

COLLEGE ATHLETICS CLIPS GUEST COMMENTARY

CLIPS EDITOR: In this commentary Frank Splitt – fast becoming the conscience of college athletics - eloquently frames the dilemma that college presidents across the country face every day: to maintain the status quo of the arms race (i.e.-feed the monster), or to enforce financial and academic restraint (i.e.-tame the monster).

Presidents Flex Their Muscles to Maintain the Status Quo in Big-Time College Sports

by Frank G. Splitt

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Brad Wolverton's article, "Presidents Flex Their Muscles," [*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, <http://chronicle.com/free/v52/i34/34a04801.htm>, April 28, 2006], and the related piece, "Other Presidents Who Are Shaping College Sports," [<http://chronicle.com/free/v52/i34/34a04901.htm>], aim to tell a story of how "a wave of college leaders, led by the U. of Hartford's Walter Harrison, is exerting more influence over sports." One is led to expect to read of how these leaders are exerting their influence to bring about substantive reform in college sports.

With all due respect to these well-intentioned presidents, the reader is sadly left to wonder what these leaders have really accomplished beyond flexing their muscles to maintain the status quo and providing salient examples of the implementation of the NCAA's Deloitte-consultant-recommended, reputational-risk-mitigation strategy. Let me explain.

First off, presidents cannot stand up to lead an effort to change the status quo in any meaningful way without risking termination driven by a storm of protest about economic impact and assorted tradition-based arguments by trustees/regents, boosters, alumni, and rabid fans. Presidents are pressured by their boards and boosters to approve costly football and basketball palaces, athletic scholarships, exorbitant coaches' salaries, professional-class training facilities, eligibility centers, and more. They are then under pressure to approve extortion-like seat taxes, an extension of the football season by the addition of a 12th game, and other revenue-enhancing mechanisms to help service the incurred debt.

There should be little wonder that presidents serve on the NCAA's executive committee, presidential commissions and committees, as well as on the Knight Commission. Simply put, they serve as 'foxes' guarding a money-filled henhouse.

In accordance with the Deloitte strategy, presidents also serve as a part of the NCAA's communications (spin) team that works to mitigate unfavorable press. For example, see the Sept. 24, 2005, accentuate-the-positive-ignore-the-negative letter to the editor by Mark Murray, president of Grand Valley State University, in response to Skip Rozin's column, "The Brutal Truth About College Sports," [*The Wall Street Journal*, Sept. 15, 2005].

An outcomes assessment of the work of the college leaders would show work to enact rules limiting colleges' use of American Indian imagery, but little if any evidence of work to de-emphasize college sports via reform measures aimed at limiting its growth and restoring academic and financial integrity in our nation's colleges and universities. On the contrary, presidents have worked to:

1. Put an academic face on the NCAA's commercial college sports entertainment business, complementing the hiring of Myles Brand, the former president of Indiana University as its president;

2. Support the NCAA's effort to avoid congressional inquiries on 'hot' issues such as: the legitimacy of its tax-exempt status, the use of steroids and performance enhancing drugs, the violent behavior of some college athletes, and alleged antitrust violations;
3. Serve as forceful advocates of the NCAA party line -- parroting Brand on policies and reform measures;
4. Maintain the status quo and the illusion that college athletes are legitimate, degree-seeking students in good standing;
5. Develop and tout the NCAA's latest window-dressing reform measure, the Academic Progress Rate (APR), that is intrinsically susceptible to countermeasures since its implementation is based on self reporting (without external oversight), the availability of easy-to-get waivers and exceptions, weak enforcement, and even weaker penalties for infractions and cheating.
6. Co-opt the Knight Commission that has apparently abandoned its "watchdog" mission as it works in cooperation with the NCAA, satisfied with mediocre "results" and less – steadfast in its belief that working through presidents and with the NCAA is the best way to reform college sports -- becoming a well-orchestrated charade funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation..

Something obvious is missing. Could it be the rest of the story? This would be a truth-telling story containing matching, equivalent-length profiles of current and past presidents, faculty and others that are really exerting influence to bring serious reform to college sports -- restoring academic and financial integrity to institutions of higher education along the way.

Might I suggest the following for consideration: Scott Adler, Linda Bensel-Meyers, Derek Bok, Jim Duderstadt, Jim Earl, Jon Ericson, Gordon Gee, John Gerdy, Jason Lanter, Richard Lapchick, Tom Palaima, Kathy Redmond, David Ridpath, Allen Sack, Virginia Shepherd, Richard Southhall, Ellen Staurowski, Carol Simpson Stern, Bruce Svare, John Thelin, Carl Wieman, Andrew Zimbalist, and Nancy Zimpher.

Note that Derek Bok and Jim Duderstadt are emeritus presidents and that Gordon Gee and Nancy Zimpher are the only sitting presidents in the above listing. The following quote may explain why the dearth of sitting presidents. It comes from Clara Lovett, president emerita of Northern Arizona University:

"For nearly twenty years, campus presidents, chancellors, and some trustees have not only fought abuse within the system but have also accepted more responsibility than in the past for oversight of the system – teams and coaches, athletic directors, boosters, and the indispensable vendors and sponsors. The welcome changes in oversight have not, however, reformed a bankrupt system; they have merely shortened several presidential tenures." See Commentaries in "RECLAIMING ACADEMIC PRIMACY IN HIGHER EDUCATION," http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Reclaiming_Academic_Primacy.pdf.

More than ever I am convinced that many university presidents and their governing boards sacrificed academic integrity when, over the years, they made what amounts to a Faustian-like bargain with the entertainment industry to tap into a huge source of money. It would take a tremendous amount of courage for university presidents sitting on the NCAA Executive Board, its Division I A Board of Directors or its Presidential Task Force on the Future of Intercollegiate Athletics, or, on the Knight Commission, to flex their muscles and buck the "system." It's certainly a lot less stressful and much less career threatening to go along to get along in the "real world."

All indications point to the fact that it is now time for government intervention -- for the Congress to step in to force the presidents and the NCAA to enact serious reform.

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NOTE: The above essay is an extension of a May 1, comment made by the author on *The Chronicle of Higher Education Forum "Power Players,"* <http://www.chronicle.com/forums>. The forum was initiated on April 21, 2006, to address the question: What would you do to reform college athletics? As was stated by the Forum Moderator: "With rising public concern about college athletics programs, more institutions' presidents and chancellors are getting involved in sports policy. If you are a college leader, what are you doing to resist commercial interests? To ensure ethical behavior by your athletics director and coaches? To raise money for sports facilities? To help your athletes stay on track academically? To discourage players' illegal or uncivil behavior off the field? If you are not a college leader, what would you recommend your president or chancellor do? The moderator provided hyperlinks to the articles by Brad Wolverton. The articles were published in the *Chronicle* a week after the forum was initiated.