

Unrestrained Growth in Facilities for Athletes: Where is the Outrage?

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By Frank G. Splitt

"It requires no tabulation of statistics to prove that the young athlete who gives himself up for months, to training under a professional coach for a grueling contest, staged to focus the attention of thousands of people, and upon which many thousands of dollars will be staked, will find no time or energy for serious intellectual effort. The compromises that have to be made to keep such a student in the college and to pass them through to a degree give an air of insincerity to the whole university-college regime."¹

—Henry Smith Pritchett, Former MIT President (1900-1906) and President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1906-1930).

Sol Gittleman, a former provost at Tufts University, wrote to me with reference to Brad Wolverton's recent article, "Rise in Fancy Academic Centers for Athletes Raises Questions of Fairness,"² saying: "This would be a joke, if it weren't for articles that state how public universities are losing out in hiring to the well-heeled privates. So, while faculty flee to the private sector, the public universities build these Xanadus for athletes. Have we lost our minds? Where are the presidents?"

Re: Dr. Gittleman's first question: Have we lost our minds?—Based on the sad state of affairs in America's system of higher education, it would certainly seem so, but there is no way to prove it as yet. However, taking a queue from Henry Pritchett, it requires no tabulation of statistics to prove that America's system of higher education has been reeling under the negative impact of over commercialized college sports. Compromises have to be made and opportunities lost in the quest for fame and fortune.³

Gittleman's second question was answered, in large part, by a previous essay.⁴ As Jim Duderstadt has said: "University presidents are usually trapped between a rock and a hard place: between a public demanding high quality entertainment from the commercial college sports industry they are paying for, and governing boards who have the capacity (and all too frequently the inclination) to fire presidents who rock the university boat too strenuously. It should be clear that few contemporary university presidents have the capacity, the will, or the appetite to lead a true reform movement in college sports."⁵

A related excerpt from Clara Lovett's commentary on my first essay on college sports reform provides still another perspective.⁶ "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.”

To be sure, all of this is not new. Most presidents have long gone along to get along—a sad story chronicled in the Carnegie Foundation’s 1929 report. In most cases, if you want to remain, or be hired, as the president of a school that supports big-time—and oftentimes lesser—college athletics programs, you do not advocate meaningful reform that could possibly restrain the growth of athletic facilities. You overlook enabling academic corruption, or, as Henry Pritchett politely put it: “insincerity.” Using the recent academic corruption at the University of Michigan as a case in point, Jon Ericson provides an insight into how university presidents work to explain the unexplainable via evasion, rationalization, and denial.⁷

Where are the presidents? You can find many of them sitting on NCAA and Knight Commission Committees that effectively do nothing but protect their vested commercial interests (money)—blocking significant reform while providing the illusion of such reform.

This modus operandi allows the president to enjoy the stimulating pageantry and fund-raising opportunities associated with college athletics, the pomp and circumstance surrounding the president’s office, as well as being on good terms with governing board and alumni boosters and, most important of all, job security.

Presidents have bigger things to worry about than faculty flight—like stadiums, arenas, and top-drawer physical training and academic eligibility centers for their so-called student-athletes, i.e., academically disadvantaged athletes who must pretend to be serious students as part of the college sports tax scam.⁸

Further to the above, John V. Lombardi, President, Louisiana State University System and former Chancellor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, presented the first of many countermeasures in defense of the status quo in college athletics—arguing in opposition to the Revised IRS Form 990 (stimulated by Senator Grassley and the Senate Finance Committee) that can help force the NCAA and its member institutions to tell the truth about their sports entertainment business.⁹ It appears that since taking over the presidency of the LSU System, Dr. Lombardi has not only become an ardent apologist for the status quo in college athletics, but a staunch advocate of the student-athlete, amateur myth as well.¹⁰

It is ironic that current federal tax policy forces parents, students, and other American taxpayers to help foot the bill for multimillion-dollar salaries for coaches, ‘stadium wars,’ tax breaks for wealthy boosters, NFL and NBA minor league teams, and other artifacts of the big-time college sports arms race. Sadly, small colleges have also joined the college sports frenzy.¹¹ Meanwhile, the NCAA works to further its financial interests and thwart any and all serious reform efforts—especially those that could expose their ‘student-athlete’ ruse or possibly reduce their revenues.

Apparently, what may be the object of concern by the tax-exempt organizations in the college-sports entertainment business is the set of recommendations submitted to the IRS by The Drake Group. These recommendations would go a long way toward reclaiming academic primacy in higher education—doing that which presidents, governing boards, faculty, the NCAA, the Knight Commission, and others have failed to do for a variety of reasons.¹²

So what can be made of all of this? Facilities for athletes will continue to grow unabated in the absence of restraining federal intervention requiring a substantial increase in transparency, accountability and oversight, at the NCAA and the athletic programs at their member institutions. Where is the outrage?

AFTERWORD

The foregoing essay was posted at *College Athletics Clips* as a *Guest Commentary* on August 24, 2008. Shortly thereafter, the co-chairs of the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, published a revealing article.¹³ The article clearly demonstrated there is no end to the means by which the NCAA and the NCAA co-opted Knight Commission will go to defend the NCAA's big-money turf and the student-athlete myth in collegiate athletics.

The authors write: "These online fantasy leagues, which use the real names and statistics of collegiate athletes, raise a crucial question for higher education leaders: Is it amateurism in college sports that has become a fantasy?" A 'yes' answer to their question has long been apparent to all who are concerned about the integrity of collegiate athletics and are working to bring about transparency, accountability, and independent oversight to the college sports entertainment business.

The subtitle of the Knight Commissioner's article read: "NCAA rules are clear: college athletes are amateurs and should not be part of these new business enterprises." Unfortunately, NCAA rules do not amateurs make, at least not in the NCAA's big time programs as well as in many of their lesser programs. In his recent book Allen Sack tells how the NCAA abandoned its central principle of amateurism in its pursuit of big money in the form of highly commercialized and professionalized big-time college athletics.¹⁴

The NCAA's bedrock amateurism principles of many years ago—which required colleges and their business partners to treat athletes like other students and not as commodities—were undermined by unrestrained commercialism and related academic corruption. Since it was founded in 1989, the Knight Commission, which consists of university presidents and trustees and former college athletes, has strongly advocated policies that protect college athletes from commercial exploitation *except by the NCAA and the colleges themselves.*¹⁵ The CBS Sports' Fantasy College Football enterprise (that the Knight Commission co-chairs berated in their article) is simply following the lead of the college's commercial exploitation of their athletes.

Kudos must go to Mark Alesia and the *IndyStar* for their special report on ‘special admits’ at 55 colleges and universities.¹⁶ Special admits include athletes and others who are admitted under exceptions to normal standards to provide schools with special talents. These admits were found to be predominantly athletes the schools need to field winning (at least competitive) teams—notwithstanding the athletes marginal academic qualifications. The latter coupled with the athlete’s lack of time for serious academics requires the building of what Sol Gittleman called Xanadus for athletes. If they do nothing else, these elaborate facilities indicate how far schools are willing to go to perpetuate the amateurism and student-athlete myths in collegiate athletics.

A careful reading of this essay and the referenced material should leave little doubt as to the fraudulent, tax-avoiding nature of big-time collegiate athletics, especially in the NCAA’s football and men’s basketball programs—fronted by compliant, see-no-evil school presidents and highly compensated NCAA executives.¹⁷

Again, as Henry Smith Pritchett said some 80 years ago: “The compromises that have to be made to keep such a student in the college and to pass them through to a degree give an air of insincerity to the whole university-college regime.” To say the least, all of this does not bode well for the future of higher education in America.

Apparently, America’s sports culture has triumphed over the academic mission of its colleges and universities while the educational mission of our high schools is being undermined as well. The athletic tail will continue to wag the academic dog so long as our colleges and universities are prostituted by the college sports entertainment industry. Unless Congress gets involved, America’s system of higher education will continue to be held hostage to the sports entertainment industry.

To be more specific, a slow but sure decline in America’s educational system is inevitable unless and until the Congress can restrain the growth of the college sports entertainment industry by forcing the NCAA and its member schools to comply with their tax-exempt purpose of keeping sports as “an integral part of the educational program and the athlete as an integral part of the student body,”—demanding measures of transparency, accountability, and oversight that are adequate to this task.

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NOTES

1. Savage, Howard J. et al, "American College Athletics," Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching Bulletin Number Twenty-three, New York, 1929. The Pritchett quote comes from the Preface of this document.
2. Wolverton, Brad, "Rise in Fancy Academic Centers for Athletes Raises Questions of Fairness," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, p.A14, August 14, 2008. It is of interest to note that Dr. Gittleman was the author of a letter, "Can Colleges Control the NCAA Beast?" *The Wall Street Journal*, Sept. 24, 2005, in which he famously opined "A Robert Hutchins comes only once in a lifetime"—referring to Robert Maynard Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago, who abolished football at the University of Chicago in 1939, saying: "To be successful, one must cheat. Everyone is cheating, and I refuse to cheat."
3. Splitt, Frank G. "Sports in America 2007: Facing Up to Global Realities"
http://thedorakegroup.org/Splitt_Sports_in_America_2007.pdf. See also, Fairclough, Gordon, "In China, Jocks Don't' Rule School; But the Smart Kids, They're Cool," *The Wall Street Journal*, p.A10, August 19, 2008 and Murphy, Cullen, *Are We Rome?: The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America*, Houghton Mifflin, New York, NY, 2007.
4. _____, "Presidents Flex Their Muscles to Maintain the Status Quo in Big-Time College Sports." http://thedorakegroup.org/Splitt_Presidents_Flex_Their_Muscles.pdf.
5. Duderstadt, James J., An Epilogue to the Paperback Edition of *Intercollegiate Athletics and the American University: A University President's Perspective*, 2003
6. Splitt, Frank G., "Reclaiming Academic Primacy in Higher Education: Working for Reform in Intercollegiate Athletics and Engineering Education," Foreword by Theodore M. Hesburgh, CSC, IEC Publications, December 31, 2003, http://thedorakegroup.org/Splitt_Reclaiming_Academic_Primacy.pdf
7. Ericson, Jon, "Professors need courage to deal with athletics/academics," *Ann Arbor News*, May 15, 2008.
8. Splitt, Frank G., "The College Sports Tax Scam Revisited,"
http://thedorakegroup.org/Splitt_Tax_Scam_Revisited.pdf
9. Lombardi, John V., "Taxing the Sports Factory," *Inside Higher Ed*, October 1, 2007. Dr. Lombardi states that: "Mega college athletics is indeed a remarkable American invention, it reflects the decisions of academic administrators and governing boards at almost all colleges and universities for over a century. It prospers because for the most part we (our faculty, our staff, our alumni, our legislators, our trustees, our students, and our many other constituencies) want it. We could easily change it, IF MOST OF US WANTED TO CHANGE IT. All protestations to the contrary, we, the colleges and universities of America and our friends and supporters, do not want to change it. What we really want is to imitate the best (often the most expensive) programs in America by winning games and championships."
10. _____, "The Amateur Challenge of College Sports," *Inside Higher Ed*,
http://www.insidehighered.com/views/blogs/reality_check
11. Kelderman, Eric, "Small Colleges Sweat Over Sports Facilities: *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, p.A1, July 11, 2008. For more, see the Nightly Business Report Blog, "The Business of College Football, at http://www.pbs.org/nbr/blog/2007/11/the_business_of_college_football.html
12. Splitt, Frank G., "More on Taxing the Sports Factory,"
http://thedorakegroup.org/Splitt_More_on_Taxing_the_Sports_Factory.pdf

13. Kirwan, William E. and Turner, R. Gerald, "Tackling college football fantasy leagues," *The Los Angeles Times*, August 30, 2008, <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/sunday/commentary/la-oe-kirwan30-2008aug30,0,7890950.story>
14. Sack, Allen, *Counterfeit Amateurs, Counterfeit Amateurs: An Athletes Journey Through the Sixties to the Age of Academic Capitalism*, pp 67-76, Penn State University Press, University Park, PA, 2008. For more, see: Splitt, Frank G., "The Student-Athlete: An NCAA False Claim?" at http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_The_Student_Athlete.pdf
15. Otto, K.A., and Stippich, K.S., "Revisiting Tarkanian: The entwinement and interdependence of the NCAA and state universities and colleges 20 years later," *Journal of Legal Aspects of Sport*, 18(2), 243-308, 2008. The authors argue that our nation's universities and colleges are denying employees and athletes their Constitutional rights in order to placate the NCAA, saying: schools perceive that the benefits of remaining in the NCAA far outweigh the 'cost' of unconstitutional behavior and that while the NCAA does provide benefits as it pertains to the governing of intercollegiate athletics, it should not be allowed to do so at the expense of the Constitutional rights of college athletes and America's taxpayers.
16. Alesia, Mark, "'Special' treatment for athletes: Little accountability, Only schools know how far they bend admission requirements and how many such students graduate," *Indianapolis Star*, Sept. 7, 2008. This report was followed on Sept. 9 by an *IndyStar* editorial, "Recruited for winning, starting out behind," — stating their position that "Special admissions for college athletes must be transparent, limited, and lead to degrees."
17. _____, "Brand's pay from NCAA: \$935,000," *Indianapolis Star*, Aug. 17, 2008. NCAA president Myles Brand received compensation of more than \$935,000 in 2006-07, according to public tax documents—more than every public university president in the country. Brand's compensation breaks down as \$728,902 in salary, \$199,084 in benefits and \$7,147 in other allowances. Other highly compensated NCAA employees are executive vice president Tom Jernstedt (\$555,803); senior vice president Bernard Franklin (\$448,559); and chief financial officer James Isch (\$428,314).