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Ty Willingham

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Ty Willingham
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Welcome back to the bizarre world of intercollegiate athletics. The news this week comes out of Notre Dame and several other institutions of higher learning where football coaches are fired with reckless abandon. A few weeks ago we saw the spectacle of the public humiliation of Ron Zook at the University of Florida. This week the big news is the public humiliation of Ty Willingham by the acolytes of purity at the University of Notre Dame.

Several things are worth noting about this unsavory event in this unsavory week. Ty Willingham has had a winning record at Notre Dame, he has run a clean program, his integrity is unquestioned, his players respect him, and apparently many at the university and across the country do as well. That isn't good enough in the world of college football.

Ty Willingham had a five-year contract at Notre Dame and unlike other coaches in previous decades who served out their contracts of five years, Willingham is gone after three. The fact that Willingham is the first and only African American coach in the history of Notre Dame is seen by some as playing a role in the decision. Although I doubt this, I do find the coincidental 3/5 ratio historically symbolic.

In some ways in fact the firing of an African American football coach is heartening as it sends the message that African American coaches will be treated just as poorly as other coaches. This was an equal opportunity injustice. It is no longer enough to win. Coaches must win in high percentages and go to lucrative bowl games, and bring back big bags of money to the institution of higher learning.

Also this week David Cutcliffe the head coach at the University of Mississippi was fired. In his six seasons at Ole Miss Cutcliffe just completed his first losing season. His six-year record is 44-29. Apparently he was masquerading when he went 10-3 last year. This year his true self was revealed. Other firings include those at Indiana and Stanford, while at BYU and several other locations coaches jumped before being pushed. There will be more in the days ahead.

The other thing worth noting is that with the firing of Willingham, the firing of the head coach at New Mexico, and the resignation of Fitz Hill at San Jose State there are now but two African American head football coaches at the over 100 Division IA schools. This is an issue that I will return to at a later date.

In some ways what is most intriguing is the reaction in the national media to the Notre Dame action. It reminds me of Oscar Levant's line that he knew Doris Day before she was a virgin. It is remarkable how Notre Dame repeatedly loses its purity and innocence. Then somehow lost innocence is reclaimed under the power of the Golden Dome only to be lost again and again.

In the last few days Jim Caple has told us in shocked tones that Notre Dame is just like everyone else, Dave Anderson has said that by its actions Notre Dame has turned pro, and Alan Grant has declared that Notre Dame has lost its integrity. There was shock across the land that Notre Dame would act just like any other football factory. Why?

What this means is that either no one has been paying attention, which is doubtful, or that Notre Dame for some reason is allowed to serially lose its innocence. Some of us have been watching and reading about the Fighting Irish long enough to remember when the school ran a less than exemplary program and shoehorned marginal students inside the Dome to bring cash and glory on Saturday.

For those with shorter memories one need only go back to the hiring of one of most unsavory characters in recent history. The hiring of Lou Holtz was proof positive that standards and character meant considerably less than winning a national championship. As Kevin White, Notre Dame's AD, noted when dismissing Willingham winning on Saturday is more important than class and integrity. Holtz, you may remember, left behind a legacy of NCAA violations at Minnesota and chaos at both Minnesota and Arkansas.

Just three years ago Kevin White demonstrated that he was running a less than tight ship in South Bend when he hired George O'Leary without bothering to make a cursory check of O'Leary's resume. As it turned out five days later a journalist unmasked O'Leary and Kevin White had to let him go. It was interesting that White explained away his blunder by saying the O'Leary looked like he had been sent in by central casting. He

was an Irish Catholic, a good football coach, and a good institutional fit.

White's message could not be clearer. Image is where it's at and is all that counts when hiring a football coach. It was a stunning admission that integrity no longer trumped image at Notre Dame, a conclusion to which many had already come, but some have already forgotten.

So why is anyone surprised by the events of this week? Why all the shock over the revelation that Notre is just as corrupt as everyone else. The fact of the matter is that since the departure of Fr. Theodore Hesburgh standards and ethics at Notre Dame have been in free fall. To say this might even suggest that the hiring of Ty Willingham was done primarily to cover an extremely unprofessional hiring process conducted by Kevin White, which in turn produced the O'Leary fiasco.

Or perhaps it is simpler than that. If Florida has its Bull Gators perhaps Notre Dame has its Bull Leprechauns.

One wonders if Touchdown Jesus is signaling a safety on this early December day of 2004 or perhaps just covering his eyes.

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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