football coaches at the bowl-eligible schools increased by 35 percent from 2011 to 2012. Average annual pay has ballooned to $1.64 million, an astonishing increase of more than 70 percent since 2006. This is all as tuition hikes, furloughs, layoffs and cuts in student aid have continued unabated. In an era of stagnating wages, compensation for coaching a college football team has risen like a booster’s adrenaline during bowl season. The question is how—not just how is this possible, given the stark economic realities of most universities, but how can schools be this shameless?

The question is increasingly relevant as the organization’s crisis spills into open view. “I don’t recall a time when there has been less optimism about the NCAA and how it operates,” said Josephine Potuto, the former chair of the NCAA’s committee on infractions and a law professor at the University of Nebraska, speaking to The New York Times recently.

After he became NCAA president in 2010, Mark Emmert had to be shamed into the idea of considering basic fairness to the athletes who generate all this wealth. In an interview on a PBS Frontline special, “Money and March Madness,” a visibly agitated Emmert refused to reveal his own seven-figure salary on camera and insisted that it would “be utterly unacceptable…to convert students into employees…. I can’t say it often enough, obviously, that student athletes are students. They are not employees.” He quickly backpedaled, though, telling USA Today that at the April 2011 NCAA board meeting, he would “make clear…that I want [paying players] to be a subject we explore.”

After Emmert revealed that he was “justice-curious,” the NCAA quickly issued a statement that this kind of “exploration” was consistent with previous statements. Sure enough, the April meeting produced a proposal for a stipend. Even though it was quickly rescinded, the issue will not go away. In fact, just in time for the NCAA finals, we seem to have reached a tipping point on the issue of compensating college athletes. As former Syracuse all-American linebacker Dave Meggyesy said, “These are more than full-time jobs. When I played at Syracuse in the early 1960s, it wasn’t like that. We had a regular season and twenty days of spring practice. Now it’s year-round. It’s a more cynical system now than when I played, starting with those one-year renewables. That’s a heavy hammer. You get hurt, tough shit, you’re out. And there’s no worker’s comp for injuries.”

The biggest impediment to reform, however, is the greed of those in power. Even as schools are losing money, even as “student-athletes” put themselves at risk for free, those running the NCAA have never had it better. March Madness, the sixty-eight-team elimination basketball tournament, generates at least 90 percent of the NCAA’s operating budget. That included, for 2009, a total compensation for the fourteen top executives of nearly $6 million, with the president earning $1.1 million. The association has lavished $35 million on a 130,000-square-foot expansion of its headquarters in Indianapolis. Other revenue streams come from video games, posters, jerseys and boutique credit cards featuring images of popular amateur athletes.

The corruption extends to the college sports media industry. Over the past decade, the number of college football and basketball games broadcast on ESPN channels has skyrocketed from 491 to 1,320. ESPN now happens to be both the number-one broadcaster of college football and basketball and those sports’ number-one news provider. Covering sports and shilling for the industry have become carnally intertwined. Nationally credited journalists from ESPN and other media outlets reportedly show up at the Fiesta Bowl a week in advance, where they stay at the finest resorts and receive a different expensive present every day, courtesy of the tournament’s corporate sponsors. As DC sports radio host Steve Czaban said, “It sounds like sports-media Hannukah.” The Fiesta Bowl was an embezzlers’ paradise awash in scandal for years, with no one the wiser until Fiesta Bowl CEO John Junker pleaded guilty to fraud last year. Then there’s March Madness on CBS and its neat $1-million-per-commercial rates for the Final Four. Eight hours of coverage, with all those lucrative commercial breaks, are the cure for media recession blues.

And all that’s apart from the multibillion-dollar gambling industry. March Madness is now officially a busier time in Vegas than the Super Bowl. No other event unites sports fans with non–sports fans in offices and factory break rooms quite like it. Every year, overheated articles from the business press rail about declining productivity as employees fill out their brackets and lodge their bets. More than $100 billion passes through Sin City at that time—and that’s chicken feed compared with the money changing hands under the table and online.

For the “student-athletes,” though, there is nothing. As former LSU coach Dale Brown said, “Look at the money we make off predominantly poor black kids. We’re the whoremasters.”—former LSU coach Dale Brown

‘Look at the money we make off predominantly poor black kids. We’re the whoremasters.’
—former LSU coach Dale Brown

This is a civil rights issue, a fact that was made manifestly clear by one of the great chroniclers of the civil rights movement, Taylor Branch. The Pulitzer Prize–winning author of a magisterial three-volume series on Martin Luther King Jr., Branch also has roots in the sports world, as the co-author of Bill Russell’s memoir, Second Wind. In October 2011, in an article for The
Atlantic, “The Shame of College Sports,” Branch sparked a discussion that has been amplified by the recent scandals. “For all the outrage,” he wrote, “the real scandal is not that students are getting illegally paid or recruited, it’s that two of the noble principles on which the NCAA justifies its existence—‘amateurism’ and the ‘student-athlete’—are cynical hoaxes, legalistic confections propagated by the universities so they can exploit the skills and fame of young athletes…. The NCAA makes money, and enables universities and corporations to make money, from the unpaid labor of young athletes.”

Branch added that “slavery analogies should be used carefully. College athletes are not slaves. Yet to survey the scene—corporations and universities enriching themselves on the backs of uncompensated young men, whose status as ‘student-athletes’ deprives them of the right to due process guaranteed by the Constitution—is to catch an unmistakable whiff of the plantation.”

The injustice is outrageous. It’s time for a change.

The arguments against issuing a stipend or work-study to scholarship athletes wither at the slightest touch. The best that critics can come up with is that the free room and board players get should be enough, or that paying them would ruin their “spirit” and “love of the game.”

Comparisons to the Old South have come not just from those branded as “outsiders,” like Branch. Walter Byers, the association’s executive director from 1951 to 1987 and the man most responsible for the modern NCAA, has seen the light. After his retirement, he told the great sportswriter Steve Wulf: “The coaches own the athletes’ feet, the colleges own the athletes’ bodies, and the supervisors retain the large rewards. That reflects a neo-plantation mentality on the campuses.” In a year when we are celebrating a film about Abraham Lincoln’s struggle to pass the constitutional amendment that abolished slavery, there is still some emancipating to be done on college campuses, where young men are employees but are treated like an uneasy combination of chattel and gods.

We need a massive reformation of this warped system. Here are a few suggestions:

§ The corrupt cartel otherwise known as the NCAA should be abolished.

§ Scholarships should be guaranteed for four years, so players can’t be dismissed from school if they run afoul of their coaches.

§ Ceilings should be put on coaching salaries, with the money saved in revenue-producing sports used to pay stipends to athletes.

§ The NBA and NFL should fund their own minor leagues, so universities don’t have that responsibility.

§ The The corrupt cartel otherwise known as the NCAA should be abolished.

Any one of the above would make the current system more just, less rife with hypocrisy and more able to handle the challenges of intercollegiate sports.

Letters

(continued from page 2)

CAMBRIDGE, MASS.
Samuel Moyn discusses Richard Rorty’s Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity and finds its final two chapters “extraordinarily flawed.” Since I think that book (those two chapters in particular) an extraordinary achievement, I enter a demurrer. Rorty does not “place torture first among public concerns.” He defines a liberal, following Judith Shklar, as “one who thinks cruelty is the worst thing we can do.” That is not the same thing. Rorty’s main point in these two chapters and throughout the book is that contingency prevails: there is, for good or ill, no human nature and no political or historical inevitability. As he tersely puts it: “Socialization goes all the way down.” Things may not end well for our civilization; indeed, for the foreseeable future, the prospects for solidarity and global justice are pretty dim. This is not to say—Rorty’s whole life argues otherwise—that “idealism in public affairs isn’t possible” or that “our world of hierarchy and suffering just has to be accepted.” Nor does it “believe” Rorty’s frequently expressed social-democratic commitments.

A lesser point: Rorty does not “attack” Raymond Williams; he politely, respectfully takes issue with him about the interpretation of 1984 and the relation of philosophy to politics. There is not a harsh or snide word about Williams in these chapters, or anywhere else in Rorty’s writings, as far as I know. A disagreement is not an attack.

GEORGE SCIALABBA

Moyn Replies

NEW YORK CITY
I am grateful to George Scialabba for his many wonderful reviews, including his longtime promotion of Richard Rorty’s work. I admire Rorty too, of course, which is why I called Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity “extraordinary.” But there is no gainsaying that its final two chapters, which are Rorty’s most theoretically rich account of politics, revolve around the example of torture as the epitome of cruelty in action. And he convicted himself of pessimism about available change in the passages I cited: if cruelty is the worst thing one can do, according to Rorty, minimizing cruelty is the best, in the absence of plausible alternatives. As I said in my piece, Rorty tended toward social democracy, notably in his later book Achieving Our Country, but he never explained how to reconcile that position with the cramped orientation to cruelty he defended in Contingency.

I thank Joan Gregg for taking my point. But I was not arguing against reading Elaine Scarry, or I would not have done so at such length. She is a brilliant critic who deserves our attention precisely because her work stands for our common moral stance in all its grandeur and limitations.

Finally, I am grateful to Florence Roisman for recalling Senator Harkin’s role. For far more on Americans and human rights after Vietnam, look out for Barbara Keys’s Reclaiming American Virtue (forthcoming from Harvard University Press), a tour de force that covers this and many other crucial episodes.

SAMUEL MOYN

Clarification

Laura Flanders, in “Demanding Women” [Feb. 18], said that 55 percent of women (including 96 percent of black women and 67 percent of single women) voted for Barack Obama. She meant women voters.