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3/11/08

Sports Culture: The Perception of the Collegiate Athlete

One of the most vaunted locations on campus was the sight of the final home game to three of Illinois' varsity basketball players. The Assembly Hall has long been a landmark of Illinois basketball and the University of Illinois itself. With a capacity crowd of 16,618, the Hall is routinely filled with drones of Illinois students and supporters on game days.

The game took place last Saturday March 8, 2008 at noon central time against conference foe Minnesota. It was a special game for a lot of people in attendance. The three senior ballplayers, the senior managers, the senior members of the band, cheerleading, and dance squads, and the seniors in the Orange Krush student section were all a part of their last home basketball game as a member of the University of Illinois student body.

Senior Night is a special night in which the players and the fans get to thank one another one last time in a special tribute to their services and contributions to the community and the team. It's always filled with a lot of emotion and reflection developed over the last four years. This day was no exception.

As the pregame festivities were about to begin, there was a different feeling in the arena than had been present in my previous three attendances of Senior Night. The stands were not filled; in fact the seats were barely half full. Gone was the mystique from Illinois legends. In its place was a rather maligned, exhausted crowd ready to move on and put this season behind them. Nevertheless, the crowd of around 7500 that was in attendance displayed gratitude towards the seniors and their accomplishments along the way. Even then, the jeers were toned down to a point where it seemed as though the crowd as a whole was doing little more than paying lip service to their respective seniors. Why has there been

such a change in the response over the last 4 years? Was it the people being honored? Or was it a simple fact of wins and losses and the related fallout?

The first reason one could think of is the team's record. Often times it is said that the team's record is a reflection of the senior leadership and therefore a large burden is placed squarely on their shoulders. This year's squad came into the game with a 12-18 record; by all accounts a down year for the program. In comparison the 2005 team, in which the current seniors were freshman members of, had a record of 37-2, the 2006 Illini went 26-7, and the 2007 squad had a record of 23-12. Many fans see this record as a direct reflection of the seniors. Some may argue it is, however it is difficult to put all the blame onto these three students, when they only make up 3/18 of the team. Yet, fans will be fans and the sometimes delirious expectations developed by the preceding teams have rendered some blind to the fact that only the elite of the elite never have a down year.

So many circumstances have surrounded the team and been contributing factors for the downward spiral that has been the final season of the senior class. The Jamar Smith redshirt, the Eric Gordon decommitment, the ineligibility of Quinton Watkins all left this squad without a shooting guard on scholarship. These three instances are just examples of situations out of the control of the seniors that has put them in the predicament they are in.

However, at the same time, it is impossible to completely dismiss the seniors' roles. Senior A missed key free throws at critical moments in numerous games in which Illinois went on to lose. Senior B is also free-throw challenged and has never lived up to his full potential. Senior C, a non-scholarship player is a fan favorite in the Rudy Rudiger mold. Unfortunately, are the teams' pitfalls the make-up of who they and what they will be remembered for during their four years here? Hopefully not, but in some minds, they will.

After the acknowledgements, the game got underway. The crowd filled as the game got underway, eventually reaching around 12,000. The teams battled hard, but in the end, the camaraderie of the Illini team and the will to win helped the orange and blue pull out the win. Senior C hit his only basket of the year with no time left which led to undoubtedly the biggest ovation of the night.

After the game, the seniors were able to address the fans. Senior A apologized to the crowd for the Indiana game. Senior B was almost brought to tears. It was a moving display of emotion, of how much they have given to the program.

It was obvious the respect and admiration the fellow players have for the departing seniors. Everyone has a role, whether that be a starter or the last guy off the bench. The team realizes that, but it still remains a hard concept for the fans to grasp.

It's a new age of sports today with the message boards and blog entries. With these, fans have the right to say whatever they want without any accountability. As stated, many fans have made a living ripping to pieces the play of the Illinois' seniors, and it's sad. Admittedly, they both claim this year as a disappointment, but also as a learning experience in life. They both want to come out of this season as better people.

Senior A has spoke out in interviews about the hate mail he has received over the missed free throws. He has been repeatedly booed by his home fans. He has been ridiculed by the press. All this takes a mental toll on a kid. It's tough being the representation of a program. Has he handled it all admirably? No. He was suspended by his teammates earlier this season for a game against Ohio State for conduct detrimental to the team. Coaches have even alluded to the necessity of everyone to buy into the team concept that the staff is trying to instill in all its' players.

Senior B came into Illinois with great expectations as one of the greatest prep players in America. Gifted with such incredible athletic talents and abilities, he showed flashes of greatness but was never able to put it all together. The biggest hindrance to his ascent to greatness has been his constant battle with injuries. When healthy, he has recorded numbers that would have been number 1 at the 2007 pre-draft camp. However, while healing wounds after amassing injuries over time that includes a torn abdomen, broken knuckle, sprained ankle, etc., he never had the time to develop.

There is a saying out there that states, “winning heals all wounds.” Despite being in many close battles this year, the team seemed to always end up in the L column. Would the reception have been different had the team been 18-12 instead of 12-18? Absolutely. Fans love a winner and for three years, these guys played for a winning program, and everything was fine. Suddenly, the team starts losing ballgames fans think they shouldn’t and everyone goes haywire.

The most interesting fact that I took out of the game and have noticed all season however was the change in the fans. Their attitudes and their reliance on winning are quite astonishing to say the least.