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Gene McDowell

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This past Thursday U.S. District Judge Anne Conway sentenced former University of Central Florida football coach, Gene McDowell, for his string of lies to federal agents, prosecutors, and a grand jury about the cell phone scandal within the UCF football team.

Many will regard this development as just another example of a rising football program and its coach going wrong in search of the cash and glory in big time intercollegiate athletics.

In the courtroom on Thursday both the U.S. Assistant Attorney and the federal judge suggested otherwise. Both argued that there were too many people around Central Florida and around the world of college athletics who didn't seem to understand what happened in this case. Too many seem to think that McDowell had done nothing wrong and that now somehow he is a victim. That McDowell was simply trying to protect his players and his university.

These views, appearing in the local media and in letters to the court, prompted the Assistant U.S. Attorney Cynthia Collazo to point out that McDowell not only lied, but he repeatedly lied, and then after admitting he lied, he went before a grand jury and lied again. If that wasn't enough McDowell then ordered his players to lie in order to save his job and keep himself out of jail. For a football coach holding enormous influence over his players, to ask those players to perjure themselves seemed to Collazo to be the ultimate crime committed in this case.

After pointing out to McDowell that the court was going very easy on him, that it could have increased both the charges and the penalties against him, Judge Conway said she was troubled by some of the letters submitted to the court on McDowell's behalf. One of these came from FSU head coach and state icon, Bobby Bowden, who offered Gene his help and said, "You didn't do any more than what a lot of us coaches would have done under the circumstances." The judge hoped that Bobby didn't know what he was talking about, that he didn't understand the full extent of McDowell's action.

The next day Bowden issued a statement that he did not endorse breaking the law and that the letter was sent before he knew the details of the charges or of McDowell's guilt.

That might have been the end of it except for the fact that Judge Conway is a graduate of the University of Florida. Football boosters and fans being who they are jumped all over Conway, assuming that she was more of a Gator than a judge. She was accused of intentionally smearing Bowden and FSU and being harsh on McDowell because he was the coach of a future potential Gator rival.

The unfortunate reality is that the atmosphere around intercollegiate sport is so poisoned that all human actions, and especially any negative action towards a coach, is interpreted only in terms of the booster mentality. You are for us or against us, and if you are from one of our rivals you must be against us.

The fact that the judge in this case was appalled by the suggestion from another coach that McDowell had done only what any coach would do, could not be taken at face value. The fact that McDowell had violated federal law and then repeatedly lied about it somehow got lost in the public reaction which reduced it all to the Gator-Seminole-UCF football rivalry.

The fact that the judge could have a reaction that was based on respect for the law and ethical human behavior seemed in the minds of the boosters to be beyond credulity. This is a sickness that runs deep in the corrupt world of intercollegiate athletics and it is a mentality that stifles all hope for genuine reform of the system.

The case also illustrates the tendency for the coaching fraternity to stick together under adversity and shill for one another. Lee Corso and Dick Vitale on ESPN or Billy Packer on CBS have become masters of this form of apologetics. They routinely excuse coaches for the behavior of their players, dismiss as insignificant any number of NCAA transgressions, and find coach's on-court boorish and childish behavior or aggressiveness toward players, press and fans, to be completely acceptable.

The accountability of coaches is nearly non-existent except in the win-loss column. Within the last two weeks UCLA has been placed on three years probation for violations in the basketball program. The person deemed responsible for the violations, Jim Herrick, was fired over a year ago. At the time UCLA was criticized heavily by the shills. Herrick since has gone on to

become head coach at Rhode Island over the objections of the faculty there.

Herrick took his team to the NCAA tournament this year and was praised heavily by those at ESPN and CBS. UCLA obviously had made a major mistake. On the same day that UCLA was penalized, a story ran that Herrick was considering several potential jobs in the NBA. Herrick reaps the rewards and UCLA the penalties.

Both Herrick and McDowell lost their jobs and therefore did not totally escape punishment. Herrick is back working and enjoying great success, and with the judge's help McDowell's rehabilitation may have begun.

Judge Conway didn't seem to understand that she was not in a court of law in this case, but out there amongst the tailgaters, where it isn't the nature of your conduct that counts. It is the school colors you wear to the big game.

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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