

Victoria Jackson on College Sports, Football, and the Olympic Pipeline

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Victoria Jackson's lecture at BYU pushed back on the idea that Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) is the main thing "wrong" with college sports. She suggested that the bigger question is how this whole system came to be and why that unusual structure still matters. Her main argument was that U.S. college athletics, built on the back of football money, has turned into one of the most important ways the world develops Olympic athletes.

Jackson explained that American universities now operate something like a global under-23 development system. In sports such as women's soccer, track and field, and basketball, many NCAA programs feel closer to professional training environments than casual school teams. Athletes receive intensive coaching, demanding schedules, robust medical support, top-tier facilities, and the opportunity to earn a degree while competing. Those conditions draw athletes from all over the world who choose to compete in the American college system. Jackson pointed out that around 75% of Team USA athletes have competed in college sports in the United States, underscoring how closely the Olympic pipeline runs through universities.

For Jackson, none of this exists without football. Football's popularity and revenue built modern athletic departments and created the financial model that still shapes college sports today. It also produced a distinctly American arrangement in which elite athletic development happens inside universities rather than in independent professional clubs. Early on, amateurism fit well with that world, especially when universities mainly served elite male students, and sports were framed as character-building activities. After World War II, however, the NCAA formally institutionalized amateurism through detailed rules and enforcement mechanisms. Even as college sports became a large commercial enterprise, the language of "amateur" and "student-athlete" continued to justify how revenue was distributed.

Jackson also argued that Title IX did more than require gender equity in education. She suggested that critics who blame Title IX for cuts to men's Olympic sports often miss the larger issue: football-centered budgeting decisions within athletic departments. In her view, Title IX helped preserve a broad model of college athletics and kept many Olympic sports within universities rather than pushing them into separate national or private systems.

One of Jackson's strongest points focused on how football revenue has historically worked inside the system. Because amateur rules prevented schools from paying football players directly, much of that revenue was directed to facilities, staffing, and non-revenue sports. In

practice, football was quietly funding Olympic development across dozens of other sports. Now, as athletes gain more opportunities for compensation and revenue-sharing becomes more likely, that old cross-subsidy looks far less stable.

Jackson concluded by asking what might happen if football could no longer carry the rest of the system. She suggested that new funding streams, including taxes on sports betting, could help support Olympic and other non-revenue sports if football revenue is no longer available in the same way. Her larger point was that the American college sports system developed in a somewhat crooked and accidental way. However, it has still produced real benefits for athletes, universities, and international sport. The challenge now is deciding whether people are willing to recognize that this unusual structure is worth preserving and then support it with real policy decisions and funding.

Bibliography

Jackson, V. (2026). Guest lecture on college sports and Olympic development.
Brigham Young University, Provo, UT.