

## CollegeAthleticsClips.Com Guest Commentary

*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.*

### Sports in America 2005: Facing Up to Global Realities

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by Frank G. Splitt

*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 AND AN OPPORTUNITY.** The National Academies have responded to a request from concerned members of Congress with a call-to-arms report, “**RISING ABOVE THE GATHERING STORM: Energizing and Employing America for a Brighter Economic Future,**” -- saying: “This nation must prepare with great urgency to preserve its strategic and economic security.” The report (aka the Augustine report) goes on to say that America faces an enormous challenge because of its disadvantage in labor costs; and, that science and technology provide the opportunity to overcome that disadvantage by creating scientists and engineers with the ability to create entire new industries. It is estimated that a coordinated and sustained response to the challenge would cost the country about \$9 billion a year.

In his opening statement for a congressional hearing on the Augustine report, Congressman Sherwood Boehlert (R-NY) said: "Science programs still have to scrounge around for every additional cent; young scientists still have to beg for funds; our education system is still producing too many students who cannot compete with their counterparts around the world; and the federal government is still ignoring our fundamental energy problems while wasting money pandering to special interests."

A salient example of this pandering is the government's favorable tax policies on college sports, particularly the NCAA that is treated as an institution of higher education. Quid pro quo contributions from boosters and the boom in the leasing of stadium skyboxes by corporations and other big-money contributors as well as extortion-like seat taxes, are fueling the uncontrolled growth of the big-time college-sports entertainment business. This is because the federal government weakly enforces its Unrelated Business Income Tax (UBIT) law. Also, a 1999 IRS ruling allows boosters to deduct most of the donations they make to lease skyboxes, estimated to account for billions of dollars to Division I universities.

In effect, the government is subsidizing the college-sports entertainment industry that operates 'free-of-charge' minor leagues for the NFL and the NBA. Elimination of this subsidy would provide substantial incremental tax revenues that could aid the implementation of the Augustine report's recommendations – helping to finance a boost in the federal investment in basic research, recruitment of future STEM teachers, and scholarships for undergraduate STEM students that want to go to college to learn.

Finally, 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

**Frank Splitt** – is an active member of The Drake Group and a frequent contributor to College Athletics Clips. He holds a Ph.D. in Electrical and Computer Engineering from Northwestern University and served as a McCormick Faculty Fellow at its McCormick School of Engineering and Applied Science. He is also Vice President Emeritus of Educational and Environmental Initiatives, Nortel Networks, a Fellow of the International Engineering Consortium, a Life Fellow of the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers, and an Eminent Engineer of Tau Beta Pi. His interests involve research and planning for the future of Engineering Education, environmental conservation, and college-sports reform.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE** This commentary is an outgrowth of a 'brief' prepared for the April 2005, workshop, "What Does it Mean 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. The Augustine report, "RISING ABOVE THE GATHERING STORM: Energizing and Employing America for a Brighter Economic Future," can be viewed at <http://books.nap.edu/catalog/11463.html>.