



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

MISCELLANEOUS

NCAA has no death penalty

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Allegations of scandalous activities involving the University of Miami football program have fueled speculation over whether the NCAA will come down hard against this perennial Division 1 powerhouse by imposing the death penalty. □ Meanwhile, I'd like to know what genius □ was the first to have characterized the supreme sanction levied against big-time college athletics in such a graphic way.

Was it a sports journalist, an athletic director or a college administrator? I sure hope it wasn't a representative of the official accrediting body for intercollegiate athletics who thought that comparing a temporary program suspension and the forfeiture of scholarships to the ritualized taking of human life would be appropriate.

Go ask one of the thousands of prisoners awaiting an assigned end-date to earthly existence whether his or her plight is like sitting out a year of athletic competition. Or maybe ask the mother of a brutally murdered child whether the egregious crime that forever broke her heart is at all akin to under-the-table payments for amateur student-athletes and top prospects.

The NCAA's authority is over the operations of a game, albeit one that has the dimensions of a multimillion-dollar business enterprise. And, of course, the intensity of the fan base in some parts of the country has even been likened to religious fervor. But nowhere and in no way is college sport a matter of life and death.

Beyond the utter lack of comparability in severity between the punishment dictated by some NCAA executive and the grim death work carried out by the executioner, the two are fundamentally different in terms of permanence. College programs such as University of Kentucky basketball and Southern Methodist University football did eventually recover from their punishments, arguably not any worse off than they had been previously. By contrast, the real death penalty is indeed the nail in the coffin.

As a university professor and a follower of college sports, I am deeply disturbed and outraged by the shameful activities that go on in top-tier (and not so top-tier) college athletics programs, all at the expense of the core mission of academic institutions. But as a criminologist who has worked with condemned inmates and has witnessed lethal injection, I am offended even more by the attempt to link sanctions given athletics programs with capital punishment. Let's not trivialize a very serious matter -- the barbaric practice of state-sponsored killing as a sanction for killing -- by invoking the death penalty as a metaphor for anything in sports.