Contemporary Blue Chips: A Critical Analysis of a Sports Journalist's Approach to the Scandals Surrounding College Athletics

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Introduction

Sports films are a limited genre within cinema. In the late 1980s, early '90s, however, a string of breakout movies covering multiple fields of play were consecrated by critics as sports classics. *Bull Durham, White Men Can't Jump, and Tin Cup,* all written by Academy-Award nominee Ron Shelton, distinguished themselves as sports classics.[1] In 1994, Shelton deviated from Triple-A ballparks, blacktop street courts of Compton, and U.S. Open fairways, to the hardwood of college basketball in *Blue Chips,* starring Nick Nolte. The film is an allegorical exposé on the corruption existing in the high-pressure world of college basketball,[2] primarily focusing on the black-market recruiting world going on behind the scenes.

Blue Chips is unique because it is one of the first "blockbuster" movies to cover college basketball, let alone basketball in general. *Hoosiers,* made in 1986, is touted as the greatest sports film ever,[3] however it only focuses on a small-town high school in rural Indiana. *Blue Chips* was the first film to point the lens at the multi-billion-dollar collegiate sports industry policed by a board of governors in the NCAA and scrutinized by media conglomerates. The bulk of the film focuses on the moral discrepancies of Pete Bell, played by Nolte, head men's basketball Coach of the Western University Dolphins. However, the figurative antagonist of the film is Ed Axelby, played by Ed O'Neill, a beat reporter for the local newspaper who appears to have a grudge against Bell for his previous success.

The film was a box-office bust, its brief 108-minute production grossing only $22.3 million worldwide.[4] It also did not hold the same relevance in the cinematic sports community as Shelton's other films, such as *Bull Durham* and *White Men Can't Jump*. "Blue Chips…is almost shut out by its own cliches,"[5] wrote Desson Howe of the Washington Post, "a plodding, moronic, connect the dots morality." Said Janet Maslin of The New York Times, "Blue Chips falls apart when the filmmakers, figuratively speaking, haul their soapbox right onto the court."[6] The germaneness of *Blue Chips,* however, is its relevance to today's sporting community as the moral lessons it suggests apply to modern sports media. In his own review of the film, the late Roger Ebert posed the rhetorical question, "Is there a national championship collegiate athletic program anywhere in the country that can truthfully say all of its recruiting was done entirely within the official guidelines? Just asking."[7] Twenty-seven years later, those words are still pertinent amidst the for-profit cut-throat mentality of collegiate athletics.

This paper dissects the moral obligations of journalists as a whole, specifically correlated with the moral obligations of Ed Axelby, the beat reporter covering Western University men's basketball. Next, it delves into the corrupt world existing in Ron Shelton's 1994 fictional sports universe but is also enveloping the current sphere of college basketball, as well as collegiate sports as a whole. Finally, it discusses the changing moral standards in the world of college sports, and how the actions that were once criminal are now embraced with little to no consequence, and how the journalists pursuing these crimes are losing their leverage in today's world.

Moral Obligations of the Media

The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) Code of Ethics states that journalists seek truth and report.[8] Truth, in some situations, is subjective, which in turn instigates ethical battles

journalists face in their pursuit. Relativity causes conflict as journalists and audiences do not always share a universal understanding of what "truth" means.[9] There is, however, a nobility connected to the role of a reporter, as they are "morally committed to maximally relevant truth-telling in the public interest and for the public good."[10] Truth-telling by some is viewed as an ethical value journalists accept,[11] while others push for truth as a universal code.[12] Regardless of the standard for journalists, the primary purpose instigated in their obligations is to report the truth as they are "gathering, reporting, and interpreting information."[13]

The moral assumption of truth-telling is the overarching premise of *Blue Chips* as the story navigates varying ethical standards multiple characters have in the collegiate sports landscape, which in turn causes rooted contention between characters at various plot points. Head coach Pete Bell, for example, adheres to a pure athletic standard of teaching players the fundamentals of basketball and helping them gain an education at Western University. Athletic Director Vic Roker, played by retired Hall-of-Fame point guard Bob Cousy, and Alumni Chairman Happy Kuykendall, played by J.T. Walsh, are committed to donors and alumni to produce a winning basketball program, with championship banners hanging from the rafters as proof of their success. The Western University Dolphins press draws on the contention between these characters and reports that said truth to the viewing public. As Kantian as this philosophical perspective may be,[14] it is their responsibility and moral obligation as journalists to report the truth about the men's basketball program, regardless of Pete, Vic, or Happy's desires.

Truth-telling causes conflict. Which, as Tehranian alludes, "attracts the media as powerfully as flies gather around sweets."[15] A primary conflict in *Blue Chips* occurs in one of the opening scenes, a post-game press conference following a Dolphins blow-out loss to rival Texas Western. Coach Bell stands on the stage in front of the reporters, gives his obligatory

congratulations to their opponent on the win, states that he has nothing more to say about the game, and opens the floor to questions, "Stupid or otherwise." [16] The simple utterance of the word “stupid” foreshadows the strained relationship between Bell and the journalists covering the team, and the lack of respect he has for them reporting on their perspective of truth. While Bell refuses to further comment on the game, the press are obligated to ask, with the opening reporter asking about Bell's side of the "basketball-kicking incident" when he was ejected in the second half and drop-kicked the ball into the stands. Bell rebuffs him, saying, "Alan, you used up your question. That was stupid. Next question."[17] Bell’s condescending response is an allegory to the dichotomous perspectives held by coaches and the media, primarily traced back to the pure motivating factors for their careers. A college basketball coach’s main priority is to win, very well indicated by Bell’s vitriolic passion for his team. The media, arbitrarily, are not influenced by the game's outcome but are bound by the duty to report the truth to the public. Thus, these bifurcating viewpoints in some cases cause contention, typically from the coach's side of the table.

In 2009, former UCONN head coach Jim Calhoun reprimanded a reporter asking about his salary, saying, “My best advice for you is, shut up.”[18] Calhoun’s ACC counterpart, Syracuse head coach Jim Boeheim once singled out a reporter, similar to Bell, telling ESPN beat writer Andy Katz, “I’ll answer anyone’s question but yours, you’re an idiot.”[19] Arguably, the greatest instigator of media conflict stems from Hall of Fame head coach Bobby Knight,[20] who had numerous outbursts and censored clips in post-game interviews. His disdain for the media is best epitomized with the statement he made in a December 2003 interview to the press in which he said, “I’m trying to help you young guys in this profession you’ve chosen that’s one or two steps above prostitution.”[21] Knight may have been a primary influence for Shelton when he wrote

Bell's character; given his mannerisms throughout the film and the authoritarian position he took over Alan's question about the basketball-kicking incident. Be that as it may, Bell's aversion to the media, specifically in the opening act press conference, is symbolic of the combative relationship between the media and college basketball coaches. Bound by contrarian motives, these verbal jousts between parties are held in hundreds of post-game press conferences in locker rooms all across the country.

Moral obligations of Ed Axelby

Western University beat reporter Ed Axelby has a marginal role in *Blue Chips;* however, his assertions in the film's opening moments drive the plot down the corrupt rabbit hole existing in the college sports landscape. Immediately following the patronizing remarks from Coach Bell, Axelby raises his hand and asks, "Do you think it's fair to say that your inability to get the program back on track is strictly related to recruiting problems that started four years ago after the alleged point-shaving incident?"[22] Bell violently responds to Axelby, denying the allegations, saying they were something Axelby had invented. In a condescending manner, he then explains the definition of what the word "alleged" means by fabricating a story of Axelby having an intimate relationship with bovine creatures. The rupture between Axelby and Bell continues only a few more seconds while Axelby backs his allegation of a point-shaving incident within the program, and Bell defiantly adheres to his claim that no such incident happened and immediately ends the press conference. Whether the incident is alleged or proven is beside the point, as the fact of the matter remains; Axelby, the local beat reporter covering the team, feels an obligation to report on any matters of academic integrity and athletic purity.

Under the standards given to the Society of Professional Journalists, Axelby is potentially out of line, as journalists should "avoid pandering to lurid curiosity" and "balance the need for

information against potential harm or discomfort."[23] Bell is on the verge of his first losing season, and the allegations that Bell said were created by Axelby two years earlier, in theory, do not correlate with his team's performance that evening. However, college sports as a whole are "rife with corruption," [24] as commercialism and corporate interest have progressively saturated the locker rooms on college campuses.[25] Under these assumptions, there is validity to Axelby's skeptical inquiries about Western University's program and Bell's integrity as a whole. Primarily because there is corruption in college basketball, and has been since its inception, accounting for a large portion of the severe scandals in American higher education.[26]

Point shaving specifically is something tarnishing college basketball as early as 1950. CCNY, a winner of both the NCAA and NIT tournament that year, later admitted to having seven players shave points throughout the season.[27] CCNY was decimated and remains a Division-III program today. One year later, the famed University of Kentucky Wildcats were caught shaving points in the 1951 NIT tournament.[28] In 1979, Boston College had three players admitting to point-shaving in connection with members of the New York mafia.[29] In 1984, Tulane President Eamon Kelly dropped the men's basketball program for five full years after Coach Ned Fowler and player John "Hot Rod" Williams were found guilty of point-shaving.[30] Even during the production of *Blue Chips*, Arizona State University star and future NBA player Stevin Smith received $20,000 per game during the 1994 season to fix four separate ASU games.[31]

Axelby accusing Coach Bell's knowledge about the alleged point-shaving incident is then justified, as corruption litters the lapels of many college basketball coaches in the modern era. University of Kansas coach Larry Brown illegally gave money to multiple players during his tenure.[32] Hall of Fame UNLV coach Jerry Tarkanian resigned less than 18 months after winning

the national title after photos leaked of his players in a hot tub with a noted gambler.[33] One of the most celebrated college basketball coaches in the modern era, Rick Pitino, was found guilty of overseeing an escort service for his players at the University of Louisville, vacating his wins during the 2012-13 season, including the 2013 NCAA title.[34] Four years later, Pitino resigned as head coach after having connections to a "pay for play" scandal for a recruit at Louisville.[35]

Given the history of corruption in college basketball, there is little doubt as to why Axelby is asking Coach Bell about an alleged recruiting incident being an unwashed stain on the Western University basketball program. Axelby's job as a reporter is to find the truth. However, the act combined with the scene raises some skepticism as to the purpose behind his question. The press conference is held immediately after Texas Western drubbed Western University in the second to last game of the season. With the loss, the Dolphins fell one game below .500, in danger of having their first losing season under Bell. Bell is not riding the highs of entering March Madness as a top-seed looking for a national championship, let alone celebrating the enthusiasm of securing a conference title for consecutive years. Rather, he is nearing the low point of a dismal season and gives the impression that his attendance at the press conference is a sheer contractual mandate. With the overwhelming level of inadequacies facing Bell, why is Axelby asking questions about a supposed scandal from three seasons prior? Is he asking about the allegations because he feels an uncovered kernel of truth needs to be dug out of the Western University program? Or is he asking to elevate his character and assure dominance in his own mind?

This is a theoretical dilemma many journalists, whether real or fictional, deal with constantly. Illustrated in HBO's *The Wire*, the plotline for season five centers around the above-mentioned premise of the true intentions of journalism. In that season, there is a tense

relationship between an archaic purist, Editor Gus Haynes, and upstart beat reporter Scott Templeton, who deceitfully fabricates quotes, evidence, and information detailing a dramatic serial killer in East Baltimore. In the season finale, Haynes catches Templeton and questions his journalistic intention with the rhetorical stance of "Maybe you win a Pulitzer behind this stuff, and maybe you gotta give it back."[36]

The audience could ask the same question about Axelby by this logic. His true motivations are never explicitly revealed in either this scene or throughout the rest of the film, despite his role as a truth-seeker looking to bring down Coach Bell. However, given the scandal-ridden past of men's college basketball, as well as the drastic shift of power and athletic dominance that Bell once enjoyed now decaying, there is validity to Axelby asking these types of questions. Whether hoping to unleash an angry outburst by Bell, similar to his 30-yard punt while being ejected from the game, or the analytical itch to uncover a deeper scandal within the athletic department, we can assume Axelby is looking for some truth in which is he obligated to report to the public. Sports broadcaster Colin Cowherd wrote, “My loyalty is to honesty – the truth as I see it. If I don’t shoot straight, I’m no good to anybody.”[37] Axelby is shooting straight, and he is reporting the truth as he sees it. Axelby and the public surrounding Western University deserve to know if the truth of Western University's previous success hinges on cheating.

Cartel Corruption in College Basketball

The first act of *Blue Chips* comes to a close as Western University is blown out in the final game, finishing the season two games below 500, the lowest point Coach Pete Bell has reached in his tenure. As the second act begins, Bell has now shifted to the recruiting trail to sell himself to the best recruits in the country and entice them to join his program. Two of the top stars on his radar are Butch McRae, a young point guard from the south side of Chicago, and

Neon Bordeaux, a behemoth-like center playing junkyard ball in the underbelly of New Orleans. Hall-of-Fame NBA legend Shaquille O'Neal plays Bordeaux, and McRae, by O'Neal's then-teammate on the Orlando Magic, Anfernee “Penny” Hardaway. Bell wines and dines the recruits, selling himself and the program he represents to the players and their families. The fiction of Bell enticing McRae and Bordeaux with champagne and fine dining is a reality as the best college basketball coaches in America act like traveling salespeople on road trips across the country, looking to lure recruits away from their homes and help the schools they play for succeed. Recruiting college athletes has now become a war for college coaches to win,[38] buying student-athletes for their programs.[39]

In one of the scenes, Bell is standing in the office of McRae's high school principal, Father Dawkins, alongside several other college coaches such as Jerry Tarkanian of UNLV, and Jim Boeheim from Syracuse, waiting for permission to speak with McRae. Before any receive access, Father Dawkins stands in front of the coaches like an auctioneer selling McRae's time slots to the highest bidder. Father Dawkins says:

> Alright gentlemen, what are my bids? Give me $50 for this strapping young boy. 17 and getting bigger every day. Dig deep in your pockets, gentlemen. Now see he’s a potential All-American and he can read and write. The boy can actually read and write...Now, what are my bids, gentlemen? Dig deep in your pockets, dig deep![40]

The coaches sit in silence, but Father Dawkins is not a fool. He knows he has a commodity on his hands, and his role as an auctioneer is something he has played before with these same coaches coming after other former top prospects. This is the structure of collegiate sports; auctioning off players to the highest bidder willing to pay to compete for a championship banner.[41] The irony of Boeheim and Tarkanian remaining silent as if they are not willing to cross that moral threshold is laughable given the recruiting scandals both have been involved in over their respective careers. Each of the three college basketball programs Tarkanian coached in his

31 seasons – Cal State Long Beach, UNLV, and Fresno State – were put on probation by the NCAA for some type of recruiting or academic violation.[42] Boeheim, one of the winningest coaches in NCAA history, was forced to vacate 106 wins over five different seasons when he knowingly played athletes who were academically ineligible. His actions also placed Syracuse University on probation for five years.[43]

The players are not benign to Father Dawkins' tactics either; as again stated, this is the structure of college sports. It is a cartel industry monopolizing on ticket revenue for football and men's basketball.[44] Players are auctioned off to the highest bidder in hopes that it will bring their program championships and athletic accolades, increasing their revenue and prestige. As unethical as these practices may be, all the recruits' teachers, families, and mentors understand the bottom line: crime pays in the NCAA.[45] When Bell meets with McRae, Butch leverages his family's needs, specifically his single mother in Chicago taking care of his grandmother and two additional siblings, for the opportunity to have him play for Western. Another recruit, French Lick standout Ricky Roe, approaches Bell in his office and says he will play for Western as long as Bell gives him a briefcase of $20,000, along with a brand-new John Deere tractor that his father initially requested during Bell's visit.

Bordeaux's struggles are due to his educational shortcomings and academic ineligibility. In one scene, Bordeaux plays the role of an incompetent high school dropout not understanding what country is directly south of the United States. However, when the tutor says she will give him $50 if he can name the countries directly south of the United States; without hesitation, Bordeaux rehearses Mexico, Guatemala, and four additional countries in the correct geographical order, followed by the line, "Now where's my $50?"[46] The athletes are not ignorant to the for-profit system in college basketball. Their time and energy are measured by the amount of money

someone is willing to pay them. “You start off by insulting me asking these third-grade geography questions. You think you're a liberal, but you're nothing but a racist," Bordeaux tells the tutor.[47] Again, this is the system that Bordeaux, McRae, and Ricky Roe have all come to understand. They know they are talented athletes. They know they are sought after by college programs all across the country. Most importantly, they know the system in college basketball rewards them for their efforts with sums of cash, vehicles, or other illegal benefits grouped together in “package deals”.[48]

The fictional characters of Bordeaux, McRae, and Roe are replicas of actual players housed in the corrupt structure of college basketball. One of the most publicized teams of the 1990s, the University of Michigan Wolverines, better known as the "Fab Five," were active participants in under-the-table booster endorsements and were actively receiving these types of payments during the production and premiere of *Blue Chips.* Chris Webber, arguably the most talented member of the Fab Five, received roughly $280,000 from Ed L. Martin,[49] a booster for the University of Michigan, over the course of five years; most notably during the consecutive final four runs the Fab Five made in 1992 and 1993. Webber was not the only player to receive cash incentives from Martin, as investigations into Martin’s relationship with the Michigan program found he gave over $600,000 to former Wolverines Webber, Robert Traylor, Maurice Taylor, and Louis Bullock.[50] Former Michigan coach Steve Fisher, akin to Coach Pete Bell, knew about the illegal donations and was fired in 1997 for his involvement with the scandal.[51]

The corruption of the University of Michigan program is only one of the many scandals that tainted 1990’s college basketball. The moral dilemma of paying athletes under the table to play was a debate hundreds of coaches, such as Fisher, Boeheim, and Tarkanian, faced year after year while sifting through thousands of recruits. This ethical conundrum is what Bell faced when

pressure from Alumni Chairman Happy Kuykendall and other university boosters pushed him to break his moral compass and give in to the demands of the players. Bell, like Fisher, and dozens of blacklisted coaches dismissed from their respective programs for recruiting violations valued winning over the contemporary moral standards.

The Dual Roles of Ed Axelby

For less than 90 seconds in the second act, reporter Axelby plays the role of a truth-seeking detective on the hunt for malpractice inside the locker room of Western University. While he is not the protagonist of the film, he does give the impression as one of the only characters adhering to any moral obligation. A scene shows Axelby ripping off a newswire report that McRae, Bordeaux, and Roe have all signed letters of intent to play for Bell, and Axelby suspecting that the players were all paid to play. “He bought ‘em, Charlie, I know he bought ‘em," Axelby says to a fellow reporter. “He paid for ‘em, baby, I can smell it.”[52] The source of Axelby’s skepticism is never revealed; however, his character portrays open vitriol towards Bell and how he operates his system at Western. A few moments later, he shows fellow beat writer Charlie the concurrence of gifts that have spontaneously appeared within the network of the recruits. He shows McRae's mother as the owner of a new house in Chicago and identifies the loan officer who approved the mortgage as an alumnus of Western University. He presents pictures of Ricky Roe’s father standing next to a brand-new John Deere tractor. He then states that the largest distributor of farming machinery in the state of Indiana is a former classmate of Alumni Chairman Happy Kuykendall. Finally, he shows a brand-new Lexus given to Bordeaux, a car Neon never officially requested. To Axelby, all of these coincidental benefits have ironclad paper trails that cannot be traced back to the program or the actual athletes themselves. However, he remains firm in his suspicions that Western University has now entered into the realm of

dishonesty in college athletics. “We gotta keep digging, it’s all right here.” He tells Charlie. “We’re gonna get this guy. We’re gonna get the great Pete Bell.”[53]

This stanza in *Blue Chips* insinuates that Axelby has a personal vendetta against Bell and the corruption within Western University. While the scope of the film grazes only a handful of games bookended around the recruiting season, it does briefly allude to the alleged recruiting violations Axelby speculates occurred a few years earlier. Axelby also doubts the integrity of Bell, given both his persona and the onslaught of recruiting violations littering college basketball by other high-profile coaches. Taking this into consideration, a more significant question resonates during Axelby’s passionate reveal of the illegal donations, that being: what is the ultimate reason behind his obsession with Western University? Is he bound by the moral standards instilled by SPJ to report the truth objectively? Or, is he looking to expose the legend Pete Bell and figuratively mount the Western University men’s basketball program scandal as a trophy on his wall?

The same hypothetical question compares to other reporters who have taken down similar coaches Coach Bell's resume emulates. In 1980, UCLA vaulted back to basketball greatness under head coach Larry Brown, leading the Bruins to the national title game, only to lose to the University of Louisville. Brown, however, resigned less than a year later after the NCAA Infractions Committee found he illegally gave players cash payments and free access to cars during the season.[54] The NCAA probe was spurred by reports from *Los Angeles Times* staff writers Jerry Cohen and George Reasons that multiple star UCLA players “acquired sporty vehicles within a short time of each other.”[55] At the time, Brown was a young, successful coach who had won at the college, ABA/NBA level, and was in the process of restoring UCLA back to relevance following the prominence of John Wooden. However, Brown's impending legacy at

UCLA was cut short following his NCAA violations, and he quickly left both college basketball and Southern California to coach the New Jersey Nets in the NBA. UCLA vacated its wins in the 1980 season and was banned from the 1982 tournament and placed on 2-year probation.[56] UCLA shares many parallels with Western University, as a college basketball powerhouse in California with the same sky blue and gold color scheme.

An equivalent comparison can be made to another decorated coaching legend on the opposite end of the career spectrum, Bobby Knight. Knight, who has the fifth-most wins in NCAA history,[57] is one of a handful of coaches to win multiple national titles, and was at the helm of the 1976 Indiana Hoosiers, the last team to go undefeated in collegiate play. However, Knight's prominence at Indiana came to a halt in March 2000, after CNN ran a piece by Robert Abbott that Knight choked one of his players, Neil Reed, during practice.[58] Later that year, Knight allegedly grabbed a student on the campus of Indiana University and told him to address him as “Mr. Knight” or “Coach Knight.”[59] This action led to his immediate termination in September of 2000.[60] Knight’s disdain for the media, similar to Bell’s, was also on the lowlight reel of his career, having frequent outbursts and rants to the journalists covering the teams in post-game press conferences. In a 2000 interview, while sitting down to discuss his tenure at Indiana with ESPN beat reporter Jeremy Schaap, son of hall-of-fame writer Dick Schaap, Knight condescendingly embarrassed the young reporter by walking out of the interview and insulting his character. In one instance, he said, "You've got a long way to go to be as good as your Dad, you better keep that in mind.”[61] Knight’s remarks are not as warped as Pete Bell telling Axelby that he sleeps with sheep in the opening press conference; however, the characters are nearly identical in their mannerisms.

Knight and Brown are both iconic instances of coaches being written off the bench by investigations into their illegal and unethical activities by the journalists covering them. However, they are not sole proprietors of these acts, and the scandalous pattern of cheating, personified by Bell, is the overarching premise of *Blue Chips*. Amidst the disgrace littering college basketball since CCNY's travesties in 1950, one could raise the question of the pure motivating factor behind the reporters covering the controversies. Is it their journalistic obligation to report the truth, or rather is it the anticipation of bagging another trophy on their award-covered wall? Were Jerry Cohen and George Reasons acting on tabloid hunches to sell the *Los Angeles Times*, or did they feel a moral obligation to report on suspicious correlations within the UCLA program? Did Robert Abbott, Andrew Bargnato, and Jeremy Schaap all have a vendetta against coaching legend Bob Knight, or were they bound by the task of reporting the disreputable facts surrounding his legacy at Indiana? The same can be asked of Ed Axelby and his relationship with Pete Bell. Are his actions as the detective probing into the potential recruiting violations out of pure vitriol and spite, or out of moral obligation of reporting to the public? While that question remains rhetorical for the sake of the film, Axelby's gumshoe nature is the ultimate downfall for the Western University program.

A Changing Moral Landscape

When Ron Shelton originally wrote the screenplay for Blue Chips, college athletes did not have the same privileges and benefits as athletes currently pursued on the recruiting trail. Neon Bordeaux being given the keys to a brand-new Lexus in 1994 was a near-death penalty act. Programs caught with any under-the-table bribery faced NCAA disciplinary responses setting them back a decade.[62] Today, those same actions are not outlawed but rather applauded, with millions of likes on multiple social media platforms. In August 2021, five-star quarterback Quinn

Ewers committed and enrolled at the Ohio State University, and by doing so, publicly received a customized Ford F-250 Tremor from a local car dealership in Columbus.[63] Rather than being condemned, as gifts like these once were, it is now glorified, with college athletes being recipients of a long-overdue payment. The standard for what is now acceptable evolved from when a scholarship and room and board were sufficient payment for athletic performance. Revenue-generating sports such as football and men's basketball have become too large for the NCAA to handle,[64] and student-athletes are no longer valued as the pawns in the multi-billion-dollar corporation.

One of the most historical changes in this movement happened in 2009, when former UCLA power forward Ed O'Bannon filed a class-action lawsuit against the NCAA, challenging the usage of his character by the NCAA for commercial purposes.[65] O'Bannon, joined by Bill Russell, Oscar Robertson, and 18 additional athletes in the lawsuit, sought reparations for having their faces, images, jerseys, and likeness displayed and marketed by both the NCAA and the affiliated institutions they represented.[66] The argument was simple; O'Bannon felt hundreds of thousands of college athletes did not receive fair compensation for being student-athletes for their revenue-generating institutions. O'Bannon and his fellow plaintiffs won the lawsuit in 2014, forcing the NCAA to pay $42.2 million in fees.[67] The case was a benchmark moment giving student-athletes leverage to receive additional financial compensation for their contributions to college athletics.

Before O'Bannon's lawsuit, the NCAA policed any "unethical" gifts and benefits to college athletes, regardless of the sport. The NCAA was the governing body to which reporters held players, coaches, and universities accountable. When Larry Brown oversaw prohibited contributions to his players at UCLA, he was reported to the NCAA. When Chris Webber

accepted the hundreds of thousands of dollars from an outlawed booster for the University of Michigan, he was reported to the NCAA. In *Blue Chips*, the patrolling body to which Axelby is looking to expose Pete Bell is the fictional NCA; however, the same administrative assumptions remain constant in the film. Axelby is holding Bell accountable to Western University's contract to the larger governing body of collegiate athletics.

Following O'Bannon's lawsuit and subsequent legal decisions, the NCAA is no longer the magistrate controlling the lives of the participating athletes. In 2019, senators Nancy Skinner and Steven Bradford introduced a bill in the California legislature, allowing players to receive compensation for their name, image, and likeness (NIL).[68] In 2020, the NCAA removed the one-year red-shirt penalty for all college athletes, enacting the blanket waiver, allowing them to enter the transfer portal at any given time and be eligible to play the following season.[69] In 2021, due to pressure from the passage of Skinner and Bradford's legislation, the NCAA adopted an interim NIL policy, allowing all college athletes to chance to profit off their personal brand.[70] The recent changes in leverage for student-athletes have transformed the traditional educational structure to being depicted now as a professional business model.

The standards for coaches committing fraudulent acts have also shifted in the recent pay-for-play era. In March 2019, a story broke that LSU men's basketball coach Will Wade held a conversation with a booster about making a substantial financial offer to a top recruit.[71] 17 months later, in August 2020, a report emerged that Wade offered "impermissible payments" to at least 11 different high school recruits, their families, coaches, and anyone in their network to help influence them to attend LSU.[72] An overwhelming amount of evidence, including phone conversations and text messages verifying Wade's offers, were published by the NCAA; however, for over three years after the allegations were made, Wade still walked the sidelines as

the head coach in Baton Rouge taking them to the NCAA tournament twice. In 1994, Wade would have been immediately terminated and boycotted from the ranks in college basketball. Rather, once the allegations were made known to the public, Wade simply restructured his contract with the institution, forfeited a $250,000 bonus, and kept his title for an additional 18 months. It took a formal Notice of Allegations from the NCAA, driven by a decision from the Independent Accountability Resolution Process (IARP), a committee chaired by former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, to ultimately force LSU to fire him in March 2022.[73] Reporters Dan Wolken,[74] and Dana O'Neil[75] both exemplified Ed Axelby, calling for Wade to be fired early on into the scandal; however, their influence today was not as robust as Jerry Cohen and George Reasons accusing and ultimately ousting Rick Pitino from UCLA in the 1980s.[76] The media may still play the role of objective intermediaries; however, their power has weakened given the current fraying moral standards.

Conclusion

The final stanza of *Blue Chips* shows Bell, loaded with a talented roster of under-the-table fully compensated athletes Butch McRae, Neon Bordeaux, and Ricky Roe, win their season opener against ironically, Bobby Knight and Indiana University. The victory closes the loop on Bell's original quest of returning to the glory days of Western University, as the program is now restored to its competitive apex. Following the game, the audience returns to the auditorium where Bell initially scolded members of the media for doing their job. However, this time, he enters to a standing ovation by reporters, boosters, and alumni. After the applause and brief soapbox speech about Bell's passion for the purity of the game, Axelby, bound by his journalistic responsibility, raises his hand, "I gotta ask this question, or I wouldn't be doing my job. Would you care to comment on the rumor that you, uh…arranged for an automobile to be purchased for

Neon Bordeaux?"[77] Shaking his head in disbelief at Axelby's persistence, Bell then unloads what appears to be a satirical rant, admitting they gave him a car, even further implying Bordeaux would have played even better had they given him a Ferrari. In what begins as a sarcastic rebuff of Axelby, Bell's diatribe evolves to a confessionary petition, affirming his sins to the reporters, admitting to giving the house, cash, and tractor to McRae and Roe, with his final words to the media being the utterance, "I quit."[78]

As a journalist, Axelby stands by his duty to report the truth. His words are minimal but impactful, in that his question is the essential breaking point of Bell's conscience**,** which in turn provokes him to confess his sins before the public, and out Happy Kuykendall for his dishonest actions as the booster president. Whether the statutory interrogation is motivated purely because of his journalistic obligation, or the fact that he was a predatory sleuth earlier in the film looking to nail Pete Bell to the cross, neither are explicitly revealed. What occurs, however, is the simple fact that Axelby's words pushed Bell beyond his moral threshold, leading to his admission to the public the guilt he had been bearing for the second half of the film. Axelby, a journalist acting as the objective liaison seeking the truth regardless of his true intentions, is the one holding him accountable to the public.

Despite his minimal role as a fictional character, Axelby exemplifies George Reasons, Robert Abbott, Mark Schlabach, and all previously mentioned reporters holding college basketball coaches and players accountable for their actions. While their motivations and articles exposing cheating in college basketball may have similar positions, the consequences for the perpetrators are drastically different. Axelby asking a brief question in a post-game press conference today would not hold the same weight as it does in the film's final scene. The standards have changed. College athletes are now directly given six-figure bonuses for enrolling

at powerhouse institutions and no one blinks an eye. The power of a journalist's pursuit in today's for-profit landscape does not have the same clout as it did during the under-the-table cartel of college recruiting in the 1990s. Axelby potentially winning a hypothetical Pulitzer for his landmine front-page story about the corruption within Western University led by head coach Pete Bell would now be barely a blip condensed to 280 characters and a hashtag.

From a filmmaking perspective, *Blue Chips* is not held in the same regard as Shelton's other sports classics, *Bull Durham* and *White Men Can't Jump*, which he wrote and directed. (In fact, Shelton quit the project disagreeing with the director over changes in the script.) Critics say it is full of "heavy-handed nonsense"[79] and a storyline that is "skeletal."[80] Overall, the film is a bust and is not a nostalgic piece of sports cinema. However, the film's underlying message focusing on media members holding individuals accountable for their misdeeds resonates today given the current state of college athletics. Axelby, along with the hundreds of journalists covering powerhouse college basketball programs, are still bound by the SPJ code of ethics to "seek truth and report it."[81] Coaches and players are still examined under a microscope with journalists "holding those with power accountable."[82] While the four principles of ethical journalism have not changed, player compensation in college athletics has drastically transformed from the archaic standards Ed Axelby held to Pete Bell. The media still objectively reports the truth of under-the-table recruiting violations carried out by current coaches and student-athletes; however, the consequences for the guilty coaches and players, such as public outcry, institutional disbarment, even NCAA penalties, do not have the same magnitude.

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