'More Varsity Teams': A Question of Quality

By Barb Moore

"Image conscious" is the description given to the MIT athletic program by many of its athletes, who feel that this attitude is working to the detriment of the sports program.

In recent weeks, perhaps spurred by the women's basketball tournament held at MIT January 31 and February 1, criticism has reached a new high. Some of those involved in the basketball tournament feel it was an attempt to whitewash not only the shortcomings of women's sports, but also the failings of the entire athletic program.

An obvious benefit of the basketball tournament was publicity for MIT's sports program, which bills itself as having more varsity teams than any other college in the country. In the eyes of members of the team, this publicity was as important to the administration, much more important than the experience or satisfaction gained by the team. It was, in the words of one player, "more publicity for the top brass - some clippings to add to the files."

The idea for the tournament was conceived with this end in mind. The original plan was to promote the role of women through women's athletics, at schools traditionally considered "male" or "intellectual." Some complaints were directed at the scheduling problems and inadequacies in the facilities. Larry David '73, manager of the team, has formally complained about the poor scheduling of games and the lack of overall control by the coach. His feelings were presented to the athletic administration last fall. According to Ross Smith, Director of Athletics, most of the problems are being solved.

The scheduling complaints center around both the times and the schools played. As David explained it, "a lot of our traditional opponents have gotten too strong for us. We are losing talent through recruiting and financial aid." One varsity player agreed that "being blown off the court every year by Yale really hurts morale."

To compound the scheduling difficulties, the coach does not have final control over the schedule for his team, according to David. Consequently, the players are irritated at those who decide their schedule. In fact, a major cause of many of the complaints can be traced to isolation of athletic department higher-ups.

Basketball is by far not the only team with complaints. A constant concern of the department is the quality of coaching. The hockey team spent 25 years under a coach who, in the past few years, could barely ice skate. However, physical education professors can be tenured and it is no simple task to displace a tenured professor.

Since Associate Professor of Civil Engineering Wayne Pecknold, an accomplished hockey player, took over the team, members report a definite increase in morale. The scores may not yet reflect the difference, but players are optimistic about the future of the team. The swimming team has experienced similar deterioration, attributed by team members to the poor coaching.

Women's athletics at MIT have special problems. They receive funding from the department, but, as one varsity athlete says, "they (the administration) take women's athletics as a joke."

Although teams receive financial support, they often do not feel they are given the enthusiastic backing of the department. "The administration really is concerned with the image," she continued, and she feels that image is the reason for even women's funding.

Teams will always have complaints, and the ideal situations of unlimited financial support and perfect team input in all decisions will obviously never be reached. But a sizable segment of the athletic community has dissipated with the current situation. Even if MIT has more teams than anybody else, it may be time for a look at the value of quality versus quantity.

(Kirk Mote '75 is a former Chairman of the Tech.)

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