

## Dr. Bob Slagter: *mixing politics with sports*

BY PAT COLE

Dr. Bob Slagter has always been equally at ease, whether standing in front of the classroom or seated on a bench at a ballgame.

As professor of political science and outgoing chair of the Department of Political Science, Economics, and Sociology at Birmingham-Southern, Slagter also is an avid sports fan and has served as the faculty athletic representative for the college at the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) level, and then later during BSC's affiliation with the NCAA.

"I love sports and probably have spent more time playing basketball during my life than any other activities except sleeping and reading," says Slagter. "I also appreciate the positive impact athletics can have as a part of the college experience."

Slagter will be on sabbatical during the spring 2008 term and recently relinquished his position as faculty athletic representative. Dr. Randall Law, assistant professor of history, will lead BSC into its inaugural season this fall as a member of NCAA Division III and the Southern Collegiate Athletics Conference (SCAC).

Slagter says he is proud to have served as one faculty voice that upholds the college's traditional liberal arts values and the well-being of its student-athletes. He received the title of faculty athletics representative in 1997 by then-BSC President Dr. Neal Berte because of his availability and willingness to serve.

"The main focus of the FAR is academic integrity," says Slagter. "Less formally, I served as the liaison between BSC's athletic and academic programs to ensure that both components of the college attained the best possible degree of mutual understanding of the other's perspectives, demands, and needs. The position let me interact with many individuals in the BSC community to achieve a workable level of understanding."

And working with people is something that Slagter enjoys. Having a personality type that reflects both grace and humor, he helped steer the college through the difficult transition period last year when the move from Division I to Division III athletics was announced by the Board of Trustees. "The overwhelming majority of BSC faculty were in favor of the move," Slagter remarks.

"Birmingham-Southern is in a very unique position in American higher education. In 1999, the college made a necessary decision to leave the NAIA after winning two national championships in basketball and one in baseball during the previous 10 years. BSC committed to NCAA D-I affiliation and achieved success both athletically and academically, and reached full compliance and membership on schedule. As both a liberal arts institution and one of the smallest colleges competing at the D-I level, BSC faced issues involving the compatibility of D-I membership with the mission of the college and financial strain.

"One example illustrates the challenge. The college was giving full scholarships to some students on the basis of their athletic ability, but was unable to do the same thing for students based on academic ability. With our transition to D-III, student-athletes will receive financial aid on the same basis as all other students and will be committed to academic achievement and athletic competitiveness in the great tradition of athletics at BSC."

Originally from Chicago, Slagter received his bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees from Southern Illinois University, all in political science. Prior to college, he served 14 months in the Vietnam War as a U.S. Army combat medic.

After returning and working in construction for several years, he earned his degrees and began his teaching career at BSC.

"One of my professors in college had attended graduate school in the South and knew about BSC," says Slagter. "He suggested that I contact the school and apply for a teaching position that was open."

Slagter has worked hard as a professor—while traveling and raising his daughter single-handedly—to become a noted expert on social, economic, and political subjects in Thailand and their interaction with Japan and the United States. He also gained expertise in American politics, most notably at the national level, and an interest in the competence in teaching of research methods for political science and sociology.

He believes serving in the Vietnam War is what piqued his interest in  
*(Continued on next page.)*



Slagter

studying Asia. "When the Vietnam War ended, there just wasn't a lot of academic opportunity in that area," he says. "I kept that interest alive though, and in 1990, I spent a summer in Thailand as a Fulbright-Hayes Scholar. Then in 1993, I received another Fulbright Scholarship to study in Beijing, China, for a year."

In 2000, and after two years of writing, Slagter published *Modern Thailand: a Volume in the Comparative Societies Series*. "I never dreamed I would end up publishing a book in sociology and not political science, but the impetus to explore new topics from the perspectives provided by multiple disciplines is completely natural at BSC," he conveys. "The daily contact with professors and students in sociology, psychology, economics, and political science provides a constant intellectual challenge for me."

Slagter has gained intensive experience traveling abroad, having led students on international travel and service-learning interims throughout his 22 years of teaching at BSC. He is credited as one of the founders of the Service-Learning program at Birmingham-Southern in the mid-'80s, along with former BSC Dean of Chapel Dr. Stewart Jackson.

"The opportunity to travel with students to Zimbabwe, Brazil, and Bolivia in pursuit of learning and service has been one of the most rewarding aspects of my life here," says Slagter. "These shared experiences with students are unique to the learning environment at BSC."

In more recent years, his Interim projects have focused on Southeast Asia in which he and several student groups have visited Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand to explore

intriguing historical and cultural situations. "I've had some wonderful students over the years," he expresses. "Their academic ability, collaborative work, and engagement in subjects that are interesting to me and to them have been terrific to watch."

Slagter has especially kept a watchful eye for the past decade on how BSC's student-athletes perform in the classroom. He's had help though in more recent years from an important academic measurement created by the NCAA. The Graduate Success Rate (GSR) measures the academic success of student athletic teams among the D-I institutions each semester based on a four-class average. The statistics have shown repeatedly that BSC is the premiere institution in Alabama when it comes to its student-athletes succeeding in the classroom and earning their college degrees.

"The GSR has revealed that the college has been doing a great job over the years in regard to the grade-point average of our student-athletes," he notes. "The main challenge for the college this year will be the sheer number of students being admitted, with the addition of new sports. However, the college's newest athletic conference, the SCAC, and D-III competition in general, should allow both returning and new athletes increased opportunities for academic success and enrichment. The new athletic affiliation will allow student-athletes to enjoy the total BSC experience."

In addition to his love of sports, teaching, travel, and study of Asia, Slagter is the majority partner of a private beach resort on a Thai island in the Indian Ocean. His wife, Daeng, is a native of Thailand.

## Three BSC faculty members awarded endowed professorships

Three Birmingham-Southern professors in separate fields have been named to endowed chairs at the college that were made possible by previously established individual donor gifts. BSC faculty are appointed to endowed professorships in recognition of their high level of service to the college through teaching, research, or advising.

Dr. Stephen Craft, associate professor of marketing, was appointed to the Elton B. Stephens Professorship in Marketing. Craft will hold the endowed chair in honor of Stephens, the late BSC alumnus and trustee member who was a prominent businessman and philanthropist and founder of EBSCO Industries. Craft joined the college's faculty in 2004.

Dr. Bill Nicholas, professor of history, was appointed to the James A. Wood Professorship in History. The endowed chair is named in honor of the late Dr. Wood, a 1907 Birmingham College graduate (a parent institution of BSC) and a physician. Before her death, his widow, Kathleen Wood, presented a generous gift to BSC to establish the Wood Room in the college's Rush Learning Center/Miles Library. The room contains a collection of Wood's books on American history. Nicholas has been a member of the BSC faculty since 1972.

Dr. Duane Pontius Jr., associate professor of physics, was appointed to the T. Morris Hackney Professorship in Physics. The endowed chair is a tribute to Hackney, who is a BSC trustee, philanthropist, and a prominent local business leader. Pontius joined the BSC faculty in 1999.



Spieler

## Spieler receives Outstanding Educator Award

Dr. Barry Spieler, professor of mathematics at Birmingham-Southern, was presented with the Outstanding Educator of the Year Award for 2006-07 during the college's recent Commencement ceremonies.

The award is given to an outstanding member of the BSC faculty based upon recommendations by his or her colleagues. It recognizes a faculty member who is characterized by excellence in all aspects of teaching, including classroom performance, scholarship, and student advising. The award includes a cash stipend and an invitation to serve as speaker at the following year's Commencement.

"Dr. Spieler is an exceptional educator who has earned the respect and admiration of his colleagues and his students," says BSC Provost Dr. Kathleen Murray. "I am delighted to be able to recognize a faculty member who has had such a positive impact on the lives of students."

This is not Spieler's first teaching award though. In 1998, he was voted the Omicron Delta Kappa Professor of the Year by BSC students. He was named the 1999 Alabama Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Council for Advancement and Support of Education.

In 2002, he was recognized for his work as the principle investigator of a National Science Foundation project, through which he and his mathematics faculty colleagues at BSC implemented a new computer-equipped classroom and made major improvements to the college's mathematics curriculum.

A member of the BSC faculty since 1994, Spieler received his bachelor's degree from Tufts University and his master's and doctoral degrees from The Ohio State University.

## DeVan performs internationally in spring tour

During the spring semester, Birmingham-Southern Artist-in-Residence William DeVan supplemented his role as a piano professor on campus to devote some of his attention to performing and conducting master classes in Europe, China, and parts of the United States.



DeVan

As a world-acclaimed Steinway artist and presenter, DeVan is recognized for his brilliant piano technique and his ability to give strong and convincing performances. His singular artistry earned him the distinction of being the first American pianist to win the prestigious "Vianna da Motta" competition in Lisbon, Portugal, and he is the founder of a concert series aimed at introducing young children to classical piano music. He also has co-authored a book on the solo piano works of Robert Schumann.

During his spring tour, DeVan taught master classes, lectured, and presented concerts at the Music College of Qinghai University in Xining, China, and at the Guangxi Arts Institute in Nanning, China. This was his third trip to China in as many years, and he has been invited to return to both cities to perform and lecture during the 2008 concert season. Prior to his appearances in China, DeVan performed the Paris premiere of the *Piano Sonata No. 3* by American composer Lowell Liebermann at the American Church in Paris.

His tour also included stops throughout America with master classes at the Alabama School of Math and Science in Mobile, a Steinway Classics for Children concert at the Avondale School in Birmingham, then two more Steinway Classics for Children concerts in Indianapolis, and two workshops for piano teachers in Chicago. In March, DeVan performed *The Story of Babar, the Little Elephant* with narrator J'miah Nabawi at the Lucas Theater for the Arts in Savannah, Ga., as part of the Savannah Music Festival, in addition to giving a master class at the Savannah Arts Academy.

A native of Pine Hill, Ala., DeVan received his bachelor's and master's degrees from the Juilliard School. He also studied for five years in Germany, receiving the Konzertexamen Diploma in 1979 from the Staatliche Hochschule für Musik und Theater in Hannover. He has been teaching piano at BSC for 27 years.

DeVan was introduced to Birmingham-Southern while a student at Juilliard. "I entered and won the Lilly Mae Caldwell Competition that BSC hosted one year and met several members of the music faculty, including the late William Baxter and Hugh Thomas," he recalls. "Then in 1980, when I saw an announcement for a piano position at the college, I applied."

This exuberant piano man plans to continue pushing the boundaries of live performance, playing concerts throughout the globe—wherever he is invited. "I particularly enjoy giving workshops and master classes, which allow me to meet other teachers from around the world."