

Greg Wheeler

To: officeofthepresident@middlebury.edu
Subject: Response To Your "Striking the Balance" Article In the Winter 2008 Middlebury Magazine

Dear Dr. Liebowitz:

I read with great interest your recent article, and was pleased, as a former lacrosse player at Middlebury in the mid-70's, to see a platform established here for a balanced discussion of the Middlebury athletic experience. Sadly, this is something I've generally felt has been intentionally skewed, overlooked, or avoided through the years by many in the Middlebury family, particularly in its publications and other media resources.

Is it purely coincidental that the annual Middlebury calendar, distributed to friends and alums, consistently omits pictures of sporting activities, or at best, includes one or two per every 24 months, when, as you point out, approximately 30% of Midd's students participate in Varsity athletics? Unfortunately, I think it not a coincidence, although it is pertinent, I believe, to note that Middlebury athlete alums are among your most successful graduates, and most generous donors, when it comes to both capital campaign and annual fund giving at Middlebury!

I was particularly taken by how "your thinking evolved" following your Spring Varsity Captain's Lunch, when Pete Mellen '07 and all the other captains voiced the sentiment, "but we beat them all anyway." This is precisely the single biggest memory I have of my days playing for a highly successful Middlebury lacrosse team which won four consecutive Division II-III New England Lacrosse Championships from 1975 to 1978, despite no recruiting of talent, and rules at that time preventing us from playing in post season NCAA play, due to our NESCAC affiliation (thankfully, this rule was relaxed soon after). Not only did we set the goals per game New England record for all divisions that I believe still stands today, but our 7-goal victory over Dartmouth that year, at a time when they had just beaten D-I 4th-ranked Penn, and had lost by the same 7 goals to D-I 1st-ranked Cornell (who just happened to go on to win the National Championship!), hammered home memories that endure for me today, as if they happened yesterday!

How could this be? How could a bunch of unrecruited, bright, well-rounded kids from a small New England college compete with, and beat the best?!! The answer lies in the pride we felt to be a Panther.... quietly, we knew we were good.... and we knew we could compete. Thirty years ago or today, Panther pride is something special, something that grows within you, and something you never lose.

Today, when I walk the streets of Vail with my Middlebury lacrosse teammates, still competing as a Panther after all these years, I am frequently approached by other non-Middlebury people who, seeing the Middlebury logo on my shirt or shorts, come up to me and say, "Congratulations.... on beating this team or that team you guys are THE class act in Vail, and THE class act in all of lacrosse.... no one does it right like you guys." I find myself crying as I write this, crying with pride at being a Panther. Still.... after all these years.... the fire still burns, although the body struggles to follow."

As to the question regarding whether NESCAC schools and other D-III teams with high academic standards and stringent rules should be spun out into a D-IV or D-III subdivision, I must say.... with all due respect, I think you have it backwards! Middlebury is quite arguably THE class act of D-III sports, and I believe few would refute this finding or statement, whether inside or outside of the Middlebury family. Why not lobby for D-III to retain the best and the brightest, forcing others with lower standards to migrate to other pastures? Let's not penalize the good guys.... but rather, show the others the door!

In summary, nothing feels better than "beating them all anyway," when you know you did it right. Someone once said, "The sweet taste of fair and righteous victory endures far longer than the tarnished lustre of success falsely achieved," or.... if someone didn't.... they certainly should have! Please.... maintain the standard, and maintain the pride.... once a Panther.... always a Panther."

Respectfully submitted,


Greg Wheeler, Class of 1978

Striking the Balance

Debating the future of Division III athletics: Where does Middlebury fit in?

BY RONON MIDDLEBURY, DONALD D. LIEBOWITZ



THE FOLLOWING COLUMN has been edited from an entry on my blog, “Ron on Middlebury.” I post on the blog at least once a month and address what I hope are topics of interest to multiple College constituencies. I plan to reserve this column in the *Middlebury Magazine* for special occasions and therefore I will not appear in every issue.

I invite you to visit the blog and to add your perspective and opinions on whichever posts are of interest to you. “Ron on Middlebury” is at: www.rononmiddlebury.wordpress.com

THE PRESIDENTS OF THE NATIONAL COLLEGIATE ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION (NCAA) Division III colleges are now considering a proposal that would redefine the current division, of which Middlebury and its New England Small College Athletic Conference (NESCAC) institutions are members. The rationale for this proposal is rooted in the belief that the recent, rapid, and anticipated further growth in Division III, now with

more than 420 member institutions, has altered, and will further alter, the character of D-III athletics. NESCAC, arguably the most successful D-III conference in the division, is the D-III conference with the most stringent rules that govern varsity athletics, including the length of each season, the number of contests, student eligibility, practice schedules, recruiting policy, post-season play, and others, yet some fear it will feel the need to alter its principles in order to remain competitive within the division.

Interest in this topic became national as a result of two books published in 2001 and 2003 (“The Game of Life” and “Reclaiming the Game”) that questioned the degree to which the balance between academics and athletics at selective colleges had been compromised by an overemphasis on the latter. These books raised two central questions:

1. Is preferential treatment in admissions, common at the most selective liberal arts colleges and universities for exceptional athletes, “fair?” And,

2. Do varsity sports programs, in which approximately 30 percent of our students participate, create a “sub-culture” on campus that carries with it negative social and academic consequences for the campus at-large?

The current concern is that with schools coming into D-III that have more lenient rules than NESCAC governing their athletics programs, the annual votes on rules changes taken at the NCAA convention will soon run counter to NESCAC’s philosophy. The anticipated rules changes would give our competitors on-field advantages that appear unfair. To counter this, a number of D-III member institutions are encouraging colleges that share our (and their) conference’s philosophy on the balance between academics and athletics to support the proposal for a “Division IV” or “Division IIIa” and “Division IIIb” subdivisions. By establishing a new division or sub-division, schools would be grouped and compete with schools that share more similar philosophies on the role of athletics on their campuses. It would also allow the new division to

introduce new and perhaps even more stringent rules guiding athletics at their institutions.

My initial reaction to all of this was that it would be good for Middlebury to compete with schools and athletic conferences that set similar parameters around their athletics programs. It didn't seem right to me (or "fair") that some of our varsity teams compete against programs with student bodies that are two, three, and even five times the size of Middlebury's—programs that begin their seasons weeks ahead of our teams, with many more games/contests under their belts before post-season play, and with fewer other restrictions on their recruiting, admissions, and other relevant areas.

However, because of a student lunch that my wife Jessica and I hosted for the varsity spring sport captains last April, my thinking has evolved. Pete Mellen '07, last year's captain of the men's lacrosse team (and best face-off man last year in D-III), listened to my comments on this apparent uneven playing field, and responded, "But President Liebowitz, who really cares? We beat them all anyway." His position was seconded and supported by all other captains at that lunch.

His comment reframed (for me) the question this way: so what if other D-III conferences had rules more lax than our own, and so what if, on those campuses, a greater number of classes would be missed by varsity athletes, or too much time was expected from athletes in terms of their commitment to one activity on campus, or if some athletes were red-shirted, or any of the other things that would be out

of "sync" with NESCAC philosophy? If our conference retained the proper rules and balance, and was still able to compete successfully, who cares what the other 400+ D-III schools did? We could still set the example and the standard.

Well, at least two issues come to mind. First, since NESCAC occupies a leadership position within D-III athletics, to reject a proposal by what are viewed as the more academically oriented

Right now, of course, that is not happening. In fact, NESCAC is the most successful conference in terms of NCAA championship play, but how much pressure would presidents of NESCAC schools begin to feel from student-athletes, coaches, athletic directors, alumni, parents, and others if our current success gave way to early tournament departures? How tempting would it be to compromise on the current balance we prize and celebrate to win more?

If NESCAC retains its own high standards in how it runs its athletic programs, should we really care about a larger D-III?

institutions to form a division within the NCAA committed to ensuring the balance between the classroom and the playing field would put our conference in an awkward position. Some believe it would cast our institutions as hypocrites by not leading by example and supporting a move that at least seeks to "reclaim the game." And second, if colleges with philosophies that differ greatly from NESCAC began to dominate D-III rules debates and voting so there was a wider discrepancy in rules governing athletics between most D-III schools and NESCAC schools, what would happen if NESCAC teams began to get beaten and beaten badly in first round NCAA tournaments as a result?

Several questions to consider:

If NESCAC retains its own high standards in how it runs its athletic programs, should we really care about a larger D-III?

Would moving to a D-IV or sub-divisions within D-III affect the recruitment of excellent student-athletes at schools like Middlebury? Many coaches believe it would. Should that matter?

Since NESCAC teams often beat many D-III schools that are larger with more lenient policies guiding athletics, is this proposal, in reality, designed to make the would-be D-IV athletic conferences more competitive for

non-NESCAC schools?

Would stricter guidelines on our athletics program, which might come with a new D-IV, be a good thing?

It seems to me that striving for the best of both worlds should guide our position on this issue: that is, providing the best competition for our student-athletes while, at the same time, applying the necessary policies to ensure a healthy balance between our academic and athletic programs. That would mean choosing to remain in D-III while retaining the most stringent guidelines to ensure the kind of overall education we seek for our students.

I am interested to hear your views on this topic. In the coming months, I plan to hold discussions with our coaches, varsity athletes, and our Athletic Policy Committee to gain multiple perspectives on this issue. In the meantime, please send along your views.

And by the way, congratulations to our men's soccer team—recent winners of the NCAA D-III national championship over a remarkable (and undefeated) Trinity University (Texas) team. Special congratulations to long-time Panther coach, Dave Saward, who, along with so many Middlebury coaches, represents the best of D-III athletics. 🌟

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