

December 2, 2008

OPEN MEMBERSHIP

Rise of College Club Teams Creates a Whole New Level of Success

By [BILL PENNINGTON](#)

In intercollegiate club sports, there are no athletic scholarships, no adoring crowds and minimal adult leadership.

Open Membership

Playing for the Love of the Sport

Institutional financing is meager and hard work abundant, with dozens of volunteer hours required from the athletes just to put on a single game or match.

It's college athletics without the pageantry or prerogative, and that's the way athletes in club sports like it. They devise the practices, make the team rules, decide whom to play and when, raise the money for uniforms and game officials, schedule the hotel and travel arrangements and manage the paperwork.

"It's a ton of work, but we do it because we take ownership of our team," said David Gerstle, the player-coach of [Yale](#)'s club water polo team, which like most club teams operates largely outside the purview of the university athletic department. "I think it's a more collegial experience than the varsity team model."

College club sports are swiftly rising in popularity, a largely unnoticed phenomenon sweeping across campuses nationwide. These are not intramural sports but expertly organized, highly skilled teams that often belong to regional conferences and play for national collegiate championships.

Twenty years ago the national club volleyball championship drew 20 teams and 206 male athletes. Last spring, the same championship hosted 258 teams and 2,806 participants in four men's divisions and two women's divisions.

The soccer club championship started in 1994 by the National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association had 15 teams and 252 male and female players. Last year, it had 75 teams and 1,380 players. The inaugural tennis tournament in 2000 drew 11 teams and 89 participants. In 2008, it had grown to 64 teams and 523 participants, with 20 teams on a waiting list.

An estimated two million college students play competitive club sports compared with about 430,000 involved in athletics governed by the [National Collegiate Athletic Association](#) and the

National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics.

The less restrictive nature of club teams has also been a magnet for the thriving nontraditional sports market. While many N.C.A.A. athletic departments are cutting varsity sports, club teams are competing for national championships in bass fishing, ballroom dancing and Brazilian martial arts.

Because of this independent and inclusive spirit, competitive club sports have emerged as an alternative to the semiprofessional, regulated, commercial environment of modern, elite college athletics.

“It is a return to pure amateurism and a lot closer to the original model for college athletics,” said Jim Giunta, the executive director of the National Collegiate Wrestling Association, which hosted 70 club teams at its most recent national championships, an increase from 17 teams 10 years ago.

“Nobody competes for the money or the fame because there are no scholarships and not a lot of attention. The kids have to do all the work to make their club function. They do it because they love their sport, and I’ll tell you what, we don’t have the prima donnas you see at the higher levels of college athletics.”

In Search of Teams

Several other factors are driving the club sports boom. One frequently mentioned by college officials is America’s outsize youth sports culture. With more than 40 million children playing organized sports — often on first-rate travel teams — more students are graduating from high school with extensive athletic interest and skills than ever before.

A small number of those graduates, fewer than 5 percent, are good enough to play a varsity college sport. That leaves many thousands who are accustomed to competing at a high level and looking for an athletic outlet.

“Intramural sports can be too loose and not competitive enough,” said Tiffany Villalba, a senior on [Villanova University](#)’s women’s club soccer team, which won the open division at the national championships last season. “But the varsity teams, even if you make one, can be intense and require a lot of your free time. The club team fills that big gap between the two. It’s not too demanding, but it’s not trivial.”

The ability to balance one’s academic, athletic and social life is an apparent draw to the club sports model. Chip Spear, a volunteer coach for the Yale water polo team, said that one of his players was a member of the Whiffenpoofs, Yale’s celebrated a cappella group.

“He misses some practices for their engagements,” said Spear, who played water polo at Yale when it was still a varsity sport. “The team works it out because all practices are not mandatory. I’m not sure how that would have worked on a varsity team.” Students say they sometimes choose a club sport (like sailing) for cultural or lifestyle reasons or because it was not available in high school (like Ultimate Frisbee).

In either case, the students shape and influence the makeup and philosophy of the team, and tailor their commitment to it.

College administrators said they put club sports in the same category as student development.

“Being active in the leadership of a club sport teaches a wealth of real-life lessons that college students might not learn anywhere else,” said Chris McAlpine, who coordinates recreation and club sports at Villanova. “What they are doing is résumé building, like an internship. I get a lot of business reference calls, and I’ll be asked: ‘Did so-and-so work well with others? Can she follow through on a project?’

“And I’ll answer: ‘Well, she led a team of 25 girls, balanced a \$12,000 budget, handled travel arrangements in 5 states and planned 100 practices. Oh, her team won, too.’ ”

Making It Work

With no single national governing body for all club sports, teams operate differently from institution to institution. Most are overseen by a student activities association, which doles out money to individual clubs that apply with their financial requests. Some clubs may get \$500, some \$20,000, if they make an exceptionally good case for needing the money.

Typical university financing is a few thousand dollars. At that point, the clubs solicit sponsorships from the community and seek donations from alumni who played the sport.

Almost all teams require players to pay an annual fee, which can range from \$50 to more than \$1,000 for an expensive sport like ice hockey. Fund-raising car washes and raffles are common. Getting players to pitch in to help is not usually a problem. Club sports have become so popular that many teams have tryouts, cuts and waiting lists.

Each sport generally has a national governing body, which often helps with scheduling and rule uniformity and hosts a championship tournament. In many cases, that governing body will require that all the athletes attending the nationals have at least a 2.0 grade point average.

The interaction between club and varsity athletes is limited, but the two sectors generally work together amiably. Fields, courts and pools usually have to be shared, although the varsity

programs always take priority. Occasional friction develops when a handful of varsity athletes quit to play on a club team, but a majority of varsity athletic administrators expressed support of the mission of club sports.

“I see only positives in an outlet that lets college students keep competing in a sport,” said Tim Selgo, the athletic director at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Mich., whose club wrestling team has won the past three national championships. “There are always conflicts over scheduling of facilities, but no college has enough room. Hey, our club women’s rugby team beat [Michigan State](#) last month. That’s a source of great pride; it made everybody feel good.”

Club athletes interviewed conceded that they were occasionally envious of the varsity players, who not only have status on campus but may receive scholarships, dress in lavish locker rooms and travel in luxury.

“It’s easy to be jealous when you’re watching the varsity kids board a nice coach bus as someone loads their equipment for them,” said Betsy Pantazelos, a recent captain of [Boston University’s](#) club ski racing team. “We would be standing there waiting for our little van, which we would jam full with kids and all our equipment and then take turns driving. The frustration would build when it broke down on the side of the road and we had no one to help us.

“But you can learn a lot from those situations, like arranging for emergency road service. There was always an attitude that we can get through this and find a way to do it better next time.”

Pure Enjoyment

The entrepreneurial spirit of the modern college student is a factor often cited when explaining the growth of club sports on campuses. The Internet receives its share of credit too.

“With the new technologies, they are savvier and communicate far better: e-mail, [Facebook](#), all that,” said Andy Lewandowski, another former Yale varsity water polo player who is a volunteer coach. “They can rally support for a cause in a flash. New club sports teams sprout up on this campus every semester.”

Clubs have been so enjoyable for many college students that if given the chance to turn their teams into fully financed varsity sports, most said they would decline.

“It would be less fun,” Jacob Tulipan, a Yale senior who plays water polo, said. “We wouldn’t be doing it for the same reasons.”

Gerstle, Tulipan’s teammate, explained why he preferred the club model.

“If you look at it in economic terms, varsity sports are like a high-regulated industry with

restrictions, caps and incentives,” Gerstle said as he stood next to the pool before a recent practice. “But club sports eliminate the barriers and let anyone in, much like libertarian economics. It raises the level of competition because it inspires people’s competitive nature. It frees them to want to do it and do their best.”

Preparing to jump into the pool, Gerstle, a physics major, added, “It’s also sport for the love of sport.”

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