

Are Big-Time College Sports Good for America?

By Frank G. Splitt

To be successful, one must cheat. Everyone is cheating, and I refuse to cheat. – Robert Maynard Hutchins, 1939

It is worth a take-home exam to discover how the brains behind higher education have lost their minds in the pursuit of football superiority. – Selena Roberts, 2005

INTRODUCTION – Like my colleagues in The Drake Group (TDG), I love sports. However, all of us are concerned about the exploitation of big-time (NCAA Div I-A) college sports and athletes by the overly commercialized college-sports entertainment industry to further its financial interests.

Also, we are concerned about the negative impact college sports have on America's system of higher education and on the collective physical and intellectual well being of Americans. Furthermore, as discussed in "Sports in America 2005: Facing Up to Global Realities" [1], we are concerned about the negative impact college sports have on America's prospects as a leader in the 21st century's global economy.

The negative impact of college sports on higher education is not a new story. In 1929, the *Chicago Tribune* featured a headline column on the Carnegie Report's indictment of college sports [2]. This report focused on the need for reform based on the negative influence of big-time college sports on higher education – stating that: "(College football) is not a student's game as it once was. It is a highly organized commercial enterprise. The athletes who take part in it have come up through years of training; they are commanded by professional coaches; little if any initiative of ordinary play is left to the player. The great matches are highly profitable enterprises. Sometimes the profits go to finance college sports, sometimes to pay the cost of the sports amphitheater, in some cases the college authorities take a slice for college buildings."

GALLICO ON SPORTS – Some seven years after publication of the *Chicago Tribune* story, Paul Gallico gave up a successful sports-writing career with the *New York Daily News* to devote himself to full-time writing. His first book was *Farewell to Sport*, published in 1938 [3]. As the title suggests, it was his farewell to sports writing, but it was much more than a farewell. It illuminated the increasing professionalism in sports during the 1930s, and bemoaned the loss of sport in its original sense. The following 68-year-old Gallico quotes provide additional context for this essay:

"College football today is one of the last great strongholds of genuine old-fashioned American hypocrisy. ... There are occasionally abortive attempts to turn football into an honest woman, but, to date, the fine old game that interests and entertains literally millions of people has managed to withstand these insidious attacks. ... It is a curious thing that the college to which a boy goes, not only for an education, but for the set of morals, ethics, and ideals with which to carry on in later life, is the first place he learns beyond any question of doubt that you can get away with murder if you don't get caught at it or if you know the right people when you do get nabbed. His university is playing a dirty, lying game and it doesn't take him long to find out. ... If there is anything good about college football it is the fact that it seems to bring entertainment, distraction, and pleasure to many millions of people. But the price, the sacrifice to decency, I maintain is too high."

Robert Maynard Hutchins, President of the University of Chicago and a contemporary of Gallico, deplored undue emphasis on nonacademic pursuits. Guided by his personal beliefs and, perhaps, triggered by Gallico's remarks, he abolished football at the University of Chicago in 1939. When asked why he did this he replied with the simple statement given in the header to this essay. As former Tufts University Provost Sol Gittleman opined "*A Robert Hutchins comes only once in a lifetime*" [4].

GERDY ON SPORTS – In his 2002 book, *SPORTS – The All-American Addiction* [5], John Gerdy argues that our society's huge investment in organized sports is unjustified, claiming that ardent boosters say that sports embody the "American Way" – developing winners by teaching lessons in sportsmanship, teamwork, and discipline.

I concur with Gerdy's claims that America's obsession with modern sports is eroding American life and undermining traditional American values essential to the well-being of the nation and its people – allowing Americans to escape problems and ignore issues as if they were drug addicts [1].

Gerdy asks tough questions. Have sports lost their relevance? Is it just mindless entertainment? Is our enormous investment in sports as educational tools appropriate for a nation that needs graduates to compete in the information-based, global economy of the twenty-first century? Do organized sports continue to promote positive ideals? Or, do sports, in the age of television, corporate skyboxes, and sneaker deals, represent something far different?

MINOW ON TELEVISION – Then Federal Communications Commission Chairman Newton Minow's, "Vast Wasteland," speech to the National Association of Broadcasters was still newsworthy in 2001 [6]. Likely it would have been far beyond Minow's imagination to think his speech would ring truer in 2006 than it did in 1961. Television can rightfully claim credit for providing an ocean of money that has corrupted academic integrity and values. It can also be credited for the transformation of America from a nation of sports participants to a nation of sports spectators along the way – robbing sports of its most direct and vital benefit, that of improving the health of our nation's citizens [5, Chapter 6].

THE NCAA AND BRAND ON REFORM – To begin, college sports are big business [7, 8], and the NCAA is not in the business of reform. The NCAA is in the business of staying in business as the franchiser of professional-caliber, big-time college-sports programs for its member school franchisees. Together with the schools, the NCAA exploits college athletes while making huge amounts of tax-exempt money under the guise of an institution of higher education. In effect, the government subsidized NCAA manages minor league teams for the NFL and the NBA – supplying a stream of professional-level athletes for their respective drafts.

The NCAA's strategy to stay in business is to maintain the illusion that they are an institution of higher education, that college athletes are really students on a legitimate degree-seeking track, and that it is capable of instituting requisite reforms without government intervention and a consequent loss of its tax-exempt status.

Hiring Myles Brand was a key tactic – providing him with a total annual compensation in the order of \$1 million to allow him to live large along with the NCAA's top brass while he gives the NCAA an academic front. Brand was not empowered by the NCAA to initiate serious reform, i.e., to emulate Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, baseball's first commissioner who was able to take firm control of major league baseball when its integrity was in question. Simply stated, the NCAA would never allow Brand to accomplish serious reform.

Other NCAA anti-reform tactics are to co-opt external reform efforts by "working together," to provide weak rules enforcement, and to shroud its nefarious conduct in a veil of secrecy – protected by the Buckley Amendment to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act – operating as the least transparent business in America.

CONCERNS AND A CONCLUSION – So what's to be concerned about in present-day college sports? A composite list of concerns is provided in the Appendix. These concerns come from Gerdy, Bruce Svare, President of the National Institute for Sports Reform, Jim Duderstadt, President Emeritus of the University of Michigan, and the author.

The length and gravity of the listed concerns do not portray a pretty picture. The list, coupled with arguments made by Gerdy [5] and Svare in the first chapter of his book, *Crisis on Our Playing Fields* [9], as well as by Duderstadt, in the foreword to the essay, "The Faculty-Driven Movement to reform college

Sports" [10] and Splitt [1, 11], lead to an obvious conclusion: Big-time college sports, as they exist today, compromise the educational, economic, and physical, well-being of our nation and are no longer good for America. Simply put, they are an anachronism. Not only that, they have also contributed to an imminent crisis in America that goes well beyond its playing fields [1].

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A BLEAK SITUATION – The key facts are these: there is no one charged with anything resembling responsibility for controlling the wretched excesses of big-time college sports; the NCAA has become expert at resisting true reform and co-opting would-be, well-intentioned reform initiatives; few, if any, college presidents can buck the system today and expect to keep their jobs; faculty members, even though protected by tenure, have little chance of making any real impact internally; and sadly, high school sports are becoming just as corroded as they are at the college and professional levels [12]. Also, if a school with a big-time athletics program should decide to cut it back, it would be faced with the almost impossible job of replacing the revenues to service the large debt on its athletics facilities; not every school has billionaire boosters that can donate \$165 million to its athletics fund or provide major gifts for athletic facilities [13, 14].

This is a bleak situation indeed – prompting one of the reviewers of this essay to comment that it brought to mind the near-impossible predicaments the British created over time by importing Protestants to Northern Ireland in the 17th century and by carving up the Ottoman Empire after World War I to form, among other things, Iraq. Some even say this is a lost cause.

WHAT CAN BE DONE? – The obvious question is: What, if anything, can be done? Is it possible to restructure organized competitive sports to make them good for America? I believe that the answer is yes. However, as painful as it may be, it appears government intervention is now the only way to bring about requisite reform.

One way the government could intervene to clean up big-time college sports is to employ the quid pro quo (no reform-no tax exemption) strategy outlined in "What Congress Can Do About the Mess in College Sports" [15]. Implementation of this strategy would help bring about academic and financial disclosure and the restoration of academic and financial integrity in America's institutions of higher learning. Failure to implement and comply with congressionally-stipulated corrective measures over a reasonable amount of time would put the NCAA and/or individual institutions at risk of losing their nonprofit status. Once implemented, evidence of a continuation of existing patterns of fraud, continued efforts by universities and colleges to circumvent the intent of the reform measures, or, retaliation against whistleblowers, would garner penalties of such severity as to make the risk of noncompliance not even worth thinking about. However, since schools would still be saddled with the burdens and temptations associated with the college-sports entertainment business, even more radical approaches may prove to be necessary in the light of new global realities.

These approaches would involve divestiture – the elimination of professional-level sports from America's education system. This would not only put a long overdue end to the NCAA's contrived façade of 'amateurism' but also release the stranglehold the college-sports entertainment business has on our institutions of higher learning. The approaches would involve the development of professional minor league football and basketball leagues modeled after the European and Australian club sports system as advocated by Svare [16] and Gerdy [5]. Alternatively, the government could consider the establishment of Age Group Professional Leagues along the lines proposed by Rick Telander [17].

OUTLOOK – It is to be expected that those who benefit from a continuation of the status quo will continue to resist reforms that pose a threat to their tax-exempt status – railing and retaliating against individuals and organizations that tell the brutal truth about big-time college sports.

Also, if and when, Congressional hearings are called to investigate this blight on America's system of higher education, fierce opposition will be mounted. Resistance will no doubt take the form of a well-

organized, well-funded, lobbying and public-relations campaign orchestrated by the NCAA – bringing to bear its financial power and its friends in the media as well as in federal and state governments. In other words, the NCAA would be in a fight for its life using all of its awesome financial and political resources to protect its money making machine.

There will certainly be screams to keep the government out of college sports with claims of grandstanding and posturing by members of Congress. – forgetting that it is the government that is subsidizing the growth of the big-time college-sports entertainment business in the first place.

Hopefully, enlightened legislators will see that America can no longer afford to have its educational system, the health of its citizens, and its place in the global economy, undermined by professional-level college sports programs; and, then go on to see the connection between college-sports reform and the National Academies' recommendations set forth in their report, *Rising Above the Gathering Storm* [18]. Subsidizing institutions of higher education so they can serve as centers for public entertainment is not a smart thing to do in today's world.

CONCLUDING REMARKS – Big-time college-sports entertainment is embedded in America's culture. The NCAA, with its ability to control the money game and thwart reform, coupled with its ability to exploit America's love affair with sports and its high tolerance for misbehavior by its heroes, has helped bring about a horrific mess in big-time, college sports ... a mess characterized by seemingly unrestrained growth in spending with a corresponding desperate need by 'hooked' schools for additional revenues.

The wealth and health of America and its citizens are at risk. Based upon the magnitude of the problems and the high stakes involved, it would seem obvious that government intervention is in our national interest. We can no longer afford the luxury of muddling along with a handicap – engaging in distracting, resource-draining activities that divert our attention from new global realities [1].

Likewise, reform cannot be deterred by naysayers who would either discount the threat or label reform efforts as an exercise in futility. To succumb to this negativism and do nothing would all but ensure the eventual decline of America's position on the world stage.

There appears to be no option but to respond with resolute intensity, resources, and vigor. Will it happen? Unfortunately, not immediately; perhaps it may never happen at all. There are no guarantees, but we must at least begin. So what is the Congress waiting for?

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APPENDIX – CONCERNS RE: PRESENT-DAY, BIG TIME COLLEGE SPORTS

Commercialism. Professional-level, college-sports entertainment is big business with increasing commercialization that undermining the academic integrity and educational values at America's institutions of higher learning.

Corruption. Academic corruption is pervasive in our public schools and in institutions of higher learning that house big-time sports programs.

Costs. Costs are rising – reflecting an unrestrained growth in spending with a corresponding desperate, death-spiral-like, need for more revenues to finance the 'arms race' and 'stadium wars' between NCAA cartel members.

Culture. America has developed an athletic culture that is anti-intellectual and systematically creates "dumb jocks." Sports loving parents, many of whom are well intentioned but not sufficiently armed with important information, may not be aware of the threat posed to their children by America's runaway sports culture and its win-at-any-cost mentality.

Drugs. The utilization of supplements and performance enhancing drugs is pervasive and has been fueled by a culture of winning at any cost. Congressional focus on the use of drugs by professional, rather than the relatively larger and more vulnerable high school and college athletes, indicates an apparent lack of awareness of the problem.

Faculty. Untenured faculty are too busy getting tenure to work for reform, while tenured faculty are too busy doing research and/or just don't want to get involved in controversial nonacademic affairs. Both faculty groups fear retaliation for speaking out against pro-sports school policy.

Governance. Existing sports governing bodies, youth and amateur organizations, and educational institutions have done a poor job of protecting the health and welfare of athletes who are increasingly abused and exploited by our present sports culture. See also *Faculty, Governing Boards, Knight Commission, NCAA, Presidents, and Oversight*.

Governing Boards. Members of university and college governing boards (trustees and regents) are often wealthy, influential boosters with predominant interest in athletics rather than academics.

Health. Sports injuries and other health related issues are increasing for almost all levels of athletics and seem to be tolerated by the public as a price that must be paid for their entertainment, consequently, not enough is being done to prevent such injuries. Also, a greater number of spectators are idly watching the few elite athletes compete which satisfies the needs of small groups of athletes, is the dominant theme in our sports culture while recreational and fitness-based sports, which satisfies the needs of the vast majority, have been de-emphasized – a significant long-term negative impact on public health is as certain as it is predictable.

Knight Commission. The Commission has abandoned its "watchdog" mission and is far removed from its origins as it now helps to perpetuate the status quo. Also, the Commission seems to lack passion concerning its mission and appears to be 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. Simply put, it has become a well-orchestrated charade funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

Media. The media often seems reluctant to cover college-sports related issues that impact America and public policy – apparently deeming these issues too provocative to attract and maintain readers or offensive to advertisers and potential job-killers for their sportswriters. At times the media acts irresponsibly as well as unethically in the manner in which it overexposes, glamorizes and hypes the lives of young athletes and popularizes their misbehavior both on and off the field. The printing of point-spread information facilitates gambling and threatens to undermine the integrity of sports.

NCAA. The NCAA has become expert at resisting reform – undermining the Knight Commission, the Association of Governing Boards, and apparently the Coalition for Intercollegiate Athletics, while advocating for more commercialism in college sports, touting its unworkable reform initiative based on its Academic Progress Rate, and denouncing TDG and its serious reform proposals as radical.

Oversight. The NCAA's successful co-option of the Knight Commission means there is nobody responsible for the oversight of college sports. The NCAA cartel is in a position where it can literally do as it pleases.

Policy. The government continues to provide generous (and questionable) tax policies that fuel further commercialization of college sports, while both the government and higher education alike continue to treat intercollegiate athletics as a special case, shielding coaches from the personnel and conflict of interest policies governing other university staff, ignoring the all-too-frequent misbehavior of college athletes.

Presidents. 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 influential 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.

Society. Sports opportunities are shifting dramatically – producing severe inequities and lost opportunity coats in many segments of our society. Tremendous sums of money vanish to college athletic programs. In professional sports, the money goes to wealthy owners, millionaire players, and coaches. All the while, bridges, inner cities, and schools are crumbling.

Sportsmanship. Declining sportsmanship, elevated violence and the general misbehavior of athletes, coaches, parents, and fans not only pose a serious threat to potential victims, but also threaten to compromise the essence of athletic competition.

Violence. There is an apparent lack of concern and 'blame the victim' mentality with regard to violence by college athletes and the connection of violence to the use of performance enhancing drugs.

Youth. Sports have become very serious business and immense pressure is now placed upon the early specialization and professionalization of young athletes. There is intense promotion of athletic achievement for the reward of an athletic scholarship or professional contract. The NCAA recipe for 'success' has not gone unnoticed by America's high schools. High-school sports programs are doomed to follow colleges and universities down the slippery slope to where the athletic tail wags the academic dog.

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AUTHOR'S NOTES – In large part, this essay is based on notes prepared for use on Bob Gilbert's January 7, 2006, WCBR-Knoxville radio program where I used the quotes from Paul Gallico's *Farewell to Sport* to set the context for my remarks. On a personal note, my thanks to Gilbert for having me as his guest and to John Gerdy, Bruce Svare, and John Prados for their thoughtful comments and suggestions. Also,

Gallico's, *Lou Gehrig: Pride of the Yankees*, Grosset & Dunlap, New York, NY, 1942, was a gift from my favorite aunt in 1942. It made an indelible impression on this then 12-year old – casting Gehrig as my boyhood hero. A collage of Gehrig photos hangs above my computer desk – a gift from my daughter's pastor.

The title for this essay was 'inspired' by the January 3 2006, PBS Frontline program, "Is Wal-Mart Good for America?" The program probed Wal-Mart's tendency to rely on products manufactured in China – presenting two starkly contrasting images: one of empty storefronts in Circleville, Ohio; the other, of a sea of high rises in the South China boomtown of Shenzhen. It suggested that Wal-Mart is the connection between significant American job losses and soaring Chinese exports. For Wal-Mart, China has become the cheapest, most reliable production platform in the world, the source of up to \$25 billion in annual imports that help the company deliver everyday low prices and enabling it to beat down competition with its opening "price-break" offerings. This message is closely related to that given in "Sports in America 2005: Facing Up to Global Realities."