

Education is as important as athletics

by Wayne Westlake

Chukchi News and Information Service

KIANA — About six years ago, the National College Athletic Association, better known as the NCAA, increased its academic standards for incoming freshmen athletes at all NCAA colleges and universities.

The move touched off a fireball of controversy that has burned ever since.

OPINION

Inupiat Paitot
People's Heritage

As a secondary school basketball coach in rural Alaska for eight years, I believe that maintaining academic standards also applies to high school athletes.

Over the years of coaching and dealing with players' academic responsibilities, I have had athletes that did well in school and others that did just enough for eligibility to play basketball. Still others didn't do well enough to participate in sports at all.

This does not mean that the passing students were smarter than the others. Rather, they wanted to play basketball, so they worked harder to get good grades.

How does this relate to the NCAA? Well, the NCAA's original "proposition 48" required entering freshmen to be eligible for scholarships only if they achieved at least 2.0 average in a college preparatory curriculum in high school and scored at least 700 on their college Scholastic Aptitude Test.

In addition, subsequent NCAA proposition number 42 would close a current loophole allowing academically ill-prepared athletes to forego playing sports their freshman year in order to concentrate on academics, but still receive full scholarships.

Proposition 42, however, would go even further and make these athletes

pay their own first year, which many, mostly minorities, cannot afford to do.

Some educators and athletic officials believe these propositions discriminate against underprivileged students, particularly minorities who may miss their only opportunity to escape the ghetto.

"It's easy to educate the bright kids, but even a deficient student should have the opportunity to get an education," Temple University's basketball coach John Chaney told *Sports Illustrated*. "Let's give the economically disadvantaged kid a chance."

But Indiana basketball coach Bobby Knight, who supports these propositions, said that the opponents "need to understand that college isn't for everybody."

I agree with Bobby Knight because I like the new rules' intent to get athletes to work just as hard on academics as on athletics.

During the 1988-89 basketball season, for example, I had three good players who didn't do well in school.

It wasn't because these young men were not able to do the work, but it was because they didn't do it at all. I knew these young men were capable of getting good grades, because they had done it in the past.

As another example, two years ago

I had a young man on the basketball team who barely passed all season long and didn't pass his final tests. As a result, his grades dropped below eligibility level, and he wasn't allowed to play in the district and state tournaments.

Over the past two years, however, he has worked hard in school and has never had a problem with passing and being eligible to play basketball. Here is a young man who wanted to play basketball, and who worked hard enough in school to make it happen.

Playing basketball in high school and college gives students a chance to learn discipline and the importance of working with others, as well as how to set goals as individuals and as a team.

However, we must remember that basketball and other sports cannot teach the kids how to read, write and do math.

For Native students in rural Alaska, skills such as reading, writing and math are essential for continued education, be it college or vocational training. These skills are essential to compete in the job market.

In the case of the college athlete, even though he is able to play basketball, he might not be good enough for

professional basketball.

Consequently, he doesn't get his education if all he studies are basketball films. When his years of college eligibility run out, this leaves him in the dark without any marketable skills.

As a basketball coach who is also attending college, I believe sports and academics go hand-in-hand. Sports can be a big motivator to get students to attend school and do well and graduate from school.

With regards to the NCAA's proposition 42, I feel that this new rule would not rob qualified people of a college education. Rather, it would not allow the unqualified to get into college just because they are good athletes. In addition, it might compel athletes to study harder in high school.

Inupiaq Eskimo Wayne Westlake, who plans to become a certified mathematics teacher, wrote this piece in an English composition class at Chukchi College, a branch campus of the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Westlake, a licensed electrician and father of three children, has coached basketball at Kiana High School since 1981 and has led teams to two state championships. Chukchi News and Information Service is a writing project of Chukchi College.