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Shoplifting and Shop Forgetting in Tallahassee: FSU one more time

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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It may be something in the air or perhaps the water but whatever the cause illegal shopping for wearing apparel seems endemic to Tallahassee, Florida. Or perhaps it is just the fact that two of the more corrupt institutions of our time are located there: government and a major college football program.

A few years ago it was the "Foot Locker" Scandal at Florida State University in which a number of FSU athletes went on a shopping spree for free shoes at the local affiliate of that national chain.

Then a few months ago the wife of the Governor, Columba Bush, went on a \$19K shopping binge in Europe. There is no record of what discounts she was able to garner, but her trip became big news anyway. Columba Bush suffered memory loss during the transatlantic flight and forgot all about her shopping extravaganza. She failed to declare any of the merchandise on the customs forms when she reentered the United States at the Atlanta airport. Columba Bush was stopped by officials who no doubt wondered about all the Harrods bags she was carrying.

Now comes the latest in shopping stories out of Tallahassee. At least two Florida State University football players, one a Heisman Trophy Candidate, made a major clothing purchase at Dillard's Department Store in the Tallahassee Mall. Peter Warrick and Laveranues Coles were charged with receiving over \$400 worth of clothing for a little over ten dollars. This is slightly better discount than what most people are able to get at the Factory Outlet Mall here in Orlando.

After the "Foot Locker" fiasco FSU was dubbed "Free Shoes University." Now it could become "Free Suits University." Tallahassee should be thinking about adopting the motto, "City of Shoppers."

I must confess I am not an unbiased observer. This is the second major scandal at one of my alma maters in less than a year. The basketball program at the University of Minnesota was hit by a scandal involving papers being written for players. Now comes this flap at FSU. I now fear

for my third alma mater, Marquette University, which so far has stayed out of the headlines.

One of Tallahassee's finest said that his department has received a lot of calls, e-mail and faxes about this incident, and some of them have been amusing. My favorite so far is a picture of Warrick in Heisman pose with a Dillard's shopping bag draped over his arm.

After all the jokes are made and the laughs subside none of it is all that amusing. For Warrick and Coles it could be even less amusing. Because of the value of the clothing they have been charged with a felony. Had authorities divided the value between them, about \$200 each, it would have been a misdemeanor, but at \$400 it qualifies as a felony. It is now clear that their attorney will be using this as a major plea bargaining point in the case.

Beyond the legal case, once again we see another scandal in intercollegiate athletics. And once again the reaction of university authorities, coaches, players, boosters and fans is less than admirable. Although Coles was dismissed from the team because he was already on probation, Warrick was suspended from the team and missed Saturday's game with Miami. This was certainly appropriate action.

What was inappropriate was Warrick's comments that it was no big deal as it was not like he had shot the President. This was followed a few days later by a public apology on television before the Miami game. This scripted set of comments lacked both sincerity and credibility, and failed to mention the damage his action has done to the university.

Bobby Bowden, the distracted and aging coach of the Seminoles, seemed to think that everything would be all right, because after talking to Warrick, Bowden knew that Warrick understood that he had done something wrong. Indeed both Bowden and the FSU Athletic Director have indicated that if Warrick is only guilty of a misdemeanor he would be reinstated to the team.

In the meantime at the Miami game on Saturday Peter Warrick was on the sideline, gave the team a pre-game pep talk, and was on TV making his clumsy "apology," to all his fans. Throughout the game there were camera shots of Warrick cheering on his teammates from the sidelines. It was hard

to remember that he had been suspended from the team. It is obvious that this whole episode was regarded as much less serious than a case of turf toe by FSU authorities.

True to form Seminole boosters and lesser fans could only regard these arrests as a case of Gator conspiracy. Surely these players were set up. Surely the police had pro-Gator motives in charging the players with a felony rather than a misdemeanor. The boosters demanded a reduction of the charges. Perhaps it was the department store that was at fault. Maybe Dillard's was part of the vast Gator conspiracy emanating from Steve Spurrier's office. Perhaps the cow jumped over the moon.

One could argue that Warrick will be punished sufficiently by his loss of the Heisman Trophy and therefore some millions of dollars in his initial NFL contract. Still I am not sure that when he picks up several millions anyway he will feel the sting all that much.

The only thing clear in all of this seems to be that where football matters little else does.

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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