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William Lewis Matthews, Jr.—To Whom Intercollegiate Athletics Owes So Much

By Frank J. Remington*

I had known of W.L. "Bill" Matthews for a long time as one of the able faculty representative members of the National Collegiate Athletic Association. He was one of the few people who were so highly respected that people listened carefully to what he had to say when he spoke on the floor of the annual NCAA Convention.

I came to know Bill really well, and came to value him as a close friend later when I became a member of the NCAA Infractions Committee. The Committee is the judicial body responsible for disciplining those in intercollegiate athletics who choose to violate the rules, usually with the hope of gaining a competitive advantage.

I remember well my first meeting with the Infractions Committee. It was a meeting at which I got to know, and came to admire, Bill Matthews' approach to people and to legal issues. At the meeting there was, as one item on the agenda, a very minor issue involving a violation self-reported by an NCAA member institution. At that time a school was entitled to have an extra football coach if, but only if, it played at least four games as part of its junior varsity schedule. The school in question had scheduled four junior varsity games and thus was justified in having the extra coach. At the last minute, however, the team fourth on the schedule called and said that because of injuries they had to cancel the scheduled game. That left the school with only three games and thus the school was in apparent violation of the rule.

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A motion was made to "admonish" the school not to do it again. Bill Matthews asked how they could avoid "doing it again" when they had done nothing in the first place—the other school had cancelled the game. The response was that the "law is the law," it says that there must be four games and if there are not it is a violation and a judicial body, the Infractions Committee, has no authority to do other than enforce the rule. There was, thus raised, the classic question of whether ours is a government of law or of men, and I watched with great interest the reactions of the lawyer members of the Infractions Committee. The majority, to my surprise, took the position that a rule is a rule, and that a penalty, if only admonition, had to be imposed even though the institution had itself done nothing wrong. Bill Matthews dissented on the ground that to impose any penalty was unfair and did not make sense. That was the first of many occasions in which I observed Bill Matthews bring a human quality to the task of judging.

The past decade has been a time when there was a lot of support in intercollegiate athletics for being tough on rule violators, and enforcing strictly all of the rules. There was a respectable argument that could be made that if a rule did not make sense it was a problem for the legislative branch, the NCAA Council, and not for the judicial body, the Infractions Committee, to worry about. It would have been easy, therefore, to just enforce the rules strictly as written. The only problem with that approach, as Bill Matthews said, is that to do so was unfair to the school involved and it did not make sense to tell a school not to repeat a mistake when it had not done anything wrong in the first place. Bill Matthews believed that enforcement had not only to be strict, but that it had to be applied with compassion and understanding. I believe he was right about that. I also believe that the NCAA Enforcement procedure has great credibility, not only because it is tough on rule violators, but also because it has a quality of humaneness, of understanding, and of compassion. These qualities were the contribution of Bill Matthews and, so long as they continue to exist, we will continue to be grateful to Bill Matthews.

Bill Matthews was first and foremost a law teacher. Athletics were his avocation. The legacy of those who teach is not the tangible items they have left behind. Rather, it lies in the people who knew him, who learned from their experience with him,
and who were stimulated to try to emulate the fine human qualities that characterized him. I count myself as one of the fortunate who had an opportunity to work with Bill Matthews and to get to know him as a close friend. I believe that I am a better person because of what I learned from Bill Matthews about the difficult task of sitting in judgment of other people. To say this is to give high praise to a person who devoted most of his life to teaching those who carry on after he is gone.