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Four Months in Russia:What I Missed in Sportsworld

Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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After being away from this weekly exercise for over four months I thought I might begin by reviewing some of the most notable stories I missed, such as the atrocity committed by Wayne Huizinga in the wake of his purchase of a World Series winner and his failure to extort a new stadium from the people of Broward or Dade counties.

Or I could begin with the timely story of the day, the astounding television contract signed by the NFL and the deranged television executives at the major networks and Disney headquarters. Or for that matter the Super Bowl.

I finally settled on the Super Bowl and the NFL television contract as the appropriate subjects for this week's reentry to the airwaves. Now these will have to wait until a later date. As often is the case, events have taken over and I must use this week's comment, on a local issue: the firing of Gene McDowell as the head football coach at the University of Central Florida

Gene McDowell's career began at UCF thirteen years ago when he was hired as head coach and Athletic Director with the mandate to bring order out of existing chaos and eliminate the million dollar debt plaguing the program. He did both and in the process produced winning football and a program that moved up through Division I-AA to Division IA and into the big time of college football.

Gene came to UCF after sixteen years of experience at FSU and a reputation as Bobby Bowden's most effective coach; a man of integrity who believed that the student part of student-athlete was worth preserving.

In those days I was member of the athletic committee and had a chance to observe McDowell up close and personal, as they say on TV. What I saw, I must say I did not like, and quite frankly found surprising. From the beginning I was struck by McDowell's insecurity in his position which could be seen in his paranoia in dealing with anyone outside the world of athletics. He was particularly suspicious of faculty and expressed his hostility to faculty all too often in committee meetings. Over the years he was increasingly inclined to dissembling in the same meetings.

I never understood why he arrived at UCF with such feelings, and why he would never accept the notion that there were faculty who could be both critical and supportive of the athletic program. But he could not. He quickly developed a difficult relationship with local media and seemed to enjoy any opportunity to humiliate or intimidate the local beat reporters. At one point his relations with the local press were so bad that one television station refused to show his picture over the airwaves. Many of those who worked in the athletic department found him a very difficult taskmaster. One secretary, who finally left the department, recounted how she would stop on the way to work each morning and toss her breakfast as she contemplated another day in McDowell's Athletic Department.

And yet through all of this he was straightening out the mess in the athletic department, retiring the debt, and building a reputable football program. He was "Clean Gene." UCF was moving up, and Gene was taking them to the next level. And he was winning. He was NCAA Division I-AA Coach of the Year in 1990.

All was not well however and Gene's removal as AD in 1993 was one indication that the direction of the wind was changing. Then this past season, with a killer schedule in front of him, it seemed that Gene McDowell was entering the final days of his career at UCF. The scenario was clear: After a few losing seasons with the big boys he would be let go amidst great thanks for a job well done.

Gene would have none of that. His team went out and played the big boys toe to toe. They earned a standing ovation in Lincoln, Nebraska. UCF was suddenly a known commodity in college football. It looked to me like he had defied the odds and set himself up to be coach for life.

Instead Gene McDowell shot himself in the foot and went into a free fall that ended this past week. Faced with the first major scandal of his tenure at UCF, this one involving the illegal use of cell phones, Gene let his worst instincts take over. He tried to cover up rather than to deal openly with the problem. In the process he obstructed justice, perjured himself, and misled his boss. Career over.

Another chapter in the corruption of intercollegiate athletics has been written. Another head coach thought he was bigger than the university and above the law. He has paid the price. UCF has reached the big time.

Will anything change? Has anything been learned?

Don't count on it.

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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