

Wolfe: Marketing football players



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Gavel to Gavel: Kicking the Players

Hank Williams Jr.'s Monday night power ballad signals the start of what many sports fans consider a holiday: the start of football season. With the eve of this great time upon us, the college football season is once again marred by yet another NCAA ruling on the eligibility of the reigning Heisman trophy winner.

Following in the footsteps of Cam Newton, Johnny Manziel, aka "Johnny Football," was in danger of losing his eligibility to play due to rules violations. In particular, he has been accused of being paid for participating in autograph sessions.

While the NCAA wants to limit what money college athletes can make, the NCAA and its constituent schools certainly have no problem marketing products with a college athlete's image or likeness in effort to increase school spirit. Jerseys frequently change each year based on that school's particular star player. Have you ever seen a jersey with the number of the school's kicker?

Whether college athletes should or should not be paid for their play is up for debate (they should), but by punishing players for receiving payment for their signature, the NCAA has effectively forbid college athletes from making any money from their name. But what's in a name?

Although generally a person's name cannot be trademarked, this rule does not apply to all celebrities. Where an individual's name is a brand then the name can qualify. Think Tiger Woods, Michael Jordan, Emeril Lagasse and Martha Stewart. These names are associated with a person, but are also used for branding products ranging from basketball shoes to cooking pans. They all receive compensation every time their names are used commercially to advertise or market a product, and trademark law protects these registered names.

While Johnny Manziel isn't currently trademarked, Johnny Football was registered in early 2012. Unfortunately for the true Johnny Football, he won't be allowed to make money off his own moniker until his eligibility in college football is over.

With Johnny Football only receiving what amounts to less than a slap on the wrist with a half-game suspension, Hank Williams' song rings true: "Are you ready, ready/ Are you ready for some football?"

I know I am.