

## *College Athletics Clips*

### *Collegiate Athletics Reform: The Tainted Glory of College Sports*

#### *Clips Guest Commentary*

*Our guest author focuses on the motivation behind Sonny Vaccaro's endorsement of David Ridpath's book, Tainted Glory, and the antitrust lawsuits against the NCAA while again pointing out the need for corrective action in the world of college sports.*

*Frank G. Splitt, 11-17-12*

*If you care, truly care about sports and academics—you have to read this book.  
—Sonny Vaccaro, former Sports Marketing Executive*

The above quote was taken from the jacket for David Ridpath's 2012 book, *Tainted Glory*. [1]

**Notwithstanding** the claim of Robert Lipsyte, former *New York Times* columnist that “this is the best insider’s examination of a corrupt system that I have ever read,” few sport fans will actually take the time to respond to Vaccaro’s appeal. No doubt, Ridpath’s book will be considered by NCAA , college, and government officials as well as media supporters and other defenders of the status quo, as just the latest in a very long list of revelatory books on the corrupt college sports entertainment business – books they seem to believe are akin to attacks on motherhood and the American flag. [2]

To better understand the motivation behind Vaccaro’s appeal see Libby Sander’s article, “The Gospel According to Sonny,” [3] wherein Sander tells how Sonny Vaccaro helped commercialize college sports and why he wants athletes to get their due.

More insights into Vaccaro’s motivation can be found in Pulitzer-Prize-winning Taylor Branch’s essay “The Shame of College Sports.” [4] Branch begins his narrative with remarks about Vaccaro and then elaborates later in the narrative on Vaccaro’s behind-the-scenes role in the antitrust lawsuits against his nemesis (the NCAA).

*The NCAA would have you believe that it is the great protector of amateur athletics, preventing college athletes from being tainted by the river of money pouring over college sports. In fact, the NCAA's real role is to oversee the collusion of university athletic departments, whose goal is to maximize revenue and suppress the wages of its captive labor force, aka the players. [5]  
— Joe Nocera, New York Times columnist*

Also consider Vaccaro’s comment:

*It has taken me a long time to acknowledge the inequity in athletics and academics. When you are so deeply involved on one side of the fence you fail to see the other. When I finally emerged from my cocoon and looked over the other side of the fence, I knew then that I wanted to get out my sword and go after the windmills. I wanted to try and make sense of reasons for the failure of people to understand that academics and athletics could coincide in college sports. [6]*

The most poignant of all Vaccaro stories comes from Neal Gabler, a University of Southern California professor, journalist, author, film critic and political commentator. His essay, "The Redemption of a Sneaker Pimp,"[7] addresses two questions, to wit: 1) Did Sonny Vaccaro ruin college sports? and 2) Is he really the right guy to save them? Gabler tells how Vaccaro has been criticized through the years for turning college sports into big business that takes advantage of so-called student athletes.

He then tells how Vaccaro intends to make amends with the sports world before it's too late. Vaccaro is hoping his lawsuit will do just that with respect to his reputation. "He doesn't want to be known as the man who commercialized amateur athletics. He wants to be known as the man who wound up changing the system that abused young athletes. He just might do it," says Gabler.

Finally, we all need to wake up and face a sad reality: Our nation's institutions of higher education are academically adrift in a sea of sports and mediocrity. America cannot compete in the 21st-century global marketplace by being the least-educated industrial nation in the world ... a nation in which its colleges and universities serve as prostitutes for the sports entertainment industry—with many focusing resources on athletics at the expense of academics so its best and most important future products could eventually be limited to athletic sports entertainment venues and world-class athletic entertainers.

Unfortunately, the slow but sure decline of America's educational system will continue, unless and until the growth of the professionalized college sports entertainment industry is restrained 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"-requiring 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 that—like the current Vaccaro-inspired antitrust lawsuits—would be strongly resisted by the NCAA, which admits nothing and denies everything, while obfuscating and litigating to the best of its considerable ability.

Perhaps it will be left to Sonny Vaccaro and the likes of David Ridpath and his colleagues in The Drake Group to bring about significant corrective action in collegiate athletics that have been tainted by immense oceans of tax-free money. Absent this corrective action, reform-minded organizations and individuals are likely to adopt the approach of Don Quixote's faithful squire Sancho Panza and just laugh at America's dysfunctional schools and government, viewing the battle against academic corruption, exploitation, crime, and complicity in college athletics with all of its ironies in dark, sardonic humor.

## POSTSCRIPT

*Once you get rid of integrity, the rest is a piece of cake.* — **Larry Hagman**, as J.R. Ewing, a rapacious, roguishly charming Texas oilman on "Dallas."

Three recent publications inspired the above Clips Guest Commentary: 1) Dave Ridpath's book, *Tainted Glory*, 2) Neal Gabler's October 2012, *Playboy* article, "The Redemption of a Shoe Pimp," and 3) Brad Wolverton's *Chronicle* article, "Need 3 Quick Credits to Play Ball: Call Western Oklahoma." [8]

Ridpath's book provides a striking example—a case study—of how America's institutions of higher education destroy academic integrity. In a foreword to the book, Dr. Richard Vedder said: *The commercialization of big time sports has led universities to compromise their academic and moral integrity. The time for reform is now.*

The Clips commentary formed the basis for a review of the book.[9] Both the book and Gabler's essay are referenced in the commentary.

In the third publication, Brad Wolverton describes how providing accredited 10-day online academic courses enable college athletes to satisfy eligibility requirements with a minimum of effort—generating significant revenue for the institution. The process certainly raises serious questions about the institution's academic integrity but even more serious questions about the integrity of the NCAA's Academic Progress and Graduation Rates.

Shortly after the publication of Wolverton's piece, a newspaper report detailed accusations from a University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill reading specialist about how the school and its academic support system tolerated and participated in cheating to keep athletes eligible to compete.[10] The specialist said numerous people in the academic support program looked the other way at plagiarism and knew of the school's no-show classes that were billed as lecture classes but never met. Those classes were frequently a favorite of athletes.

In the end, it's about glorious pageantry, rabid fans, and America's sports culture, but above all it's about enabling academic corruption and the loss of academic integrity, complicity and immense amounts of tax-free money. A good sense of the glory and money dimensions as well as the sports entertainment industry can be obtained by viewing *CBS's 60 Minutes* program segment, "Has college football become a campus commodity?"[11]

FGS, 11-27-12

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## ENDNOTES

1. Ridpath, B. David, *Tainted Glory: Marshall University, the NCAA, and One Man's Fight for Justice*, iUniverse, 2012.
2. For example, here's a revelatory book list: Paul Gallico's *Farewell to Sport*, James Michner's *Sports in America*, Walt Byers' *Unsportsmanlike Conduct*, Allen Sack's and Ellen Staurowsky's *College Athletes for Hire*, Murray Sperber's *Shake Down the Thunder, Onward to Victory*, and *Beer and Circus*, Rick Telander's *The Hundred Yard Lie*, John Thelin's *Games Colleges Play*, Andy Zimbalist's *Unpaid Professionals*, Jim Duderstadt's *Intercollegiate Athletics and the American University*, Don Yaeger's and Doug Looney's *Under the Tarnished Dome*, Allen Sack's *Counterfeit Amateurs*, John Gerdy's *Sports: The All-American Addiction and Airball*, William Dowling's *Confessions of a Spoilsport*, Mike Oriard's *Bowled Over*, Ron Smith's *Pay for Play*, Mark Yost's *Varsity Green*, and Ken Armstrong's and Nick Perry's *Scoreboard Baby*.
3. Sander, Libby, "The Gospel According to Sonny," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 25, 2010, <http://chronicle.com/article/Sonny-Vaccaro-Helped/123672/>.
4. Branch, Taylor, "The Shame of College Sports," *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 2011, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/10/the-shame-of-college-sports/8643/>.
5. Nocera, Joe, "The College Sports Cartel," *New York Times*, Dec. 30, 2011 [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/31/opinion/nocera-the-college-sports-cartel.html?\\_r=1&todaypaper](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/31/opinion/nocera-the-college-sports-cartel.html?_r=1&todaypaper)

6. Vaccaro, John P., An excerpt from Sonny Vaccaro's, Nov. 2, 2010, comment on "Collegiate Athletics Reform ... It's a long and Lonely Journey," [http://www.thedrakegroup.org/Splitt\\_Journey.pdf](http://www.thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Journey.pdf).
7. Gabler, Neal, "The Redemption of a Shoe Pimp," *Playboy*, Vol. 59, No. 8, October 2012.
8. Wolverton, Brad, "Need 3 Quick Credits to Play Ball: Call Western Oklahoma," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 16, 2012; <http://chronicle.com/article/Need-3-Quick-Credits-to-Play/135690/>.
9. Splitt, Frank, "The Tainted Gory of College Sports," *Amazon.com*, November 20, 2012, <http://www.amazon.com/gp/pdp/profile/A3927GE69M656Q>.
10. Editorial, "The deeper scandal with college athletes: Report raises questions about athletes ill-equipped for UNC," *Charlotte Observer*, November. 19, 2012, <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/2012/11/19/3677036/the-deeper-scandal-with-college.html#storylink=cpy#storylink=cpy>.
11. "Has college football become a campus commodity?" *CBS 60 Minutes*, November 18, 2012, [http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-18560\\_162-57551556/has-college-football-become-a-campus-commodity/](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-18560_162-57551556/has-college-football-become-a-campus-commodity/)