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COLLEGE ATHLETES: ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE: Behind the line on grades

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Football and men's basketball players on the nation's big-time college teams averaged hundreds of points lower on their SATs than their classmates, and some of the gaps are so large they call into question the lengths to which schools will go to win.

The biggest gap between football players and students as a whole occurred at the University of Florida, where players scored 346 points lower than the school's overall student body. That's larger than the difference in scores between typical students at the University of Georgia and Harvard University.

Nationwide, football players average 220 points lower on the SAT than their classmates — and men's basketball players average seven points less than football players.

Those figures come from an Atlanta Journal-Constitution study of 54 public universities, including the members of the six major Bowl Championship Series conferences and other schools whose teams finished the 2007-08 season ranked among the football or men's basketball top 25.

While it's commonly known that admission standards are different for athletes, the AJC study quantifies how wide the gap is between athletes and the general student body at major universities.

Georgia Tech's football players had the nation's best average SAT score, 1028 of a possible 1600, and best average high school GPA, 3.39 of a possible 4.0 in the core curriculum. But Tech's football players still scored 315 SAT points lower on average than their classmates.

At the University of Georgia, the average football SAT was 949, which is 239 points behind the average for an undergraduate student at Georgia — and 79 points behind Tech's football average. The Bulldogs' average high school GPA was 2.77, or 45th out of 53 teams for which football GPAs were available. Their SAT average ranked them 22nd.

Nationwide, coaches who would never offer a scholarship to a player who was 6 inches shorter or half a second slower than other prospects routinely recruit players whose standardized test scores suggest they're at a competitive disadvantage in the classroom.

It's the price of winning.

"If you're going to mount a competitive program in Division I-A, and our institution is committed to do that, some flexibility in admissions of athletes is going to take place," said Tom Lifka, chairman of the committee that handles athlete admissions at the University of California, Los Angeles. "Every institution I know in the country operates in the same way. It may or may not be a good thing, but that's the way it is."

UCLA, which has won more NCAA championships in all sports than any other school, had the biggest gap between the average SAT scores of athletes in all sports and its overall student body, at 247 points.

Administrators such as Lifka say the SAT gap between athletes and non-athletes is the price of fielding a team, and they argue what's important is that large numbers of their scholarship athletes earn degrees. Critics say athletes who arrive on campus unprepared to compete academically get shuffled off to easy majors and unchallenging courses and don't receive much of an education.

Questions about fairness

"The problem is there's a huge world of Mickey Mouse courses and special curriculums that athletes are steered into," said Murray Sperber, a visiting professor in the University of California's graduate school of education and the author of four books about college athletics and college life. "The problem is there are many athletes graduating from schools who are semiliterate."

Who gets hurt? Former Princeton University President William Bowen points to the students the colleges would have admitted if they hadn't enrolled less qualified athletes.

"There are grounds for concern," Bowen said. "Places at a lot of these schools are precious things. To have them allocated this way raises troubling questions about fairness, about taking advantage of educational opportunity."

But Georgia Tech men's basketball coach Paul Hewitt says he and other coaches are able to go beyond test scores to find recruits who can succeed in school while also having the talent to play at a high level.

Hewitt says the only fair comparison is between athletes and other students with similar socioeconomic backgrounds. Seen that way, he argues, athletics programs perform very well. Black athletes, for example, graduate at higher rates than black students as a whole.

"To insinuate that athletics has caused this problem of poor graduation rates [among black students] is wrong," Hewitt said.

The Journal-Constitution obtained the test scores and other academic data from reports each major college athletics department is required to file with the NCAA, college sports' governing body. The NCAA considers the reports confidential; the Journal-Constitution obtained them under state public record laws.

The reports are required only once in 10 years; the Journal-Constitution requested the data from the most recent report filed by each school.

The data from the University of Georgia are for the freshman classes of 1997, 1998 and 1999. The university does not have more recent information, athletics department spokesman Claude Felton said. The data from Georgia Tech are for the freshman classes of 2003, 2004 and 2005.

The differences in the age of the data make comparisons among the schools imperfect, but there are two reasons to think they're still noteworthy. First, there's little difference on average between the figures for the schools with the oldest data and those with the newest. Second, each school reported figures for three consecutive freshman classes, and the average change in the football team's SAT scores was less than three points between a school's oldest class and its most recent. Twenty-seven schools improved their average football SAT; 26 didn't. Also, regardless of the differences between individual schools, some universal truths emerged:

- > All 53 schools for which football SAT scores were available had at least an 88-point gap between team members' average score and the average for the student body.
- > Schools with the highest admissions standards, such as Georgia Tech; the University of Virginia; the University of California, Berkeley; UCLA; and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, had the biggest gaps between the SAT averages for athletes and the overall student body.
- > Football players performed 115 points worse on the SAT than male athletes in other sports.
- > The differences between athletes' and non-athletes' SAT scores was less than half as big for women (73 points) as for men (170).
- > Many schools routinely used a special admissions process to admit athletes who did not meet the normal entrance requirements. More than half of scholarship athletes at the University of Georgia, the University of Wisconsin, Clemson University, UCLA, Rutgers University, Texas A&M University and Louisiana State University were special admits.

"If the university says they'd help us meet team needs, that's as important as finding an oboist for the orchestra," said Nancy McDuff, the University of Georgia's associate vice president for admissions and enrollment management.

Special admissions

The numbers, however, show special admissions exceptions are used far more often for athletes than oboists. At Georgia, for instance, 73.5 percent of athletes were special admits compared with 6.6 percent of the student body as a whole.

The University of Oklahoma and the University of Florida, whose football teams play Jan. 8 for the national championship, ranked near the bottom in standardized test scores. Florida's freshman football classes of 2002-04 ranked 50th in average score out of 53 schools for which football SAT averages were available, and Oklahoma's freshman football classes of 2001-03 ranked 42nd. Florida's football players ranked last in average high school GPA, at 2.54. The average for all football players in the study was 2.93.

This season is typical. Five of the last seven public universities to win college football's national championship ranked among the study's bottom 20 in football SAT scores.

It's true not just in big-time college sports but even in the Ivy League. Football players in the Ivies' 1995 freshman class scored 144 points lower on average than other Ivy League men, according to Bowen's book "Reclaiming the Game."

The key question, Lifka said, is whether schools admit only athletes who have a reasonable chance to succeed academically. Seventy percent of UCLA athletes graduate within six years of enrollment, according to the latest figures reported by the NCAA. Nationally, the figure for athletes is 64 percent, two points higher than for all students, though athletes in the high-profile sports fared worse. Division I-A football players were six points behind the rate for all students, and men's basketball players were 13 points behind.

Lifka said his 26 years of experience working with athletic admissions have shown him high school GPAs do a much better job than test scores in predicting athletes' college success. Coaches and athletes say a player's attitude toward school and willingness to put in the effort matter as much as anything.

"If the teacher can teach it, I can learn it," said Calvin Booker, a senior quarterback who transferred from Auburn University to Georgia Tech two years ago.

Even Sperber, a critic of the college athletics system, says the test scores in the Journal-Constitution study should not feed a dumb jock stereotype. Instead, he said, the scores reflect the students' background and their focus on

sports over academics.

“I met very, very few certifiably dumb jocks,” Sperber said, adding that athletes whose athletics careers were over proved to be some of his best students. “The discipline they had learned in sports they finally could apply full time,” he said.

NCAA President Myles Brand said the big question isn’t whether athletes are as qualified as other students when they enroll but whether, given help, they can obtain degrees. “What you are really looking for is whether the student-athletes who are being accepted have the capability of graduating from that institution with the academic support they have available,” Brand said.

Schools make the call

The NCAA leaves that calculation to its member schools, though various reforms over the past 25 years set minimum standards for freshman eligibility. Brand said it’s not up to the NCAA to regulate how many admissions exceptions a school grants recruited athletes and how much of a gap there can be between athletes’ academic qualifications and those of other students.

“Admission standard is entirely the province of the school,” he said.

Brand is concerned enough about the numbers of special admissions that he is instituting a program to alert college presidents whose schools grant an unusually high number of exceptions.

The decision how far to go in lowering admissions standards for athletes varies considerably from school to school. It can be a challenge to avoid a race to the bottom.

“We go out on the field and get beaten by people we couldn’t admit,” said Charles Young, former president of the University of Florida and former chancellor of UCLA. “It creates strong pressures to go [to rival schools’ admissions standards], and there have to be very strong countervailing pressures to avoid going there.”

One observer says the Journal-Constitution figures show current university policies are less about admitting only qualified students and more about lowering standards for athletes and then dealing with the consequences.

“They’re saying we’ll take just about anybody as long as we can get them through,” said Allen Sack, director of the University of New Haven’s Institute for Sport Management and a former University of Notre Dame football player. “They’re betting what they can do is they can get anyone through school if they get the right kind of counseling.”

FOOTBALL SAT SCORES: THE TOP 10

SchoolAverage

Georgia Tech1028

Oregon State997

Michigan997

Virginia993

Purdue974

Indiana.....973

Hawaii968

California967

Colorado966

Iowa964

FOOTBALL SAT SCORES: THE BOTTOM 10

SchoolAverage

Oklahoma State878

Louisville878

Memphis.....890

Florida.....890

Texas Tech901

Arkansas910

Texas A&M.....911

Mississippi State..911

Washington State ..916

Michigan State917

HOW WE GOT THE STORY

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution gathered the information for this project via public records requests to every public university that competes in a Bowl Championship Series conference or finished in the 2007-08 season's football or men's basketball Top 25s. Once every 10 years, each NCAA member school is required to undergo an athletics certification process. The SAT and core GPA data presented here came from reports the universities filed as part of that process.

A few universities are so open about their athletics departments' performance that they publish the report containing their SAT and GPA data on their Web sites. Others, such as Penn State and the University of Pittsburgh, refused to provide it. The University of Kansas and West Virginia University said their most recent NCAA certification self-study did not include the information.

The SAT scores in this study are on the 1600-point scale that predates the addition of an SAT writing component. For schools that reported ACT scores, we derived comparable SAT scores using the NCAA's conversion chart. Some schools refused to provide men's basketball SAT scores on the grounds it would violate the privacy rights of individual athletes. Kansas State University did not provide the AJC any sport-by-sport data.

Private schools were not included in this project because they are not subject to public records laws. The NCAA does not release the school-by-school information; it considers it confidential.

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