

Cheating in College Athletics: Presidential Oversight Notwithstanding

By Frank G. Splitt

BACKGROUND – In a recent *Inside Higher Ed* article, Elia Powers correctly states: "It's standard practice for a college president's job description to include the phrase 'athletics oversight,'"¹ Also, Jim Duderstadt, President Emeritus and University Professor of Science and Engineering, University of Michigan, is quoted as saying: "Presidents sometimes don't realize how disruptive athletics scandals can be to universities and to their own work; and, the idea of putting athletics oversight in the hands of presidents was supposed to make them more inclined to control the beast, but presidents have largely been unable to stop the enterprise from careering out of control."

DOWNSIDE OF PRESIDENTIAL OVERSIGHT – Apparently, no one anticipated the horrific downside to putting athletics oversight in the hands of sitting presidents who are literally caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place—"between a public demanding high quality entertainment from the commercial college sports industry they are paying for, and governing boards who have the capacity (and all too frequently the inclination) to fire presidents who rock the university boat too strenuously."²

The NCAA hired Dr. Myles Brand, a president out of Indiana University, to serve as its president as well as its academic front man. Brand is the first university president to so serve. The NCAA then went on to appoint like-minded presidents to its Executive Committee.

During his tenure in office, Brand has continued the pattern by appointing NCAA-friendly presidents to his special 'study' committees. Similarly, the Knight Foundation appointed several status-quo-defending presidents to its Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics—facilitating the co-option of this Commission by the NCAA.

The presidents have not only been unable to stop the college sports enterprise from careering out of control, but, on the contrary, have contributed in large measure to building the colossal college sports entertainment business.³ In so doing they have secured their jobs by keeping their booster trustees as happy donors with tax benefits, legislators as enthusiastic supporters, and, most important of all, cashing in on the ocean of money generated by their sports business.

Considering the benefits, it's easy for an otherwise distinguished college president to give eloquent lip service to athletics oversight and look the other way while his/her school cheats in one way or another to stay competitive, especially so when almost all the other presidents are doing the same. Besides, cheating in college athletics has become part of America's sports culture and who wants to be a spoilsport?

CHEATING IN COLLEGE ATHLETICS – Similarities exist between today and the 1960s-1970s era—rendering an insight into why what occurred decades ago, with the

widespread use and abuse of recreational drugs, provides a context for what occurs today in big-time college athletics. "Rules and laws aren't always the factors determining behavior in society. Sometimes it's the prevailing culture" says Mike Imren.⁴

Imren also says a stigma wasn't always attached to smoking cigarettes or even drinking and driving. They were simply things people did without thinking. It was simply part of the culture. Now society and sports emphasize the adverse health effects as well as legal consequences of those activities. According to Imren, baseball players believed it was OK to use performance enhancers in the 1980s-2000s because it was ingrained in the culture, saying: "Participants didn't necessarily think it was all right. They just thought it fell into a wink-wink gray area that wasn't all wrong. Some players have been scared straight. Yet many likely continue to try to beat testing and the system."

So too it is with cheating in college athletics that ranges from breaking NCAA rules to the use of performance-enhancing drugs and academic corruption.⁵ Everybody cheats to one degree or another; it's ingrained in America's sports culture as is the fine art of casting a blind eye. It's only wrong if you get caught.

NEED FOR A BRIGHT LINE – As many of America's colleges and universities have now become dependent on their take of the revenues related to their service as homes for the NFL's and NBA's minor league football and basketball teams, there is a compelling need for a bright line to be drawn between permissible and illegitimate support of big-time football and men's basketball programs at these schools.

No such bright line has ever been drawn and enforced. If drawn, it would be subject to considerable downward pressure to lower the bar so as to allow the schools to recruit and keep academically disadvantaged college athletes eligible to play and even graduate from academically shallow "diploma-mill-like" general studies programs.

The latter course of action was made all the easier when Congress made clear last year that it stands firmly alongside the colleges on accreditation matters. The outcome of recent accreditation wars between the U. S. Department of Education (DOE) and the colleges appears to indicate that colleges, rather than the DOE and its approved accrediting agencies, have secured the right to define academic success—giving colleges, the authority to set the terms of their own academic evaluations.

These events take us to another Imren insight: "Education isn't what matters most anymore. Not even winning is. A school would be content with stupid losers if the program still generated enough revenue."⁶

THE U.S. CONGRESS – Congress could follow up on previous investigations with a hearing on an unheralded national scandal—cheating in college athletics driven by tax-free money generated by the NCAA's participation in the college sports entertainment business. However, many, if not most, members of Congress consider taking on the NCAA to be political suicide—no matter the long-term harm to our nation resulting from the high-jacking of its education system by this business.

Members of Congress appear to have separated what they think is right from what they think will work. This is an election year when political realities dictate a focus on more pressing concerns such as getting elected/re-elected, the economy and terrorism. In the end, tolerating cheating in college athletics via performance-enhancing drugs and academic corruption appears to be preferable to confronting the formidably resourced NCAA and its member institutions. Maybe so, but still one must wonder—change is in the air.

CONCLUDING REMARKS – People who should know better simply look the other way, or are taken in by the NCAA's spin, letting America's taxpayers continue subsidizing the business of college sports played by professional athletes, who must pose as students as part of the NCAA's student-athlete charade. But not all cheaters are created equal. The degrees of cheating and associated rationale are as diverse as are the schools and the individuals involved—presidents, trustees, athletic directors, boosters, coaches, and faculty.

To whatever degree, as Paul Gallico wrote some seventy years ago: "College football today is one of the last great strongholds of genuine old-fashioned American hypocrisy."⁷ Today he would have to give equal billing not only to college basketball, but to all the cheaters in college athletics.

But at what cost is all of this cheating to the educational mission and academic integrity of America's institutions of higher education and to American taxpayers? Obviously, that will be a problem for someone else to face.

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NOTES

1. Powers, Elia, "SPORTS AND THE PRESIDENTIAL PEDIGREE," *Inside Higher Ed*, Feb. 20, 2008, <http://insidehighered.com/news/2008/02/20/scandal> . In large part, this essay is based on the author's posted comments on this article.
2. Duderstadt, James J., *Intercollegiate Athletics and the American University: A University President's Perspective*, Epilogue, First paperback edition, University of Michigan Press, 2003
3. . Splitt, Frank G., "Presidents Flex Their Muscles to Maintain the Status Quo in Big-Time College Sports," http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Presidents_Flex_Their_Muscles.pdf
4. Imrem, Mike, "Steroids can be fuzzy issue for some of us," *The Daily Herald*, February 19, <http://www.dailyherald.com/story/?id=137628>
5. Splitt, Frank G., "Going Beyond the Mitchell Report: Cheating in College Sports via Performance Enhancing Drugs and Academic Corruption," http://www.thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Mitchell_Beyond.pdf.
6. Imren, Mike, "Blame adults for lawlessness in college sports," *The Daily Herald*, February 10, 2008, <http://www.dailyherald.com/story/?id=132051>.
7. Gallico, Paul, *Farewell to Sport*, Knopf, New York, NY, 1938.