

# **Sports in America: Facing Up To Global Realities**

***Three Related Commentaries***

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*Greed, fanatic sports fans, an apathetic public and inconsistent government policies allow the commercially driven college-sports enterprise to grow unchecked, all but guaranteeing distracted, booster-beholden university administrators and an expanding set of fun-loving consumers for their entertainment business ... a business that has hijacked the academic mission of many universities.*

*America has the most to lose as it confronts new global realities with its STEMS gap and its institutional priority of athletics over academics – all the while handicapped by the public's continued obsession with sports entertainment. America's present-day position does not present a pretty picture.*

## INTRODUCTION TO THE COMMENTARIES

Milton Friedman once said “the proper role of athletic activity at a university is to foster healthy minds and healthy bodies, not to produce spectacles.”<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the most important products from some of our nation's most prestigious colleges and universities appear to be entertainment venues for its sports-obsessed public and athletes that will graduate to the National Football League and National Basketball Association; this rather than prioritizing the transmission of understanding, ideals and values to students while adding to the body of intellectual knowledge and know-how.

*The Wall Street Journal* published three noteworthy stories on college sports that offer chilling evidence that America's colleges and universities are helping to lead the way as it slithers toward second-rate nationhood.<sup>2-4</sup> For all intents and purposes, government at all levels stands idle while many of its most prestigious schools prostitute themselves in a mostly futile quest for fame and fortune via their sports entertainment businesses.

The *Journal* stories provide additional insights into what's going on with sports in America, specifically with the big-time college sports entertainment industry. These insights are valuable because they indicate that this industry continues to distract the public, its elected officials, and others from serious issues confronting our nation. For example, consider the weak response of the co-chairs of the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics to the recent howl and cry for a college football playoff emanating from the media, fans, and politicians—including President Obama and, more recently, the House Energy and Commerce Committee.<sup>5</sup>

These insights are also valuable because they indicate that the college sports entertainment industry continues to operate as a very large, powerful, and politically connected enterprise that simply does as it pleases—seemingly not accountable to anyone, least of all the federal government. Briefly:

**Darren Everson** amplified current talk about a bigger *March Madness* event with his story;<sup>2</sup> and there is even talk of a 128-team tournament. Perhaps the promoters that benefit from the expanded commerce that provides many of them with a very fine living—making some very rich—would brand Friedman as a radical cynic.... a brand not unfamiliar to reform-minded school presidents and faculty.

**Hannah Karp** tells how wealthy alumni and other boosters exert undue influence by writing big checks to get what they want done at 'their' colleges and universities. Whoever thinks that presidents run their schools has another think coming.

**Mark Yost** claimed Nathan Tublitz, an Oregon biology professor and co-chair of the reform-minded Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics (COIA), and other critics are mostly howling into the wind.<sup>4</sup> He quoted Prof. Tublitz as saying: "The mission of the university is to educate students and perform cutting-edge research, to be spending so much money on an auxiliary enterprise is not only scandalous, it's criminal." As will be seen, things are worse yet.

It seems as if there is no limit to the greed and to the number of schools that are willing to give their all to feed at a tax-free money trough as well as to number of fans that exhibit extreme irrationality concerning their team's games—especially bowl games.

College sports entertainment rules, no matter how negative its impact on America's education system and how damaging its effect on our nation's future position on the world stage.

The culprits are many and varied, beginning with a sports obsessed public that seems to value sports over education as it craves 24/7 entertainment—a pathological cultural problem. Then there are the promoters of ever expanding sports venues such as the expansion of NCAA's *March Madness* basketball tournament to 96 teams described by Everson—as well as the Big Ten Conference to 12 schools<sup>6</sup>—and the wealthy boosters described by Karp who actually direct the show at many schools.

The loss of academic primacy at all too many colleges and universities supporting big-time football and men's basketball programs has not gone unnoticed by America's Asian and Middle-eastern competitors. They have prioritized the education of their citizenry above all else as they build world-class universities with laser-like focus on academics, especially science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, rather than building facilities for the entertainment of spectators or the employment of 'student-athletes.'

The following commentaries tell a good part of the story.

## NOTES

1. Taken from Friedman's 1998 endorsement of the *Rutgers 1000* campaign where he said: "Universities exist to transmit understanding and ideals and values to students, and to add to the body of intellectual knowledge, not to provide entertainment for spectators or employment for athletes. The proper role of athletic activity at a university is to foster healthy minds and healthy bodies, not to produce spectacles."
2. Everson, Darren, "Why March Madness Needs 96 Teams," subtitled: "Talk of Adding More Schools to the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament Has the Support of Many," *The Wall Street Journal*, page D10, Dec. 15, 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704869304574596193031015448>
3. Karp, Hannah, "Texas Football Boosters Think Big" subtitled: "Billionaire Supporters Help the Longhorns' Program Set a Revenue Record," *The Wall Street Journal*, page D7, Dec. 17, 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704541004574600051780005902.html>
4. Yost, Mark, "Building Teams, Brick by Brick," subtitled: "Who pays for the expensive facilities arms race?" *The Wall Street Journal*, Leisure & Arts, page W14, Dec. 19-20, 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704541004574600002554600262.html>
5. Kirwan, William E. and Turner, R. Gerald, "College Sports in Financial Crisis, Playoff Not the Answer," *The Washington Post*, December 19, 2009, accessible at the Knight Commission's Website, <http://www.knightcommissio.org>.

The authors are correct in saying that a playoff is not the answer to the financial crisis in college sports, but neither is their proposed solution that is narrowly focused on the school's consideration of a new business model for their athletic programs. The Commission's plan to collaborate with the leaders in higher education and athletic directors to develop a reform agenda is misguided in the sense that these leaders and athletic directors have a strong vested interest in maintaining the highly commercialized and professionalized programs they developed over the years.

Also, the authors avoid the real issues confronting colleges and universities supporting big-time football and men's basketball programs. The professionalization of these programs—wrought by the NCAA and its minions—is enabled by academic corruption. Furthermore, wealthy, highly influential sports boosters—not school presidents—occupy the power centers at these schools and so control America's major college sports programs. These boosters don't seem to realize that the schools are supposed to be in the education business, not the entertainment business. A new business model reflecting this understanding along with a clear prioritization of academics over athletics and full transparency regarding all aspects of athletic operations—including related academics and financials—would be a big step in the right direction.

6. *Associated Press*, "Big Ten to revisit adding 12<sup>th</sup> school," *The Daily Herald*, Dec. 16, 2009.

## THE COMMENTARIES

1. *Sports in America 2005: Facing Up to Global Realities*, 2005, page 4.
2. *Are Big-Time College Sports Good for America?*, 2006, page 8.
3. *Sports in America 2007: Facing Up to Global Realities*, 2007, page 16.

# Sports in America 2005: Facing Up to Global Realities

CollegeAthleticsClips.Com Guest Commentary

by Frank G. Splitt

*From the Clips Editor: Once again Frank Splitt – thinker, writer, engineer, educator, advocate – provides a thought-provoking perspective on American sports. If you never heard of a “STEM” before, read on.*

Posted 10 November 05

*He who knows not that he knows not is a fool; shun him.  
He who knows not and knows that he knows not is a child; teach him.  
He who knows but knows not that he knows is asleep; wake him.  
He who knows and knows that he knows is wise; follow him.*

*Ancient Arab Proverb*

**AMERICA’S OBSESSION WITH SPORTS** James Michener provided deep insights into our national obsession with college sports in his 1976 best seller, *Sports in America*. Among other things, Michener said sports are a major factor in American life and in the life of other countries as well – nothing to worry about at the time.

Today, however, America has the most to lose as it confronts new global realities with its continued obsession with sports. Here’s why:

You can ask Americans about big-time college sports and they will be willing to tell you three things: first, it’s great entertainment; second, they know most schools cheat; and third, they don’t want to be bothered with the details of related issues and reform efforts.

For many Americans the most important page in their newspaper is the one carrying the betting line; and, for many wealthy alumni, the target for major contributions is not for academics, but rather for their alma mater’s athletics fund.

**CHINA’S OBSESSION WITH STEMs** According to a Sept. 8, 2005, page-one story, “Inside Pentagon, A Scholar Shapes Views of China,” by Neil King in *The Wall Street Journal*, Beijing sees the U.S. as a military foe.

But why fight the best customer for your textile and manufactured products? And, why would China ever want to fight a military war against the United States rather than waging a less painful and more profitable economic war against an adversary that is not only losing its edge in R&D, but also is preoccupied with fun and games?

In China, which educates approximately one-half of the world’s engineers, engineering education is valued as a preparation for contributions in government, policy, innovation, intellectual property, broad engineering disciplines, and manufacturing. The study of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEMs) is considered to be a patriotic duty — providing a robust pipeline of human resources for R&D.

This will be China's real army — fighting to dominate the technology-driven, global economy that is both expanding and becoming evermore complex.

**AMERICA VS. CHINA** It seems that only in seemingly complacent America that is governed mostly by lawyers, can we find a general public that views sports as super cool while STEMs are considered to be nerdy and where athletes have a definite edge when it comes to college admission.

Meanwhile in China, its president and every member of its nine-man governing central committee are engineers by profession, as are scores of other leaders – ranging from ministers and governors to CEOs and entrepreneurs.

Also, enormous investments are being made to upgrade its university system, STEM students have a definite edge, and English is becoming big business as the country's growing middle class pays to learn the language of global commerce.

**DESTROYING A PRECIOUS RESOURCE** America's love affair with big-time college-sports entertainment in combination with excessive cynicism, apathy (if not purposeful ignorance), and gambling, has been a recipe for growing commercialization at America's institutions of higher learning.

Excessive commercialization has brought academic corruption, financial shenanigans, increasing expenditures on athletics, and money-focused presidents who view sports programs as an economic necessity and undergraduate education as an expensive nuisance.

Worse yet, greed, fanatic sports fans, an apathetic public and inconsistent government policies allow the commercially driven college-sports enterprise to grow unchecked, all but guaranteeing distracted, booster-beholden university administrators and an expanding set of fun-loving consumers for their entertainment business ... a business that has hijacked the academic mission of many universities.

If all of this is coupled with the rising costs of residential higher education (without corresponding improvements in academics) and improved technology-driven competitive education delivery systems, we are led to the conclusion that America's higher education enterprise is rapidly becoming untenable – unable to survive, just as predicted by Peter Drucker back in 1997.

It is ironic that the government's subsidy of college sports via favorable tax policies is helping to fuel the destruction of what has been one of our nation's most precious resources.

**AMERICA NEEDS TO FACE UP TO GLOBAL REALITIES** The technology-driven, global economy is both expanding and becoming evermore complex. There will be no place in the game for societies that remain clueless — asleep at the switch, not knowing what is at stake, or, preoccupied with other things.

Michener put the reason for the lack of public reaction this way (with reference to injuries and fatalities in high school and college football): "... because every society decides what it is willing to pay for its entertainment, and if football injuries and deaths do not markedly exceed the present rate, they will not be considered excessive.... Football has been so enshrined as a spectator

sport...that it would be impossible for revisionists to alter it without protests of an almost revolutionary character.”

Little did Michener know that an obsession with sports in America would help lubricate its slip from its position of global economic and business leadership. But sports aren't the only lubricant.

The drive for incremental (quarter-to-quarter) profit improvements “demanded” by Wall Street has resulted in all too many short-term-thinking CEOs that strive to keep their jobs by pleasing the 'street.' Most of these CEOs curtail investment in innovation-breeding incubators and long-term projects – even abandoning R&D and treating engineers as either disposable or outsourceable commodities. Companies require instant gratification and returns on their new engineering hires – on-the-job training, a science and math brain drain, and the future, who really cares?

If the US businesses continue in this mode, R&D will be conducted in labs far from America. Microsoft plans to nearly double its workforce in India over the next four years with Bill Gates, the company's chairman saying: “The growth in employment for Microsoft will be more in India than the United States.”

Such actions ripple down — reducing the demand for engineers and scientists and STEM students. It is surprising how quickly students perceive change and alter their choice of a major to follow the money. There has been a large fall off of Computer Science students and Electrical and Computer Engineering is also declining. Look for more of America's young folks to become lawyers and financial persons unless we can develop turnaround strategies and tactics. Unfortunately, it is difficult to abandon tactics that are adding to current profits.

All but forgotten are the sobering words of the January 2001, Hart-Rudman Commission Report: “... the inadequacies of our systems of research and education pose a greater threat to U.S. national security over the next quarter century than any potential conventional war that we might imagine.” America must come to better understand its critical shortcomings and shortsightedness.

**WHAT TO DO?** So, what do we, as a nation, need to be thinking about if we are going to continue as a dominant player on the world stage in the 21st century? Might I first suggest that we need to get priorities right at our nation's universities. Members of top-ranked BCS football teams and the NCAA's Final-Four basketball teams will not likely be eligible to play in this global game.

America's higher education enterprise should be focused on academics not athletics. This means emphasis on learning and research not on commercialized sports entertainment and health-spa-like facilities. We need to think about our universities and STEMs literacy in a global context. These will be the arsenals and 'tools' of modern-day economic warfare.

Pentagon strategists need to balance the input from high-cost 'China scholars' with a relatively low-cost reading of two best-selling books, Thomas Friedman's, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, and Jared Diamond's, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. Perhaps they will come to understand that we have much to learn from past societies that destroyed themselves by destroying their resource base.

There should not only be concern at the Pentagon, but also at the highest levels of our government — concern that things are moving in a direction where America could very well be a net loser in a modern-day economic war.



**THE GOOD NEWS** A democracy has as one of its fundamental strengths the ability to bring great ideas, innovation and individual initiative, into what could otherwise be a failing system. But democracy is only as strong as the people who are willing to keep it vital and ever evolving. We all need to wake up and rise to the challenge.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE** This commentary is an outgrowth of a 'brief' prepared for the April 2005, workshop, "What Does it Means to be Educated in the 21st Century?," sponsored by the National Science Foundation (NSF) and hosted by Chancellor Nancy Cantor at Syracuse University. It also reflects my experience working with the International Engineering Consortium and the Electrical and Computer Engineering Department Heads Association on the November 2005, NSF sponsored workshop, "Globalization Effects on ECE Education for the Engineering Profession," hosted by President William Wulf at the National Academy of Engineering. Portions of the commentary have been posted on *InsideHigherEd.com* and published in THE INTERFACE, the joint newsletter of the IEEE Education Society and the ASEE Electrical and Computer Engineering Division.

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# 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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.

**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 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."

*America's higher education enterprise should be focused on academics not athletics. This means emphasis on learning and research not on commercialized sports entertainment and health-spa-like facilities. We need to think about our universities and STEMs literacy in a global context.*

# Sports in America 2007: Facing Up to Global Realities

*By Frank G. Splitt*

**INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND** – America's apparent priority of athletics over academics, particularly STEMS (Science-Technology-Engineering-Mathematics), can have negative consequences in our changing world. [1] This essay continues discussions begun in previous essays. [2, 3] But first, here's some stage-setting background:

America leaves 2007 still facing a wide array of unsettled issues surrounding: unpopular, divisive, resource-draining wars in the Middle East, a global jihad with threats posed by transnational terror networks, homeland security, overuse of foreign oil, the impact of climate change, a healthcare system short on service but long on costs, illegal immigration, neglected repairs/upgrades for aging physical and transportation infrastructure, an overstressed, if not broken, education system warped by sports culture, predicted downstream Social Security funding deficits, inner cities ravaged by criminal drug empires, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and America's growing debt, approximately half of which is held outside the United States.

Taken together, these issues represent enormous challenges of almost paralyzing complexity. The lack of resolution of these issues, along with its loss of prestige on the world stage, undermines America's position as a global military and economic superpower. Furthermore, oil has continued to climb toward \$100 a barrel, big financial companies are now taking multibillion-dollar write-offs linked to the credit-market turmoil, and the Federal Reserve is warning that the nation's economic growth is likely to slow. Making matters worse, loan defaults on adjustable-rate sub-prime mortgages, occasioned by an economic downturn, would aggravate an already bleak mortgage-industry situation, and conceivably provide the tipping point for sending the economy into a tailspin akin to the depression years of the 1930s.

**HIGHER EDUCATION AND BUSINESS INSTITUTIONS** – So what are the forces at work in America's higher education and business institutions? Putting the issue of college sports aside for the moment, it is to be noted that for many years an increasing number of America's front-line colleges and universities have been working to enhance Far and Middle Eastern higher education. Engineering education is no exception. It is difficult to see how, in the long run, America's own schools can provide a proportional advantage to its engineering graduates that offset substantial wage differentials and so arrest off-shoring of engineering functions. [4]

U.S. companies are working to survive in our changing world. Motorola provides an instructive example with its early November 2007, announcement of the opening of its new Beijing R&D complex housing 3,000 employees including 2,000 engineers. It is representative as well. Ten days after the Motorola announcement, AP reported that technology outsourcing is becoming big business in China's northern port city of Dalian. German software giant SAP AG now brings its toughest jobs to Dalian. Along with SAP, Hewlett-Packard Co., IBM Corp., Britain's BT Group PLC, Japan's Yokogawa Electric Corp. and some 230 other foreign companies have flocked to Dalian in the last decade.

The AP story went on to say "a critical mass of development is coming. Ground broke this year for both a \$2.5 billion Intel Corp. factory and a \$6.5 billion nuclear power plant for the city. Cranes line the busy waterfront as office and apartment towers rise at a furious pace." Not to worry! America is doing its own thing in the way of furious building.

**INVESTING IN ATHLETIC INFRASTRUCTURE** – One need only look at big-time (NCAA Div IA) college and university campuses where the building and expansion of football stadiums, basketball arenas, and other athletic facilities reflects the extant values and priorities at these institutions of higher education.

This building frenzy is not only symptomatic of the American public's sports culture, but also of the strong influence of wealthy and/or politically connected boosters, many of whom sit on big-time school governing boards. Stadium expansions across the U.S. – aided and abetted by state and federal policies – are contributing to the ongoing deterioration of America's education infrastructure while the college sports entertainment business grows unabated.

**PUBLIC APATHY** – In the meantime, it seems that the American public is still quite content with not really knowing what's going on so long as it is being entertained – not recognizing that STEMS literacy will be essential in meeting the unsettled issues and challenges we face as a society. Apparently the public does not care that, while we as a nation desperately need a more STEMS literate electorate and STEMS literate leadership, the most important products from many of its big-time colleges and universities are professional football and men's basketball players. These players represent the output of alternative educational systems engineered at Academic Support (Eligibility) Centers that are absolute marvels of ingenuity, innovation, deceit, and deception.

If the truth be told, the warping of educational missions and priorities at U.S. colleges and universities supporting Div IA men's football and basketball programs have made America the laughingstock of our global competitors. These competitors are focused on building – ironically with help from U.S. educators – educational systems that produce graduates that will enable them to compete against the U.S. in our changing world, rather than in sky-boxed stadiums and well appointed basketball arenas.

For example, in China, which educates approximately one-half of the world's engineers, engineering education is valued as a preparation for contributions in government, policy, innovation, intellectual property, broad engineering disciplines, and manufacturing. STEMS study is considered to be a patriotic duty — providing a robust pipeline of human resources for R&D.

It is of interest to note that a 2006 National Science Foundation survey found that 25% of Americans did not know the earth goes around the sun. America's public apathy may very well reflect the fact that most Americans are scientifically illiterate.

**STEMS GAP** – Recently, the media reported a new study demonstrating that students in Asian countries, who are likely to be our chief economic competitors in the 21st century, significantly outperform all U.S. students – pointing to a potential 'STEMS gap' and a corresponding need to guide both the public and Congress to address the problems that have produced this gap as well as the serious consequences the gap may engender.

Lawrence Krauss, professor of physics and astronomy at Case Western Reserve University and chair of the Physics Section of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, describes the need for STEMS related education this way:

*America's current economic strength derives from the investments in fundamental research and technology made a generation ago. Future strength will depend upon research being done today. One might argue that many key discoveries occurred as a result of importing scientific*

*talent. But as foreign educational systems and economies flourish, our ability to attract and keep new talent could easily erode. Even with a continued foreign influx of scientific talent, it would be foolish to expect that we can maintain our technological leadership without a solid domestic workforce as well. Almost all of the major challenges we will face as a nation in this new century, from the environment, national security and economic competitiveness to energy strategies, have a scientific or technological basis. [5]*

**NEED TO OVERCOME IMPEDIMENTS** –If America is to do well in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century’s globalization game, then it needs to get its priorities right, especially at our universities and government institutions. However, according to Henry Kissinger, the entire government system "is now much more driven by short-term political calculations, the need to keep powerful and vocal constituencies happy, and an eye on the next election." [6] This presents difficult political circumstances that can impede progress on corrective-action initiatives, such as reclaiming academic primacy in higher education by requiring appropriate levels of transparency, accountability, and oversight of the NCAA and its member institutions.

On a more positive note, Krauss reports that a group of scientists, journalists and business people held a "science summit" this past summer to discuss ways to build a growing awareness of the importance of scientific issues in government – convening a working group to explore ways that the scientific and business communities might work together to ensure that science becomes an issue in the 2008 campaign. [7]

**CONCLUDING REMARKS** – Today, America has the most to lose as it confronts new global realities with its STEMS gap and its institutional priority of athletics over academics – all the while handicapped by the public’s continued obsession with sports entertainment. America’s present-day position does not present a pretty picture.

Perhaps the mass realization by America’s citizenry, liberal and conservative alike, that, as a whole, it shares responsibility for the resolution of America’s problems. This realization could be of inestimable value in drawing together America’s presently fragmented-and-apart citizenry – after all, these citizens will all share in creating our common future.

If America keeps doing what it has always done, it’s going to get what it always got and is still getting. Obviously, we need to do things differently. A good place to start would be with our national media. A transformation from a seeming obsession with what ‘sells’ -- sex, violence, scandals, and sports – to presentation of more detailed coverage of issues that threaten the future physical and economic well being of America would be a good first step. As for politics, the election of candidates that have a firm grasp of the issues and coherent plans for the future could very well be a consequence of media enhanced voter awareness and enlightenment.

December 7, 2007

## NOTES

1. This essay is based on the letter, “Universities must address priorities,” *Daily Herald*, Nov. 26, 2007.
2. Splitt, Frank G., “SPORTS IN AMERICA 2005: Facing Up to Global Realities,” [http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt\\_Sports\\_in\\_America.pdf](http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Sports_in_America.pdf)
3. \_\_\_\_\_, “ARE BIG-TIME COLLEGE SPORTS GOOD FOR AMERICA?” [http://www.thedrakegroup.org/Splitt\\_Good\\_for\\_America.pdf](http://www.thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Good_for_America.pdf)

4. In the face of rapid globalization, efforts to focus America's engineering schools on innovation and entrepreneurship, though a worthwhile goal, will likely provide a short-term fix at best. Information technology has already changed the way business is done worldwide and will keep on changing it -- smoothing out differentials along the way.
5. Krauss, Lawrence M., "Science and the Candidates," *The Wall Street Journal*, p. A18, December 6, 2007.
6. Professor Krauss is also part of ScienceDebate2008 that issued a public call for a U.S. presidential debate devoted to science and technology – covering three broad categories: the environment, health and medicine, and science and technology policy.
7. Rivkin, David B., "Diplomacy in the Post-9/11 Era," *The Wall Street Journal*, OPINION, p. A11, Nov. 17-18, 2007.

*It is ironic that the government's subsidy of college sports via favorable tax policies is helping to fuel the destruction of what has been one of our nation's most precious resources.*

## THE AUTHOR

**Frank G. Splitt**, is a member of The Drake Group, a former McCormick Faculty Fellow at Northwestern University, and a vice president emeritus of NTI (the U.S. portion of the former Nortel Networks Corporation).

He was the recipient of the *2006 Robert Maynard Hutchins Award* for his courageous defense of academic integrity in collegiate athletics and was the author of “Reclaiming Academic Primacy in Higher Education,” a brief with a Foreword by the Rev. Theodore Hesburgh, C.S.C., President Emeritus of Notre Dame University and a founding Co-Chairman of the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics.

Dr. Splitt also authored “The Faculty-Driven Movement to Reform Big-Time College Sports,”—the sequel to the “Reclaiming” brief—with a Foreword by Dr. James Duderstadt, President Emeritus of the University of Michigan, and an Afterword by Dr. Jon Ericson, former provost and Ellis & Nelle Levitt Professor Emeritus at Drake University. Both documents are accessible at <http://thedrakegroup.org/splittessays.html>.

## **THE DRAKE GROUP**

**The Drake Group Mission:** The mission of The Drake Group (TDG) is to help faculty and staff defend academic integrity in the face of the burgeoning college sport industry. The Drake Group's national network of college faculty lobbies aggressively for proposals that ensure quality education for college athletes, supports faculty whose job security is threatened for defending academic standards, and disseminates information on current issues and controversies in sport and higher education. The Drake Group seeks to form coalitions with other groups that share its mission and goals.

**The Drake Group Vision:** The Drake Group vision is to create an atmosphere on college campuses that encourages personal and intellectual growth for all students, and demands excellence and professional integrity from faculty charged with teaching.

**Contact:** Please contact The Drake Group directly with any questions ([info@thedrakegroup.org](mailto:info@thedrakegroup.org)).

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