

# **Collegiate Athletics Reform: A Collection of References from the *National Catholic Reporter***

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*Prepared for distribution at the April 19-21, 2012, Scholarly Conference on College Sport, sponsored by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's College Sport Research Institute, to be held at the William C. Friday Center for Continuing Education on the campus of the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill*

**By Dr. Frank G. Splitt**

**February 21, 2012**

*Perhaps the sentiments contained in these pages are not yet sufficiently fashionable to procure them general favour; a long habit of not thinking a thing wrong, gives it a superficial appearance of being right, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defense of custom. But the tumult soon subsides. Time makes more converts than reason. (1776)*

—Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*

*Big-time college sports do far more damage to the university, to its students and faculty, its leadership, its reputation and credibility, than most realize--or at least are willing to admit....Far too many of our athletics programs exploit young people, recruiting them with the promise of a college education—or a lucrative professional career—only to have the majority of Division 1-A football and basketball players achieve neither....have put inappropriate pressure on university governance, as boosters, politicians, and the media attempt to influence governing boards and university leadership....have damaged university culture and values, with inappropriate behavior of both athletes and coaches, all too frequently tolerated and excused. So too, the commercial culture of the entertainment industry that characterizes college football and basketball is not only orthogonal to academic values, but also corrosive and corruptive to the academic enterprise. (2000)*

—James J. Duderstadt, President Emeritus, University of Michigan

*To millions of Americans, not least those rooting for one of the nine Catholic universities participating in this year's men's National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I basketball tournament, March Madness is a time of near nirvana:...But to others, including some increasingly vocal university faculty members, it could hardly be worse. March Madness, they say, is not innocent fun and games, but an aptly named symptom of an insanely organized and increasingly commercialized college sports system badly in need of an intervention. (2007)*

—Joe Feuerherd

*The NCAA's front business is amateurism. The whole operation—the rules and regulations, the investigations, the seminars on balancing academics and athletics, and the ludicrous term student-athlete—are designed to hide the real business the NCAA and their participating schools are engaged in: extortion. Viewed in the harshest—I would say "candid"—terms, they are extorting money from the (mostly poor and mostly black) kids who provide the raw material for the sports-entertainment business that generates billions of dollars for the NCAA and participating schools every year. (2010)*

—Mark Yost, *Varsity Green: Behind the Scenes Look at Culture and Corruption in College Athletics*

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## DEDICATION

*This collection of references on collegiate athletics from The National Catholic Reporter is dedicated to the memory of Joe Feuerherd who demonstrated uncommon courage—as a correspondent, editor and publisher—when dealing with contentious, politically sensitive issues.*

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## PROLOGUE

“A few millennia from now, when archaeologists from an ascendant Brazil or Turkey or wherever sift the shards of American civilization and find the ruins of the Big House in Ann Arbor, Mich., they will wonder why a 109,901-seat entertainment venue was attached to an institution of higher education”—so began George Will’s November 10, 2011, *Chicago Tribune*, op-ed, “What it was, was football.”

Will went on to say: “Today, the accelerating preposterousness of big-time college football is again provoking furrowed brows and pursed lips.... It is arguable, if not easily demonstrable, that universities' athletic successes cause increased student applications and alumni giving. Such giving matters increasingly as states' appropriations decrease. But even if true, this raises a question: Is the football industry as currently conducted an efficient way to do this? This is, in several senses, an academic question.... Today, the muscular interests around, and institutional momentum of, big-time football make it impervious to reform. Agitation, in several senses, will continue.”

If any of the archaeologists were at all familiar with Catholic teachings on ethics and morals as well as the considerable research on the decline of higher education in America as it became adrift in sports, they might also wonder why Catholic colleges and universities invested so heavily in similar stadia and other athletics facilities—sacrificing integrity, moral values, credibility and reputation in a Faustian-like bargain for fame and fortune.

Further still, they might wonder why these Catholic schools did not take a leadership position in curbing “the accelerating “preposterousness of big-time college football” ...preposterousness that includes prioritization of athletics over academics, academic corruption, violence-prone athletes, performance-enhancing drugs, skyrocketing athletics budgets, low graduation rates for athletes who actually play, retaliation against whistleblowing faculty members, and limited ability of athletes to obtain a real college education.

A recompiled collection of these references—beginning with the late Joe Feuerherd’s piece, “March Madness highlights sports vs. academics dispute” followed by “Time for accountability in sports,” Tom Roberts’ piece on how the system conceals the truth, and then Ken Briggs’ focus on brain trauma in “Catholic silence on football risks” set the stage for “Truth telling on campus”—form a veritable primer for Will’s hypothetical archaeologists.

As suggested in “Telling the truth on campus,” the presidents of our Catholic colleges and universities could be moved to solicit advice from their faculty and others on the place of the value-distorting, sports entertainment business in their schools. They might even go so far as to provide independently verifiable evidence that their athletes are bona fide, degree seeking students. For example, they could publish aggregated academic data from cohorts of football and basketball team athletes – providing the names of the faculty (along with the title of the courses and course GPA) who are providing university-level courses for many academically unprepared athletes who have a full-time (athletic) job, miss numerous classes, and come dead tired to others.

This would be a breakthrough of historic proportions since getting institutions of higher education to tell the truth by making public information on how they do, or don't, educate athletes has been a long and arduous battle—as Paul Gallico wrote some 70 years ago in *FAREWELL TO SPORT*, “One of the easiest things in the world is not to have evidence when evidence is liable to prove embarrassing.”

Barbara Tuchman has said, “Telling the truth about a given condition is absolutely requisite to any possibility of reforming it.” But as will become clear in this collection of references, the truth is especially hard to get when really big money is at stake.

Finally, my thanks go to Ken Briggs for sharing his insights as well as to the editors and publishers of *The National Catholic Reporter* for permission to reprint the copyrighted material in this collection.

Frank G. Splitt

February 21, 2012

# Truth telling on campus

*Catholic colleges and universities could lead the way*

By Frank G. Splitt

Posted at *Collegiate Athletic Clips*, March 7, 2006

In a cover story based on an earlier speech to his faculty, Fr. John Jenkins, C.S.C., the new president of the University of Notre Dame, discussed issues surrounding the ability of institutions to maintain their Catholic identity while sustaining academic freedom [1].

Jenkins centered compelling observations on two of the three controversies that have swirled about the university in recent years – the fate of “The Vagina Monologues,” a play celebrating women's sexuality, and the Queer Film Festival, devoted to gay and lesbian cinema – signaling a willingness to exercise his authority only after broad consultation.

This willingness is really encouraging since it stands in stark contrast to the handling of the third controversy that attracted considerably more media attention than the others. It involved the termination of Tyrone Willingham – breaking the university's long-standing tradition of honoring its contract commitment to their football coach.

The termination was accomplished by a small group of trustees and university officials -- including then incoming president Fr. Jenkins – apparently without listening to and taking seriously contrary voices and prompting then president Fr. Edward Malloy to say he was "embarrassed to be president of Notre Dame" [2]. Unfortunately, incoming and sitting presidents are in no position to oppose the will of prominent and wealthy sports boosters, especially those that sit on governing boards.

This action allowed the university to quiet rabid fans and alums that were threatening to withhold contributions as well as hire a new pro-level coach. The expectation? – an accelerated return of Notre Dame's football program to national prominence and really big money. To many, the action signaled the end of an era at Notre Dame as it adopted the win-at-any-cost business model of its competitors and provided yet another example of the ability of money to trump principle. No longer can it be said that Notre Dame stands above the mess in the world of the big-time (Div 1A) college-sports entertainment business that, all too often, displays hallmarks of hypocrisy, secrecy, deceit, and deception.

The college-sports entertainment business not only maintains a virtual stranglehold on America's institutions of higher education, but also serves as a major distraction from their academic mission – undermining America's ability to face up to global realities [3, 4]. It also spawns varying degrees of academic corruption with a corresponding need to keep the public and the Congress in the dark. The dearth of academic skills and knowledge imparted to athletes, whose primary aim is to play professionally, is shrouded by the Buckley Amendment to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act that impedes truth telling – effectively shielding academic corruption in intercollegiate athletics.

But there could be good news in all of this.

Paraphrasing a related editorial [5] – for reasons that go far beyond the merits of a single film festival or play, the experiment in broadly based dialogue at Notre Dame bears careful watching. It could very well serve as a model for a much wider discussion on the Catholic identity of its institutions as well as a discussion of the hypocrisy related to the big-money sports programs on its college and university campuses.

The presidents of our Catholic colleges and universities could be moved to solicit advice from their faculty and others on the place of the value-distorting, sports entertainment business in their schools. They might even go so far as to provide independently verifiable evidence that their athletes are bona fide, degree seeking students. For example, they could publish aggregated (Buckley-compliant) academic data from cohorts of football and basketball team athletes – providing the names of the faculty (along with the title of the courses and course GPA) who are providing university-level courses for many academically unprepared athletes who have a full-time (athletic) job, miss numerous classes, and come dead tired to others.

This would be a breakthrough of historic proportions since getting institutions of higher education to tell the truth – making public information on how they do, or don't, educate athletes has been a long and arduous battle. As Paul Gallico wrote some 70 years ago in *FAREWELL TO SPORT* (with reference to the Amateur Athletic Union): "One of the easiest things in the world is not to have evidence when evidence is liable to prove embarrassing."

Perhaps, the University of Texas, the University of Southern California, Ohio State University, Duke University, the University of Connecticut, Florida State University, the University of Michigan, and other top-ranked schools in college sports might also be moved to tell the truth about how they manage to maintain eligibility for their athletes as well as avoid being punished by the NCAA's new Academic Progress Rate measure that has hurt lesser-ranked schools [6].

Stranger things have happened, but just don't bet on it happening without government intervention.

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## ***The National Catholic Reporter: Letter to the Editor***

***NCR Editor's Note: In the Feb. 10 issue, NCR printed a talk given to the University of Notre Dame faculty Jan. 23 by Holy Cross Fr. John I. Jenkins, the university's new president, Fr. Jenkins addressed controversy about whether the university should allow the Queer Film Festival and "The Vagina Monologues" to be presented on campus and what that controversy had to say about academic freedom and Catholic identity. [http://www.ncronline.org/NCR\\_Online/archives2/2006a/021006/021006a.php](http://www.ncronline.org/NCR_Online/archives2/2006a/021006/021006a.php).***

March 31, 2006

**RE: Fr. Jenkins February 10, 2006, Essay on Catholic Identity**

Fr. John Jenkins centered his observations on two of the three controversies that have swirled about the university in recent years, signaling a willingness to exercise his authority only after broad consultation. This willingness is encouraging because it stands in stark contrast to the handling of the unmentioned third controversy that attracted considerably more media attention. It involved the termination of Tyrone Willingham, which broke the university's long-standing tradition of honoring its contract commitment to its football coach and prompting then-president Fr. Edward Malloy to say he was "embarrassed to be president of Notre Dame."

The termination was accomplished by a small group of trustees and university officials, including then-incoming president Fr. Jenkins. To many, this signaled the end of an era at Notre Dame as it adopted the win-at-any-cost business model of its competitors. No longer can it be said that Notre Dame stands above the mess in the world of the big-time (Division 1A) college-sports entertainment business that maintains a virtual stranglehold on America's institutions of higher education.

The film festival and the "Monologues" represent low-hanging fruit. Suppose these programs produced net annual revenues — including alumni contributions — exceeding those of the football program. Now that would really stimulate debate and help clarify values, illuminating the propensity of money to trump principle.

FRANK G. SPLITT  
Mount Prospect, Ill.

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**Author's Note:** This letter formed the basis for the essay, "TRUTH TELLING ON CAMPUS Catholic colleges and universities could lead the way."

**NOTE:** *College Athletics Clips* was the first to publish the Guest Commentaries. They were posted on *Clips* with the permission of the author. The opinions, intimations, conclusions and inferences contained within these essays and commentaries are solely those of the author; they do not reflect the opinions or endorsement of *College Athletics Clips* or Northwestern University.

***In the last 10 years big-time college sports has definitely swamped academic values and transformed big-time college athletes into paid employees in a multibillion dollar industry. (2007)***

**—Allen Sack, Professor, University of New Haven, President Elect, The Drake Group**

# March Madness highlights sports vs. academics dispute

*Big money, pressure to perform distort purpose of athletics, critics claim*

Used with the permission of *THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER*

March 23, 2007

By Joe Feuerherd

*Washington* – To millions of Americans, not least those rooting for one of the nine Catholic universities participating in this year's men's National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I basketball tournament, March Madness is a time of near nirvana: Crack open a beer, curl up on the couch and watch endless hours of highly skilled undergraduates soaring over 10-foot rims. It doesn't get any better.

But to others, including some increasingly vocal university faculty members, it could hardly be worse. March Madness, they say, is not innocent fun and games, but an aptly named symptom of an insanely organized and increasingly commercialized college sports system badly in need of an intervention.

The problem is most severe, critics say, among the "revenue-generating" programs -- men's football and basketball. CBS Television, for example, paid \$6 billion in 1999 for the rights to broadcast the NCAA tournament through 2014.

"In the last 10 years big-time college sports has definitely swamped academic values and transformed big-time college athletes into paid employees in a multibillion dollar industry," said Allen Sack, a University of New Haven sociologist and coauthor of *College Athletes for Hire: The Evolution and Legacy of the NCAA's Amateur Myth* (Praeger Publishers, 1998). Sack's views were shaped as much on the gridiron as in the ivory tower: He was a starting defensive end for Notre Dame's 1966 national championship football squad.

A critical juncture was reached last year, Sack told NCR, when NCAA president Myles Brand "crossed the line" by embracing the commercial aspects of university athletic programs.

In his annual "state of the association" address, Brand said, "Commercial activity, meaning for example, the sale of broadcast rights and logo licensing, is not only acceptable, but mandated by the business plan, provided that [emphasis in the original text] it is done so in a way that fully respects the underlying principles of the university.

"Instances in which advertising is offensive, in which it is crass or overwhelming, are incompatible with these values," he continued. "But commercialism per se [emphasis in the original text] is not. It depends entirely on how the commercial activity is conducted."

Sack does not buy the notion that the hunt for big bucks has little impact on the academic life of college athletes or the culture of a university. "Making billions of dollars and making more and more every year heightens the pressure on college coaches to win, makes television ratings far more important than ever before, and thereby takes this pressure that is now on the coaches to win, or else they will be fired, and pushes that pressure down to the athletes. That's inevitable."

Corruption is nothing new to collegiate men's basketball and football.

In 1906, the NCAA was created at the behest of President Teddy Roosevelt to combat the brutality present in men's football. Among the group's first findings: Athletic scholarships were incompatible with higher education and amateur intercollegiate athletics because they amounted to payments to players.

In 1950, players for the national championship City College of New York basketball squad were charged with "shaving points" -- intentionally scoring less than they might have otherwise to allow gamblers to "cover the spread" on their bets. Similar gambling-related scandals hit St. Joseph's of Philadelphia in 1961 (the school was stripped of its third-place finish in the championship tournament as a result), Boston College in the late 1970s, and Northwestern and Arizona State in the 1990s.

More recently, in 2004, Colorado State University was rocked by a recruiting scandal in which prospective football players, teenagers all, were supplied with alcohol and prostitutes as an inducement to sign with the Rams. That type of recruitment technique, frequently the product of overzealous alumni boosters, led former University of Nevada-Las Vegas head basketball coach Jerry Tarkinian to comment that he preferred transfer students to incoming freshman because "their cars are already paid for."

## **NCAA's harshest critic**

Founded in 2000, the Drake Group (so named because it was the brainchild of retired Drake University professor Jon Ericson) has emerged as both the NCAA's harshest critic and chronicler of collegiate athletic corruption. Among its more vocal members is Frank Splitt, a one-time semi-pro baseball pitcher, holder of nine patents, and, until recently, a faculty fellow in engineering at Northwestern University.



His indictment of college sports is both well-informed and harsh. It includes:

- Admission standards for athletes that often have more to do with tackling, blocking, throwing, shooting and dribbling skills than SAT scores.
- Skyrocketing athletic budgets (including long-term debt associated with the construction of new football stadiums and basketball arenas) at the expense of academic programs. Spending on athletic programs has increased at about twice the rate of other university spending.
- Pressure on faculty to pass nonperforming students who are key to the success of a schools' basketball or football programs.
- Retaliation against faculty members who blow the whistle on plagiarism and other academic abuses by athletes and their athletic department-sponsored tutors.
- Programs that require time and travel commitments from players that make class attendance sporadic at best, impossible at worst.
- Seven-figure salaries (and separate product endorsement deals that flow from their position at the university) for the most coveted coaches.
- Scandalously low graduation rates for Division I basketball and football players.

The only way to true reform, says Splitt, is for Congress to intervene. Lawmakers should use the stick of potentially withholding a school's valuable tax exemption, says Splitt, in return for concrete steps to guarantee that student-athletes are students first and foremost.

His efforts have gotten some attention in Congress and from the NCAA.

In a 25-page October 2006 letter, then-House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Bill Thomas, R-Calif., wrote to NCAA president Brand, "Educational organizations comprise one of the largest segments of the tax-exempt sector, and most of the activities undertaken by educational organizations clearly further their exempt purpose."

He continued, "The exempt purpose of intercollegiate athletics, however, is less apparent, particularly in the context of major college football and men's basketball programs.

"Corporate sponsorships, multimillion-dollar television deals, highly paid coaches with no academic duties, and the dedication of inordinate amounts of time by athletes to training lead many to believe that major college football and men's basketball more closely resemble professional sports than amateur sports," wrote Thomas. "Beyond rules prohibiting compensation for college athletes, what actions has the NCAA taken to 'retain a clear line of demarcation' between major college sports and professional sports?"

Brand responded, "The lessons learned on the football field or men's basketball court are no less in value or importance to those student-athletes than the ones learned on the hockey rink or softball diamond -- nor, for that matter, than those learned in theater, dance, music, journalism or other non-classroom environments.

"If the educational purpose of college basketball could be preserved only by denying the right to telecast the events, students, university faculty and staff, alumni, the institutions of higher education themselves and even the American taxpayer would ultimately lose," he continued. "The scale of popularity and the media attention given to football and men's basketball do not forfeit for those two sports the educational purpose for which they exist."

### **He removed Bobby Knight**

Brand, in fact, has positioned himself as a reformer. As president of Indiana University in 2000, he led the charge to remove controversial basketball coach Bobby Knight as coach of the Hoosiers perennially winning and much beloved basketball team.

Brand says the NCAA has instituted new programs, including the loss of athletic scholarships for schools with failing grades in athlete graduation rates, that are making university presidents more accountable and athletes more academically oriented.

Brand notes, for example, that the "Graduation Success Rate" -- a measure developed by the NCAA to track athlete progress -- is higher among Division I athletes (with 77 percent graduating within six years) than among the general student population. "There is little that frustrates me more than critics of college sports who get the facts wrong and make derogatory comments about the academic accomplishments of student-athletes," Brand said in his January "state of the association" speech.

He continued, "Critics pounce on the point that football and male basketball student athletes graduate at lower rates than the general male student population. They are right, and improvement is needed. But they very often fail to note some key exceptions and overall

improvement," including the fact that African-American football and basketball players are more likely to graduate than their counterparts in the general student population. "We do need to do better in higher education in graduating African-Americans, but in athletics, we have, in fact, made genuine progress," said Brand.

Still, argue Splitt and others, it will take more than incremental changes from the NCAA to counter the so-called "Flutie Effect" -- the positive impact a high-profile sports program is thought to have on the quality of an admissions pool, alumni morale and fundraising. The trend bears the name of former Boston College quarterback Doug Flutie, whose last minute "Hail Mary" pass in the 1984 Orange Bowl resulted in both a victory for the Eagles and widespread positive publicity for the Jesuit-run school, which experienced a spike in both admissions and the quality of applicants as measured by their SAT scores.

Meanwhile, the pressure to perform is felt acutely at the University of Notre Dame, said Sack of his alma mater. And though the school has a justified reputation for academic achievement among athletes, he said, "they are hanging on a very thin thread." The university's multiyear, multimillion dollar television contracts with NBC and ESPN increases the pressure to win so that those games remain popular with viewers and the contracts are renewed.

That pressure was evident in late 2004 when the university fired football coach Tyrone Willingham in the third year of a five-year contract. Willingham's teams finished 21-15 during his tenure, not good enough for a school that traces its gridiron roots to Knute Rockne and hopes to keep the television revenue pouring in. Willingham's dismissal was a first for the Fighting Irish, which had not previously let a football coach go prior to the end of his contract.

On one level, at least, the move seems to have paid off. Under coach Charlie Weis the team finished 10-3 in 2006.

Notre Dame's Golden Dome is a far cry, perhaps, from the two Division III schools, the University of Scranton and The Catholic University of America, where Jesuit Fr. William Byron served as president. The football coach at Scranton, recalled Byron, held practice for two hours each day, from 6:30 in the morning until 8:30, because a number of the players were premed majors who needed to be in the laboratory in the afternoon. "It was a great balance between academics and athletics," he said.

Byron served on the NCAA presidents' committee in the 1980s, a body designed to move some of the decision-making authority for sports from university athletic directors to university presidents. He's convinced that there is no absolute contradiction between bigtime sports and bigtime academics, noting that schools such as the University of Michigan and Penn State are renowned for both their athletic prowess and their capabilities as research and teaching institutions. It's not brain surgery, said Byron: "If you're going to have a college athletic program, you have to stick to your principles and stay within the guidelines."

### **Guidelines should change**

Those guidelines, however, should change, argues Sack. Though the NCAA considers such reforms "radical," he said that three changes in NCAA rules would go a long way toward restoring the balance he says is missing in universities that mount major sports efforts.

First, freshman should be ineligible for varsity basketball and football. "It's unconscionable for a young man or woman with marginal academic skills" to have to deal with the pressure of Division I competition while adjusting to the changes inherent in the first year away from home, Sack said.

Next, he said, require students to maintain a 2.0 grade point average. It's not too much to expect a legitimate student to have a "C" average, said Sack.

Finally, the NCAA should require schools to provide five-year scholarships that cannot be terminated for reasons unrelated to academics. Such a move, said Sack, would demonstrate the school's commitment to the student athlete is not contingent on performance on the basketball court or football field.

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*It is certainly plausible and even probable that the directors and others within the Penn State community were influenced in its actions by what has occurred in Catholic circles. Denial, cover-up, excuses simply don't work. They merely extend the crisis and drain the institution of credibility. (2011)*

—Tom Roberts

# Time for accountability in sports

*Corrupt collegiate athletics overshadow faltering academic mission*

National Catholic Reporter publication date: November 14, 2008

Section: S. Special Section *Catholic Colleges & Universities – Viewpoint*

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By FRANK G. SPLITT



-- Photos by Dreamstime.com

As evidenced by the plethora of scholarly articles and books on college sports reform, there can be little doubt as to the disingenuous, tax-avoiding nature of bigtime collegiate athletics -- especially in the football and men's basketball programs franchised by the National Collegiate Athletics Association. Unless Congress gets involved, America's system of higher education will continue to be held hostage to the professionalized collegiate sports entertainment industry. Sadly, this system includes many of our Catholic schools, which, rather than being leaders in college sports reform, have been willful participants in this money-focused, win-at-any-cost industry.

There has been a growing sense of frustration among reform-minded faculty over the lack of bipartisan follow-up in Congress on the strong effort of retired Rep. Bill Thomas, R-Calif., the 109th Congress' House Ways and Means Committee chairman, to have the NCAA provide justification for its tax-exempt status. Also contributing to this sense of frustration are the political obstacles faced by Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, past chairman and now ranking member of the Senate Finance Committee, in his effort to significantly improve the transparency, accountability and oversight of the NCAA's operations. It was Grassley who once said: "Big money, tax-free and no oversight have created a cesspool in too many cases."

## Perhaps the time has come

However, today's financial crisis could very well precipitate a dramatic shift away from the federal government's laissez-faire "oversight" of America's financial system and business enterprises. The turmoil on Wall Street, along with seized-up credit markets, shrinking endowments and reductions in state funding, is shaking the financial foundation of higher education.

Adding to the problem is a stealthy byproduct of bigtime college athletics programs that comes in the form of debt incurred via enormous investments in football stadiums, basketball arenas and academic centers for athletes, all of which are part of the runaway athletic-facilities arms race.

There are striking parallels between the uncontrolled, greed-driven, anything-goes operations and excesses on Wall Street, with its misrepresentation of material assets in the form of disadvantaged financial instruments, and those in the NCAA's college sports business, with its misrepresentation of material assets in the form of disadvantaged academic instruments -- so-called student-athletes. In articles exploring the roots of America's financial crisis, there has been a mantra-like repetition of *transparency*, *accountability*, *oversight* as a path to help ensure business integrity. This could very well mean more intense scrutiny and rule-setting to curb excessive commercialization and corruption in college sports.

In the near term, sporting events sponsored by the NCAA will serve as convenient distractions -- diverting the public's attention from our nation's economic woes. In the long term, congressional scrutiny of the tax-exempt status of the NCAA and its franchisees could explode the student-athlete myth and thus have a negative impact on the professional level of play in their bigtime athletic programs -- forcing the NBA and the NFL to operate their own minor leagues.



With few exceptions, America's colleges and universities are deteriorating while on a government-subsidized quest for sports-related revenues -- abandoning their souls, compromising their integrity and warping their academic missions. Unfortunately, there are no visible means to reverse what appears to be a downward spiral into a pervasive beer-and-circus modus operandi at these institutions. This scenario and its potentially catastrophic consequences are either invisible to or ignored by the general public as well as those in the highest circles of the U.S. government.

There is little public outrage over drugs and corruption in college sports -- likely a combination of public apathy and the superb job done by NCAA public relations. In the end, tolerating cheating in college sports via performance-enhancing drugs and academic corruption appears to be preferable to confronting the formidably resourced NCAA and its member institutions. As Stephen Ross, chairman of Penn State's Sports Law Institute, has put it: "Congress only cares if the people they talk to care." So, if their constituents aren't complaining, they aren't either.

Meaningful reform in collegiate athletics will certainly not be led by those with a vested interest in the status quo: the NCAA, college and university presidents, governing boards, coaches, and athletic conferences. Similarly, experience indicates that the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics and the U.S. Department of Education, as well as state/regional accreditation boards, are not up to the task. Faculty-based, reform-minded organizations such as the the Drake Group and the Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics can help lead the way, but simply do not have the wherewithal to confront the collegiate sports entertainment industry by themselves, without the help of Congress.

### **The tax-exempt purpose**

The history of college sports reform tells us that no matter how compelling the arguments for corrective measures, market and political realities dictate that nothing of consequence will be done for a variety of reasons, not the least of which are an abundance of corrupting, tax-free money and related benefits at stake. Also, members of Congress -- like sitting school presidents -- want to keep their jobs, and so look the other way, separating what they think is right from what they think will work.

Consequently, the slow but sure decline of America's educational system will continue, unless and until Congress restrains the growth of the professionalized 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.

Since these measures strike at the very core of an enterprise built on myths and falsehoods that are best shrouded in secrecy, they would be strongly resisted by the NCAA, which would admit nothing and deny everything, but obfuscate and litigate if need be.

Under normal circumstances, it is most likely that Grassley's congressional colleagues would simply continue to ignore the issue -- leaving him to stand alone in his effort to have the NCAA justify its tax-exempt status. Under this circumstance, reform would not come anytime soon, if ever, no matter how corrupt, disingenuous and debilitating the operations of the collegiate sports industry continue to be.

### **Reform not dead**

In spite of this pessimistic view, reform is not dead, for these are definitely not normal times. Today's epic financial crisis coupled with the rise of intense global competition may serve as a loud and compelling wake-up call for Americans at all levels to rise above their obsession with professional-level college sports entertainment -- coming to understand that the continuation of this obsession would not bode well for the future of higher education in America as well as for America's stature on the world stage. This understanding could pave the way for America's colleges and universities to reprioritize their values -- making capital and human resource investments that place academics well above athletics.

The persistent efforts of Sen. Grassley and reform-minded faculty organizations such as the Drake Group and the Coalition for Intercollegiate Athletics could help catalyze a process whereby college sports reform would come sooner rather than later. Only time will tell if Congress and the American public hear and respond to the wake-up call. We can only hope it will be Catholic colleges and universities that lead the way.

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# Penn State's scandal throws light on the church's

## *Abuse and cover-up: Penn State's Catholic-like scandal*

PERSPECTIVE, Nov. 25-December 8, 2011

By Tom Roberts

It is rare, if not unprecedented, that the Catholic church could take a lesson from a secular university's football program. But the recent events surrounding Penn State's vaunted football culture is indeed instructive on several levels.

### ***Analysis***

It is rare, if not unprecedented, that the Catholic church could take a lesson from a secular university's football program. But the recent events surrounding Penn State's vaunted football culture is indeed instructive on several levels.

For one, it helps explain why the child sex abuse scandal in the church seems never-ending. It also illustrates anew that while legal and administrative responsibilities toward children are ignored at an institution's peril, our moral obligation toward children is paramount and self-evident even in an avowedly nonreligious setting.

Jerry Sandusky, a former assistant football coach at Pennsylvania State University, has been charged with sexually abusing eight young boys over a 15-year period. Two university officials, former athletic director Tim Curley and former finance official Gary Schultz, have been charged with failing to report Sandusky to police after they were told of an incident in 2002.

The parallels between what happened at Penn State and what has happened for decades throughout the Catholic community in the United States and in other countries are striking.

The patterns outlined in the 40-count indictment charging Sandusky are familiar: the grooming of vulnerable youth, using a trusted position and stature within the community to gain access to children and to fend off suspicion, descriptions of fondling and rape of children, reports of abuse being minimized, and a continued toleration of the abuser within a protective culture.

The charges, the description of the offenses and the reactions of those with the authority and power to report the alleged offender to police are interchangeable with those in the grand jury reports and documents both released and still hidden within the culture of the Catholic hierarchy.

The impulses also appear identical. The instinct is to protect first the institution and its prevailing culture at all costs, minimize the offense and ignore the damage to the children involved.

The differences, too, are striking. Penn State University has a board of directors, and it demanded accountability.

Within days of Sandusky's arrest, 84-year-old Joe Paterno, one of the most celebrated and revered coaches in modern college football history, was gone. His offense? He didn't do enough. He wasn't charged with a crime. In fact, it is reported he told superiors of one incident. But he didn't go to the police, didn't follow up to see what had been done and didn't pursue concern about the welfare of the children involved.

He was fired along with Graham B. Spanier, described in a *New York Times* report as "one of the longest-serving and highest-paid university presidents in the nation, who has helped raise the academic profile of Penn State."

In contrast, in the ongoing abuse crisis in the church, only one bishop who oversaw a cover-up, Cardinal Bernard Law, was removed from a position after public outrage and the outrage of his priests in Boston reached such a pitch that the Vatican had to do something. That something was to transfer him to a cushy position in Rome, where it was easier for him to get to the meetings of the six influential Vatican congregations -- offices in the Vatican bureaucracy -- on which he was allowed to retain membership.

He recently hosted a lavish party in Rome to celebrate his 80th birthday. It was attended by some of the top figures within the Vatican bureaucracy.

Cardinal Anthony Joseph Bevilacqua, who oversaw the cover-up of hideous crimes against children committed by numerous Philadelphia priests, was able to slip quietly into retirement on the grounds of St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Overbrook, a suburb of Philadelphia. The Vatican never uttered a word of reprimand for the institutional harm to children that he helped to hide during his tenure and that is detailed in a Philadelphia grand jury report.

His successor, Cardinal Justin Rigali, and some in his administration repeatedly violated the bishops' own norms for handling sex abuse and repeatedly misrepresented to the public the nature and extent of the problem. A second grand jury report resulted in the indictment of Msgr. William Lynn, former vicar for clergy, for failing to remove abusive priests. He was at the time the highest-ranking Catholic clergyman charged in the scandal.

Rigali recently slipped quietly into retirement. Again, no word of rebuke from the Vatican.

Bishop Robert Finn of the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo., became the highest-ranking clergyman charged in the abuse scandal when he and the diocese were indicted for failing to report child abuse. But Finn is staying in place, determined to run the diocese, and apparently no one can tell him, much less force him, to step aside for the good of the church while dealing with his legal entanglements.

No word of rebuke has issued -- not from fellow bishops nor from Rome -- of Bishop Fabian Bruskewitz of Lincoln, Neb., who has flatly refused to comply with the minimal controls put in place by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops during its spring meeting in Dallas in 2002.

And former Los Angeles Cardinal Roger Mahony has been allowed to quietly slip off the national stage while leaving behind a mountain of documentation that would blow the lid of the archdiocese if released, say prosecutors, victims' lawyers and others involved in assessing cases. No one knows quite how much has been spent keeping the documents -- which were supposed to be released as part of an earlier settlement agreement -- under wraps.

No board of directors exists to demand accountability of the bishops.

As the story unraveled out of Penn State, one repeatedly heard former players and football commentators, people most familiar discussing Xs and Os, outraged at the "moral" failures of those entrusted with protecting youth. Paterno had done what he was supposed to do, said one, but had he done what he was morally obliged to do?

Where were his and the president's concern for the children involved? To what lengths did they go to find out the status of the children involved? What did they do to assure that the alleged predator would be taken out of circulation? That more children would not be abused?

Not enough, on anyone's scorecard, and particularly not on those of the board entrusted with overseeing the institution.

It is certainly plausible and even probable that the directors and others within the Penn State community were influenced in its actions by what has occurred in Catholic circles. Denial, cover-up, excuses simply don't work. They merely extend the crisis and drain the institution of credibility.

Another significant difference between what has happened in the Catholic community and what occurred at Penn State is that the latter did not have several hundred more football cultures to which Coach Sandusky could be secretly transferred. It can't pass errant coaches through an international, secretive culture that claims a connection with divinity that places it beyond the reach and mores of mere mortals. Penn State's options were limited.

Perhaps Paterno was treated too harshly for someone who's given the university so much. His supporters, like the parishioners who can't imagine their priest abusing children or those who support bishops without question, were out in force after his firing was announced. But *Washington Post* columnist Thomas Boswell placed that sentiment in perspective: "Paterno has been a man above authority at Penn State for decades. He's been allowed to be selectively deaf or dumb or blind when it suits him. Those days are over."

He recounts in a Nov. 10 piece that police in 1998 were notified by the mother of an 11-year-old child who had showered with Sandusky. A university policeman reported overhearing a conversation between Sandusky and the mother in which the coach admitted, "I understand I was wrong. I wish I could get forgiveness. I know I won't get it from you. I wish I were dead."

Writes Boswell: "I'd call that a red flag -- and every other color in the moral-alarm spectrum. Penn State's decision was to close the investigation, bring no charges and not call the police or other outside authorities."

Sound familiar?

Another eerie similarity in all of this is that both institutions -- church and university -- acted first to protect themselves, the reputations of their programs and the personnel involved. The church, additionally, acted to protect its treasury. The irony, of course, is that in both cases, hiding the truth at the outset only led to the opposite of their intent. Reputations are in tatters and, in the case of the church, the treasury has been drained.

Penn State will live on with a new football coach and a new president. The community, however, will have been put on notice that placing children in jeopardy will be dealt with in the most severe way, and that those in charge will not be able to hide behind excuses. The lines are clear. The expectations unambiguous. The story in all of its detail will be known.

The church, too, will certainly live on. But under the lingering cloud of suspicion that bishops, no matter how incompetent or unresponsive to reports of abuse, will not face the prospect of losing their jobs or of having to be accountable. The community will have to continue to function with the understanding that it might never know the full story. It also knows that no board of directors will ever convene with the power to look beyond the interests of an individual bishop and take the drastic measures necessary for the greater good of the community.

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## **Excerpt from the *NCR* Editor's Note on Brain Injuries, February 3-16, 2012 Issue**

By Dennis Coday

Much good comes from football and sports in general. A good sports program can teach discipline and team work. A good sports program can build a young person's sense of worth and sometimes save a troubled life.

And playing and watching games are simply a lot of fun.

All of these are reasons to make us hesitant to examine the research linking football to severe brain damage. But we must look at these dire reports (Page 12).

Purdue University research, for example, underscored the dangers of constant head collisions that don't produce concussions. Some players endure as many as 950 hits a year, according to the researchers.

Though the percentage of payers who sooner or later suffer mild disabilities ranging from chronic headaches to Alzheimer's disease isn't yet documented, evidence suggests it's significant. Examination of large numbers of former National Football League payers, for example, indicate that those between the ages of 30 and 49 were 19 times more likely to show signs of Alzheimer's than men of comparable age who hadn't played.

The origins of the damage begin much earlier, of course, in high school and college, where the conventions of the game call for hitting hard and often. Eventually, the effects of competing over a stretch of years will be charted in stages, but at this point there is reason to believe that every stage exposes players to significant brain injury.

Catholic high schools and colleges have been most attentive to the frightening specter of collision are taking steps to prevent the trauma and, in a major change from the tradition of sending players who have their "bells rung" back into the game, to insist that the players remain out and get treated,

But as worthwhile as these measures are proving, the larger ethical question, whether risks to young men are so great they justify ending football programs, has been sidestepped by Catholic parents, educators and ethicists, where the real responsibility rests, and not with coaches, athletic directors and trainers.

The concern, of course, is universal, but it would seem the Catholic arena would be an especially apt place to consider the question, given the community's high regard for protecting life in all its phases,

At stake is no less than the long-term physical and mental health of young Catholic men who naturally love the sport.

*No Christian tradition has more ethical and theological resources than Catholicism to take on the challenge of football, but there is no rush to do so. (2012)*

—Ken Briggs

# Catholic silence on football risks

*While studies raise alarm about long-term effects of repeated blows to head, there is little discussion of ethics*

NATION, February 3-16, 2012

Used with the permission of *THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER*

By Ken Briggs

Growing scientific evidence that football players can suffer permanent mental disease has so far stirred no broad discussion among Catholic colleges and high schools or national church organizations about the ethics of continuing to sponsor the game.

A sampling of Catholic groups and scholars who study sports culture and promote its moral benefits say they believe the medical hazards exposed by the research raise serious questions about the continuation of football but add that they haven't called attention to the apparent threat, in part because it could ignite stormy protests by fans and financial backers. Some believe more evidence is needed but concede that the existing findings are alarming.

Pope John Paul II, a former soccer player with a love of sports, provided a rationale for making hard choices. Sports could be "a gymnasium of the spirit, a means to exercise moral education," he told a Milan, Italy, soccer team in 1979, only if it was "inspired by healthy principles that exclude all unnecessary risks on the part of the athlete, and the disordered emotions on the part of the fans that may occur in competition."

Experiments conducted in recent years by Purdue University, the University of Michigan and the University of North Carolina, among others, have shown widespread brain damage to current and former players from high school through the National Football League.

While the bulk of media coverage has been on the effects of concussions, the most sensational head injury, studies have raised increasing alarm that repeated blows to the head that appear harmless can eventually result in the same chronic illnesses, among them, memory loss, depression, Alzheimer's and dementia.

One analogy cited by some sources is the cumulative effect of smoking: No single cigarette triggers lung disease. Another is the grim image of a death by a thousand cuts.

The scientific catch name for the collection of most serious diseases is CTE, "chronic traumatic encephalopathy," signs of which have been found in college players. Former NFL players with brain disorders have been filing suits against the league, alleging they were kept in the dark about the risks to their mental health.

No widespread alarm over the link between football and the long-term welfare of players has emerged in Catholic circles, however, according to an informal survey. Neither the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities nor the Catholic Theological Society of America, for example, has devoted conference time or special sessions to the subject.

Nor have church and society centers and institutes at universities such as Notre Dame taken up the cause. Instead, the problem has been largely left to athletic trainers and coaches, who are relied upon to improve strategies for treating concussed players and upgrading precautions.

Michael Galligan-Stierle, president of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, says the 240 member schools are aware of the research and dedicated to player safety. Though the association's core members, college presidents, have never convened discussions on long-term injuries, he said, a "stronger response" would be warranted if science produces a stronger case.

But the former football player and basketball coach said it would be "morally wrong" to sponsor football "if it's clear a person would end up mentally and physically impaired," adding emphatically, "but we're not there yet." For now, he said, coaches and their staffs are able to "make the right decisions."

A special edition of the National Catholic Educational Association's *Momentum* magazine in 2009 reflects similar ambivalence. Titled "Sports and Spirituality," the issue paid legitimate attention to the legacy of Catholic belief in the virtue of sports and included debate over whether sports actually produces character. However, it contained no references to the dangers that had recently emerged in the news.

Though coaches and athletic directors at the 1,206 Catholic high schools and 46 Catholic colleges that offer football have responded promptly to the need for better care for players hit by concussions by removing them from games -- even entire seasons -- and providing more safety precautions, no school could be found that has seriously considered giving up a cherished football tradition as a compelling moral remedy.



More than a million American high school students play football every year. While only a small fraction play for Catholic schools, many teams from those schools are renowned for football, making them highly visible in the sports world. For example, a lengthy article in the Jan. 2 issue of the *New Yorker* magazine lionized the team from the Salesian-run Don Bosco Prep in Ramsey, N.J., depicting it as a vehicle for athletes' upward mobility.



*The Ironmen of Don Bosco Preparatory High School in Ramsey, N.J., play football Nov. 24 against the Green Knights of St. Joseph Regional High School in Montvale, N.J. (Newscom/Icon SMI/Tyler Kaufman)*

Within that culture, violence and injuries have been accepted as a reasonable price for achievement and “playing through pain” is part of the creed. A 2011 documentary on PBS’s “Frontline” called “Football High” estimated that 60,000 concussions alone occur in high schools. At least 50 high school players have died since 1997. The full pattern of long-term effects that may show up only decades later isn’t yet known.

Edward Rielly, professor of English at St. Joseph’s College of Maine and author of *Football: An Encyclopedia of Popular Culture*, is among the legions of Catholics who feel torn by the research. Having grown up loving and playing the game, the evidence troubles Rielly, but he prefers to think that remedial action like limiting playing time or placing weight limits on players will suffice. He doesn’t foresee Catholic schools dropping football but thinks further proof that it’s “extremely dangerous” could create “a tipping point.”

“We can’t be Romans sending our sons like gladiators just to please folks who love football,” he said. But, the critics say, that’s precisely what’s happening.

The roots of the resistance to such drastic options as dropping football lie deep within American Catholic memories of beleaguered immigrant Catholics proving themselves (“the Fighting Irish”) and in the public passion for the game, abetted by vast profit-making and gambling activities. Among the country’s religious adherents, none mesh faith with football more than Catholics and Southern evangelicals.

No Christian tradition has more ethical and theological resources than Catholicism to take on the challenge of football, but there is no rush to do so. Michael Malec of Jesuit-run Boston College, who specializes in the sociology of sports, said he wasn’t aware of any “serious, hard

thinking” on whether schools should ban football but he was “starting to think it should be addressed” as a major ethical issue. However, he said, devotion to the sport is “so ingrained in culture” that initiating such a discussion would be difficult.

But mounting evidence might cause parents “to be more reluctant to let their sons play” and that might prompt the question in another manner, said Stephen Pope, a theologian at Boston College who has studied sports in the framework of Catholic ethics. Knowing what he does now about the potential impact of injuries, he said he probably wouldn’t have wanted his own sons to play.

Frank Splitt, a retired telecommunications specialist who’s relentlessly pressed for Catholic colleges to spearhead a drive to “clean up the cesspool” of bigtime sports, said progress was blunted because “when money is involved, nothing else matters nearly as much. Nobody wants to touch this thing because it could impact their income.”

The medical red flags exist within a much larger indictment of high-profile college sports.

Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Taylor Branch, in a blistering attack in the November 2011 *Atlantic* magazine, accused major college athletics of operating a “plantation mentality” by exploiting athletes and subverting education in a chase for riches. Branch has joined a rising chorus of critics who claim that greed and craving for media fame have subverted the purposes of education and the welfare of athletes. These critics have frequently targeted the National Collegiate Athletic Association for allegedly condoning bad behavior.

Scientists in brain research have also warned against complacency. Dr. Julian Bailes, a neurosurgeon who has studied former NFL players, wrote in *The Sport Digest* that a boy suiting up for football understands that risks include blown knees and paralyzing broken necks. “Those are all known risks,” he wrote. “But you don’t sign up to become a brain-damaged young adult.”

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*Consider James Michener's perspective on America's sports culture—provided in his blockbuster 1976 bestseller, Sports in America:*

*Football has been so enshrined as a spectator sport, both in college and professionally, that it would be impossible for revisionists to alter it without protests of an almost revolutionary character. As long as the deadly violence does not accelerate, football is in no danger of discipline from without, and it is my own sad guess that deaths could triple or quadruple without much outcry.*

*Michener believed football is the American form of violence that is morally sanctioned by the public. So too, collateral damage and bad behavior are either overlooked or simply given a headline for a day and a passing glance by the public. Incidents are soon forgotten. In effect, collateral damage and bad behavior are legally and morally sanctioned by the American public. It's a price Americans seem willing to pay for their entertainment. So, is it any wonder that elected officials treat serious reform—such as requiring compliance to measures of transparency, accountability, oversight, and enforcement—as political suicide? (2010)*

—Frank G. Splitt (From "Death Puts Focus on College Athletics,"  
[http://www.thedrakegroup.org/Splitt\\_Focus.pdf](http://www.thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Focus.pdf))

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**Frank G. Splitt** is the former McCormick Faculty Fellow of Telecommunications, McCormick School of Engineering and Applied Science, Northwestern University, and Vice President Emeritus of Educational and Environmental Initiatives, Nortel Networks. He is a member of The Drake Group and the College Sport Research Institute's Advisory Committee, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

*As we noted in the 2001 Knight Commission Report, “on many campuses, faculty indifference prevails even when informed critics make their case.” Some dedicated faculty members are already overburdened as they invest considerable time and energy in teaching and research, as well as professional and other worthy activities. So it is quite encouraging to see the emergence of faculty with the will to act and what appears to be a robust faculty initiative....Needless to say, this effort will not be for the faint of heart. Faculty members need to know that their time will be well spent with a reasonable expectation of success. Though they may not know it, for some it will be the most important work of their professional careers. Unfortunately, faculty work on reform will likely be the least recognized or rewarded by their universities. (2003)*

—Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President Emeritus, University of Notre Dame

*Frank Splitt’s well-researched brief identifies clearly the distortion of institutional priorities and the threats to academic integrity that result from increasing commercialization and obsession with winning in “big-time” college sports. The situation has developed gradually over the past 100+ years, and now its correction faces major obstacles, both financial and psychological, in particular, the dependence on revenues from football and men’s basketball to fund bonded indebtedness on expensive athletics facilities and to support the non-revenue producing sports, and the over-identification by too many alumni and other supporters of their own value with “their” school’s athletic success. Can the situation be corrected? I believe it can, but with great difficulty. It will demand a long-term, coordinated effort by responsible faculty leaders, presidents, and governing board members who are willing to put aside personal advantage and work together to do what is right for their institutions and the educational enterprise. Frank Splitt has pointed us down the right path. Will we have the courage and perseverance to follow it? (2003)*

—John W. Prados, Vice President Emeritus, University of Tennessee, and former president, Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology

**NOTE:** The above quotes were taken from the brief “Reclaiming Academic Primacy in Higher Education.” The Reverend Hesburgh’s remarks are from his Foreword on page vii while Dr. Prados’ remarks are from his commentary on page xi. The brief can be accessed at [http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt\\_Reclaiming\\_Academic\\_Primary.pdf](http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Reclaiming_Academic_Primary.pdf)

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