

# A View from the Arena

By Roger Mickish

Though some people may not realize the fact, the University of Oklahoma athlete is also a student. He shares most, if not all, the experiences his classmates who don't participate in intercollegiate athletics share. He attends classes, studies, has roommates, enjoys a social life, encounters scholastic problems, takes finals, joins organizations, reads, writes, and calls home collect.

What sets him apart is the involvement in his sport. The athlete in addition to the traditional student life must engage himself in strenuous and often lengthy practice sessions, and he may compete with athletes from other schools. This distinction is underlined by the practice of grouping single athletes together in separate housing. Such a practice isolates him in some respects, though no more than other similar special-interest groupings which occur in the social fraternities and sororities or in an "international house" for foreign students. Despite the differences, he is still a living, breathing student. And, I believe, a misunderstood one in many cases.

Though the athlete probably belongs to as many extracurricular organizations as the average student, his participation is often limited because of the demands of his sport. The competition of the playing field, coupled with the classroom, prevents most from taking a leading part in social and scholastic clubs. Some find this undesirable enough to cause them to

leave athletics. Certainly the time one must devote to his sport is a factor in some decisions to quit.

This inability to participate more actively in campus affairs leads to misunderstanding among people outside the University as well as among other students; it contributes to the popular and mistaken belief among many that most athletes attend class simply to remain eligible, that their education is incidental or secondary to their chief concern: athletic competition. This misconception causes some athletes to doubt even more their participation in athletics.

The truth is that a large percentage of athletes are here for an education first, an education that will not only give them a basis for their livelihood but will enable them to face the decisions of life outside their profession and to form a philosophy of living.

The University today is more competitive than it has ever been. It is more difficult to enter OU, and it is more difficult to remain in school. Gone are the days when an athlete was given a passing mark because of his athletic ability. If an athlete is not equipped for the scholastic rigors of the University, he is advised that he ought to consider another school. As a result of the emphasis on classroom performance, which is the rule in today's University, the athlete must be a student first and an athlete second.

After a year or two in competition, the athlete becomes aware of the position in which many people place him, and he resents it. He doesn't have to be very sensitive to recognize that the public thinks of him as a boy, not a man, completely detached from current issues and controversies. Many believe his education is token, and the banal conversations they hold with him are evidence that they regard him as one-dimensional—and that dimension is, of course, athletics. It would be wrong to blame this misconception totally on the athlete's limited involvement in student life. Probably equally as important is the fact that such a person who fits the

stereotype does exist and is quite easily recognized. As a result, people become assured of their naive generalizations, to the disservice of a great majority of athletes. It should be difficult to hold onto these stereotypes with so much evidence to the contrary. There are scores of examples of former athletes who are prominent and active citizens. On the University level I can think of a number who can discredit the erroneous picture of the single-minded jock. Ron Shotts, newly appointed as assistant dean of men, and Ron Winfrey, a graduate assistant in physics, immediately come to mind. Still the image persists.

The way some fans respond to the athlete's opponents adds to the cynicism that many athletes feel about the way the public thinks of them. Often these fans boo and jeer the challenger in disrespect and ignorance of the months of intense training that athletes endure in order to compete. The athlete is fully aware of this and respects his opponent's dedication and preparation. He feels an empathy with him and believes the derision some fans show takes something out of the sport and from every participant, regardless of what he represents. Most athletes, whether they have made the team or not and whether they have been fairly treated or not, truly love their sport and see it as a form of skill and excellence. Most fans probably feel this way also, but those who demean the athletes and the sport by their actions rob much of the enjoyment for the athlete.

The athlete will continue to carry this incorrect stereotype for the future probably, but it is hoped that an increased sensitivity to it will lead to change. It is essential that such misconceptions be corrected. People must come to realize that we all must be viewed in the context of our times. Young people in particular are eager to have a wider experience and to understand persons stripped of false classifications. A person should be judged not by one narrow criterion but by the kind of man or woman he or she is. The athlete must be viewed from a different set of premises; he must be recognized as a person who does more than wear a uniform for good old alma mater. He must be perceived as a student primarily, and an athlete incidentally. □

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*Roger Mickish wrestled at 167 and 177 for OU from 1964-65 through the 1966-67 season, compiling 54 wins (which places him in a tie for second place among all-time Sooner wrestlers), 12 losses, one draw, and pinning seventeen opponents. A physics major, Mickish graduated in 1967 with a grade average well above a 3-point. In his senior year, he was named as OU's recipient of the Big Eight Medallion, which goes to each school's outstanding scholar-athlete. He is completing a master's degree in physics under one of fifteen annual NCAA graduate fellowships.*