

## **Football's dangerous — and for what?**

*An open letter to Education Secretary Arne Duncan*

*The prevailing attention (finally) being devoted to head injuries has stirred an open letter to the Education Secretary by Frank Splitt. It was posted May 4, 2011 on collegeathleticsclips.com. The letter expanded on Splitt's April 29, 2011, letter to the editor of the Daily Herald that focused attention on incipient brain damage to football players. The aim of the open letter was to create awareness of the devastating impact of sports-related collateral damage to our nation's government subsidized high schools and colleges as well as to its students.*

May 1, 2011

Mr. Arne Duncan, Secretary  
U.S. Department of Education

Subject: Collateral Damage in High School and College Football

Reference: Forwarded message dated 4/13/2011, Subject: What in the world is going on in higher education?

Dear Mr. Secretary:

Please find appended a copy of a letter written with the intent of focusing attention on football injuries. These injuries are but one example of the wide-ranging collateral damage associated with high school and college football. The letter with its original title, "Football players can brain their opponents," was inspired by the *Frontline PBS* documentary, "Football High."<sup>[1]</sup>

Subsequent to a discussion of the *Frontline* documentary with Karl Idsvoog, an Associate Professor of Electronic Media at Kent State University, he brought a relevant Purdue University research study to my attention.<sup>[2]</sup> The study found football players who had never suffered a concussion performed worse on basic memory tests as the season progressed. This newly discovered category of cognitive impairment presents a dilemma because the finding suggests athletes may suffer a form of brain injury that is difficult to diagnose and consequently could keep on playing even though they are impaired.

Considering the prevailing win-at-any-cost climate in football games, it would not be surprising to find high school and college football coaches unofficially encouraging players to "man-up" and not say anything if they get hurt because they would have to come out of the game. To be sure, it would not take much encouragement since supernormal stimuli are still at work in these young athletes.<sup>[3]</sup> What players would ever want to let their team down in "big" games?

For your information, Idsvoog directed the Kent State Student project that analyzed the student fee structure at several Mid-American Conference universities.<sup>[4]</sup> The analysis revealed that academic students help fund their school's athletic department, but the students are not aware of it because the schools don't provide this information on their billing statements. Revealing information related to athletics' programs that schools keep obscure can have unpleasant consequences for the revealer.

Unpleasant consequences can also be in store for those who dare expose or discuss the wide ranging collateral damage associated with high school and collegiate athletics. This damage is not limited to deaths and traumatic brain injuries, but includes a multitude of behaviors that reflect "beer and circus" campus environments. Such environments are characterized by oftentimes criminal outcomes such as violence, assaults/rapes, and a variety of nasty impacts stemming from alcohol abuse and/or the use of performance-enhancing drugs. Cheating, academic corruption, prioritization of athletics over academics, and academics adrift with warped educational missions, are not uncommon.<sup>[5]</sup>

America's culture is dominated by sports-entertainment and does not emphasize the importance of education and the value of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Sad to say, the public's representatives in government have chosen to look the other way, accepting the cost of collateral damage and misplaced emphasis as the price to be paid for the entertainment of their sports addicted constituents while also avoiding confrontation with the powerful NCAA cartel. Sad as well is the repeated pandering of government officials to sports fans.

Notwithstanding the above and the situations discussed in the referenced e-mail, there is still hope that good can come from this effort to make you and your colleagues aware of the devastating impact of the collateral damage to our nation's

government subsidized high schools and colleges as well as to the students who are ostensibly attending these schools to be educated rather than exploited, entertained, and/or abused as the case may be.[6]

A thoughtful response would not only be greatly appreciated, but would also be shared with academics across America.

Respectfully submitted,

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#### APPENDIX – Football’s dangerous — and for what?

Daily Herald, Letters, April 29, 2011

In his story about the renewal of the Northwestern-Notre Dame football rivalry, Lindsey Willhite quotes Pat Fitzgerald, the current Northwestern University coach (“NU-Notre Dame football series to resume in 2014,” April 15). When asked about the 1995 season opener when he played as a Northwestern junior against Notre Dame, he said: “What do I remember? That we won, it was a fun day. Outside of that, I don’t remember much. I got hit in the head a lot.”

It is ironic that Fitzgerald’s statement that “I got hit in the head a lot” appeared in a story published just three days after PBS aired the informative *Frontline* documentary “Football High” that exposed the extent of serious brain and other injuries incurred by football players.

High school and college football injuries are more widespread and more long-term than youth baseball injuries that are now being mitigated by banning composite bats that hit harder, made games livelier, but added to injury worries. It seems that little can be done to ban the football “bat” — the players who themselves can be lethal instruments. These players are now heavier, stronger, better trained and better equipped to do serious physical and mental damage to their opponents.

Barring a seismic shift in the sports-entertainment culture of the American public, it appears that little if anything can be done to change this unhealthy situation since high school players are the raw material at the front end of the supply chain for the lucrative sports entertainment industry. A few of the best of these players are destined to become college athletes — playing football on behalf of their school’s sports entertainment business — with still fewer of these athletes going on to play in the National Football League.

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#### REFERENCES

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3. Barrett, Deirdre, *Supernormal Stimuli: How primal urges overran their evolutionary purpose*, W. W. Norton & Co., New York, NY, 2010.
4. “Kent Student Project,” <http://et.kent.edu/jmc40004/fees/> <<http://et.kent.edu/jmc40004/fees/>>. Also see the WKYC Television report at <http://www.wkyc.com/news/article/184181/3/Kent-State-Journalism-class-probes-student-fees> and “Sis, boom, bust: The high cost of college sports,” *PBS Need to Know*, March 4, 2011, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/need-to-know/economy/video-sis-boom-bust-the-high-cost-of-college-sports/7808/>.
5. Vecsey, George, “Football’s Absolute Power Corrupts Colleges Absolutely,” *New York Times*, May 1, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/01/sports/ncaaf/01vecsey.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/01/sports/ncaaf/01vecsey.html?_r=1).
6. Splitt, Frank G., “Collegiate Athletics Reform: Signs of Hope,” April 18, 2011, [http://thedorakegroup.org/Splitt\\_Signs.pdf](http://thedorakegroup.org/Splitt_Signs.pdf).

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