

...on both playing field and in classroom

players at a 50 percent rate, you reduce the number of available scholarships," Kretchmar said.

Grand Experimentation

Joe Paterno's "Grand Experiment" is a good example of one coach's plan to build and maintain a successful athletic program without sacrificing academic standards. In "The Paterno Legacy" (1998), Bob Smizik took one of the famous coach's quotes from the late 1960s — when Penn State had just begun to establish itself as a national football power — to summarize the idea.

"Everybody assumes if you have a great football team there have to be sacrifices in the area of academic standards," Paterno said at the time. "People tell me it can't be done without sacrificing standards. They tell me I'm daydreaming."

Those who called Paterno a daydreamer stuck a pretty large collective foot in their collective mouth — Penn State has been one of the winningest teams in the country during Paterno's 37-year tenure, all the while ranking among the nation's leaders in graduation rates.

Recently, Paterno's teams have fallen on the field, going from 18-5 in 1998 and 1999 to 10-13 the past two seasons.

Because of the on-the-field decline, Penn State has received some criticism for not recruiting top-notch athletes from junior colleges, which is what schools such as the University of Miami, Kansas State University and Oregon State University do regularly.

At Penn State, however, incentive to keep the grades up is more than just a desire for a diploma — if Paterno's Nittany Lions can't cut it in the classroom, they don't play. Period.

"Being student-athletes, you've got to worry about a lot of stuff," said defensive back Rich Gardner. "Class is the biggest of all. You don't want to put yourself in a position where you can't play."

Joe Iorio, the Lions' starting center, is in his third year of both football and classes and is a dean's list student in the College of Information Sciences and Technology.

Like many student-athletes, Iorio understands the importance of structure when it comes to making the grade.

"I came from a Catholic school, where I learned to regulate my work habits," he said. "But when a lot of people get to college, they have trouble with that because they don't know how to do it."

Penn State's major sports — football and men's and women's basketball — bring in plenty of revenue, part of which is used to fund the academic support programs. But sports generate just as much money at the University of Oklahoma, so why did it fail to graduate a single member of the men's basketball team's freshman class of 1994?

A factor that can affect rates is how many athletes leave school early for the NBA or the NFL. It happens more and more each year — not only with athletes who have one year of eligibility remaining, but sometimes, two or three.

When the pros come calling...

What about these student-athletes, the ones who have what it takes to play in the pros, such as many of the stars at Michigan, Penn State or other big-name football programs? Finishing a term paper can become even more of a nuisance if a player knows he could be a Top 10 draft pick making millions of dollars a year if he leaves school early.

"There are legitimate cases where kids may have to go into the NBA or the NFL," Northwestern's Taylor said. His school hasn't exactly been a breeding ground for players in either professional league, sending only a select few to the next level, but other schools, Penn State among them, face the issue each year.

Should universities with top-notch athletic programs and low graduation rates be punished for sending their players to the pros before they graduate?

"If there's any doubt in their minds, we encourage them to come back, get their degree," Curley said. "But, there are extenuating circumstances."

For many student-athletes, the issue runs deeper than simply the diploma itself. They don't see Mercedes-Benzes or 14-bedroom mansions behind the loaded contracts being presented to them, but rather opportunities to provide a better lifestyle for themselves and their families.

Take the case of former Nittany Lion football star Brandon Short, who had the opportunity to leave Penn State after his junior season and make the jump to the NFL.

Weighing heavily on Short's decision was how poor his family was. But he decided to stay and play his senior season, earn his degree and join the pros afterwards.

Short found what many athletes find — that the pros aren't going anywhere, and that a player can be just as successful — in many cases, more so — in the pros if he sticks around for his final year of eligibility, earning a high-quality education in the process.

"That says an awful lot about Brandon, where his priorities are," Curley said. "But we realize that every situation's different. I don't criticize someone who makes a different decision."

Raising the bar

Keeping a high academic standard goes beyond establishing high standards at the support level. The Morgan Center could not have had the impact it has had at Penn State without the support it has received from the university.

"You need commitment from the central administration first," Kenepf said.

"The university has to expect student-athletes to be students first."

Kenepf said another key to Penn State's academic success is due to the fact that Curley has a seat on university president Graham Spanier's Presidential Council.

"It's unlikely an athletic director would have the same sensitivity if he wasn't (involved)," she said.

Curley, who helped develop the Morgan Center in the 1980s when he was an assistant athletic director, said the process of maintaining high standards and bringing in exceptional student-athletes is cyclical.

"If you didn't have any or less standards you

Big Ten Conference

Graduation rates of student-athletes in basketball and football (in percentages).*

	Men's Basketball	Women's Basketball	Football
Northwestern	73	93	86
Penn State	80	82	70
Iowa	67	82	64
Purdue	55	47	57
Michigan	14	75	45
Indiana	43	41	70
Wisconsin	46	100	53
Illinois	45	56	54
Michigan State	71	92	40
Minnesota	17	93	46
Ohio State	20	64	33
National Average	41	64	49

*Last four student-athlete classes studied by the NCAA (players who entered as freshmen in 1991, 1992, 1993 and 1994 and who earned a degree within six years.)

Source: NCAA

Jaimie Confer/Colegian

would not have access to those kinds of students," Curley said.

The lofty standards Penn State has established are one of the reasons that Nittany Lion athletes garnered 227 Academic All-Big Ten honorees to lead the conference for the fifth consecutive year in 2000-2001.

Reaching toward improvement

Some schools just don't make the grade, for one reason or another. Obviously, not all universities share the annual graduation success rates of Northwestern or Penn State.

For instance, although the University of Cincinnati's overall graduation rates for student-athletes greatly exceed those of the school's overall student body, the men's basketball program has graduated only eight percent of its players over the last four measured years — and none from the freshman class of 1994.

Like Penn State, Cincinnati has its own academic support staff, required study hours for freshmen and hundreds of thousands of dollars at its disposal to facilitate the guidance process.

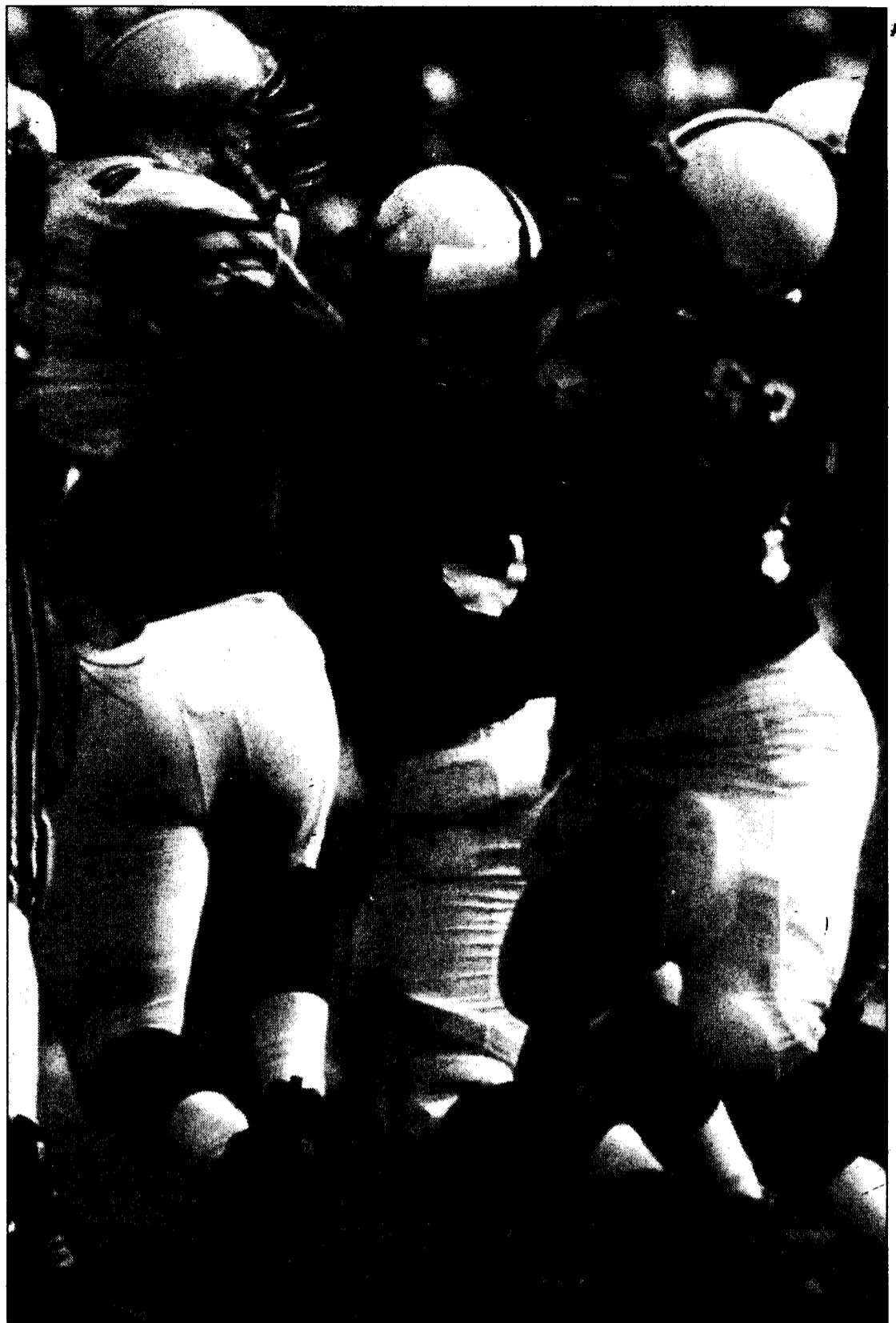
What, then, is the disparity, especially on the hardwood, where the Lions graduate 80 percent of their players compared to the Bearcats' eight?

"Our basketball program has relied a lot on junior-college recruiting," said Cincinnati Assistant Athletic Director and Media Relations Director Tom Hathaway. "Two years at a junior college does not necessarily transfer into two years of study at a four-year school. That works against you a little bit toward the graduation rate."

What's to be done

There are a number of factors that can have substantial effects on graduation rates, including how many athletes transfer to another college or how many leave school early to pursue professional careers.

What are the differences between the "haves" and the "have-nots?" Why aren't the schools strug-



Randy Litzinger/Colegian

Joe Iorio protects quarterback Zack Mills. Iorio is one of several Nittany Lion athletes on the dean's list. Penn State's academic reputation is renowned, as the Lions graduate nearly three-fourths of their football players.

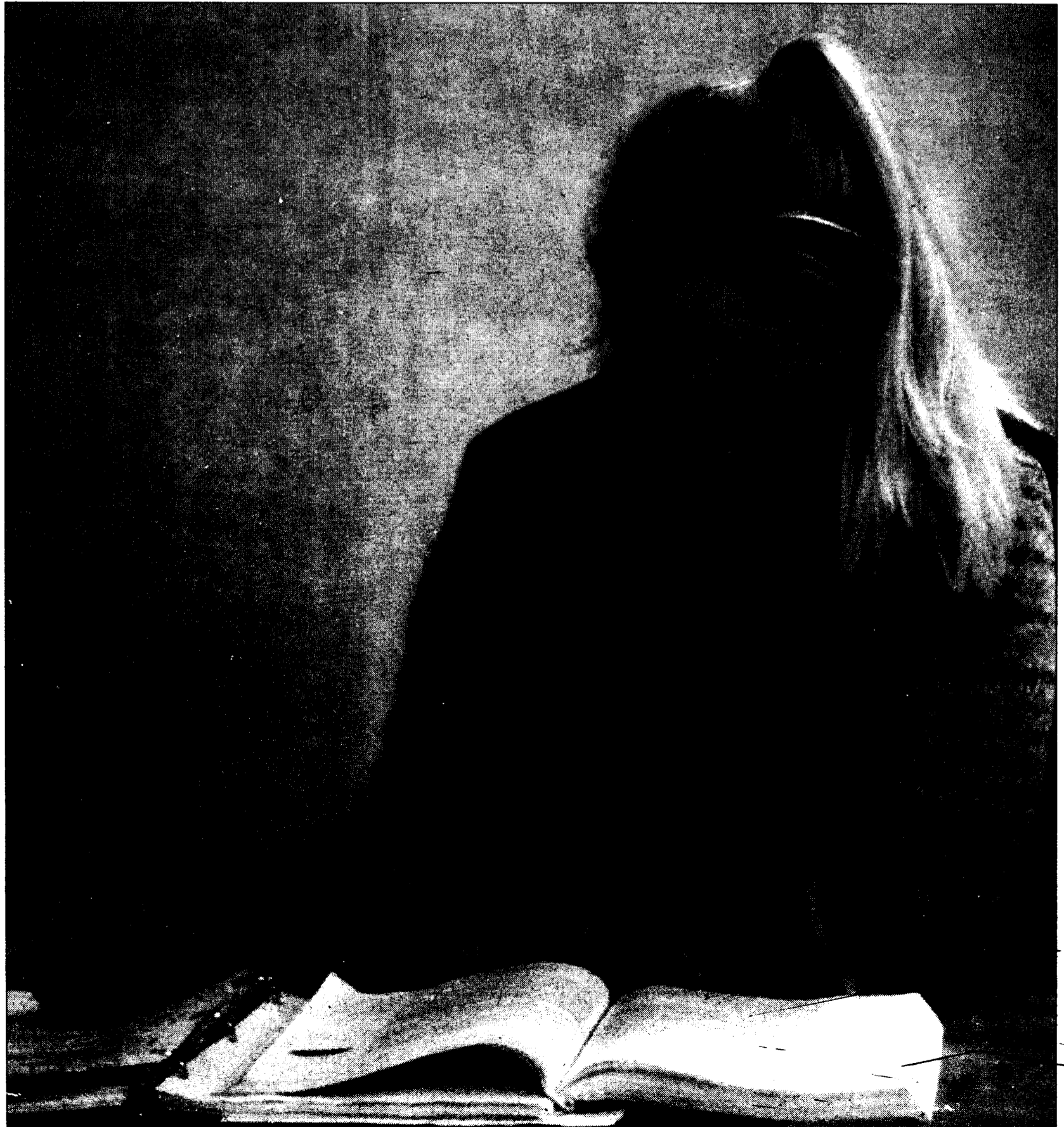
gling to graduate a majority of their players establishing the same kind of "culture" that exists at Penn State, Michigan or Northwestern?

"Our philosophy has always been emphasizing the student in student-athlete," Kenepf said. "And ensure that they're provided with a wealth of opportunities."

Some schools that aren't measuring up, though, can't be blamed for lack of trying. The academic

support centers at Penn State and Stanford have been emulated for years. The disparity in grades doesn't match up to the disparity in academic support.

"I don't know that there's that much difference," Cincinnati's Hathaway said. "There may have been 20 years ago. But now, people know what other people are doing. If someone's found this or that to work, other people will try to adopt it."



Candice Sinclair Ferguson/Colegian

Jackie Sherman, a sophomore women's lacrosse player, takes notes at the East Area Locker Room yesterday evening. Each of Penn State's 29 varsity teams have their own minimum required amount of study hours per week. Many spend their time in the East Area building.