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How UCSD's Own 'Bridge to Nowhere' Went Unnoticed

After Hurricane Katrina hit last fall, the "bridge to nowhere" — a special pork project inserted into a federal bill that would have paid hundreds of millions for a bridge connecting two unpopulated areas in Alaska — became the focus of national ridicule. A year earlier, though, no one gave a damn about UCSD's own bridge to nowhere, a project that became a black hole for millions of dollars of taxpayers' money.



Hats Off

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In early August 2004, the university sent out a little-noticed press release, "UCSD To Discontinue Campus Bridge Project," explaining that it was scrapping the construction of a bridge connecting east and west campus because of rising construction costs and budget shortfalls. In the previous six years, UCSD blew \$7.4 million — \$3.3 million of its own money, and the rest from the state and federal government — on the bridge that never came to be.

But the story of the I-5 Advanced Technology Bridge Project is not simply an amusing anecdote in the annals of UCSD history; it shows how self-interested lawmakers use so-called "earmarks" to waste billions on pet projects at their favorite universities, even as they cut billions from student loans and financial aid.

Every year, Congress approves bills with thousands of special provisions that provide funding for local programs — projects too inefficient or useless to qualify for federal funding under normal allocation processes. Alaska's bridge was one such project, funded by a special provision attached by Sen. Ted Stevens (R-Ala.) to a 2005 federal highway bill. And so was UCSD's bridge, funded by a special provision attached by Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) to a 1998 federal highway bill.

The difference, though, is that Stevens became the subject of jokes on late-night talk shows, while Boxer was seen as a local hero.

In 1998, shortly after "bringing home the pork," Boxer staged a press conference on campus, announcing proudly, "We are entering a new era of bridge building. This project will be a national model."

Nor was Boxer shy about her role in getting the \$6 million in federal funds, as a press release put out by her office proudly explained that "Boxer was instrumental in ensuring both authorization and funding for this bridge."

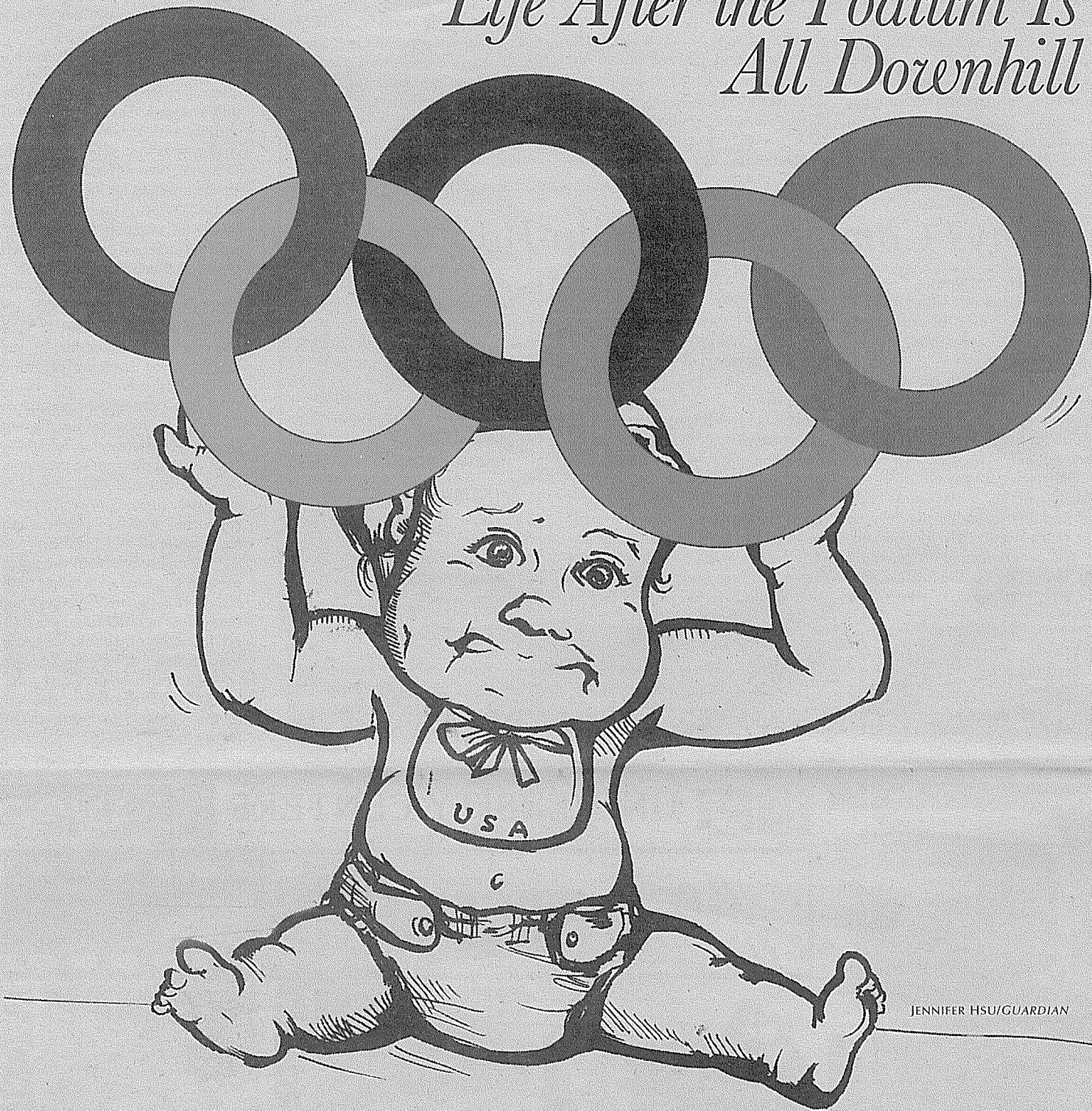
Whatever the virtues of a bridge to connect two sides of a university campus — I would argue the government has better uses for the \$6 million, like feeding the hungry and providing health insurance for the poor — it was never built, even as the university spent millions on the project.

UCSD, of course, argues that the bridge program was surely worthwhile, since it provided groundbreaking new research on construction with carbon-composite materi-

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Disposable Athletes

Life After the Podium Is All Downhill



JENNIFER HSUI/GUARDIAN

Competition-minded countries push young athletes to peak early, stunting crucial development in other areas of their lives.

By Megan Durham
STAFF WRITER

Children as young as five waking up at six and taking part in grueling training exercises to make them Olympic champions. Scouts in elementary schools across the country measuring children to see how they will develop and sending the most likely prospects into athletic schools, whether or not they show interest. A state determined to win Olympic medals, so much so that they disregard the education and emotional health of their elite athletes. Four-time rowing gold medalist Matthew Pinsent's recent visit to, and subsequent condemnation of, China's elite sport school Shi Cha Hai alerted many to the presence of these scenarios in the Chinese sport system.

His remarks to the BBC have sparked a debate about China's winning bid for the 2008 Olympics, but this debate raises issues that resound across the world of sports,

issues that concern how children become athletes, how athletes are trained, and whether they ignore their future in order to excel at their chosen sports.

It does seem atrocious to force children into a sport, but that habit is not limited to the Chinese. It occurs in the United States all too often, only instead of through a government program, it is overzealous parents determined to have their children become Olympians. Just look at how speed skating gold medalist Shani Davis got started, with his mother, Cherie, taking him to skating rinks at two-and-a-half years old and giving him quarters for skating as fast as he could, waking him up before school every day to run a mile, and signing him up for intensive classes when he was only six.

"It's easy for him because I do the work," she told the *Denver Post*.

Athletes start just as early here as they do in China, especially in sports that have young peak ages such as gymnastics or figure skating, two of the most popular Olympic events. Of the eight women who

have won Olympic gold in all-round rhythmic gymnastics since 1976, two were 15, one was 16, one was 17 and two were 19. As Istvan Balvi of the National Coaching Institute of British Columbia insists, if it takes 10 years to produce an elite athlete, and the Olympic peak age is in late adolescence, then in order to be competitive athletes are forced to start early in life.

This means that athletes enter the sporting world before they have had a chance to experience life outside of it. Add to this the fact that the American sports establishment barely prepares athletes for life after their sport, and you've got a recipe for misery. Even if an athlete is lucky

enough to win large sponsorships, one day the fans will stop screaming, the cameras will stop flashing, and the dream will end. Psychology Today reports that "those at greatest risk of post-retirement letdown are the athletes who dominate their profession, who know nothing of failure and everything of success." These are the athletes who are least prepared to cope with the day-to-day clutter and

problems of the real world.

This is especially true in sports, like gymnastics, that start at a very early age. Children that have been sport-focused their entire lives have never really learned to interact with others. Instead they have been incubated in a world of adults — coaches, trainers and nutritionists — or at best, other children who are as goal-oriented as they are. And without the usual interaction with their peers, their emotional development falters, leaving them less able to deal with life after their sport ends.

"Because they've been so focused on sports from an early age, many athletes never develop necessary parts of the self," observes Cristina Versari, head of sports psychology at San Diego University for Integrative Studies, in *Psychology Today*. "There's a developmental arrest."

But it's more than just dealing with the real world — once someone leaves a sport they have spent their entire life training for, they rarely are qualified to do anything else. For every gold medalist there are silver and bronze medalists, athletes almost as good but who seldom receive the lucrative sponsorships or rewards that come with the gold. It is the lucky ones who plan ahead and work at their educations at the same time they work on their hand-

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