

Commentary: Fight for 18! Why is college necessary to be a professional athlete?



NBA Commissioner Adam Silver speaks during a news conference, Sept. 28, 2017 in New York. (Julie Jacobson/AP)

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Dear sports fans,

In June I turn 18 and will receive my high school diploma. I am industrious, dependable and ambitious. Not to brag, but I am also quite talented academically, artistically and athletically. It would seem that the world is pretty much my oyster. I might enroll in a four-year college, but I'm weighing other options.

My first choice would be something in athletics. As quarterback on my high school team, I set several state records; and I was the starting point guard and captain of my school's varsity basketball team.

As a scratch golfer, I could pack up my golf clubs and try to qualify for the PGA tour. As the best pitcher and best hitter on my school's baseball team, I am confident I could succeed in baseball — and maybe even make a Major League roster. Given my hand-eye coordination and risk-loving attitude I might even give NASCAR a shot.

I ice skate pretty well and also like to hit people, so maybe I should give hockey a try and enter the NHL draft.

Or maybe forget the skates and just hit people as a professional boxer. I could also join the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association and ride bulls for a living, or bowl on the Professional Bowlers Association circuit.

As a fallback position, I could apply for a job at McDonald's or Macy's. I could take the military's Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery test, enlist in the Army and help defend my country. I could head to Hollywood and hope my considerable acting skills would land me a part in a movie and launch a rewarding career. Or I could move to Nashville and try country music. But what annoys me to no end is that as an 18-year-old, I would be prohibited from following my dream in basketball or football. The NBA insists that I be at least 19 years old, so about my only option is to — wink, wink — be a college "student-athlete" for about seven months (that is, 24 hours after my team plays its final game); then when the draft arrives, I would be one of those "one-and-done" guys, as seven first-round draftees were this year. I wouldn't have to attend any classes after the fall semester and could keep my eyes open for sneaker deals and agents in trench coats lurking in parking lots with bundles of \$100 bills in their pockets.

The NFL requires that I kill three years before trying to make one of its 32 teams, so my realistic path is to suit up in college and spend most of my days in the weight room.

Most professional sports leagues operate development leagues or minor-league systems, through which someone with my skills and discipline can start collecting paychecks at age 18 and hope to rise through the ranks. The interim pay and

glory aren't great, but the lure of making it to the premier league is incentive enough, and it would pay for my training. But the NFL and NBA have come up with an ingenious plan to limit my viable paid alternative jobs: They pawn off their future players to be trained at someone else's expense, by getting the NCAA and its member institutions to build and operate state-of-the-art athletic facilities. Because they don't have to pay their players, these colleges can acquire top-of-the-line coaching while filling their stadiums and arenas with paying customers and attracting lucrative broadcasting contracts. This is a "win-win-lose" arrangement for the pros, the colleges and me.

Being an academically gifted and curious high school senior enrolled in an advanced placement economics course, I think I will explore this anomaly for my class term paper. After spending a few evenings in my school library I might begin to understand why the professional leagues support these rules. Indeed, NBA Commissioner Adam Silver is currently promoting the idea of changing the basketball entry prohibition from one year to two years.

In addition to free training and coaching for young players, the NFL and NBA also learn more about their potential future high-visibility stars, such as whether they like to carry firearms, do drugs, gamble or abuse women, all of which tend to sully the leagues' reputations.

They also have more time to evaluate which ones of us are injury-prone. And by delaying our entry into the league, the NFL and NBA can postpone the time at which we can declare free agency in our mid-twenties, at the peak of our careers, potentially creating considerable payroll savings for their team owners.

Now armed with a better understanding of why my professional basketball and football employment prospects are limited, I think I will spend more time in a batting cage or work on my skating speed. Alternatively, I might aim for law school and the opportunity to sue the NFL and NBA for a collective boycott of my age 18 employment opportunities. Is this a great country or what!

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