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Send high school football to the showers

by Colman McCarthy

In these pinched times of teacher layoffs, budget cuts and outright school closings, a prime way for school boards to economize is high school football teams. As the season opens, send them to the showers -- permanently. No sport is more expensive, with uncounted dollars being squandered on field maintenance, helmets, pads, cleats, uniforms for players and cheerleaders, payments for refs, bus trips for away games, salaries for coaches -- and not counting the health care costs for the inevitable injuries to limbs, muscles and craniums.

Depending on the size of a school system, the annual savings could range from a few thousand dollars to millions. Instead of football, direct the money where it's needed: everywhere from teacher's salaries to a school's music, drama or arts programs. Get those grunting hunks of male flesh into the glee club or teach them the manly art of playing the violin or cello. If they aren't up for that, and they probably won't be, considering how football-crazed the country has become, involve them in lifetime family sports: running, golf, tennis or swimming.

How many high school football players 20 years from now, and in full brawniness, will be suiting up their wives in pads and helmets for an hour of hard hits on the front lawn? Instead, for recreation they are likely to be on the golf course or tennis court -- and probably inept because they didn't play those sports in high school when they might have.

In his Senate days, Minnesotan Gene McCarthy had it right when he said that "being in politics is like being a football coach: You have to be smart enough to understand the game and dumb enough to think it's important."

Right now, some of the dumbest people are in Texas where the high holy days are the upcoming fall weekends when football is worshiped and the unwritten state law -- "Leave No Football Player Behind" --

is religiously obeyed.

A few years back, two high school districts in Texas spent \$20 million each on stadiums. *The Dallas Morning News* reported that building 15 new high school stadiums in the Dallas area has or will cost \$179 million. At Allen High School, football players scoring touchdowns will soon be dancing in the end zones of a \$60 million, 18,000-seat stadium, cheered on by citizens who took lunacy to new levels by voting to tax themselves for the colossus.

This profligacy raises a question: What is so intellectually or culturally empty in these scatterbrain Texas towns that watching male teenagers violently hitting and mauling each other fills the void? Why are the values of school boards so off the rails that, by last count, the average salary of a football coach was \$73,000 while the average teacher got \$42,000?

One possible answer is that Texas is ground zero for academic stagnation: It ranks last in the nation in the percentage of adults with high school diplomas. At the same time that pampered high school football players are entertaining fans beneath the Friday night lights, Texas students lead the way in underachieving: The state ranks 49th in verbal SAT scores and 46th in math.

Football, a collision sport that should be called bashball, is brutish and bloody. Among high school sports, it has the highest injury rate, double that of basketball and baseball. An estimated one in 100,000 players suffers serious spinal cord injuries. Except for enriching orthopedists and keeping ambulance drivers and emergency room doctors busy, and satisfying the gladiatorial cravings of beer-drinking fans, of what value is football?

The answer is none, if the stand of a few educators means anything. Since 1990 more than 40 colleges and universities have dumped football programs. Last November it was Northeastern University in Boston, followed in December by Hofstra University in Long Island, N.Y.

Stuart Rabinowitz, Hofstra president, said it was time to reinvest those resources [\$4.5 million a year] into new academic programs and need-based scholarships. Other schools that have punted include Siena College in Loudonville, N.Y.; Fairfield University in Connecticut; St. John's University in New York City; and Canisius College in Buffalo, N.Y.

The good news is that higher education is slowly seeing the light. The bad news: Secondary schools remain clueless. A favorite pre-game pep talk of high school football coaches is to send the boys from the locker room with the bellow: "Go out there and go for broke." A fitting line for "financially broke" is now the state of most school systems.

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