

What Games Are They Playing?

A Critique of *The Game of Life and Reclaiming the Game*

Speech of Hal S. Scott '65

Nomura Professor of International Financial Systems,

Harvard Law School

at the Princeton Football Association President's Dinner

Princeton Club of New York

February 26, 2004

I want to thank the Princeton Football Association, and President Frank Vuono, for inviting me to be their guest speaker at this important annual event. I also want to thank Coach Hughes, who is fast becoming a Princeton veteran, for honoring us with his presence here. And finally, I want to thank our Athletic Director Gary Walters, who could not be here tonight, for his friendship and crucial leadership on the issue of the importance of athletics to Princeton. I know that this was not a winning season for Princeton football on the scoreboard, but I also know it was a successful one for our seniors, and the school, in (to coin a phrase) the Game of Life.

I have two strikes against me here tonight: I am a Harvard Professor and did not play college football. The good news, however, is that I will be a Visiting Professor at Princeton in the Woodrow Wilson School in the 2004-2005 academic year and I am a member of the Class of '65 (which was blessed with a great football team). Most importantly, when Princeton plays

Harvard in football, I always root for Princeton. 28 years as a Harvard Professor cannot compare with the emotional tug of 4 years as a Princeton undergraduate.

There are currently 102 football players at Princeton. This is a substantial percentage, 16%, of the 657 male athletes. However, it is only about 4% of the approximately 2,380 male undergraduates, or 2% of the entire undergraduate student body, men and women. Football in terms of numbers is important to male athletics but is only a small fraction of the entire student population. Whatever discrepancy there may be between the academic qualifications of football players and other students has a relatively small impact on Princeton as a whole.

As I am sure you know, the number of football players at Princeton is regulated by the Ivy League Presidents. These regulations presently permit the matriculation of only 30 football players per year, down from 35 in 2001 and from 50 as recently as 15 years ago. To my knowledge, you and the other so-called High Profile athletes, men's ice hockey and basketball, are the only group on campus today whose numbers are strictly restricted—in the past this “honor” was reserved for Jews, women and African-Americans. You are at least in good company.

I want to share with you tonight five points about Bill Bowen's two books, the *Game of Life* and *Reclaiming the Game*. I begin with the rather dull but important matter of statistics: the cards on which Bill has built his house.

1. **Bowen's arguments are built on statistical misrepresentations.**
- A. Exaggeration of the probability of admission of athletes

In the *Game of Life*, Bowen claims that athletes have a 48% better chance of being admitted to elite schools than other applicants, despite significantly worse academic credentials. This was a statement that Bowen knew would incense non-athletes and their parents. If it were true it should have. The problem is that it is a serious misrepresentation of the truth. The claim was based on admissions at one unidentified school in 1999 which is hardly a reliable sample. More fundamentally, it totally ignored the fact that athletes go through a pre-selection process; before athletes formally apply to a school, their prospective coaches get a "read" from admissions. Many athletes are rejected through this process, and the ones that go on to actually apply have a high probability of admission (they have been told they will get in). Indeed, some schools send athletes in some sports, "likely to admit" letters, before formal action is taken on their applications. Those rejected in the pre-read almost never actually apply. A fair comparison of the probability of admission would take this into account by looking at the acceptance rate of athletes who applied informally through pre-reads, as well as those who filed formal applications. This pre-read process was no secret. The authors knew about the process but only acknowledged it in an endnote, without modifying their claim in the text.

In *Reclaiming*, Bowen attempts to respond to the pre-screening point by pointing out that at the lowest range of SAT scores, those below 1100, "recruited" athletes (a term I shall shortly say more about) and non-athletes are roughly equally represented. He infers from this parity that non-athletes are winnowing themselves out of applying to the Ivies at the same rate as

admissions is winnowing out the athletes, so winnowing can be ignored. But this is pure conjecture.

In looking for evidence of the significance of athletic winnowing, it is more relevant to look at the middle ranges of SAT scores, 1100-1399. These are scores that are high enough to get in, but only with help. In these ranges, there are significantly more recruited athletes than non-athletes. This may be because athletes believe their chances of admission are better than the non-athletes believe their chances to be. Why? Because a significant portion of these athletes have gotten positive feedback from the pre-screening process before they apply. But this is also conjecture. The fact remains that winnowing exists and Bowen ignored its impact entirely in *Game*.

B. Exaggeration of differences in academic qualifications of athletes and students-at-large

In *Game of Life*, Bowen effectively used the hidden ball trick by failing to disclose to his readers that, aside from the three High Profile sports, there were insignificant differences in the academic credentials of athletes and non-athletes in the Ivies. My analysis of Bowen's own data—which he has never contested—showed that in 1989—the last class which he studied—the average SAT I score differences, between Low Profile athletes (about 87% currently of all men and women Princeton athletes) and the rest of the student body at the Ivies were quite small: for men 39 points and for women 9 points. Yet the authors claimed that Low Profile Athletes had a “large” admissions advantage.

Bowen has found a way in *Reclaiming* to increase these differences substantially. His new book deals with Alexis's class, the class of 1999 (which entered in 1995). Whereas in the *Game of Life* he compared athletes to the rest of the student body, in *Reclaiming* he only compares "recruited" athletes to the rest of the student body. And given claimed data limitations, he only does so for four of the eight Ivies—Columbia, Penn, Princeton, and Yale.

"Recruited athletes" are defined by Bowen as applicants who were on a coach's list at the time admissions decisions were being made. Based upon this definition, Bowen reports that at the Ivies (remember actually only 4 of the 8), 82% of High Profile athletes were recruited, whereas only 47% of Low Profile men athletes, and only 52% of all female athletes were recruited. Can this really be true? In the *Game of Life*, Bowen claimed that the idea that an unknown player, whether High or Low Profile, would show up and make a varsity team was "in the words of one admissions dean, 'essentially zero.'" And Bowen recounts in *Reclaiming* how the admissions process is getting ever more efficient. Yet, according to his data, most Low Profile athletes are not-recruited. Bowen, in fact, labels the athletes who are not on a coach's list as "walk-ons." What gives?

What gives is that many coaches do not put all the players they have identified, talked to, invited for visits and want, on their lists. We have no idea how the practices of the four Ivies Bowen includes—Columbia, Penn, Princeton, and Yale—compare on list inclusion practices, or how the included schools compare to the excluded schools—Brown, Cornell, Dartmouth, and Harvard. There are no Ivy rules on who must be on a coach's list. Any definition of "recruitment" based on a coach's list is meaningless because schools and coaches in the Ivies follow very different practices. I have no doubt that Bowen was well aware of this problem; it

was adverted to in earlier preparatory studies for his book. He just hid it from the reader, the way he did with pre-screening in the *Game*.

I am told that Princeton coaches are supposed to put on their list all the players they want—but do they follow the practice? Is it conceivable that 53% of the low profile varsity athletes at Princeton are athletes the coaches did not want? More likely, this includes a number of athletes the coaches wanted but for whom they were not asking admissions for help. They know that help from admissions is a scarce resource, so they only put the players on the list that they really want.

Of course, this would be unlikely to be the case for football or the other High Profile Sports where there is a strict limit on admitted football players. That is why such a high percentage of High Profile athletes, 87%, are on a coach's list. But the other sports have no strict limit.

I am not suggesting that a coach would leave off a list his top picks, even if they were brilliant—he cannot take the risk that they would not get admitted. After all, many applicants with perfect SATs get rejected at the Ivies. However, the coach might leave off players that he wanted less than others or after the pre-read might be willing to take the risk that the applicant will get in even if he or she is not on the list. In any event, these are athletes that he would have encouraged to apply and sincerely hoped would be admitted. In commonsense parlance, they are recruited.

In some schools, Williams for example, coaches only identify tips—athletes that will be impact players and need help from admissions. Overall tips are now limited to 66, or about 13%, per class for all athletes. If a Williams coach has a very good player with 1500 SATs, they may not be on the list, because they do not need help and probably will get in anyway. After all we

know that about 42% of the Williams students play varsity sports—most of these students are not on any list.

So, here is the main point. Bowen contends in *Reclaiming* that there is a big gulf between the SAT scores of recruited athletes and the rest of the students. This may be true but only because Bowen has eliminated from the definition of “recruited” many of the smartest athletes—the ones who may not be on a coach’s list because the coach does not seek help for these students from admissions. This permits Bowen to exaggerate the differences between the less academically qualified athletes on a coach’s list and the rest of the student body.

Equally important, Bowen fails to acknowledge that the Ivies have long had effective control over the differences in academic qualifications between athletes and the rest of the class. An informal rule, which recently became formalized, required that the average AI (the academic index composed of SAT I and II scores and secondary school ranking) of any team could not be lower than one standard deviation below the average AI of the school’s previously admitted four classes. Football is subject to even tougher controls, through the absolute limits I have already mentioned, and a requirement that the AI curve, not just the AI average, reflect the student body as a whole.

The AI system has the effect of raising the standards for athletes as the standards for students, in general, increase. A rising tide for all ships. In the limiting case where every student at Princeton had a perfect AI of 240, the average AI of every team would have to be 240. Standard deviation is a statistic that tells you how tightly a range of scores are compressed around the mean. If all scores are the same there is complete compression. I have been told that over time the AIs at Princeton have compressed. This has reduced the standard deviation, and

thus the difference between the scores of athletes and non-athletes. Bowen is merely playing a game when he contends, through artificial use of the term “recruitment,” that this is not the case.

2. Bowen’s arguments often rely on carefully crafted anecdotes that do not tell the full story.

Take the story of the Williams women lacrosse team with which the *Game* begins. The authors recount the story of President Harry Payne who prohibited the 1996 undefeated women’s lacrosse team from accepting a bid to the NCAA championship tournament because the timing conflicted with spring term final exams. Payne is depicted as the champion of academic standards who was viciously attacked by philistine players and their parents, and forced out of office. The authors fail to disclose that the team was not a bunch of dummies; their average GPA was 3.24, nor does it explain why special arrangements could not be made for the players to take the exams, nor why the men’s golf and tennis teams were permitted to participate in their NCAA tournaments with the same exam conflicts—Payne distinguished these cases as “low roster” teams. Nor does it tell us that years later these women have been scarred by the experience, that they feel that their opportunity to succeed at something important to them was stolen, never to be replaced. And finally, we are not told how incredibly successful this group of women have been in the real world—the true game of life.

3. Bowen's point of view fails to recognize the special contribution High Profile sports make to Colleges and Universities.

I had a conversation with an Ivy President, who will go nameless, but whom I will assume was a he, about sports at his University. He said that there were only two sports that were really important to him, football and ice hockey. Football made contributions to school spirit and self-image, and its alumni were substantial contributors. Ice hockey made important connections with the greater community in which his university had to exist. In the case of football, is this worth an average 125 point SAT differential for 2% of the students? Of course it is. The benefit exceeds the cost.

4. Bowen uses a double-standard in judging the admissions advantages for minorities and for athletes (leaving aside the complicating fact that some athletes are minorities).

Bowen co-authored an earlier book in 1998 with Derek Bok, the former President of Harvard, called *The Shape of the River* which seeks to justify affirmative action for minorities in college admissions. A main part of their case is diversity; students benefit by interacting with people from different backgrounds. Yet in *The Game of Life* and *Reclaiming* the value of non-athletes interacting with athletes is ignored. Athletes are often from blue-collar backgrounds—59% of athletes at co-ed liberal colleges in 1989 had fathers with a bachelor's degree compared to 82% of students at large, and have more conservative values than the students at large—37%

of male students in 1989 identified themselves going into college as liberals or far left, as compared with only 26% of the athletes. Bowen contends these different values don't benefit other students because athletes only hang out with each other. That may be so, but they have to be in classrooms with other students, where their different values come to bear on political and social issues.

Future professors need exposure to future financiers; future scientists need exposure to future Kiwanis club presidents. One college president told me that if we want diversity in point of view and values, why not admit students on that basis rather than on their being athletes. But how would that be done? Would Princeton be comfortable in giving applicants a "values" test as part of the admissions process. I would hope not.

5. Bowen fails to give adequate weight to outcomes in life.

Reclaiming does not deal at all with life after college since it is too early to judge how the class of 1999 has fared. In *Game*, Bowen had to acknowledge that male athletes earned more money than the general student population. He dismissed this because many of these athletes pursued careers on Wall Street rather than in fields where "structures are created and technological products are designed"—whatever that means. This is just an anti-market bias, odd for an economist. Bowen further suggests that athletes succeed in business just because of the qualities that make them athletes—drive, determination, competitiveness and team play—qualities they have before they get to Princeton. This is quite astonishing—it suggests that athletes might skip college altogether and be equally successful. Come to think of it they might as well skip high school too, because they have all these qualities in grammar school. The

obvious point is that athletes learn a lot at Princeton, which combined with their personal qualities, enable them to succeed in life.

Further, one does not get the same lesson from an experience at 10 as at 21. Camus said that the only context in which he really learned ethics was sport. One's appreciation for ethics and the complication of ethical problems significantly increases with age.

Basically, Bowen believes that the mission of a great University is to train future Faculty of Arts and Sciences professors, or students who will make scientific or cultural contributions to the society. This is a worthwhile goal, but it cannot and should not be the exclusive goal, and probably not even the main one. I remember the phrase "Princeton in the nation's service." The nation is a big and diverse place. It needs people like you.

Furthermore, who pays for all this? Obviously, the uncultured money grubbers who amass great fortunes and use their wealth to enable the academic elite to do their work. By the way, it is the Mellon Foundation that pays Bowen's salary, and it is the captains of industry (whether or not athletes) who have given Princeton the wherewithal over the years to do so much good.

In the end it may not matter what the Ivies do because there is a bigger marketplace out there. If Harvard, Princeton and Williams surrender their market position with student-athletes, other schools like Stanford—significantly dropped from *Reclaiming*—will be happy to take their place. Other schools have already made great gains. The schools with the most appealing mixture of athletics and academics, as well as other factors like location, social life, art studies etc., will rise to the top. That is the real academic game of life. I, for one, hope Princeton continues to be a winner.