

Death Puts Focus on College Athletics

College Athletics Clips Guest Commentary

Our guest author uses the accidental death of a Notre Dame videographer to illustrate the potential for a wide range of “collateral damage” associated with big-time college athletics.

By Frank Splitt, Drake Group, 11-16-10

The recent tragic death of Declan Sullivan, a student at Notre Dame University who worked as a videographer for the school’s athletic department, appears to be another example of collateral damage—putting focus on college athletics as well as on America's sports culture; see "Death puts focus on college athletics," <<http://www.dailyherald.com/article/20101113/discuss/711149952/>> and "The lessons from Declan’s death," <<http://www.dailyherald.com/article/20101106/discuss/711079955/>>.

Since deadly football violence triggered President Theodore Roosevelt’s intervention back in 1905, it seems that the immediate and long-term collateral damage related to the nether world of the athletics-entertainment businesses at America's colleges and universities has never exceeded the acceptance threshold of the general public or government officials.

Unfortunately, deaths aren't the only downside to professionalized and highly commercialized big-time collegiate athletics that must be balanced against its intensely promoted upsides. In fact, there's a myriad of potential downsides beyond deaths and serious injuries, to wit:

Many, if not most, big-time athletics programs are characterized by one or more of the following (usually interrelated) symptomatic signs of an athletics-over-academics culture and win-at-any-cost mentality at so-called “beer-and-circus” schools: Academic corruption and reduced academic standards, “Party-animal” students, Negative peer effects, Physical education resources focused on elite athletes who are financially exploited and educationally deprived, Subsidization of the athletics department by general funds, Irrationally exuberant behavior (by coaches, boosters, and fans), Access denied real students by scholarship and special-admit athletes, Intimidated faculty, Use of PEDs (Performance Enhancing Drugs), Violent and/or criminal behavior by athletes, Dark-money payoffs, Lying and cheating by million-dollar coaches and wealthy boosters, and Big-money shoe contracts. Headline scandals and blatant hypocrisy, along with complicity and cover-ups by school and public officials are fairly commonplace.

Consider James Michener's perspective on America's sports culture—provided in his blockbuster 1976 bestseller, *Sports in America*:

Football has been so enshrined as a spectator sport, both in college and professionally, that it would be impossible for revisionists to alter it without protests of an almost revolutionary character. As long as the deadly violence does not accelerate, football is in no danger of discipline from without, and it is my own sad guess that deaths could triple or quadruple without much outcry.

Michener believed football is the American form of violence that is morally sanctioned by the public. So too, collateral damage and bad behavior are either overlooked or simply given a headline for a day and a passing glance by the public. In effect, collateral damage and bad behavior are legally and morally sanctioned by the American public. Incidents are soon forgotten. It's a price Americans seem willing to pay for their entertainment. Is it any wonder that elected officials treat serious reform of collegiate athletics as political suicide?

For more, see "Collegiate Athletics Reform ...It's a Long and Lonely Journey," <http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Journey.pdf>.