

Varsity Athletes Get Class Credit Some Colleges Give Grades for Playing

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One of the classes at Kansas State University meets four hours each weekday afternoon during fall and spring semesters, and is taught both indoors and outdoors. The instructor has a contract that pays him nearly \$2 million annually and is credited with turning around a once-dormant department that now raises millions of dollars a year for the school.

At least seven Saturdays each fall, thousands of Kansas State alumni return to Manhattan, Kan., to see the fruits of the students' work. The class? Varsity football. The instructor? Wildcats Coach Bill Snyder. Each semester, Kansas State athletes earn academic credit on the field in practice and games. Some athletes are able to count as many as four credit hours toward their academic degrees by playing on the school's sports teams.

Kansas State isn't alone in allowing student-athletes to earn academic credit for playing sports. A Washington Post survey of physical education courses taught at the 117 schools that field Division I-A football teams found that nearly three dozen universities award academic credit for participation on intercollegiate sports teams. Eleven football teams in the Associated Press preseason top 25 poll have players earning academic credit for practicing, including defending co-national champion Southern California, which kicks off the 2004 season against Virginia Tech at FedEx Field on Saturday night.

These classes have two requirements: (1) being a member of the sports teams and (2) attending practices and games.

The play-for-grades classes illustrate the challenge of reconciling academic missions with big-time athletics at universities. In April, the National Collegiate Athletic Association approved academic reforms that its president, Myles Brand, called "the strongest ever passed by the NCAA." Those changes will take away scholarships and postseason eligibility from schools that fail to graduate a minimum percentage of their athletes, but they fail to address schools where, for years, going to practice has been a step toward earning a degree.

The existence of such classes came as a surprise to several senior academic administrators, including Brand and the chancellor of the University of Nebraska.

"I don't know the situations at the schools you're talking about," Brand said yesterday when asked about the practice. "I'd worry about it. I'm surprised. . . . These schools need to look very carefully at these courses and make sure they're legitimate."

Nebraska Chancellor Harvey Perlman also seemed unaware that athletes at his school were being given academic credit for physical-conditioning courses tailored for their sports. "I think it's something the institutions need to look at, and we are looking at it," Perlman said.

The survey found that classes are offered for all intercollegiate sports, not just football. Most of the classes have no syllabus or exams, and student-athletes aren't required to complete written work. Most of the classes are graded on a pass-or-fail scale, although Kansas State is one of the few schools that gives letter grades for the courses.

Last fall semester, 69 Kansas State football players enrolled in Snyder's course -- ATHM 104 or "Varsity Football" -- in the school's Department of Intercollegiate Athletics. According to documents obtained from

Kansas State through state open records laws, only one of the 69 players enrolled in the class failed to receive one credit hour toward his academic degree, and all but four received grades of "A." This spring, 91 players enrolled in the course, including many who were repeating the class, and Snyder awarded 84 of them the highest letter grade, the records show.

"They give letter grades?" said Brand, the former Indiana University president who fired basketball coach Bob Knight. "That's terrible. You can't have that."

Kansas State Athletic Director Tim Weiser defends the courses, saying they have existed "for decades and decades, maybe even 100 years." Weiser said the school offers similar courses for student athletic trainers and managers and to students who participate in the marching band, drama department and ROTC program.

"What I've heard at other schools is that there are other ways to learn at an academic institution other than in the classroom," Weiser said. "What we learn doesn't necessarily have to come out a classroom or out of a book."

Many of the universities that boast the nation's most recognizable and successful football programs offer participation credits in football and other sports. Brigham Young, Florida State, Georgia, Nebraska, Ohio State and Penn State, all winners of a football national championship during the past 25 years, also have similar policies in place.

"You found that in the [course] catalogs?" asked William Friday, chairman of The Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, an academic reform think tank, and former president of the University of North Carolina. "Goodness gracious, I thought that practice had ended a long, long time ago."

The University of Maryland and University of Virginia, Virginia Tech and the U.S. Naval Academy don't offer academic credit for participation on athletic teams, school officials said.

"That surprises me," Virginia football coach Al Groh said. "I'm sure there are a few kids on this team that would like to substitute something like 'Sophisticated Blitz Tactics' for advanced physics. But I don't see the possibility of that happening at Virginia."

Virginia Tech Athletic Director Jim Weaver, a former football player at Penn State, said he recalls coaches teaching P.E. courses when he was enrolled in college in the 1960s. But Weaver, who also was athletic director at Nevada-Las Vegas and Western Michigan and an associate athletic director at Florida, said he believed the practice was largely extinct.

When a reporter told Weaver that coaches at many schools -- including those at Florida State and North Carolina State, two of the Hokies' rivals in the newly expanded Atlantic Coast Conference -- are still teaching their players, he said: "It surprises me, absolutely. I was unaware of that. I didn't think it was that prevalent anymore."

Not 'Vital to Our Program'

At Ohio State, football players can repeat Buckeyes Coach Jim Tressel's two-hour course -- SFHP 196.06 or "Varsity Football" -- as many as five times for a total of 10 credits. Last fall, 91 student-athletes were enrolled in the course, and all received "satisfactory" grades, Ohio State records show. Ohio State's online registrar showed 90 of 100 seats are taken for Tressel's class this coming fall quarter.

Ohio State offers a participation course for each of its 21 intercollegiate sports teams, including ice hockey, lacrosse, pistol and riflery. The syllabus for each of the Buckeyes' "Varsity Sports" courses includes five objectives for student-athletes, including: "To develop their skill to its highest potential" and "To learn to strive to do their best under all circumstances but to make personal goals secondary to those of the team."

Unlike Kansas State, credits from Ohio State's participation courses can't be used toward degree requirements, but at all schools, they are counted in fulfilling the NCAA's eligibility rule of six hours of academic credit each semester. Most athletic conferences require athletes to earn additional credit hours; the Big Ten Conference, for example, requires athletes to complete 12 credit hours per semester. Under NCAA rules, athletes must complete at least 18 semester hours each academic year to retain their eligibility.

"I don't think it's vital to our program," Ohio State Athletic Director Andy Geiger said. "If the faculty wants to change it, it's their prerogative to change it."

The University of Iowa and University of Nebraska, among other schools, allow student-athletes to apply the credits from participation courses toward their degrees. Four of Kansas State's colleges -- Agriculture, Arts and Sciences, Business Administration and Human Ecology -- allow students to apply four hours from participation courses toward degree requirements. The College of Education allows two credits, and the College of Engineering doesn't allow any. Kansas State students are required to complete a minimum of 124 hours to earn their degrees.

"I didn't know that practicing or playing a game had any acceptance as part of a degree program," Friday said. "I'm surprised to learn that. I think what [has been] uncovered is an issue that should immediately require the attention of the NCAA."

On April 29, in the wake of academic scandals at Fresno State, the University of Georgia and St. Bonaventure, the NCAA passed the academic reform package that takes effect in 2006. But critics of the NCAA suggest courses such as the football classes are examples of universities watering down their curricula to keep athletes eligible so they can compete on the playing fields.

Along with keeping their players eligible, another potential conflict of interest for coaches is the lucrative salary bonuses for high graduation rates that are included in many of their contracts. Iowa football coach Kirk Ferentz, for example, receives a \$900,000 bonus if his team's average graduation rate over three years is higher than 60 percent, and if his team wins more than 81 percent of its games in each of the three seasons. Tressel's contract calls for a \$100,000 bonus each year his team's graduation rate is 70 percent or higher, and \$50,000 for each quarter in which at least 60 percent of his players achieve a 3.0 grade-point average or better. Tressel doesn't receive the money -- it goes to an Ohio State scholarship of his choosing.

The physical education class descriptions are buried in course catalogs and bulletins, which are often hundreds of pages long and contain hundreds of course listings. Florida State's Department of Sports Management, Recreation Management and Physical Education offers PEL 1644, or "Varsity Football," during fall semester. The class description says students get "face-to-face classroom instruction" from Bobby Bowden, college football's winningest coach with 342 victories in 38 seasons.

At Penn State, football players can enroll in ESAT 1351, "Varsity Football," taught by Coach Joe Paterno, who is entering his 55th season at the school. Paterno's class, according to the school's bulletin, is "a full or partial semester course to develop physical and recreational skills and gain knowledge about them." The only requirement for the 1 1/2-credit course: "membership in the performing group through tryouts and selection."

"You've got letters of the rule and spirit of the rules, and this is a violation of the spirit of education," said David Ridpath, an assistant professor of sports at Mississippi State and a member of the Drake Group, a consortium aimed at reforming college sports. "It just seems excessive to me and the bottom line is a football coach shouldn't be giving out grades that affect a player's grade-point average and progress toward a degree."

Credit Where Credit's Due

Most schools allow student-athletes to take the participation courses only once. Athletes at the University of Georgia, for example, are given one credit hour for playing on an intercollegiate team. The class doesn't count toward the student-athlete's grade-point average, but does fulfill the school's physical education requirement.

Physical education courses at Georgia came under intense scrutiny last year after a former Georgia basketball player told NCAA investigators that he never attended or completed work for a basketball course taught by former Bulldogs assistant coach Jim Harrick Jr. Among the items on Harrick's 20-question final exam were: "How many halves are in a college basketball game?" and "How many points does a 3-point field goal account for in a Basketball Game?"

Harrick was suspended and his one-year contract wasn't renewed, and his father, Bulldogs coach Jim Harrick, was forced to resign. Earlier this month, the NCAA placed Georgia on four years' probation because of academic fraud and other rules violations.

But Harrick Jr.'s class, which involved some classroom instruction and a written final exam, may have seemed arduous compared to some schools' sports participation courses.

The football class at Kansas State doesn't involve written work and there is "no required syllabus, mid-term, or final examination," according to a statement from the school. The University of Nebraska's response to a Freedom of Information request seeking details on the number of student-athletes enrolled in the school's football and basketball courses and the grade distribution said that "no syllabi or exams exist" and that "evaluation is based upon class participation."

According to records obtained from Nebraska, 31 student-athletes were enrolled in former Cornhuskers coach Frank Solich's football class during fall semester 2003. Nebraska didn't release the grades of the students enrolled in the class, saying the grades couldn't be disclosed "due to the relatively small number of enrollees and the grade distribution in these courses, the disclosure of such grades is 'information that would make the student's identity easily traceable' and is prohibited by the Federal Educational and Privacy Act of 1974."

University of Iowa records show 43 Hawkeyes football players were enrolled in its football class last fall, and 32 are enrolled this semester. The course instructor is Bill Dervich, the Hawkeyes' director of football operations and a former strength and conditioning coach. Iowa officials said 189 student-athletes were enrolled in classes for all sports last fall semester, and 186 received "satisfactory" marks. Two student-athletes withdrew from the courses and one failed. During spring semester this year, all 83 students enrolled in the sports classes received passing grades. Iowa allows its student-athletes to repeat the participation courses once.

Virginia's Groh and other coaches complain that the participation courses are an example of an unlevel playing field, in which schools with tougher academic standards for athletes are penalized.

"It's never a level playing field in the sense that some institutions have more stringent academic standards and some classes are going to be more difficult," Brand said. "An English course at one school could be harder than an English course at a different school. In some situations, student-athletes are going to have to work harder academically."

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