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What does church teach about March madness?

Mike Sweitzer-Beckman | Apr. 1, 2010

It?s that time of year again -- a time for everyone, including my mother-in-law, to fill out brackets and have friendly competitions to see who can pick this year?s NCAA men?s basketball winners. It?s the first time my mother-in-law has participated in a bracket. She picked her teams based on geographic proximity to her home in Auburn, Ind., and easily won the pool with Butler going to the Final Four.

It?s a time of year similar to Christmas: people reconnecting with each other, even just briefly, amidst the grind of everyday life. It?s a time of year when productivity in the American workplace goes down because of so many people are following the games to see if their bracket is still intact. I know in the Jesuit community around the country, it?s a time of year to root for Georgetown, Marquette and Gonzaga because of their Jesuit tradition. All these teams got knocked out early, but it was all the more reason to start cheering for Xavier University to bring home the Jesuit pride during the second weekend of action. It?s a time for Catholics who can?t stand the Jesuits to get behind little St. Mary?s from Orinda, Calif., during their first run to the Sweet 16.

Lots of money is exchanged during this time of year, and I don?t mean the $50 that the quiet guy sitting over in that cubicle in Section D-3 will take home on April 5. The National College Athletic Association signed a $11 billion television contract with CBS, beginning in 2002 and ending in 2013. When you add up all the money raised from the tournament -- including TV rights, tickets, merchandising and the like -- it accounts for an astounding 96 percent of the college athletic association's annual revenue. It?s a big time of year for the colleges and universities to balance their budget amidst an economic recession if their team can go deep into the tournament. Even if you don?t like sports, it?s something worth paying attention to because of the economic influence this has on the American education system.

Unfortunately, like most systems, this one is rigged. With all the money being exchanged, only a small percentage of the players will see any of it. This is not an article on how college athletes should be paid, because I don?t think that is the solution. I believe that college athletics should come in that order of priority: academics first and sports second. If athletes are only playing college basketball so they can wait a year to go pro, I think they should follow Brandon Jennings? lead (play in Europe for a year and then get drafted by the Milwaukee Bucks). Of course, the best players in the tournament will probably see riches if they are able to move on to play professionally in the National Basketball Association or overseas in Europe.

But what about a guy like Ed O?Bannon? In 1995, Ed and his brother Charles brought the UCLA Bruins their first title since 1975, when they completed a string of ten titles in twelve years. Glory was restored to the basketball-crazed campus. Ed was named the Most Outstanding Player of the tournament and gave up his knees to bring in millions to a university that considers itself the best when it comes to men's college basketball. He didn?t make it far in the pros because of those knees.

Now O?Bannon is living the good life in Las Vegas -- he has a family and sells cars after returning to UCLA to earn his degree. He?s the lead plaintiff in a lawsuit against the nonprofit NCAA to try to get the players to see some of the money that the NCAA is making. O?Bannon says that it?s not about the money; it?s about doing

what?s right.

What should church teaching tell us about what?s right in this lawsuit? Catholics should have a position on this issue; there are many Catholic schools that benefit from the structure that the NCAA has in place. There are many stars at Catholic schools that get depicted on jerseys for sale and in video games who never see much of that cash the NCAA is making.

All the scholarship players are having their tuition covered by playing ball for their school. I?m sure they get plenty of other perks too -- a lot of travel, and meals that are included. When I was a student at DePaul a decade ago, it always seemed that the men's basketball players were driving brand new black SUVs around town. We, the fans, always hoped it was just a coincidence that they were on the basketball team.

I don?t believe that the church provides any clear answers. Perhaps the status quo of the church is to be happy that there is money that comes in to a university from bowl berths and basketball tourney victories. The players receive their benefits of scholarships, and in turn bring more name recognition to the school.

However, the question that needs to be posed: how is the lowest tier of the university benefitting? Are the players succeeding beyond college? What percentage of the money that the Catholic schools are seeing goes toward social ministry and justice programming at the school?

One hopes that after all the madness of March, there can be time to reflect on these issues.

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