



AN UNWORKABLE SYSTEM

Richard Moore

James Butts, a twenty-four-year-old black man from California, represented the United States as a triple-jumper in the 1976 Olympic Games at Montreal. Butts acquitted himself well, receiving a silver medal for second place with one of the top ten jumps ever made. To get his chance at Olympic glory, Butts had to spend a full year, not just the usual regimented dedication of a world-class athlete, but in a back-breaking, mind-wracking regimen that most Americans would not be willing to endure. Butts, a college graduate, worked at two full-time jobs—as a supermarket boxboy and a night watchman—in order to support himself, his wife, his infant son and his mother. In addition, he

trained religiously for four hours each day in his track and field specialty. On most days, the grind left him less than four hours for sleep or family. Many of the factors that forced Butts into such a situation in order to fulfill a dream are directly attributed to outdated codes of amateurism that govern international athletics. The rules stipulate that athletes may receive no compensation that is a result of athletic skill—Olympic hopefuls may not even receive payment for coaching!

This is no plea for government subsidies for athletics. Taxpayers are overburdened now with supporting enterprises that should succeed or fail on their own. Those who say Butts should abandon his quest if the road proved too difficult are not right either. Americans demand champions, or at least contenders, in events such as the Olympics. Many are more than happy to pay for their demands. Only a system that has no reasonable place in contemporary society stands in the way. The barriers of amateurism should be removed.

Amateur rules did not develop during the ancient Greek Olympics. In fact, participants there nearly always received monetary reward, even to the point of becoming wealthy because of sporting success. It was the revival of the games in the nineteenth century, a time of gentleman athletes, that inspired the no-pay-for-play standard. A gentleman who had time for sports did not need to receive compensation for his efforts. Indeed, he would have been insulted by the attempt. Such were the men who organized the system and, despite a change brought early by the search for success, their legacy lives on. In a time where the greatest athletes often emerge from humble origins in pursuit of success in professional sports, the aristocratic notions of amateurism find few adherents. We have long since passed the point when only those who can afford leisure indulge in athletics.

Besides being outmoded, amateurism is easily sidestepped by the economic systems of individual countries. Although they are not to receive any reward for their achievements, athletes in socialist countries are given subsidies as a part of the country's philosophy. Amateur officials dismiss this fact, saying the athletes are simply being treated as

other citizens in those nations. Meantime, James Butts works and trains twenty hours a day. However, Butts had been able to utilize an American means of circumventing the amateur code. By accepting an athletic scholarship, Butts, as do thousands of others every year, traded his skills for a tangible reward. No serious quarrels can be made for outlawing such scholarships to obey the letter of the law. It merely points out the double standard that exists. Why could the graduated James Butts not receive payment from a meet director who was aided by the athlete's presence in a competition that many people paid to see?

The amateur rules are not followed anyway and that is the best argument for their abolition. "Shamateurism", the under-the-table payment of amateur athletes, is widespread and generally acknowledged. It is also winked at by many of the same self-righteous officials who scream when serious reform for the system is suggested. Dwight Stones, who has won two bronze Olympic high jump medals, was suspended permanently from competition last year for receiving money to appear on the A.B.C. "Superstars" television show. Stones freely admits that the thirty-thousand dollars he earned was only a fraction of the illegal payoffs he accepted over the years. The money allowed him, after college graduation, to maintain a Corvette sports car, a beach apartment and a comfortable lifestyle while "unemployed." If anyone believed Stones was worth the bribes, why couldn't he accept them honestly, and pay taxes on the income?

Purists can maintain that the economics and finance involved have little space in the world of sports. The fact is that those "evils" are there, and trying to hide them merely compounds the problem. Few arguments for the retention of amateurism can be taken seriously. Tradition remains the major reason that athletes are expected to compete only for good will and internal rewards. In American society where professional athletes are held in higher esteem than amateur, the outdated system is neither understood nor admired. As the socialist countries allow subsidies for athletes, our athletes demand their ability to be justly compensated. Perhaps the rulers of amateur sport will join the twentieth century before it ends and initiate reforms in their code.