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Tom Osborne Father Flanagan, and Lawrence Phillips

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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The State of Nebraska is not exactly the hub of the universe. In the last half century it has been best known for two things: Father Flanagan's Boys Town and college football. It would seem now that these once separate attractions have been joined together. Tom Osborne, football coach at Nebraska has become the new Father Flanagan. Boys Town has moved from Omaha to Lincoln.

Father Flanagan, a catholic priest who ran a home for boys, established a national reputation for rehabilitating troubled youth. He managed to market his success and had a national fund raising operation that made Boys Town the best known and best funded such home in America.

With Father Flanagan having passed on and Boys Town not quite as prominent as it once was, Tom Osborne seems to be trying to fill the gap. Over the past several months Nebraska's football program has been plagued by cases of documented and alleged assaults by football players on their girlfriends, not to mention charges of attempted murder against another player.

The most prominent of these cases in the Nebraska football program involved the star of the team, and was major news in part because of the way it was handled by Tom Osborne in his new role as Father Flanagan.

Lawrence Phillips, whose picture is on the front of the University of Nebraska football media guide, was arrested for assaulting his former girl-friend who happens also to be a star of the women's basketball program. He broke into an apartment at 5:45 a.m., threw her to a bathroom floor, dragged her down three flights of stairs by the hair, and had to be separated from her by two men. Osborne immediately suspended Phillips from the team and later acknowledged that Phillips had prior warning to stay away from the woman or face dismissal from the team.

At nearly the same time another Nebraska player faced charges of attempted murder. In this case Osborne said that after reviewing the evidence he would not suspend this player. Some wondered how Osborne was able to make these decisions about guilt or innocence before the courts did. Clearly he knows and understands troubled youth.

After a few short weeks of consternation Father Tom reinstated Phillips who then was cheered heartily by Nebraska fans when he

entered his first game. The reinstatement came despite the fact that he was awaiting sentencing after a plea of no contest.

So why was this done? Cynics across the country say that Osborne is simply obsessed by the pursuit of a national championship and millions of dollars for the university. First of all, Nebraska's national championship would come with or without the services of Phillips. Second, Tom Osborne's record as coach at Nebraska does not indicate such a win at any cost attitude.

So why, then? Father Tom basically has taken the position that his only motive is to save the life of this troubled young man. Tom says that it is clear that football is a major organizing factor in Phillips' life. Without it he might leave the university. Naturally the cynics point out that football didn't provide enough structure to prevent the assault in the first place as it took place during the night following a Nebraska football game.

For his transgressions Phillips has been placed on probation by the university, must undergo counselling, do community service, and perhaps most amazing of all he must go to all classes. Going to classes as a punishment dished out by a university is seen by some as too harsh as well as a unique concept.

Did Father Tom consider the possibility that Phillips ought to demonstrate that he belonged on a college campus by going to classes and staying out of trouble, while continuing to practice with the team under the watchful eye of coaches? That perhaps he should earn reinstatement to the team? Would that not have been structure enough?

And more significantly what does this say about the issue of assault on women or anyone else? The Center for the Study of Sport and Society at Northeastern University has found that football players have significantly higher rates of assault charges brought against them than other students.

We all know of universities that have covered up in these cases. Some football players have become legendary for this sort of violent anti-social behavior. Will Osborne's actions contribute anything to these trends one way or another? Has the University of Nebraska made a statement about violence on campus that is worthy of an institution of higher learning?

Or would Father Flanagan agree that a running back is a terrible thing to waste?

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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