

**The Culture of American Collegiate Athletics:
An Ethnographic Study from a European Perspective**

Ondřej Hubka

University of West Bohemia

Pilsen, Czech Republic

With assistance from Dr. Hayden Coombs of Southern Utah University

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Abstract

This ethnographic study, conducted from a European exchange student's perspective, delves into the distinct cultural fabric of U.S. college sports. The research, based on interactions with 20 international students and athletes, uncovers a rich tapestry of customs and community bonds integral to American collegiate sports. These activities, deeply embedded in the U.S. system of higher education, go beyond mere competition, playing a crucial role in personal development, community building, and economic endeavors. The study explores various aspects of American collegiate athletics, including the complexities of student-athlete life, the impact of Title IX in promoting gender equality, and the NCAA's regulatory influence. The commercial aspect, particularly the effects of marketing and branding on the appeal and profitability of college sports, is also analyzed. Central to the study is the application of Stuart Hall's Circuit of Culture framework, dissecting how collegiate sports in America are represented, consumed, produced, regulated, and identified. The research sheds light on the symbolic representation of team spirit, the communal experience of sports consumption, and the NCAA's pivotal role in sports production and regulation. It also addresses the social norms shaping fan behavior, contributing to the distinctive experience of collegiate sports events. A significant finding of the study is the profound sense of identification with collegiate sports teams among students, staff, alumni, and fans. This identification is a key part of individual and community identity, with shared experiences fostering a strong sense of belonging and pride. This aspect is particularly resonant for international students, who find a sense of connection and community in this unique cultural landscape. This ethnography presents an insightful view into the integral role of sports in shaping the educational and cultural landscape of American universities, offering a deeper understanding of their significance from a global perspective.

Keywords: Ethnography, Amateur athletics, NCAA, Sports communication, Athletic administration

The Culture of American Collegiate Athletics

In the United States, collegiate athletics are vastly different in comparison to the European amateur sport structure. Woven into the US system of higher education, collegiate athletics are said to serve as the “front door” of institutions of high education (Benedict & Keteyian, 2014). In a 2008 interview, former President of Washington State University Elson Floyd said, so much of the reputation of a university is determined based on basketball and football, the only notable exceptions are the Ivy League institutions. That’s an unfortunate circumstance, but it’s indeed a reality” (Withers, 2008). It is an accepted fact that the vast majority of American universities are popular because of the sports teams that are part of the university athletic departments. American institutions of higher education frequently assign substantial value to their athletic programs, recognizing that a successful sports team can confer several advantages to the school. Among these advantages is the euphoria associated with triumphs in sporting events. Such victories enhance the morale not only of the athletes themselves but also of the broader school community, often fostering a unified sense of school spirit and solidarity. Furthermore, there are potential economic gains to be realized; athletic success frequently serves as a catalyst for the institution's branding as a premier competitor within the national landscape. This heightened profile can significantly increase the visibility of the school's academic offerings and, in an ideal scenario, enlarge the pool of prospective students. Specifically, increased student engagement in sports associations, both in terms of higher participation rates and improved participation quality, leads to greater student development (Watson et al., 2019). Astin (1999) underscored that a student's level of engagement in college directly correlates with the extent of their learning and personal growth. This heightened development is believed to result in increased satisfaction and a stronger sense of connection to the school (Kim, 2017).

Since university-sponsored collegiate athletics in Europe do not exist in this context, the purpose of this ethnographic research study is aimed to observe and learn about American collegiate athletics. As a European student studying abroad at an American university of higher education, I am uniquely situated to experience this new world of sports through first-hand observation of and fan participation in collegiate athletics. Over the course of several months, I attended eleven athletic events, including men's American football, men's basketball, women's basketball, women's soccer, women's volleyball, and women's gymnastics. Data is observed from my unique first-person point of view, with my perspective as a European at the forefront of this article's analysis.

Literature review

American College Sports

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is a private organization whose purpose is to regulate college athletics in terms of rules in the U.S. (Clotfelter, 2019).

Established in 1906, the NCAA emerged as a response to growing concerns over the safety and exploitation of young athletes in competitive sports (NCAA, n.d.). Its evolution was slow and the modern form was assumed about 1950. In the early years, however, the NCAA did not play any major role in controlling college athletics (Fleisher, 1988). Over the years, it has evolved into a governing body with a far-reaching impact on college sports.

The NCAA is divided into three distinct divisions — Division I, II, and III — each with unique standards and rules regarding athletic scholarships, governance, and competition (NCAA, n.d.). These divisions allow institutions to participate in a manner that aligns with their athletic program sizes and financial capabilities. The NCAA's roles are multifaceted, encompassing the setting of eligibility criteria for student-athletes, organizing national championships, and ensuring adherence to its rules and regulations. Additionally, it is responsible for overseeing student-athlete welfare, including their health, safety, and academic achievements (NCAA, n.d.).

Academically, the NCAA places significant emphasis on the scholastic achievement of student-athletes. It has established academic standards which must be met for participation in sports, reflecting its commitment to balancing athletic involvement with educational excellence (NCAA, n.d.). Financially, the NCAA generates substantial revenue, predominantly through television and marketing rights associated with its championships, especially the Division I men's basketball tournament. This revenue is instrumental in supporting NCAA sports, funding scholarships, and distributing funds among its member institutions (NCAA, n.d.).

The NCAA's mission statement reflects an idealistic view of collegiate athletics, highlighting a commitment to a college athletics model where students participate as an avocation, balancing their academic, social, and athletic experiences. The organization encourages student-athletes to uphold integrity, strive for academic and athletic excellence, and embrace diversity, thereby respecting differences and promoting institutional autonomy. (NCAA, 2021). Through several core values including integrity, excellence, diversity and inclusion, and institutional autonomy, the NCAA aims to foster a holistic development environment for student-athletes, ensuring that their athletic commitments do not come at the expense of academic and social growth, as it envisions collegiate athletics as a complement to the educational experience, contributing positively to the development of well-rounded individuals (NCAA, 2021).

Colleges and universities in America often emphasize their sports programs due to the significant benefits a successful sports program can bring. These benefits include the joy of victory which can boost the morale of both team members and the school community, fostering a sense of unity and school spirit (Clotfelter, 2019). Additionally, athletic success can enhance the school's reputation as a top competitor, attracting national attention that increases the visibility of the school's educational programs and potentially broadens the applicant pool (Clotfelter, 2019). While collegiate athletics can generate substantial revenue — with top schools like the University of Texas and the University of Michigan earning significant amounts — it is a common misconception that most college sports programs are profitable (Benedict & Keteyian, 2014). In reality, the costs associated with athletics often outpace revenues, with only a minority of programs reporting net profits. For example, among the 123 Football Bowl Subdivision programs, only 20 reported positive net revenues for the fiscal year 2013, with the remaining schools experiencing a median deficit of \$14.9 million (Clotfelter, 2019).

Despite its influential role, the NCAA has faced criticism. The primary areas of controversy are particularly regarding the compensation of student-athletes, the commercialization of college sports, and its enforcement policies (NCAA, n.d.). These controversies highlight the complex challenges faced by the NCAA in its endeavor to maintain a balance between athletic competition, academic integrity, and the overall welfare of student-athletes.

Title IX

The Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972 states, “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (Coombs, 2021). This law applies to any institution that receives federal financial assistance from the U.S. Department of Education (Carpenter & Acosta, 2004). In other words, any educational program, including institutions of higher education, that receive federally appropriated funds have to operate through nondiscriminatory methods.

When Title IX of the Education Amendments Act was passed into law in 1972, it was not initially designed to specifically address interscholastic and intercollegiate athletics. However, since sports are a major component of most U.S. institutions of higher education, Title IX has applied to numerous aspects of educational sport (Blumenthal, 2005). Gender equity in college sport became a political and legal issue with the passing of Title IX, therefore, policy to ensure that opportunities exist for both genders was enacted to be fair in delivering opportunities for both men and women (Covell & Barr, 2016).

Despite the NCAA’s recent efforts to establish gender equity, the association initially met Title IX with great resistance. After Title IX was first introduced and started to impact intercollegiate athletics, the NCAA did not warmly embrace the federal statute. In fact, the

NCAA actually brought the first legal challenge to Title IX in the mid-1970s against Joseph Califano, who, at the time, was serving as the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (Covell & Barr, 2016).

In compliance with Title IX, institutions demonstrate their adherence through a methodical approach within their athletic departments, often referred to as the three-prong approach. As Carpenter and Acosta (2004) outline, this approach allows for compliance to be achieved by meeting one of three criteria, ensuring equal opportunities for female athletes.

The first criterion, proportionality, necessitates a balance between the number of female athletes and the overall female undergraduate population. This prong aims to reflect the gender distribution of the student body within the athletic department, thereby ensuring that the representation of female athletes is proportional to their enrollment in the institution (Coombs, 2021).

The second criterion involves a historical analysis of the institution's efforts to expand athletic opportunities for women. This approach evaluates the progression and continuous efforts of an institution to enhance and increase sports opportunities for female students. It looks at the trajectory of the athletic program over time, emphasizing the importance of growth and development in women's sports (Coombs, 2021).

Lastly, the third criterion focuses on meeting the athletic interests and abilities of female students. This prong requires institutions to accommodate the sports-related interests and abilities of women, ensuring that the athletic offerings align with what female students seek and are capable of participating in. This approach allows for flexibility, acknowledging that different institutions may have unique ways of supporting and promoting women's participation in sports (Coombs, 2021).

Despite many of the great successes of Title IX, since its inception, Title IX's application to intercollegiate athletics has been attacked due to its derivative nature to

athletics (Clotfelter, 2019). As previously stated, Title IX was not initially designed to address intercollegiate athletics. Because of this, many critics have labeled Title IX to be an unjust quota system that is focused on numbers rather than experiences that limits opportunities for males (Suggs, 2006). Additionally, much scholarly research has shown that many athletic administrators use Title IX as a scapegoat for lavish expenditures for the depleting resources and opportunities that face both men and women participating in intercollegiate athletics (Coombs, 2021; Keating, 2012; Suggs, 2006).

Student-Athlete

The designation "student-athlete" is utilized by the NCAA to describe those individuals who engage in collegiate sports while also undertaking a full-time academic program (Posteher, 2021). The origination of this term is attributed to the NCAA's efforts to legally differentiate collegiate athletes from employees of the university, a distinction that became particularly significant in the wake of a tragic incident in 1955 involving a fatal injury to a football player from Fort Lewis A&M (Byers & Hammer, 2010). The subsequent legal proceedings affirmed that such athletes were not to be deemed as employees eligible for benefits, save for the scholarship for their education (Posteher, 2021). Byers' creation of the term "student-athlete" and its subsequent adoption has played a critical role in shielding the NCAA from numerous liability issues. Donald Remy, the NCAA's Chief Legal Officer, has been quoted affirming that student-athletes are not considered employees under any interpretation of the National Labor Relations Act (Byers & Hammer, 2010). Remy has also argued that the transformation of students into employees would subvert the primary educational objective of college. Participation in collegiate athletics is, therefore, framed as a voluntary activity for students, not as a labor for which they are compensated, despite the significant revenues they may generate for both the NCAA and their respective institutions (Byers & Hammer, 2010).

In collegiate athletics, maintaining eligibility is a multifaceted requirement for student-athletes who wish to compete (Posteher, 2021). These athletes are mandated to make satisfactory progress towards degree completion and uphold the academic standards delineated by their respective divisions. Additionally, the preservation of amateur status is crucial, prohibiting engagement in professional sports or the receipt of monetary compensation for their athletic endeavors.

Athletic scholarships in the United States offer financial assistance to student-athletes, a practice less common in other nations (Posteher, 2021). The pursuit of such scholarships is notably competitive, with only a small percentage—approximately 2%—of high school athletes receiving them to compete at the collegiate level (NCAA, n.d.). Annually, the NCAA disburses nearly \$3.5 billion in athletic scholarships to over 180,000 student-athletes at Division I and II institutions (Posteher, 2021). Although Division III does not award athletic scholarships, the majority of its 190,000 student-athletes receive some form of academic grant or scholarship.

The hyphenated term "student-athlete" reflects the dual responsibilities of those who must allocate their time and energy between academic pursuits and athletic commitments. This dual role frequently results in a tug-of-war for their attention, with expectations from various stakeholders, including coaches, professors, family, peers, and supporters (Posteher, 2021). The transition to college life presents typical social and academic challenges for all students, but student-athletes face additional unique pressures. This includes the adjustment from being a standout high school athlete to vying for positions on college teams and the continuous juggle of academic and athletic responsibilities, further intensified by the demands of practice, competition, and travel (Coombs, 2022b). Post-college, the cessation of a structured team environment and competitive athletics can pose significant identity challenges, particularly for those who have closely tied their self-concept to their athletic

achievements (Posteher, 2021). Research has indicated that the manner in which athletes acclimate to their college teams is pivotal in their transition and long-term adjustment (Gerdy, 1997). Despite criticisms regarding the NCAA's treatment of student-athletes, many maintain that the benefits and experiences garnered from collegiate sports justify the sacrifices made (Posteher, 2021).

Commercialization of College Sports

The phenomenon of the NCAA's annual Division I men's basketball tournament, colloquially termed "March Madness," exemplifies the widespread popularity of collegiate athletics. The event garners extensive discourse in both casual and formal settings, notably during its inaugural week. With the advent of live video streaming technologies, substantial viewership numbers are reported; network data reveals that approximately 4.8 million viewers consumed over 4.3 million hours of tournament footage (Clotfelter, 2019). The enduring appeal of college sports, particularly over the past century, has facilitated the expansion of their commercial aspects. It is noteworthy that many North American universities garner recognition predominantly for their athletic programs, notably basketball and football, which does not diminish the intrinsic value of their educational offerings (Clotfelter, 2019).

The commercialization of collegiate sports, specifically American football and men's basketball at the Division I level, is closely linked to the revenue generated through television contracts (Clotfelter, 2019). These sports are distinguished as commercial due to their significant revenue generation, in contrast to other sports which yield comparatively less (Benedict & Keteyian, 2014). This commercial aspect is intertwined with the broadcasting of games, wherein viewership extends beyond the athletic competition to the corporate involvement of major brands. The business of college football, particularly within the top Division I universities, is a lucrative enterprise, although it also incurs substantial costs. For instance, the absence of the University of Florida from a bowl game in 2013 resulted in

financial losses (Clotfelter, 2019). The pressure to succeed is acutely felt by coaches and administrative staff, driven by the expectations of stakeholders. The branding of universities is often closely associated with the success of their sports programs, which are commodified through ticket sales, broadcasting rights, merchandise, and trademark licensing. In terms of viewership, college sports have historically received considerable coverage in print media. With the digital age, the consumption of sports content has transitioned to online platforms, enabling wider access. For example, in January 2008 alone, three college basketball games attracted an estimated 4.3 million viewers (Clotfelter, 2019). The 1980s marked a significant increase in viewership due to cable television's capacity to broadcast games, enhancing not only the visibility of the players but also the coaches and the institutional brand. The status of coaches in U.S. higher education as highly valued employees further underscores the commercial magnitude of collegiate sports.

Culture

The exploration of culture, a multifaceted concept with historical debates and varied perspectives, centers around a common understanding: it constitutes a pattern of shared behaviors, beliefs, values, and attitudes that bring meaning and expression to a social world (Stensland, 2021). In the realm of sport, which acts as a societal institution, cultural symbols, practices, and meanings are deeply ingrained. This results in a distinctive sport culture, derived from the lived experiences and behaviors of individuals within this institution (Stensland, 2021). Sport culture, like other cultural forms, comprises various levels and sublevels, which can be effectively analyzed through Stuart Hall's (1997) Circuit of Culture framework, encompassing the production, circulation, and consumption of cultural products.

A dominant sport culture, focused on performative actions and measurable outcomes of individual and team achievements, celebrates athletic exceptionalism and an outcome-oriented approach (Stensland, 2021). This culture not only reinforces the notion of

meritocracy, as defined by McNamee (2008), but also plays a significant role in commercialization, entertainment, geographic pride, marketing, and the promotion of political ideologies, exemplified by events like the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games. Additionally, sport culture is deeply rooted in structures and policies aimed at enhancing physical and psychological well-being (Stensland, 2021).

Delving deeper, the multi-level model of culture by Erez and Gati (2004) elucidates that sport culture operates dynamically across five levels: global, national, organizational, group, and individual. At the global level, it reflects core societal values such as freedom of choice and human rights. National culture represents the unconscious values of a nation's majority, while organizational culture, as defined by Schein (1992), consists of shared assumptions and beliefs within an organization. The team culture focuses on group-level values and beliefs, influenced by psychological connection and interpersonal trust. At the individual level, culture is shaped by personal experiences and upbringing. These levels, though distinct, are interrelated and impact each other in various ways (Stensland, 2021).

The Circuit of Culture Framework (Hall, 1997) offers a lens to analyze how cultural products within sport culture are produced, circulated, consumed, and resisted. This framework includes five interconnected elements: representation, consumption, production, regulation, and identification. Representation involves the generation of meaning through language, signs, and symbols, as seen in sports logos and chants. Consumption refers to the decoding of cultural objects, influencing how individuals interpret cultural elements. Production, the process of imbuing cultural products with meaning, can include media outputs like newspaper articles. Regulation, concerning meanings derived from policies, can be exemplified by historical bans in sports events. Identification relates to meanings derived from social networks, influencing how individuals perceive marketing materials or slogans.

Sport, as a dominant societal institution, allows sport culture to serve as a platform for broader social discourse (Stensland, 2021). Within its various levels, it influences and frames cultural artifacts, beliefs, values, and underlying assumptions, thereby impacting individual and group behavior. This culture is continually constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed, evolving over time. As Storey (1996) asserts, meaning in culture is not only expressed but also socially produced within specific historical and discursive contexts.

College Sport Culture

Sport culture, with its dynamic and evolving nature, has undergone significant transformations over the years, reflecting broader societal changes and technological advancements (Clotfelter, 2019). Historically, sport was primarily a local or regional phenomenon, with cultural practices and norms deeply rooted in local communities and traditions. However, with the advent of globalization and the rise of mass media, sport culture has expanded its reach and influence, becoming a global phenomenon. This evolution is marked by the increasing commercialization of sports, the proliferation of international sporting events, and the growing media coverage of sports, which have collectively contributed to the creation of a global sport culture (Clotfelter, 2019). This global culture transcends national boundaries, allowing for the exchange of cultural practices and the formation of a shared sporting identity among diverse populations (Stensland, 2021).

The culture of collegiate athletics, particularly in the United States, presents a unique case in the evolution of sport culture. Collegiate sports, especially football and basketball, have grown from mere extracurricular activities to major commercial enterprises, generating significant revenue and media attention (Clotfelter, 2019). This shift is characterized by the increasing professionalization of college sports, where athletic programs often mirror professional sports organizations in terms of management, marketing, and revenue generation.

These developments highlight the fluid and dynamic nature of sport culture, as it continuously adapts to and reflects the changing social, economic, and political landscapes (Clotfelter, 2019). Whether at the global or collegiate level, sport culture remains a vital and ever-evolving aspect of human society, with the power to unite and divide, to reflect and shape societal values and norms (Stensland, 2021).

Method

Ethnography

Ethnography, a pivotal methodology within social science research, offers an immersive exploration of group life and culture. At its core, ethnography is a qualitative research method that involves observing, entering, and studying group dynamics in their natural setting (Charmaz, 2006). This methodology extends far beyond mere observation; it encompasses the intricate task of representing one form of life within the categories of another (Geertz, 1988). Ethnography necessitates a rigorous process of fieldwork, followed by the translation and interpretation of findings into written form. This process is not only methodological but also deeply reflective, considering the ethical considerations surrounding the research (Ballesterio & Winthereik, 2021).

The methodology of ethnography deals extensively with the practical aspects of collecting source material in the field and communicating an interpretation of that material. It involves capturing the voices, conversations, feelings, bodily competencies, comportment, and motility of subjects, rendering them within the scope of the research (Charmaz, 2006). The ethnographer engages in a cyclical process of observing, interviewing, and interpreting (Ballesterio & Winthereik, 2021). For instance, descriptive observations are jotted down in field notes, which are later analyzed and represented in the ethnographic writing. This process of writing up materials collected during ethnography is complex, involving numerous choices and the construction of detail. Given that ethnography is essentially the writing of culture, it grapples perpetually with the challenge of how to write about 'the other' (Ballesterio & Winthereik, 2021).

Ethnography is more than an academic exercise; it involves observing and researching the life of a particular group within their community or social world (Ballesterio & Winthereik, 2021). This observation often incorporates various methods, including diagrams,

maps, photographs, interviews, and questionnaires (Charmaz, 2006). As a qualitative research method, ethnography is widely used across the social sciences. Its popularity is evident not only in academic circles but also in English-speaking countries and beyond (Babchuk, 2013). The ethnographer's role is to study what is happening within the social group at the moment (Ballesterio & Winthereik, 2021). The goal is to describe the studied world with as much detail as possible, capturing the nuances and complexities of the group's culture and interactions. This focus on detail and depth makes ethnography a powerful tool in understanding and interpreting social phenomena (Pearson, 2015). Ethnography's strength lies in its ability to provide rich, detailed, and nuanced insights into people's everyday lives and cultural practices (Pearson, 2015). It helps in understanding the complexities of social life and cultural phenomena that might not be visible through other research methods. However, it also poses challenges, such as the need for a significant time investment, potential biases of the researcher, and the complexities of interpreting cultural contexts (Ballesterio & Winthereik, 2021).

Sample

As a European student studying American college sports, I possess a unique vantage point that makes me particularly well-suited to conduct an ethnography about American college sports from a fan perspective. Coming from a different cultural and sporting background, I bring an outsider's perspective that allows me to see and question aspects of the culture that may be taken for granted or overlooked by those who have grown up within it. This fresh perspective enables me to approach the subject with a sense of curiosity and objectivity that might be less accessible to someone deeply ingrained in the culture. Additionally, my experience with European sports culture provides me with a comparative framework to understand and analyze the unique characteristics of American college sports fandom. My position as both an outsider and a student enables me to navigate this cultural

space with a blend of detachment and immersive engagement, making me uniquely equipped to explore and articulate the nuances of this particular sports culture.

As part of this study, I attended eleven sporting events on college campuses from August 2023-December 2023. These events included men's American football, men's basketball, women's basketball, women's soccer, women's volleyball, and women's gymnastics. During these events, I participated in fan-related activities and cultural traditions, of which I took field notes.

I also interviewed several European international students and international student-athletes about their involvement and understanding of American college sports. An international student-athlete (ISA) is a student who qualifies as both an international student living abroad in the United States and a student-athlete competing in a sport at a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)-member institution (Coombs, 2022b). In total, I interviewed 20 different students, all of who were undergraduate or graduate students. The international students I interviewed had no previous experience with American college sports.

Study Limitations

In my ethnographic research on American college sports culture, I've encountered several limitations that shape the scope and impact of my findings. The inherent subjectivity of this method poses a significant challenge, as my personal biases and experiences inevitably influence my interpretation of data. This subjectivity raises questions about the objectivity of my research. Additionally, the time-consuming and labor-intensive nature of ethnography is evident in my commitment to attending athletic events at a single university. While this provides deep insights into a specific context, it limits the generalizability of my findings to broader contexts. Ethical considerations, such as privacy and consent, also play a critical role, especially given the intimate nature of my involvement with the university community.

Analyzing the qualitative data from observations and interviews is another complex aspect, as it requires interpreting large amounts of subjective data. Furthermore, the dynamic nature of cultural practices means that my findings might quickly become outdated. Language and cultural barriers occasionally impede my understanding, leading to potential misinterpretations. Lastly, my focus on a single university's athletic events means that I might overlook broader social, economic, and political factors influencing sports culture across various contexts. Recognizing these limitations is essential for conducting my research responsibly and presenting my findings with a clear understanding of their context and constraints.

Study Delimitations

In my ethnographic study of American college sports culture, I undertook significant delimitation efforts to enhance the quality and credibility of my research. One of the key steps in this process was seeking mentorship from Dr. Hayden Coombs, a renowned expert in the NCAA and international student-athlete research. Dr. Coombs, with his extensive experience as an ethnographer, provided invaluable guidance on the nuances of conducting ethnographic research in the context of college sports. His expertise in the field, particularly in understanding the dynamics of student-athletes within the NCAA framework, greatly informed my approach and helped refine my research focus. Additionally, his mentorship extended to the academic realm, where I audited a senior-level sport and athletic administration course he taught. This experience not only deepened my understanding of the administrative and regulatory aspects of college sports but also allowed me to observe and interact with students who are directly engaged in this field.

Further enriching my research was the mentorship I received from Dr. Cedric Brown, a senior athletic director at Southern Utah University. Dr. Brown's diverse experience in NCAA athletics, encompassing roles as a student-athlete, coach, and administrator, provided a

multifaceted perspective on the intricacies of college sports in America. His insights were particularly valuable in understanding the operational and logistical aspects of collegiate athletics, as well as the challenges and opportunities faced by those involved at various levels of the NCAA structure. Through interviews and ongoing mentorship, Dr. Brown helped me navigate the complex landscape of college sports, offering a comprehensive view that enriched my ethnographic study. These efforts in seeking expertise and guidance from seasoned professionals in the field significantly bolstered the depth and breadth of my research, ensuring a well-rounded and informed exploration of American college sports culture.

Findings

Initially, my research involved extensive reading of articles and books, coupled with conducting interviews, to deepen my understanding of American collegiate sports culture. The role of a student-athlete is multifaceted and extends beyond mere participation in sports. Eligibility to play on a team is governed by the Academic Progress Rate (APR), a system developed by the NCAA. Student-athletes can accumulate up to four points annually, divided between the fall and spring semesters. Points are awarded based on academic eligibility and retention at the institution. A team must maintain a minimum four-year score of 930 points to avoid penalties such as scholarship reduction, decreased practice time, and loss of financial aid (Stokowski, 2017). Thus, student-athletes shoulder significant responsibilities and adhere to stringent rules to maintain their team standing and scholarships.

The NCAA's role extends to financing scholarships, housing, and travel expenses. Although these expenditures are substantial for institutions, they are relatively modest compared to the generated revenue. Significantly, this financial support enables many students to access education that would otherwise be unaffordable. The life of a student-athlete is akin to a full-time job, involving early mornings, training, classes, more practice, and study sessions, cumulatively occupying 8-10 hours daily (C. Brown, personal communication, November 13, 2023).

The popularity of sports events among students intrigued me, leading to an exploration of the behaviors and motivations underlying this phenomenon. A standout aspect is the vibrant atmosphere created by participants. Each event begins with the American national anthem, a ritual observed with reverence by the audience. The entry of players to the accompaniment of motivational music, the enthusiastic fan response, and the distinct team introductions contribute to an electric atmosphere, eliciting strong emotional responses.

The involvement and interest of students, fans, and staff in college sports are remarkable. The roles of cheerleaders and dance teams are critical in energizing the atmosphere. Their performances, differing in focus between gymnastic feats and dance routines, are pivotal in reviving the spirit of the game. International students I interviewed concurred, highlighting the atmosphere, team spirit, and enjoyment. The college sports culture in America is taken seriously, with teams holding significant importance for their universities.

The mascot, a symbol of school spirit, is a ubiquitous presence at games, engaging in entertaining antics and interactions with fans. Similarly, the university's music band enhances the atmosphere, playing a mix of popular and classic tunes, often supported by the cheerleaders and dance teams. The band's presence, unusual in my experience at sports events, adds a unique auditory dimension to the games.

During game interruptions, the distribution of complimentary items like snacks, clothing, and vouchers by cheerleaders and staff generates palpable excitement among the audience. This practice, initially puzzling to me, became a source of fun and anticipation as I immersed myself in the games. Mini-games involving audience participation for prizes further contribute to the engaging and interactive environment.

A critical observation is the intense fandom that characterizes these events. Fans exhibit unwavering enthusiasm and support for their teams, regardless of the game's outcome. Their actions, ranging from cheerleading to opponent taunting, significantly influence the game's atmosphere. While some behaviors may border on unsportsmanlike conduct, they underscore the deep emotional investment of the fans. The number of spectators varies by sport, with football and men's basketball typically drawing the largest crowds.

Behind the scenes, numerous university employees and an athletic department work diligently to ensure seamless event execution. Their roles encompass planning, scheduling, and game management. This team includes referees, scorekeepers, announcers,

photographers, cameramen, and others responsible for live streaming and post-game reporting.

Analysis

Following a four-month immersive experience in North America, I have developed a profound understanding of the prominence of collegiate sports within this cultural context. Contrary to the perception that college life revolves solely around academic pursuits, I observed that sports play a crucial role in providing a necessary respite from the rigors of academic life. This phenomenon is not merely about leisure; it's an integral part of the student experience, facilitating social interactions and collective enjoyment of sporting events. Such gatherings often feature enjoyable snacks and beverages, creating a convivial atmosphere around the games. In my analysis, I apply Stuart Hall's (1997) Circuit of Culture framework to this ethnographic study, offering a detailed and layered understanding of the cultural significance of American collegiate athletics. This approach allows for a comprehensive exploration of the complex interplay between various cultural elements within the realm of collegiate sports.

Representation

In my observations, I noted how collegiate sports in America generate meaning through various symbols and rituals. The representation of team spirit and institutional pride is vividly expressed through logos, team colors, and mascots. These symbols are not just visual; they are imbued with history and meaning, resonating deeply with the community. The ritual of playing the national anthem before games, for instance, stood out as a powerful moment of national identity and unity. This act, along with the visual representations of the teams, constructs a narrative that is central to the identity of collegiate sports.

Consumption

My experience revealed the intense ways in which students, faculty, and the community consume collegiate sports. This consumption goes beyond merely watching games; it includes participating in game-day rituals, donning team merchandise, and engaging

in spirited discussions about the teams. The excitement and energy at the games, particularly during key moments like player introductions or during halftime shows, underscored the deep emotional connection the audience has with these events. The enthusiasm for free merchandise and participation in interactive games also highlighted the active role of fans in this cultural phenomenon.

Production

The NCAA plays a pivotal role in the production of collegiate sports culture. My research indicated that the NCAA's rules and regulations, particularly concerning athlete eligibility and academic performance, significantly influence the student-athlete experience. This production is not limited to sports alone; it extends to media portrayals, live streams, and post-game discussions, all of which contribute to the narrative of collegiate sports. The efforts of the athletic department in organizing and managing events also play a crucial part in this production process, shaping the way these sports are presented and experienced.

Regulation

Regulation within collegiate sports was evident in the policies and standards set by the NCAA, especially the Academic Progress Rate (APR). These regulations not only govern the eligibility of student-athletes but also shape their academic and athletic commitments. Additionally, there are social regulations, such as the norms and expectations for fan behavior during games. These unwritten rules contribute to the overall atmosphere and experience of collegiate sports, emphasizing sportsmanship and community engagement.

Identification

Throughout my study, I observed a strong sense of identification among students, staff, alumni, and fans with their collegiate sports teams. This identification goes beyond mere support for the sports teams; it is a critical aspect of individual and community identity. The shared experiences of cheering for a team, celebrating victories, and even enduring losses

together foster a strong sense of belonging and pride. This was particularly evident in the way international students, like myself, engaged with these sports, finding a sense of connection and community in a new cultural setting.

Conclusion

In concluding my ethnographic study on American collegiate athletics, it's imperative to reflect on the multifaceted impact these sports have on the cultural and educational landscape of the United States. Through the lens of Stuart Hall's Circuit of Culture, this study has dissected the complex layers of representation, consumption, production, regulation, and identification inherent in the realm of collegiate sports. This analytical framework has not only illuminated the significance of these sports as mere games but also underscored their role as a vital component of American cultural identity, deeply woven into the social fabric and educational system.

The dichotomy of universities in America, as observed in this study, reveals two distinct foci: high-level education and sports-centric institutions. This distinction is exemplified by entities like the University of Texas, whose Darrel K. Royal-Texas Memorial Stadium, with its vast capacity for over 100,000 spectators, stands as a testament to the monumental scale of collegiate sports. Such large-scale sports facilities are not just physical structures; they are emblematic of the profound impact that sports have on the reputation and identity of American colleges and universities (Clotfelter, 2019). The prominence of commercial sports in the university setting is not merely a feature of the American educational system; it's a cornerstone of the cultural and social experience for many students and faculty members.

This study has demonstrated that the influence of collegiate sports extends far beyond the athletes and teams themselves. It encompasses everyone connected to the institution, whether they are actively watching, discussing, or reading about the sporting events (Kim, 2017). The role of sports in American universities is thus twofold: it is a means of building and developing the university's brand, and it is also a platform for community engagement and identity formation. The fervor with which students and alumni associate themselves with

their university teams speaks volumes about the deep-seated sense of belonging and pride fostered by these sports.

The Circuit of Culture framework has been instrumental in dissecting the nuanced ways in which collegiate sports are represented, consumed, produced, regulated, and identified within the American context. Representation through symbols and rituals, consumption as a shared community experience, production overseen by governing bodies like the NCAA, regulation through policies and social norms, and identification as a form of communal bonding and pride – all these elements coalesce to create a rich tapestry of cultural significance.

In essence, collegiate sports in America are much more than competitions; they are cultural phenomena that encapsulate the values, aspirations, and identities of the institutions and communities they represent. As a European observer, this study has afforded me a unique vantage point to appreciate the integral role that sports play in shaping the educational and cultural landscape of American universities. This experience has not only enriched my understanding of American culture but has also provided a broader perspective on the interplay between sports, education, and community in a global context.

Being a collegiate sports fan in America involves more than just watching the game. It encompasses everything happening around it. Students wear university merchandise with pride and honor, participating in activities ranging from supporting their team to playing games and booing the opposing team. These enthusiasts make every event fun and entertaining. According to interviews with international students, collegiate sports events are special, enabling them to enjoy every minute, even though some were not generally sports fans and didn't watch or care about sports previously. Those who attend these events often have a connection to the school, whether as students, alumni, or financial supporters and donors. This connection is one reason collegiate sports are so popular in North America. The

emotional attachment is strong, yet fans don't seem overly upset if their favorite team loses.

Ultimately, collegiate sports events offer amazing experiences for all. They provide students a break from constant studying, while other fans simply enjoy the game and support their team.

Even at a smaller college, the experience can be magical, clearly illustrating why watching and supporting collegiate sports is a cherished aspect of American culture.

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