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Dr. Michaela Dufur, The Great Bridge and the Cost of Warping It

I went into Dr. Michaela Dufur's forum thinking I would hear a thoughtful academic case for why sports matter. I did not expect to feel personally called out by it. Her main idea was not complicated, but it was sharp: when something has that much money running through it, it becomes a system that distributes power, status, and opportunity. Sports are not neutral. They shape communities, and they shape people (Dufur, 2026).

That was the part that stuck with me, because I have watched sports create belonging and divide people at the same time. I grew up in a small California school where being "signed up" for sports was treated like a normal childhood path. Weekends revolved around games, and parents were invested in a way that felt both loving and strategic. Here is the truth about me, though: I hated being signed up. I refused unless it was something like the last-day-of-school "Olympics." My siblings participated, and I was fine roller skating around the park with other kids who also were not playing. Even from the outside, I could see the ladder. Making a team was not just about talent. It was about visibility. It was about who belonged, who got chosen first, and who started building a reputation early. By sixth grade, I did not have words for it, but I could already tell that a team could function like a social gate.

As we got older, the hierarchy became clearer. The athletes' closest friends were their teammates. Cheerleaders were their own world. The groups had loyalty and a shared language, and they moved through school like people who knew they were part of the main storyline. I was friends with athletes. I had friends in every group. But I still knew my place. I was not "in" the group, even if I was welcomed near it. People liked my hair, my clothes, and I got included when I was right there. But I was rarely anyone's first thought. If they saw me around, they would invite me. If I was in class with them, they would sit by me and be kind. Still, I felt a clear line. Maybe I drew that line for myself. Maybe I did not. But it felt real, especially because I was not a partier. I was not going out to get drunk. I was not allowed out past 11:00, and I was not allowed to hang out at Tennent Station, the cool spot in Morgan Hill, no matter how much I pleaded with my mom. And that mattered, because so much of being "in" was not about school at all. It was about who stayed out late, who went where, and who was seen in the right places.

Then there was my world: band and marching band. I know the stereotype, and I also know what was true. Our band was a national award-winning band. We traveled in California, around the United States, and out of the country. I took private lessons from a tenured teacher from France, trained by top flutists, and my family drove hours so I could participate in the Palo Alto Youth Symphony and flute choir. Practicing alone was isolating. Marching and performing was not. That was where I belonged.

Marching band was not a soft version of belonging, either. It demanded strict requirements, real discipline, and a code of ethics. It required repetition until your body could do things without thinking. We performed on major stages, including the White House, the Capitol steps in Washington, D.C., the Macy's Day Parade, and downtown Los Angeles, and we performed overseas in Russia, Estonia, and Finland. I wore that hideous uniform proudly because I earned it.

And it is important to say what that “team” really looked like. Our band represented every race, religion, and culture. It included every kind of instrument, every grade, every level of talent, and it still worked as one unit. We also had alumni support and other people who were hired to help create, design, and produce what we did. It was a full production, and it took a whole network behind the scenes to make it happen. Even now, decades later, the people who were in that band as teens still consider ourselves part of a family. That is not sentimental. That is what happens when people carry pressure together and learn to depend on each other.

So when Dr. Dufur talked about sports as a mechanism that shapes development and character, I did not need to be convinced. I understood it in my bones (Dufur, 2026). What I also understood, because of my own school experience, is that sports can build bridges and still create invisible lines. Access, status, and recognition are not handed out randomly.

That is why the NIL era bothers me more than I expected it to. I love team spirit. I love the beauty of a play that finally clicks. I love what sports can bring to a student body and a community. But I cannot stand watching college games now knowing these students can get paid more than the professors and leaders educating them. It flips the priorities. It turns learning into the background and entertainment into the main event.

What frustrates me is that the best parts of my own “sport” life were built on sacrifice, not money. We were not paid. We paid our way. In every way. We raised money for everything. We fundraised, we hauled equipment, we showed up early, and we still paid out of pocket. And we paid the price in our bodies. I paid in blood from my knees when I fell. I paid in feet that were exhausted during hell week. I paid in sweat and tears from doing the same things over and over until they were sharp and clean and right. That cost was not glamorous, but it formed something in me that still matters: loyalty, grit, responsibility, and the ability to finish what I started.

That is the version of sport I trust. The bridge is real. I have lived it. But I also know how easily a bridge can get warped when money and status become the point. If a university is going to cheer for athletics, it also has to protect what the university is for. Otherwise, we are not building a bridge at all. We are building a marketplace with a mascot.

Reference

Dufur, M. (2026, January 21). The great bridge: Do sports close or exacerbate racial gaps in communities? Forum presented at Brigham Young University, Kennedy Center, Provo, UT.