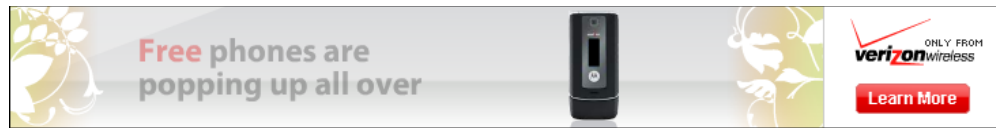


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 From the Los Angeles Times

KURT STREETER

## NCAA not exempt from hypocrisy

Why can some student-athletes have agents and others can't? And why do rules only hurt the kids?  
 Kurt Streeter

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Slated to play next season for the USC basketball team is freshman Romeo Miller, a.k.a. Lil' Romeo, a rap star and child actor whose talents in those arenas have earned him millions.

Miller has legal representation. And while playing for the Trojans, the Beverly Hills High product will continue to rake in bundles of money from his rapping and acting.

Think the NCAA will crack down?

Think again.

On college campuses, the relationships and bank accounts of athletes like O.J. Mayo are subject to tight, potentially punishing scrutiny by the NCAA. Yet it's fine for Lil' Romeo, because his entertainment career began before his expected enrollment at USC, to play basketball while keeping his agent and continuing to make loads of cash -- so long as the agent and the cash have nothing to do with college sports. It's fine, too, for a scholarship computer science major to start a fortune-making Internet site and not worry about any repercussions other than fame from being hailed as a sharp-minded entrepreneur.

All of this is meant to protect the myth that the kids playing football and basketball at big-time universities are pure amateurs, paragons of academic virtue unsullied by the millions of dollars they create.

Hypocritical?

You bet.

Just look at the best player on this season's Trojans, Mayo, the talented guard currently caught up in the NCAA's double-standard snare.

Mayo, projected to be an NBA star since junior high, came to campus because of the recent, stone-skulled decision requiring kids graduating from American high schools to wait at least a year before entering the NBA draft.

Yes, Mayo started his USC experience while tight with a guy who could be classified as an agent. No, we don't know yet what that relationship entailed, whether Rodney Guillory was cutting deals for the Trojans guard while Mayo was in school, whether Mayo received the \$30,000 in illegal benefits Guillory is alleged to have given him.

Patience, the NCAA advises, its aggressive investigation will uncover the truth and, if necessary, dole out the proper penalties to USC, a wealthy and powerful institution that can certainly weather a storm like this.

Question: In the many cases like this, who gets hurt the most? Time and again it's the athletes, most of them poor kids from the inner city who spend their college years providing extremely low-cost labor for an extremely high-profit enterprise. Mayo is one such kid. After his forced trip to USC, he'll be in the NBA next season. But he moves on with his name tarnished, his reputation sullied, his endorsement opportunities dimmed.

If anyone needs investigating, it's the NCAA, a nonprofit fueled by a boatload of corporate sponsors and a \$6-billion contract to televise the men's basketball tournament games played by its "amateur" athletes. You read right: \$6 billion. And since it goes to a nonprofit, none of it gets taxed.

The athletes make money too. After all, those scholarships are worth a good amount. But considering the billions of dollars they create with their hard-earned sweat -- risking injury and, sometimes, their lives -- a \$20,000 scholarship is hardly fair compensation.

Those scholarships come with strings attached. While coaches can leave an old job for a new one freely and easily, athletes who transfer schools are often forced to sit for a year. The best players can't have agents to help them prepare for life as a pro. A kid with a full ride can get cut on a whim, after a single poor season. Sounds a lot like pay-for-play to me. And where I come from, pay-for-play equals professional.

Yet, the NCAA is still stuck on trying to convince us that what it governs are games played by "amateur student-athletes." If you've spent much time on the campuses of most major universities you'd know that the majority of football and basketball players are students of a different kind than one typically thinks.

The athletes at these schools, many of them having been accepted despite less-than-stellar grades, "receive what generously can be called 'education-light,'" said Allen Sack, director of the institute for sports management at the University of New Haven and an expert on the growing commercialism in college sports. Sack describes a two-tiered campus life -- one tier for regular students, another for the major sport athletes, a group coddled, isolated and steered to easy course work to stay eligible for the coming season, all in the name of "doing their primary job: the athlete --

entertainer."

None of this is to let the Trojans off the hook. USC, as much as any school in the country, knows the rules. If major violations involving Mayo are found, the Trojans should be punished, swiftly and harshly.

Still, the shifty, wink-and-nod treatment given top athletes on most campuses is a symptom caused by the NCAA's need to protect its outdated amateur mythology. The agency and its bylaws need a makeover.

The college presidents aren't much interested in real change, but maybe Congress can do the job. There's a glimmer of hope coming from folks like Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) and several of his colleagues. They've begun taking a fresh look at the NCAA, asking tough questions about the agency's nonprofit status, its lack of transparency and the role of academia and college sports.

Maybe Congress can bring about a little justice.

Why shouldn't college athletes, playing for a tax-free organization whose express purpose is to educate, be forced to sit out their freshman year and learn what it takes in the classroom?

Why shouldn't they be allowed to have agents if they plan on going pro?

Why shouldn't they be allowed to augment their scholarships, at the very least, with money from endorsements?

Why shouldn't O.J. Mayo, Lil' Romeo -- and their dorm-mate, the computer science major -- be treated just the same?

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