



Press Office: 202-226-0853

Thursday, May 08, 2014

Rep. George Miller (D-Calif.) Opening Statement for Full Committee Hearing “*Big Labor on College Campuses: Examining the Consequences of Unionizing Student Athletes*”

Mr. Chairman, I am glad we are having a hearing to better understand what is really happening to college athletes, and to air out the very legitimate grievances that have been raised at Northwestern University and around the country.

Let’s start by setting the stage:

The nostalgic days where student-athletes really were “students” first—and where college sports were JUST about learning team work, self-discipline, and sportsmanship while getting some exercise and friendly competition—are pretty much over for high-level athletic programs.

During the last four decades, colleges and universities—through the NCAA—have perfected the art of monetizing the athletic play of their best football and basketball players and teams—while steadily encroaching on the players’ academic opportunities.

They have created nothing less than a big business sports empire.

That empire is consumed and driven by multi-billion dollar exclusive television, radio, and multi-media deals; branding agreements; prime-time sports shows; and celebrity coaches with seven-figure salaries.

Our nation’s talented college athletes have become commodities within this empire.

They are units of production that are over-scheduled and over-worked, left without safeguards for their health and safety, and encouraged to put their education on a backburner in favor of their success on the field.

Some athletes have figured this out, and now they are starting to ask really smart questions about this whole arrangement.

They want to know what happens to them if they suffer a catastrophic injury on the field that leaves them with a lifetime disability.

Will they lose their scholarship—and with it their chance for an education and a career?

How much of their health care will they and their families need to pay for out of pocket?

They are reading about the new studies on the long-term effects of head injuries.

And they want to know if the schools and coaches are doing all they can to prevent concussions and brain injury on the field.

Will their health come first when a decision is being made about whether or not they're fit to play?

Or will the team's desire to win a game trump the health concerns of an individual player?

They are raising questions about the adequacy of their scholarships and the restrictions that leave them with too little support for the out-of-pocket and incidental expenses they face.

Why are some of their teammates finding themselves unable to afford enough food to eat or books for their classes, while their university makes millions from their efforts?

They want know why so many players don't finish their academic programs, and they want to discuss fairer transfer policies.

How can policies be changed to support players' success in academics, not just athletics?

The NLRB's decision regarding Northwestern University football players documents the all-consuming, sometimes eye-opening, demands of a college football player in today's mega-profit-driven NCAA world.

At Northwestern, the daily life of a football player revolves around practice and preparations—commonly a 40- to 50-hour-a-week commitment during the fall season—with any classes or homework squeezed on top.

You can see a sample schedule displayed [here](#).

Players are expected to report to the training room by 6:15 on Monday mornings for their medical checks. By 7:50 a.m., it's various team and position meetings, then pads and helmets until noon.

At night they meet with coaches to review game film.

And there are always agility drills, conditioning and weight-lifting workouts, and playbooks to study in between.

From the beginning of the month-long August training camp; through the grueling 12-week season; to post-season bowl play; into mid-January winter warm-ups; to mid-February “Winning Edge” week; to mandatory spring workouts; high-stakes football preparation, not academic obligations, becomes the focus of these players’ lives and the obsession of their coaches.

Meanwhile, players worry about their health and safety, their financial future, and their prospects for a job after graduation.

The big business empire of college sports is doing very well. Its revenues are up by 32 percent over just the last six years.

And many universities are hiking tuitions and fees; turning to underpaid, overstretched adjunct faculty; and cutting student services.

So the NCAA and superstar football programs are making more and more money, and the athletes they depend on are getting less and less.

In the end, this is a classic labor dispute.

The NCAA empire is holding all the cards, making all the rules, and capturing all the profits.

The hardest-working, most valuable components of this system—the players—are left with little say or leverage, with no one blocking or tackling but themselves.

By banding together and bargaining, these athletes can win the kinds of things union workers have demanded and won across the country:

- a say about avoiding serious injury on the job,
- medical benefits and security if something does go wrong,
- meaningful input into how they balance their work—in this case football—with their academic needs and other responsibilities, and
- the respectful treatment and care they so richly deserve.

I look forward to hearing from today’s witnesses about how we can do more to help, protect, and support these hard- working student employees.