

Sports

SLAPSHOTS

College athletics little more than a springboard

Brian Castle
Columnist

When in the course of human events did institutions of higher learning become little more than farm systems for professional sports leagues?

I remember back in the good old days of the roaring eighties, when all that student-athlete purists had to gripe about were the horrible graduation rates of athletes who took up space at universities for four, and sometimes under the redshirt policy, five years. Now, we have an altogether different problem on our hands.

The coaches and administrators made a credible effort to raise the graduation rates at the various major college sports programs of the NCAA, and for the most part they have been successful. But the most troubling statistics arise from the latest fad to emerge in the world of college sports—early eligibility.

Early eligibility, which occurs when collegiate underclassmen leave school early to enter professional sports league drafts, is not a new thing. In past years, college superstars who either were not cutting the mustard in the classroom or not getting along with their coaches would skip out of school early. Or, as was the case with Earvin "Magic" Johnson and Isaiah Thomas, some college superstars found themselves stifled by the college game since they were ready for the professional level. At any rate, early eligibility was once called hardship, because the cases were so few and far between and had, almost without exception, a special circumstance.

Now, there is one major reason for college underclassmen declaring early for the respective drafts—money. In an age when even mediocre players are millionaires, and superstars are multi-multi-millionaires, who can blame a kid who has never had anything in his life but his own physical talent for leaving school early to get a taste of the good life?

I certainly won't cast the first stone at someone like Tiger Woods, who, even though he has plenty of mental capability to finish his degree at Stanford University, has made the wise choice to join the Professional Golf Association and subsequently ink a five-year, \$40 million endorsement deal with Nike. Stanford grads have one of the highest starting salary averages in the country, but Mr. Woods would indeed be hard pressed to match eight million a year in today's job market.

Something must be done at the college level to compensate for this ever-increasing drain on the best sports talent. Why? Thousands and thousands of taxpayer dollars, in the cases of public universities, and alumni dollars, in the cases of private universities, are going to waste on student athletes with very little emphasis on the student aspect.

Every time I see some superstar turn professional after his freshman or sophomore year, I think of student-athletes like the ones we have here at UNCA, whose athletic talent enables them to get a leg up in the world by paving their way to college degrees. If I'm not mistaken, these athletes were intended to be the recipients when someone came up with the term athletic scholarship.

What should the universities do? The NCAA must make a concerted effort to petition the major sports leagues to create farm systems similar to the one that has been in place for Major League Baseball since the beginning of time. Athletes should then have to sign a contract, or else join a minor league of professional sports.

Academically capable student-athletes deserve their shot at a college degree. They cannot continue to be denied by the presence of athletes who merely attend school for a short time as a springboard for a professional sports career. Let the sports leagues get their own springboards.

OUTDOORS

UNCA paddlers find challenge and beauty in the mountains

Catharine Sutherland
Guest Writer

"The real challenge is getting over the fear factor, letting yourself relax in this little piece of plastic bobbing in churning whitewater," said Christina Murrey, a sophomore at UNCA, upon her return from a beginners' kayaking trip on the Chattooga River sponsored by the UNCA Paddling Club. Once one conquers this fear, however, the joy of kayaking takes over.

Paddling, as kayaking is commonly called, is a sport driven by a love of beauty, not a testosterone-induced death wish, according to Leland Davis, UNCA Outdoor Education Coordinator and "Poolbah" (or co-president) of the year-old Paddling Club. Davis, who got his first taste of kayaking on the Green River in Utah in the spring of 1992 but did not return to the sport until 1994, explained that his love for the split-second instincts required in paddling and the inexhaustible store of beautiful views on the river have taken over his once-intense rock-climbing career.

Kevin Colburn, a seven-year paddling veteran and Davis' cohort as the "Poolbah" of the Paddling Club, is a Pennsylvania native who chose UNCA expressly because of its ideal location for paddling. "One of the reasons I moved here was to be near the Green River Narrows," said Colburn, naming the Hendersonville-area river as a favorite "run," or stretch of river to kayak.

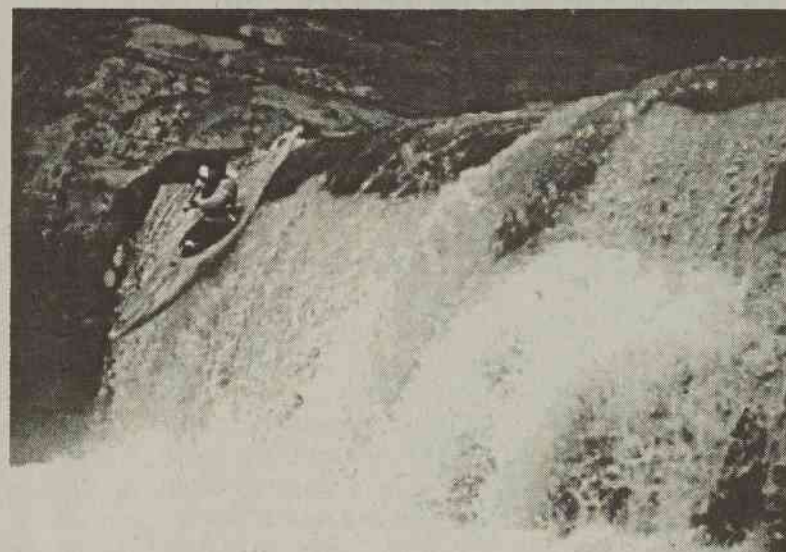
Colburn, who bought his first kayak at age 16 and currently owns three boats, also noted Asheville's proximity to the Nantahala Outdoor Center, located an hour and a half west of the city on the Nantahala River,

which he ranked as one of the whitewater hubs of the world.

In order to kayak, one must have what are considered "the five essentials": a kayak, or a long, narrow, lightweight boat large enough for one person to slide his or her legs into the nose of its needle-like body and sit erectly in the snug hole in the center of the

for solo trips.

In addition to equipment, strength ranks as another integral link in the sport of kayaking. The most powerful part of a paddler's body lies not in the arms but in the torso, the core of muscles that control one's balance and the movement of the hips. By tilting the hips from side to side, or shift-



UNCA student Andrew Parker drops off the "Baby Falls" on the Tellico River in Tennessee.

Photo courtesy of Andrew Parker

craft; a paddle; a life jacket; a helmet; and a spray skirt. The spray skirt, a rubber, skirt-like piece worn around the paddler's waist, grips the rim of the hole surrounding the paddler and prevents water from entering the boat.

Although investing in so much equipment for one sport may seem daunting and impossibly expensive, used kayaking equipment offers good quality at bargain prices. While the cost of a paddling outfit, kayak plus gear, nears \$2000 new, Colburn estimated the cost of an entire used outfit at \$500. UNCA students are fortunate. Paddling equipment is free for use by students on school-sponsored outings and costs only \$10 per day

ing one's bodyweight, one is able to change the direction of the boat.

"Women have an amazing aptitude for paddling," said UNCA junior Andrew Parker, a member of the Paddling Club who claims the number of women paddlers is on the rise. "They have a lower center of gravity and are better at using their hips, so they pick it up a lot faster than most guys."

Mental conditioning has as much to do with paddling as physical strength. According to Davis, good judgement is key to being a good paddler. "I think it's important to know your limits realistically, know when to push them, and know when to quit pushing them," said Davis. "You become

the best paddler you can be by paddling at your limits, not above or below them."

While the word "fun" bobs to the surface at the mere mention of the sport, kayaking is not without its dangers. Whitewater presents many hazards that can be fatal if not approached with skill and knowledge. Hydraulics (pits of water churning in the bottom of waterfalls), filters (any objects that water will flow through but a boater will not, such as a fallen tree), and undercut rock (rock that water will flow beneath but a boater will not) all pose a threat to paddlers, but those who are experienced and able to "read" water, or follow and understand its currents in the river, can successfully avoid or maneuver such obstacles.

However, many paddlers attribute part of the adrenaline rush of kayaking to the unpredictability of the river. No matter how adeptly one reads water or "follows a line" (navigates a preferred path in the flow of the water), one never has control. "The river can do whatever it wants to you at any time," said Parker.

The best advice for safety on the river is to paddle with others who can provide rescue for you and to stay in the boat, even if the boat is going over the rapids upside down and backwards. One is better protected tossing about rocks and rapids in a large, bouyant object such as a kayak than in a life jacket.

Davis advises beginners to ease into kayaking by practicing skills on flat water, and to stick with veteran paddlers at least the first ten to fifteen times they take to the rapids. The practice sessions held by the Paddling Club every Wednesday night from 7 p.m. to 9:40 p.m. in the UNCA swimming pool are an ideal way for beginners and veterans alike to hone their paddling skills and prepare for the beauty and rush of the whitewater.

UNCA's Osborne named Big South Player of the Week

Mark Plemmons
Staff Writer

"Hey! This next one's coming to me! It's going to land right in front of you, and you're not going to be able to do anything about it."

This attitude, said Kim Osborne, one of UNCA's top volleyball players, is essential during a game.

"I like a particularly confident attitude," Osborne said, "because it's very threatening to look across the net and see someone who's very sure of herself. I might be struggling in a particular part of my game, but that's not something I want to let on to the other team. If you can make eye contact with them, and you can see no confidence in their eyes, then they're that much easier to completely shut down, especially when it's a big hitter or someone who's really important to the success of their team."

And her confidence certainly seems to be working. In her first two weeks of play this season, Osborne helped lead the Lady Bulldogs to two consecutive second-place finishes at both the Furman Invitational, and the UNC Preview Classic. Last week, Osborne was named the Big South Player of the Week.

"I've heard people say before, 'You look so cocky out there on the court.' That's part of my game face, really. And I wouldn't use the word 'cocky,' I would just say 'assured,'" she said. "Even when I'm struggling, I try to have that appearance. But it is hard at times, especially when we're all struggling, to still have the appearance that we're going to be fine, we're still going to win."

But Osborne's strength of character didn't spring up overnight. For several years, before coming to UNCA, she played volleyball in her home town of Fort Wayne, Indiana.

"I started when I was in the seventh grade. I was a cheerleader before that, and I found out that I just could not sit still in the stands. I got

so excited over all the games, and I thought I couldn't just sit there during all that stuff," Osborne said.

"My gym teacher in seventh grade, he was really the one that got me started playing athletics. He really thought I had the ability to do it, and I certainly was excited enough to do it. So the next year I tried out for volleyball. It's taken off from there."

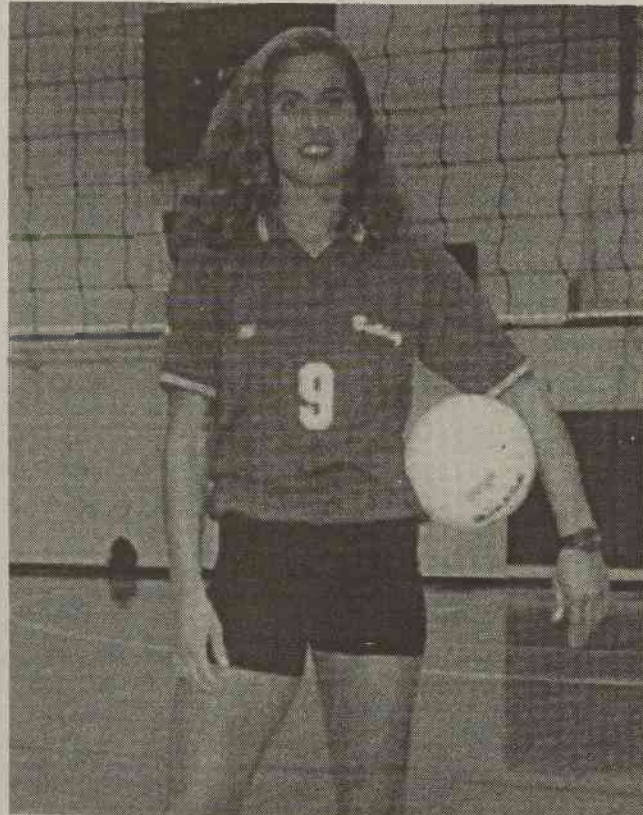
After high school, Osborne won a volleyball scholarship to UNCA. Now she wouldn't have it any other way, even though there's a lot more hard work involved than most people would expect.

"Practice is every day, with one day off every seven days. That's an NCAA rule. We practice every day of the week except Thursdays, when we get our day off. Because we travel so much on the weekend, it's more convenient to get a day off during the week."

And there's not just practice. "We lift weights two to three times a week. And that's to maintain rather than to build muscle," she said. "Our off-season is when we build strength, whereas the lifting we do during the week, in-season, is just to maintain it."

With so much physical exercise, not to mention homework, it's hard to see how Osborne has time to breathe and sometimes even find a moment to indulge herself in one of her many hobbies, which include water-skiing, listening to music, reading, and almost any kind of sports. But nothing will ever replace volleyball, or the camaraderie of her teammates.

"I love the team aspect of the sport. I love the fact that each of the girls that I play with, I have a relationship with outside of volleyball. We have a mutual respect for one another, a friendship," said Osborne.



Big South Player-of-the-Week Kimberly Osborne

Photo by Trish Johnson

"The fact that we're all working together to achieve the same goal gives us something in common already. It's like a separate community. And the competition is like an addiction. I just love the game itself. There's nothing that catches my attention more than playing this game."

When asked about her best memories, Osborne replies, "The best memories are yet to come, because I'm really confident that we're going to win the championship this year. So I haven't experienced the best memory yet. That will be in November."