

**Assessing the Case: A Book Review of  
O'Bannon, E. (2018). *Court Justice: The Inside Story of  
My Battle Against the NCAA*. New York, NY: Diversion  
Books**

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In *Court Justice: The Inside Story of My Battle Against the NCAA*, former University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) basketball star Ed O'Bannon explores various similarities between his playing career and his historic court case against the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) by interposing snippets of flashbacks within the court case narrative. The main thesis of the book is to convince readers that his case, in which he fought the NCAA for what he believed were the basic rights of college players to be fairly compensated for the use of their images and likenesses, was absolutely justified. Furthermore, while some progress has been achieved, O'Bannon writes that there are still many issues he believes the NCAA would do well to address. O'Bannon makes his view of the NCAA as a money-hungry cartel abundantly clear and emphasizes that he understands how privileged he is to have been able to not only play for an NCAA school at the Division I level, but conversely to be in a position to effectively sue the NCAA. Overall, I found the literature informative, entertaining, and persuasive, all while maintaining a lighthearted tone, making it an easy read.

One strength of the book is O'Bannon's ability to relate his experiences with the court case to his basketball career. Although O'Bannon confesses his ignorance of the law and the justice system as a whole, he cites numerous examples of how his case educated him in that area, as it will also do to certain readers. To that end, some key figures in the book are O'Bannon's lawyers. Just as they explain the intricacies of the court case to O'Bannon, he, in turn, explains them seamlessly to the reader. Most chapters, particularly in the heart of the book, begin with a quick introduction into the next stage of his court case before smoothly transitioning into a comparable story from his days at UCLA or as a professional basketball player. He always closes out the chapter by bouncing back to the main focus of the book: the lawsuit, its basis, and the supposed exploitation of the athletes. For example, in chapter four, "Tip-Off Nears," O'Bannon starts off by stating how he was hoping for a jury to be present at the trial, feeling that his case would be stronger if the NCAA's concept of "amateurism" was judged by the common people. He was confident he would be able to adequately convince the jurors of his intrinsic desire to better the game of basketball simply because of his love of the sport, claiming to "cherish basketball beyond words" (O'Bannon, McCann, & Schaap, 2018, p. 60). With that, he jumps into an account of his experiences growing up, such as playing pickup hoops with his friends after school, and includes an anecdote about how basketball can be life-changing. He wraps up the chapter by expressing his initial disappointment that he was unable to share these experiences with jurors, owing to the fact that he ultimately opted for a seemingly-necessary non-jury trial. "Tip-Off Nears" is just one of several chapters throughout the book that follows a similar format, which offers a satisfying

dichotomy between the blandness and formality of a court case and the exciting spontaneity of sports.

Another strength of the book stems from O'Bannon's unique position as not only a national champion at a NCAA Division I school at UCLA, but also as a retired professional basketball player with sufficient financial stability. His financial position allowed him to afford the hefty travel and time commitments necessary in such a court case. O'Bannon repeatedly mentions his desire to defeat the NCAA as one based not on greed but on justice, as the book's title suggests. A common criticism of O'Bannon's lawsuit was the misguided belief that he was only in it for the money, when in fact he knew from the beginning that there would be no monetary gain for him if he followed through with the lawsuit. O'Bannon mentions that, upon first learning of the minimal (if any) financial benefits, he cared not, asserting: "[t]his was about principle and fairness" (O'Bannon et al., 2018, p. 29). He was able to take this stance due to his post-college playing career. While amassing ten years of professional experience both in the National Basketball Association and overseas, O'Bannon was paid sizable salaries that has left his family well-off, in addition to his current occupation as a car salesman. He was therefore well-equipped to take on the NCAA thanks to being, in his mind, directly wronged by the NCAA after not seeing a dime from the video game *NCAA March Madness 09* that so blatantly used his likeness without his knowledge or consent. There simply are not many others with the qualifications O'Bannon possesses: from UCLA and professional basketball star to car salesman who realized the hypocritical injustice of college sports.

Though its strengths greatly outnumber its weaknesses, the book is certainly imperfect. One such weakness is that, while generally being easy to read, the book is not strictly in chronological order, which can make it slightly confusing at times. Juxtaposing the court case with his playing days is fairly straightforward, but there are other points in the book where O'Bannon repeats himself or jumps back and forth between certain aspects of the lawsuit. For example, near the end of the ninth chapter, "Judging the Judge," O'Bannon includes an amusing anecdote from the second to last day of the trial about accidentally running into Judge Wilken outside the courtroom. The story does fit within the context of the rest of the chapter, but the issue lies with the following chapter in that it does not follow chronologically. Instead of naturally delving into the details of the end of the trial in chapter ten, O'Bannon opts to describe the economics of the sport of basketball. Important though such details are so as to highlight the importance of his case, the chapter seems somewhat misplaced within the book. Reasonably insignificant incidences such as these are all that detracts from an otherwise entertaining and informative book.

O'Bannon wraps up the book by explaining the implications of his lawsuit. For example, he takes credit for forcing the NCAA to adjust its scholarships to include full cost of attendance, as well as for inciting EA Sports to grant around \$1,600 per check to roughly 25,000 current and former college athletes to use their likenesses. Proud of what he accomplished, O'Bannon mentions that what was most important to him was that he won for former players and set precedent for future cases. He goes on to name some such spin-offs of his lawsuit that have already surfaced; other cases that have been brought forth in a similar vein to O'Bannon's, with the ultimate goal of paying current and former college players what they are rightfully due. Included in the thirteenth chapter are descriptions of cases by ex-athletes such as Chris Spielman, Shawne Alston, Martin Jenkins, and Nigel Hayes. In Spielman's and Alston's cases, in fact, O'Bannon's victory was cited

to strengthen their respective arguments. O'Bannon's authoring this book has persuaded some (and could certainly lead others) to pick up where he left off and fight the proverbial man, the NCAA in this instance.

Based on the content and organization of the book, I believe O'Bannon wished to not only tell his side of the story, but also to inform readers of the pressing issue of compensating college athletes. When O'Bannon was making headlines a few years ago, I was unsure of the reasoning and purpose for the case, and assumed the case was irrelevant. My assumptions, however, were simply based in ignorance, and after reading the book, I found the evidence he used to support his thesis very convincing. O'Bannon makes clear his case against the NCAA to show readers that he is simply seeking justice where it is deserved, and to persuade them to pursue such endeavors themselves, when applicable. I think his primary target audience is former college athletes (specifically Black males in revenue-generating sports) who can innovatively use this book as a tool or a stepping stone to promote social justice and change. However, any reader can gain pertinent insight into the inner-workings of such a unique court case, where law, ethics, business, and sports intertwine. Therefore students from an array of programs, such as those involving said subjects, would all benefit from reading the work, not only to further their knowledge of the case but also to appreciate the gravity of such a case. In turn, readers can bring to the forefront an otherwise lesser problem with the NCAA: current and former college athletes' images and likenesses being used without fair compensation to the athletes.

References

O'Bannon, E., McCann, M. A., & Schaap, J. (2018). *Court justice: The inside story of my battle against the NCAA*. New York, NY: Diversion Books.