(Daily News Photo)

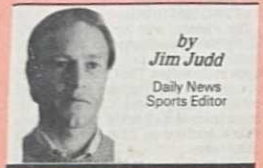
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JUDD'S JOURNAL

NCAA rules leave much to be desired



by Jim Judd

Daily News Sports Editor

Just when you think you've figured out the quirks and quarks of the NCAA they manage to come up with some other intangibles. Not that it bothers me so much as it tends to complicate the lives of a lot of young athletes.

A case in point would be Chad Biafore. Biafore, a talented defenceman with the Vernon Lakers for the past two seasons, thought he had a four-for-four deal secured with one of two NCAA Universities vying for his talents on the blueline.

Just when the future looked rosy they pulled the rug out from under his feet though. As usual, the endless red tape that surrounds the National Collegiate Athletic Association got tangled in Biafore's feet. It's certainly not the first time the United States' college sports circuit has thrown a wrench in the gears.

I don't expect it will be the last either.

A few years back, on the occasion of the Penticton Knights' first sojourn to the Centennial Cup Championship, it was essentially an NCAA bylaw that cost the B.C. Junior Hockey League club the national title. The Knights' star defenceman Ian Kidd, who had already accepted a full scholarship to North Dakota, had to be deleted from the Penticton roster on the day of the Cup championship game against Orillia, Ont.

It seems Kidd had turned 20 years of age on that very day in May when the two teams were to play for all the marbles. An NCAA ruling, decreed that a junior player who made an appearance in as much as a single game after his 20th birthday would lose an entire year of eligibility at his school of choice. That particular ruling has since been modified however.

Kidd didn't dress for the game, of course. Nobody would have blamed him for the decision either — not even the Knights. But the cold, hard fact of the matter is that with him they might easily have won the national title that year. With more than 100 regular season points and a goal per game in the playoffs Kidd could easily have supplied them with enough additional offensive punch to win the game. They lost a 4-3 decision to Orillia.

Mind you, the Knights marched right back to the Centennial Cup final the following year and won it all. On the other hand, Kidd signed a professional contract with the Vancouver Canucks after just two years with the Fighting Sioux following their NCAA Championship in 1987. In retrospect, it really didn't matter if he dressed for that Centennial Cup game or not.

Of course hind-sight is always 20/20, right?

Biafore, on the other hand, came along after the NCAA 20-year old rule had been negated. He spent two years in the junior A ranks and never so much as looked in the direction of a major junior club (another kiss of death where the NCAA is concerned). He displayed his talents in a fashion adequate enough to earn the attention of several NCAA schools last winter. Both Chicago-Illinois, and the University of Alaska-Anchorage were willing to give the Biffer a four-year ride in return for his masterful services on their blueline.

Then the NCAA found out that Biafore had attended a community college in his hometown of Cranbrook. The kid was 16-years old, fresh out of high school — a year sooner than most — and certainly wasn't looking to strike out into the world of major junior bus trips or the rough and tumble life of junior A hockey at that age. He opted, like most 16-year olds would, to stay home with his parents, play junior B hockey in his hometown and attend the local college.

What he didn't know then, but certainly does now, is that his NCAA "clock" began turning at the moment he became a full-time student at the junior college in Cranbrook.

When the NCAA found out about this, they unceremoniously informed Biff that he had used up three years of his five-year NCAA eligibility. It didn't matter a hoot if every university in the U.S. wanted to sign him for four years. The NCAA decreed that he had but two left to offer.

Somewhat disillusioned now, Biafore has decided to explore other channels. He's thinking seriously of signing with the Portland Winter Hawks of the major junior Western Hockey League. It's not the NCAA, of course, but they do have at least as much to offer at this stage in his hockey career. They'll pay for the next two years of university if he'll just spend his last year of junior hockey eligibility with their hockey club.

In the meantime, his NCAA eligibility would run out completely but he would still have the Canadian Inter Athletic Union (CIAU) — the Canadian version of the NCAA, ahead of him.

Then too, there is the strong possibility that he might get a tryout with a pro club in the interim — especially if he had a meaningful season with the Winter Hawks.

Biafore's case is actually unique, in all fairness. The ruling only applies to players who enroll full-time in a junior college. And, it's very seldom that a 16-year-old player enrolls full time in a college.

Just the same, it's important to inform youngsters of these NCAA infractions early in their high school years so that they won't make hasty decisions that could impair their educational and/or athletic future.