

Missouri

9-11-2015

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Missouri" (2015). *On Sport and Society*. 85.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/85>

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
NOVEMBER 11, 2015

On Monday the protests on the campus of the University of Missouri came to their climax with the resignation of Tim Wolfe the president of the Missouri system, and Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin of the Columbia campus. For the past several months students have been protesting a range of arbitrary and unpopular actions initiated by President Wolfe. African American students contributed the charge of "racial insensitivity" to the growing list of complaints about President Wolfe.

In previous actions President Wolfe had terminated health insurance payments for graduate teaching and research assistants as an economy move for the university system. To strike at one of the least powerful groups on campus, is of course a typical move for someone like Wolfe who came to his position with no previous experience in higher education, and who was ready to run the university system like a business. These powerless students seemed like an easy target.

The graduate students protested Wolfe's actions and his problems began. Demonstrations, a walkout, steps to start a union, and support for the demonstrations against racism all led Wolfe to reverse course. Trouble followed when Republicans in the state objected to the medical school having ties with Planned Parenthood. It is clear that Wolfe had only a minimal understanding of the political sensitivity inherent in his position as president of the Missouri university system.

The main event however centered around a series of racial motivated incidents on campus including racist harassment of the student body president. Students who looked for some administrative action over this and other cases were dismayed by the indifference of Wolfe. Among other incidents was the drawing of a swastika on a dormitory wall with feces. This provoked the ire of Jewish groups and many others. Protests and demonstrations continued and Wolfe continued to offer indifference and insult as his response. The student coalition continued to grow.

One graduate student, Jonathan Butler who had been active in the Ferguson demonstrations, began a hunger strike, the object of which was the removal of President Wolfe. Support

for Wolfe continued to erode as a number of Deans called for his removal and a large number of faculty cancelled classes for two days in lieu of a teach-in on race relations. The student government called for Wolfe's removal. Support of major donors and state officials was slipping away.

The straw that broke the camel's back came on Saturday when the football team announced that it would not take part in any football activities until Wolfe was gone. The head coach, Gary Pinkel, supported the action saying the team was united in their support of Jonathan Butler's hunger strike. Fifty-eight of the eighty-four scholarship players on the team are African American.

Within forty-eight hours of the announced action by the football team, President Wolfe resigned. Most observers point to the cost of a football boycott to the university as Saturday's opponent, Brigham Young had a \$1M dollar guarantee for the game which would be paid even if the game was cancelled.

So what does all of this mean?

The old adage that money talks, was definitely in play. The resignation took place only when the football players injected themselves into the equation, although with the building coalition of voices critical of President Wolfe it is likely that at some point he would be gone. Clearly the football team and the potential cost of \$1M hastened Wolfe's departure.

How much power college athletes have is one of those mysteries of American sport. There have been protests by athletes before and some have had minor success. Coaches have lost their jobs over protests but that has been a rare occurrence. To my knowledge no university president or head of a university system has been forced out by athletes. University presidents of course have been forced out repeatedly by football coaches, athletic directors, and football booster groups.

So this is something new. Is it a one-off event or should we look for this to become a more frequent occurrence? My inclination is to say that it will happen again, but it is not likely to happen frequently. Athletes, and especially football players, tend to be a conservative and subservient

group. Coach knows best and coach controls the lives of the players. If a coach opposes a protest action the players are less likely to participate in the protest. Most scholarship athletes in high profile programs feel as if they have plenty to lose if they defy the coach or other power figures on campus.

It is clear however that intercollegiate athletes in the high revenue, high profile sports, can bring great pressure on their university if they are willing to take the risks involved. We now live in a college athletic environment that is much different than it was even two decades ago. The amount of money flowing around intercollegiate athletics and the number of people and non-university institutions that have a stake in intercollegiate athletics has grown substantially.

High powered athletics is a world both apart and within the campus, and it operates outside the rules of the campus and the university. It is housed within the campus and therefore in a position to collide with campus issues and interests. The Missouri case clearly illustrates this dicey relationship.

Because of the need to maintain the myth of the student athlete and the façade of amateurism this conflict of roles will continue to influence campus and athletic life. The athlete is asked to serve two masters, the team and the university, and these two masters operate in two very different spheres. If the athlete should decide his or her role as student is more important than the role as athlete, as the Missouri football players did, the potential for conflict will exist. If the athletes choose to exercise their power they can be a very significant force, but this "if" remains a very big one.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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