



## Barker: Unethical Manipulator or Undiagnosed Imbecile?

by : Ron Aiken

Allow me, if you will, to delve slightly off-topic to address something in the world of higher education that, I promise, will eventually come to a discussion about sports.

Like many people, I was absolutely shocked to read that Clemson University president James Barker believes in his heart of hearts that Clemson is the best university in the country, having voted it so in the peer-review portion of the U.S. News & World Report's annual rankings in 2008, giving the land-grant school the only "strong" rating out of some 260 institutions of higher education.

In fact, not only did Barker vote Clemson as the nation's best university, what's more, not only in his mind was Clemson the best, he also scored the majority of the country's universities as only "marginal." (One guess where he scored USC.)

By any rubric, there is simply no way any sane person can arrive at the conclusion that Clemson is the best school in the country. Clemson is not even the best school in its own athletic conference by a million miles; a sound argument can be made that it's not the best school in its own state; and, given the stellar academic reputation of Furman and its off-campus amenities, one can debate whether Clemson is even the best school in the greater Greenville area.

When Clemson University's Catherine Watt first suggested that Barker had voted thusly as a rule and actually used the word "unethical" in relation to such practices, her claims were immediately derided by the Clemson spin machine as "outrageous" and having crossed the line. In the real world, the one that exists outside Tillman Hall, the only thing "outrageous" here is Barker's conduct in completing what everyone understands is supposed to be an honest assessment of other school's reputations, an assessment, it must be noted, that carries the greatest weight — a hefty 25 percent — of the overall ranking criteria.

Here's the issue in a nutshell: Either Barker honestly believes Clemson is a better school than Harvard, in which case he is stupid and should be fired immediately, or he was, as Watt alleged, deliberately disingenuous in his rankings for the sole — and reprehensible — purpose of artificially inflating his school's rankings.

Think of Barker's rankings this way: You're a "C" student in a college class, and you learn that a full quarter of your grade will come from the professor asking your honest evaluation of your own and other student's performance during the course. If you were to give yourself the highest marks over those you know to be smarter than you and who worked harder than you, that would be cheating.

And yet this was done not by a fictitious Clemson student but by Clemson's actual president. And it was not just one person or one class' grades that were affected — an entire national survey used by graduating seniors across the country was deliberately skewed by Barker's malicious, self-serving degradation of the nation's best universities. In other words, he cheated to make his agricultural school, and himself by association, look better than it is.

Folks, if Barker and Clemson don't understand that success obtained through cheating should not be celebrated — and this to me is by far the most damning condemnation of Barker and Clemson imaginable — then something in their mindset is seriously warped.

Of his valuation of Clemson in his rankings, Barker wrote this in a letter intended to allay critics, assuage the faithful and stand as his final response on the issue: "I will not apologize for believing that Clemson is the best undergraduate school in America."

I agree that no one should apologize for their beliefs — on that point Barker and I are BFFs. However, if you believe that the Earth is the biggest planet in the solar system or that any Harvard graduate would trade their degree for one from Clemson, I have the right to believe you are a dangerous moron who has no business in a position of ethical or educational leadership.

Oh yeah, I was supposed to bring this back around to sports, so here goes. The recent events at Clemson led me to think back to the last time Clemson made it its express goal to be No. 1 in the nation at something at all costs — in this case, football — and you'll recall that to achieve that goal, which it did, Clemson blatantly cheated and manipulated the system to do so, prompting the NCAA to charge the school in 1982 (just one year after winning the now-tainted 1981 title) with no less than 25 specific and severe violations that demonstrated a school out of control in its quest for results.

What this entire sickening episode tells me is that bending the rules and, in some cases, blatantly cheating to achieve rankings is nothing new at Clemson and, it may be argued by the cynical and/or astute, is actually common practice. If that, according to Barker, is the standard of the nation's best university, then we as a country are screwed indeed.

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