

Sports

Dan O'Meara editor/953-2139 nighttime: 953-2104

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Joe George, shown here carrying the ball in 1988 for the Farmington Hills Harrison football team, has changed uniforms and is now a cheerleader on the sideline at Michigan State University.

Commission emphasizes academics

By C.J. Rissak
staff writer

The spotlight has been intense. For several years, intercollegiate athletics have been scrutinized and dissected by all sorts of commissions and in-depth studies.

What have they uncovered? Problems, to be sure — serious problems, in some cases.

William Shelton, the president of Eastern Michigan University, is the only NCAA Division I representative from Michigan on the President's Commission, a collection of 44 NCAA I collegiate heads-of-state. The commission's job wasn't clear at its inception, said Shelton, but it has evolved into "quite a powerful body."

Its purpose is now clear: Put perspective back into intercollegiate athletics and make sure the student part of student-athlete is emphasized.

ALTHOUGH THE three four-year institutions located within the Observer & Eccentric coverage area — Oakland University, Madonna University and St. Mary's College — aren't directly affected by NCAA I rulings, they will feel the ramifications.

They have already. But not as much as one might expect. The smaller the school, the less chance there is for abuse. One reason is there isn't enough money involved to take the risk.

Another is that athletes at the NCAA II or NAIA level are generally more realistic about their chances of making a profession of their sport. They are in school to get a degree.

That is what the NCAA's presidents have been trying to push — academics over athletics. Proposition 48, which established criteria for prospective freshmen student-athletes, is a result of that effort. More are forthcoming.

"THERE'S BEEN a lot of attention given to the athlete portion of the student-athlete, but what about the student portion?" Shelton asked. Which is why the NCAA is currently contemplating moving up the minimum grade point average for incoming student-athletes and making eligibility requirements more rigid.

Other proposals include passing 24 credit hours a year and eight hours the previous semester to remain eligible.

While some may view the new standards as too restrictive, local schools greeted them with a shrug. The reason: They already have similar standards in some cases more restrictive, in place.

In the NAIA, for example (Madonna and St. Mary's are both NAIA members), entrance requirements for freshmen athletes are fulfilling two of the following three: a 2.5 grade point; an 18 on the ACT exam; being in the top 50 percent of your graduating class.

ACCORDING TO Madonna athletic director Ray Summers, "Athletes must meet normal admission policies." The same is true at OU, said Glenn Jackson, the athletic department's faculty representative since 1974. Any exceptions "are made by the admission's office, not the athletic department."

Jackson has been attending NCAA conventions for 15 years; he's seen the changes. "There were hardly any presidents there (before)," he reflected. "And they were hardly noticeable."

That's not the case anymore. "There were at least 250 at the last

meeting and they were definitely active. They were expressing their opinions, in several cases instead of their athletic department representatives."

Stressing academics over athletics is one way presidents plan to gain control of their athletic departments. At OU, said Jackson, that's never been a problem.

"Academics have always been stressed over athletics," he said. "We've been fortunate to have had two athletic directors, Corey Van Fleet and now Paul Hartman, who both firmly believe students are here to be students, not athletes."

AS PROOF, one need look no further than the Hilton Woods case. Woods was an Olympic-caliber swimmer (he competed in Seoul in 1988 for his homeland, the Antilles-Netherlands) who failed to pass enough credit hours last fall to remain eligible.

Through an agreement with faculty members, Woods — OU's top sprinter and the key to their NCAA II championship hopes — was to have completed the work in the winter, get a grade changed and regain his eligibility. But after examining the situation, it was ruled no such adjustment would be allowed.

Woods was ruled ineligible on the eve of the NCAA II meet; OU finished second.

At Madonna, academic restrictions have taken their toll as well, but have still been adhered to. The softball team, embarking on its initial season this spring, lost its top two pitchers to academic-related problems.

"You have to have a sound academic philosophy," insisted Summers. "Each coach knows the purpose of the university is education."

STILL, MAKING more stringent academic requirements doesn't necessarily eliminate a problem. Indeed, it may create more.

"If you really look at it, athletes have many more demands than normal students," said EMU's Shelton. "They have to pass so many credits, plus they have to practice 12 months a year."

"I'm thinking what's most in need of attention is the demand on student-athletes' time. If I could give a student-athlete anything, it would be more time."

There are perks, to be sure. Normal students don't receive the academic attention athletes do, with the availability of tutoring, close monitoring of grades and mandatory study halls. What student-athletes do in the classroom is watched closely by coaches and/or faculty advisors.

THAT COULD tend to alienate athletes from the rest of the student population more than they already are, giving them a different perspective of college life.

But with college athletics receiving such high-profile attention, solving that problem may prove impossible. Summers maintains above all else, at Madonna coaches must "present a clear understanding of athletics and academics. They go hand-in-hand, but academics always come first."

"I think the thrust behind academics will continue."

With renewed interest in graduation rates the NCAA II will require such data in 1992 and a student-athlete's progress towards completion of a degree, academic all-star athletes — like Walt Barrels of Plymouth, a Michigan State hockey player with a 4.0 grade point and a two-time Big Ten Medal of Honor winner — may start receiving more attention than merely athletic standouts.

Role reversal Former player George cheering

By Rob MacDonald
special writer

Joe George will wear a uniform at every Michigan State University football game this fall, but no one will see him score a touchdown, catch a pass or even touch the ball.

The former Farmington Hills Harrison all-star will have an indirect role in what the Spartans do since his uniform will be that of an MSU male cheerleader.

George, who played on consecutive Class B championship teams at Harrison in 1988-89, was selected to the nine-man, 12-woman cheerleading squad in April.

Since playing football was no longer an option for the 6-foot George, who played at 185 pounds in high school, he decided to try cheerleading as a means of staying close to the game.

"Being on the squad was the next best step to being on the football team," he said.

GEORGE WAS a two-way starter as a senior at Harrison, playing full-back and defensive end. He was a first-team All-Observer and Class B all-state selection on defense where he made 17 solo tackles and had 17 assists for the undefeated Hawks in 1989.

"Although I don't feel like I am part of the team like I was in high school," George said, "I do feel like I am still part of the atmosphere."

A shoulder injury he suffered in his senior year at Harrison was one reason George elected not to continue the pursuit of a playing career.

"The doctors told me to do light-weight, high-repetition lifting (to repair the shoulder)," he said, "and I pretty much figure that's what the game is."

'Although I don't feel like I am part of the team like I was in high school, I do feel like I am still part of the atmosphere.'

— Joe George
former Harrison back



"As of right now, I have light years to go before I'm good," he said. "I need a lot of work, but it's fun."

George said his football experience at Harrison aided him in making the squad, "because it gave me the mental discipline to do something until I'm proficient at it," he said.

Harrison football coach John Herrington said he wasn't surprised George would try cheerleading as an alternative to playing.

"If anybody would do something like that, it would be Joe," he said. "He always showed an enthusiastic attitude when he was at Harrison."

Herrington thinks George will do as well cheerleading as he did playing football.

"With his athletic ability, he'll be able to do the gymnastics," he said. "He knows the game well, too. So he'll do fine."

GEORGE'S FIRST live performance as a cheerleader was at the annual Green and White scrimmage April 27 at Spartan Stadium.

The crowd was not as large as some of those he played in front of while a player at Harrison, he said. "The crowd was about half the size of those that saw the Hawks win state championships in the Pontiac Silverdome."

Being on the sideline cheering instead of on the field playing took some getting used to, also.

"It's different," George said. "I zoned out the crowd when I was playing football. Now I'm trying to be in the game, yet excite the crowd."

The Spartans open their 1991 season with a home game against Central Michigan on Saturday, Sept. 14.

py the time he was accustomed to spending with football.

"I also would have had to put on at least 40 pounds to play in college. I figured that was a no go."

George said his decision to give up football left him missing the game. He wanted another activity to occupy.

"IT'S FUN, plus, I'm still near the sport," he said of cheerleading. "It keeps me from missing playing as much."

George said his sister's roommate being a cheerleader and a friend having tried out for the team interested him in doing the same.

He spent two months practicing to make the squad. He began going to informal workouts conducted by experienced members of the squad in early March. Those sessions allowed him to learn the basic tumbling routines and stunts used in cheerleading.

George said he always wanted to learn how to tumble and made a lot of progress in the workouts.

"I couldn't do a cartwheel two months before tryouts," he said. "For the tryouts, I had to be able to do a roundoff backhand spring and a standing back tuck."

"The tryouts had me pretty nervous for the two-week stretch it was going on. After the first cuts, I realized I was just there to have fun. 'If I make it, I make it. If I don't, I don't.'"

At the tryouts, George said he and the other candidates were judged on singing the MSU fight song, a choreographed dance and a tumbling routine performed by a man-woman team.

GEORGE SAID he did not have a strength in any of those activities related to cheerleading when he started and still has room for improvement.

By Dan O'Meara
staff writer

Plymouth Salem could finally let loose and celebrate its baseball successes Saturday afternoon.

The biggest prize of all — the state championship — belongs to the Rocks, who rallied to beat Rochester 4-1 in the Class A final at Bailey Park in Battle Creek.

Salem coach John Gravin implored his team to remain focused on that ultimate goal throughout the tournament.

"I told them if we won our district, they'd win it all," Gravin said. I said that to fire them up. We just believed it from that point.

"We've been very calm and matter-of-fact in our approach. We haven't really celebrated until the last out today."

THE ROCKS (27-6) used solid pitching by senior Jeff Belisle and a two-run homer by junior shortstop Ed Gundry to beat Rochester (28-6) and win its second state title, the first coming in 1973.

The Falcons advanced to their first championship game with a victory over Midland Dow in the semifinals Friday.

"We hit the ball, but they made some big plays defensively and shut down some of our rallies," Rochester coach Bob Dieters said. "They deserved to win the game, but there aren't many

better than us."

Doing his part in the final, Belisle was the perfect complement to fellow senior Scott Rodgers, the winning pitcher in the semifinal game with Grosse Pointe North.

He gave up six hits in seven innings, didn't walk anybody and struck out five to finish the year with a 5-0 record.

"To win baseball games, you have to throw strikes and play defense more than hit," Gravin said. "That's how Jeff Belisle got to be our No. 2. He throws strikes and makes them put the ball in play. He threw only 10 balls in the last four innings."

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Rocks capture state baseball championship