

Some Prompts for a Congressional Hearing on College Athletics

a CLIPS GUEST COMMENTARY

The author expands his argument for government intervention in big-time collegiate athletics by suggesting prompts that could possibly lead to hearings in the next session of Congress.

by Frank G. Splitt

INTRODUCTION – Discussions with staffers in the office of Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) were initiated as a follow up to the July 2004, publication of “The Faculty-Driven Movement to Reform Big-Time College Sports” [1]. These discussions ultimately led to the congresswoman’s Mar. 17, 2005, remarks for the Congressional Record on The Drake Group’s efforts to bring congressional attention to the need for reform in collegiate athletics [2].

During the course of the discussions, a staffer suggested that I read Pulitzer Prize winning author H. G. (Buzz) Bissinger’s best-selling book, *FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS*, a non-fiction account of life and values in the economically and racially challenged west Texas town of Odessa [3].

Bissinger’s book and his *New York Times*’ article [4], “Innocents Afield,” the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) report [5], “Athletics and Achievement,” and Tom Palaima’s essay [6], “NCAA Panel Disses the Faculty,” may help prompt congressional hearings on the current mess in big-time college sports. Beginning with *FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS*, here’s why:

FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS – Bissinger’s story centered on the 1988 Permian Panthers high-school football team. Like big-time college sports in campus communities, Permian football brought the boosters and people of Odessa together to pull for a winning team in a town where victory is prized above all else – no matter the cost. Reading the book was an eye-opening, educational experience as Bissinger presented a disturbing picture of the values and priorities that exist in a football-crazed town, and, in my view, a metaphor for many, if not most, big-time college campus settings.

It came as no surprise that Bissinger served as the editor of the Philadelphia Inquirer as he moved far beyond the sport into a wide-ranging and penetrating sociological commentary on the times and the place. It is this kind of story that we in The Drake Group are telling about the negative consequences of today’s out-of-control, big-time college sports business – recommending the book as background reading for Department of Education and Congressional staffers working on the complex, multi-layered issues related to college sports.

BISSINGER, WELBURN, AND THE NASBE REPORT – Seemingly on queue, the *New York Times* published Bissinger’s article, “Innocents Afield,” [4], at about the same time I finished reading his book. In the article, he called attention to the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) report, “Athletics and Achievement” [5]. The report called for more scrutiny of high school athletics to ensure academics are a priority – standing in sharp contrast to the shallow, self-serving reports and testimonials proffered by the NCAA and its ardent supporters. In his *Times*’ article, Bissinger quoted from the following remark by NASBE Executive Director Brenda Welburn:

State boards of education have a moral obligation to prevent the exploitation of high school athletes. Many of the problems that have plagued college athletics – shoe agents, mercenary coaches, dubious recruiting, and extravagant gifts – are now encroaching upon

the high school level. It sends a disturbing message to students and the public about the priorities of our schools.

Bissinger concludes his article by saying:

... high school sports will continue to fester into shameful overemphasis in too many places, will continue to emulate the college sports model that is America's educational shame. Which means that by the time we completely ruin the institution of sports for our teenagers, it will be too late to do anything except appoint a national commission to try to figure out how we could have missed so many warning signs.

The NASBE report and Bissinger's writings ought to be required reading for all those who have a stake in the future of America's education enterprise. Members of the Spellings and Knight Commissions come first to mind, however, when it comes right down to it, academics-over-athletics should be a priority for all Americans.

WHY A CONGRESSIONAL HEARING – In view of NCAA President Myles Brand's vacuous response to several of House Committee on Ways & Means Chairman Bill Thomas' questions, one can only wonder how he would respond to Bissinger's and Welburn's remarks, especially under direct questioning during a congressional hearing. Such a hearing would certainly reveal the hypocrisy in Brand's overall response as well as in the many self-serving testimonials by school presidents and others with vested interests in the perpetuation of the NCAA's phony amateur "collegiate" sports model.

The NCAA's use of the phony collegiate model and 'student-athlete' term to defend their tax-exempt programs and modus operandi has served the NCAA well in the past, but at great cost to America's institutions of higher education. This model and terminology have, to various degrees, spawned a culture of academic corruption in colleges and universities supporting big-time football and basketball programs – contributing in large measure to America's educational shame of today and to its potential lack of competitiveness in the expanding technology-based global economy of tomorrow.

Furthermore, the recently released NCAA Presidential Task Force Report "The Second-Century Imperative," – covering the future of Division I Intercollegiate Athletics – is a good example of the Faustian-like bargain made by college and university presidents not only to get and keep their jobs, but to maintain the status quo as well [6 -8].

Taken together, the NCAA's Task Force report and NCAA President Myles Brand's response to Chairman Thomas' questions underscore the NCAA's arrogant obfuscation and the need for a congressional hearing. Why? – to fully expose the association and its secretive ways to the light of day and reveal the true professional nature of big-time college sports as well as its negative impact on America's K-16 education system

Reading Bissinger's *FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS* after reading Walter Isaacson's *BENJAMIN FRANKLIN* and David McCullough's *JOHN ADAMS* revealed the significant change over time in America's values with respect to education. I also wonder how Franklin, Adams and our other Founding Fathers would react if they could witness the effects of the distorted values that permeate America's sport-focused high schools and colleges of today, or, if they read the NCAA Presidential Task Force Report and NCAA President Brand's response to Chairman Thomas' questions. Perhaps thoughtful reading of the NASBE report, Bissinger's writings, and Palaima's essay by members of Congress and their staffs could help prompt congressional hearings on the current mess in big-time college sports.

AFTERWORD – This is further to my previous comment on the NCAA Presidential Task Force Report “The Second-Century Imperative.” In a nutshell, Palaima [7] takes apart the faculty related components of NCAA President Myles Brand’s Task Force Report — exposing it for what it really is: A neatly packaged NCAA shift-the-blame cover up based on false accusations. But why should this come as a surprise to anyone? Consider the following:

As stated above, the report provides a good example of the Faustian-like bargain made by college and university presidents not only to get and keep their jobs, but to maintain the status quo as well [9].

President Brand’s answer to a question by Chairman Thomas contained a supportive quote from Knight Commissioner Peter Litkins, president emeritus of the University of Arizona, who served as the chairman of Brand’s Presidential Task Force.

Thomas’ question was: How does the NCAA accomplish its (primary tax-exempt) purpose of maintaining “the athlete as an integral part of the student body?” Litkins, a former collegiate wrestler at Stanford University, was quoted by Brand as saying: “As a university president and former professor of engineering, I have often said that I learned how to be a professor in the classroom, but I learned how to be a university president on the wrestling mat.”

Litkins statement, like many NCAA-serving testimonials in the past, tell a wonderful story of how participation in collegiate athletics improves fitness, coordination, and self-discipline while providing the spice of college life in the form of camaraderie, a sense of accomplishment and overall well-being — adding comments about how this participation teaches important life lessons, including dealing with adversity, developing a strong work ethic, learning the value of teamwork and building character. Great and true enough, but can’t the same be said for well organized and coached intramural athletics programs?

It is important to note that the NCAA testimonials do not tell how the NCAA accomplishes its (primary tax-exempt) purpose of maintaining “the athlete as an integral part of the student body.” To say the least, it would be interesting to have the reaction of accreditors to this type of ‘evidence’ and alternative education program for athletes wherein the academic credentials and classroom experiences of athletes are so different from those of real college students.

Nonetheless, the testimonials do cover the “sizzling” possibilities part of the NCAA story – the upside. Jim Duderstadt and I, as well as many members of The Drake Group have participated in collegiate athletics and have also experienced some of this upside, but are mindful of, and willing to tell the whole story while working for the remediation of extant problems.

What’s confounding is how the public and those giving upside-only testimonials seem to be so willing to gloss over the downside of the taxpayer-subsidized, highly commercialized version of college sports with all of its related academic corruption and serious, multi-layered issues.

Confounding as well, is that the American public is not inflamed over the use of steroids and stimulants that jeopardize the long-term health of middle-school, high-school, and college athletes while often leading to violent behavior.

We live in a sports-crazed society, the real world where it seems that anything goes so long as it’s entertaining and big money can be made. There is no cry from the public to put an end to the excesses and corruption of big-time college sports, and, there may never be. Sadly, in the real world, we will also see highly respected notables with a vested interest in the status quo – willing to defend it no matter the cost to the long-term future of America’s higher education enterprise.

Isn't that why we have a federal government – to help assure the long-term well being of America by doing what the public and states will not do, or, are not able to do for themselves for whatever reason? It's why The Drake Group has advocated government intervention to clean up the mess in college sports.

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