

THE KNIGHT COMMISSION ON INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETICS PRESENTS
A SUMMIT ON THE COLLEGIATE ATHLETIC EXPERIENCE

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The George Washington University
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7) Opening Remarks Don McPherson, Executive Director, Sports Leadership Institute, Adelphi University

DON MCPHERSON: Thank you. I'd like to begin by thanking the Commission for taking on and listening to the perspective of student-athletes and also recognizing who student-athletes are, not just on our campus but in our society. And I just came from a school, in addition to running the Sports Leadership Institute, which involves high school and elementary and community based sports in New York, I do lectures on college campuses around sexual violence and dating violence and other types of behaviors and have been for a number of years, more than eighteen years.

I just came from a school recently where three freshmen on a cross-country team were on Facebook. One had a beer in her hand, the other two were also involved in a hazing incident at that school. The pictures from Facebook ended up on the front page of the newspaper. That team has been suspended for the year. The morning I was leaving at 4:00 a.m., checking the news, one of the basketball players on their team was stopped in a traffic stop and found with marijuana and spent the evening in jail. Both of those student-athletes, or that group of student-athletes and the discussion around that campus was, once again here we are looking at the poor behavior when you talk about choices and values of student-athletes. The three young women who were on the cross-country team were on the homepage of badjocks.com, the website devoted to the bad behavior of athletes that we like to obsess about and not focus on people like Kareem here who obviously has shown what student-athletes are in their totality.

The problem with what I just described to you, as I spoke to people in that particular athletics department, as I look at the problems of the behavior of student-athletes across the board, it's not necessarily the behavior of the student-athletes, but it's the isolation of the athletics department that doesn't allow the resources or the information to be shared between coaches and people on campus or people in the greater public and we tend to think that these problems are student-athlete problems. And the reality is that they are not. Facebook is not a problem that all of a sudden athletics departments have to deal with because it was created for athletics departments.

Most people on the athletics department don't know what Facebook is. But people on campus do. And they're struggling with it and they're dealing with it but slaps the university in the face and it slaps the athletics department in the face when it happens to student-athletes.

Let me just say one other thing about the burden on athletics. If a journalism student writes a scathing, racist commentary in the school newspaper on affirmative action, it's not an indictment on the journalism department or those professors. If a chemistry student learns to build some sort of device that makes the toilets explode as from those of us who remember Animal House, the old exploding toilet gag, that's not an indictment on the chemistry department.

But if a student-athlete does something we indict the coaches, we indict athletics and we indict athletics departments as if somehow that's what caused the behavior.

And I want to provide some perspective on where that behavior that we see with our student-athletes is coming from. When we talk about the student population in general we ask young people, especially on college campuses, to make good decisions with either bad information or no information. We used, as Frank talked about earlier, just say no, don't drink and drive, don't do this. The reason why they don't know Nancy Reagan and don't just say no is because it did not work, it doesn't work. We don't talk honestly with our children about sexual behavior, we don't talk honestly with our children about alcohol and yet we promote it every single place they turn.

And we promote it to them because we are like drug dealers. If we get our kids hooked on this stuff early they will be consumers for a lifetime. And so we don't talk to them honestly. We expect them to make good decisions with no information. When it comes to our student-athletes, not only do we expect them to make good decisions with no information, we also expect them to ignore the culture from which they come. We expect them to ignore all the messages that they've received, especially those that are wrapped around the industry of sports. And we expect them to make good decisions and be stellar above all of that.

And I just want to make a comment about—Frank put the picture of the little boy up there with the baseball in his hand, and I want to just take you through what that little boy will see in the course of his lifetime, whether he becomes a student-athlete or not. First of all, if he is an athlete and he is involved in youth sports, he is not involved in the altruistic youth sports that most of the people in this room remember. He is going to be involved in travel leagues and teams and mandated performances that say that the individual is more important than the team, and the town by the way, when you come to travel teams.

And that he's going to be coached by a specialized coach, he's not going to play a number of different sports where he's going to gain an understanding of transferrable skills. He is going to learn one sport and he's going to be told by leagues, by Little League Baseball, USA Soccer, USA Hockey, that you have to specialize in this sport. It's not about being a fit young person, it's about being in that track to become a professional athlete, first thing. The second thing, when it comes to the issues off the field, at ten years old that boy is going to be sold and was sold, our boys were, Kobe Bryant by the NBA and by Nike as the guy who plays Nintendo in the lobby of the hotel, he's a good kid. And Kobe Bryant because of his behavior forced a lot of parents to have to talk to their ten year old and eight year old and nine year old boys who were walking around with a Number jersey on, about rape before they talked to them about intimacy or relationships or responsible relationships. At fifteen that boy is going to be, because he's inspired the worldwide leader in sports, he is going to be having poker parties because their parents believe that's good, safe, wholesome fun, cultivating a gambling problem. And by the way, just a note to the Commission and to higher ed and athletics, if we think that the steroid issue or the alcohol issue is bad, wait until the gambling issue hits our campuses, that we have cultivated a generation of kids who are gambling at home because it's safer than being out on the streets. And parents are promoting that.

By the way, let me just make one other point about the drug use and performance-enhancing drugs ADHD is a problem that I think was created by pharmaceutical companies because we want to drug our children because that's a performance-enhancing drug. It will help you better in the classroom. Everything, every other commercial we see is a drug commercial telling us this will help you perform better at work, this will help you perform better in the bedroom.

That's wrapped around our athletics. How many Viagra, Cealis and performance-enhancing drugs do we see non-stop on every sporting event because it's targeted to men? Another point going to that boy. As he gets older and now he's—let's just say that young boy, once again he has the Kobe Bryant thing, he has the gambling thing now, and that's the same thing that our young boys and girls are growing up with, if he's eighteen years old and he is on the verge of becoming a college athlete, he knows that Terrell Owens' behavior will get you the money quicker than Marvin Harrison's work ethic. We know Terrell Owens, he was—and people say, oh, well the NFL is upset about Terrell Owens—no, they're not. When Terrell Owens is doing all that he was doing, in the midst of all of his rants and his asinine behavior, the NFL put him in a locker room with a naked woman from Desperate Housewives on the opening of Monday Night Football. Our young people see that.

And when you talk about values and choices, that's the values and choices they see the adult world making. They come to our campuses, and again with our student-athletes we expect them to ignore the culture around them. What do they see in the social culture when you talk about violence and alcohol behavior? They see fraternities having parties like "CEOs and office ho's" or here's the one that's even more directly toward student-athletes. "Pro Athletes and Trophy Wives," these are theme parties on college campuses that are going on on a regular basis. They see Ladies' Night, that should be illegal because it flies in the face of laws around alcohol and consent where women are encouraged to come and drink for free because they know men are going to show up.

And we expect our student-athletes to ignore this culture that they live in. And if one student-athlete—and, you know, I always say if one student-athlete, you know, going back to the, you know, question about the behavior, the violent behavior of student-athletes, if there was a student-athlete or a professional athlete, you take all the aggregate of athletes in our culture, was charged with a domestic violence charge, one a day, that would be a lot and we would be up in arms. I guarantee you there are more than 365 restraining orders in a square mile of this building in the past year, and that's this building, not the entire nation.

When you look at the gravity of violence against women, the gravity of violence in our culture and when we see that Kobe Bryant a year ago was defending himself, now you know what people are asking about Kobe Bryant? Can he beat Wilt's number? All you have to do is be able to fill the bucket and it doesn't matter if you do those things.

And I think one of the big problems with all of this is that we have created, for various reasons, this isolation on our college campuses that doesn't see that our student-athletes come through our campuses with all of these different influences, all these different things that they're taking in from the culture. And then we expect them to be above reproach, we expect them to be able to do it perfectly. And the reason why I applaud the Commission is because you did such a tremendous job of looking at presidential control and looking at the entire system. But the thing that we can't control, and that's the beauty of why we're here, and that is the human spirit, the human spirit that comes to our campuses and it's uncontrollable when you're bringing eighteen, nineteen, or twenty year old kids to our campus. And so the challenge is great and we have to listen to student-athletes. We have to listen to student-athletes across the board and engage them in the process.

And I just want to make one last point about engaging student-athletes and athletics being engaged within the university. We have to recognize, as much as we don't want to, that athletics and higher education, if it continues to remain there has an educational responsibility to student-athletes. And if we ignore that they are part of a multi-billion dollar industry, these problems will continue to happen.

And every discussion that we have when it comes to student-athlete behavior, and we talk about their values and we talk about their choices, becomes punitive, it becomes after-the-fact. We missed the boat tremendously on the educational opportunities. We talk about paying athletes—case in point, we talk about paying athletes and we get so knotted up about, someone might cheat and someone might lose out and someone might get exploited or someone might, you know, go around the rules, the reality is I knew, you knew, you know, that you're part of a multi-billion dollar business and a lot of people are making a lot of money off of what these guys do. And they know it. And we don't engage them—so instead of saying that we're not going to pay you, we're going to ignore that, we're going to use that surplus and we're going to give it here or give it there, instead of making them realize that they're part of a business.

And there's a tremendous educational opportunity in that and we miss it. We miss it by coupling athletics with the business department to make athletes understand how their money is being invested or how it can be invested. We don't ask them to pay, write a check, so they don't learn how to write a check each month for that room and board, they don't learn those skills along the way and we just take it for granted that they're going to leave our institutions with the wherewithal and the skills to be a part of professional sports, or not, once their dream is over.

So I just offer that as a suggestion for the future that engaging the university population and the greater population should not be brought on with fear. But as long as we remain isolated it will keep us from some greater solutions. Thank you.