Superior Athleticism, Inferior Education

To be a Division I NCAA athlete takes skills and athletic ability that many human beings can not even imagine. Speed, strength, endurance, and desire all play a significant roles in the amount of attention athletes receive from Division I schools. But how much of a role does a factor such as intelligence play when these large schools go after these super athletes. After looking at the NCAA graduation rate report, I decided to compare two schools that are on different ends of the spectrum academically. Duke University has a truly great basketball team and they also have a truly great academic program. The school, however, boasts a less than mediocre football program. More important than both the academic and athletic accolades this school receives, in my opinion, what doesn’t get enough attention is the school’s graduation rate of student athletes. In 1999-2000, Duke University had a graduation rate of 91% among student athletes. I compared this number to the graduation rate for student athletes at the University of Southern California for the same year. The graduation rate of student athletes at USC was a drastically lower 60%.

It is true that many great athletes attend both schools. And a large portion of student athletes that are good enough make the jump from the amateur to the professional ranks before they acquire their four year degrees. The difference between these two schools brings forth questions as to the type of students these schools recruit and the types of lives they live once their playing days are over.

Just recently, a USC alum has been a prominent figure on many news channels across America. O.J. Simpson, once considered one of the greatest running backs to ever play the game of football, has been in the news for numerous felony charges which include armed robbery. O.J. Simpson, I might add, didn’t acquire a degree from the University of Southern California and has been involved in other scandals beyond this one. He is not the only athlete to find himself in trouble, Pac-Man Jones left the West Virginia early and Michael Vick has been in recent spotlights as well. The school acquires many athletes from inner-city schools where poverty is a major player in everyday life. Athletics may be many of these young adults only escape from the urban ghettos. So many of these athletes come from tough backgrounds where education is not of much importance, but getting paid is very important. Then once at a Division I program, many student athletes, especially at a school such as USC, would probably be given as much lenience in their schoolwork and extracurricular activities, because, like I stated earlier school has never been of much importance to them.

But does their early jumps to professional levels come back to haunt many great athletes after their careers. There are frequent stories of former professional athletes being involved in crimes or going broke and having to sell Super Bowl rings to stay afloat. Many spend lavishly and save sparingly, does a lack of education lead to such recklessness? Or does the lenience of a school lead an athlete to feel that they are untouchable by the very real law of the outside world? In my opinion, human beings are shaped and molded by the environments they have spent the most time in. A good athlete will likely have the same values as his parents, and a majority of their parents will be come from a lower financial status. They will probably see athletics as an opportunity to
escape their financial class or status. Education doesn’t provide this opportunity like throwing, catching, or hitting for big money does. Athletics for them are a great opportunity for social mobility. Many come from backgrounds of poverty, just the other day in class we talked about divorce rates in America. We also talked about how African-American children were more likely to be born out of wed-lock and come from divorced families. A majority of great athletes are African American as well. In inner-city schools, a stud athlete will probably have more leeway in school. At college, drug use or other unacceptable behavior may be overlooked. This leeway could be a probable cause for a lack of education or drug addiction later in life. But in the outside world this leeway is no longer there. I am not saying that alumni from Duke University or other schools with high graduation rates never get in trouble, or that every athlete who leaves USC, or other schools that are well-known for producing athletes, early will end up in trouble. I am just laying a great importance on education and a school like Duke pushes for acquiring a degree. Education gives athletes opportunities after they have great careers or after a career is cut short by injury. It also can teach you about saving money or the stock market. Once again, I am not trying to criticize the University of Southern California or any other school with top-notch athletics programs. The point needs to be made though, that athletes who attain degrees have greater opportunity and possibly save themselves the pain of being back in the same boat as they were before they entered the collegiate realm.