George O'Leary and Notre Dame's Integrity

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George O'Leary's tenure as head football coach at the University of Notre Dame was shorter than even his most vehement detractors had predicted. It took him only five days to self-destruct which could be a NCAA record.

Late last week a newspaper reporter at the Union Leader in Manchester, New Hampshire, who was working on a profile of the new man at Notre Dame and thought a nice tie-in to the story would be O'Leary's football playing career at the University of New Hampshire. O'Leary's biographical sketch indicated he had earned three letters in football at that university.

As the reporter developed the story no one could be found who remembered O'Leary the player, although several remembered him as a student and classmate. Checking further with the university it turns out O'Leary was on the team for two years but never played in a single game. At this point George O'Leary was beginning to resemble Joseph Ellis or the fictional Eddie Scissons. It turned out this was just the beginning as things unraveled further.

O'Leary's resume indicated he had a Master's Degree from New York University. Records at NYU indicate no such degree although O'Leary had taken two classes at the graduate level there.

If O'Leary had been applying for a job in the State University in Florida and lied about his educational background he would be guilty of criminal fraud. Apparently at Notre Dame and many other places this is not part of the legal code. Here in Florida he would also have been required to produce a transcript from the institution where he earned his highest degree. Apparently that requirement is not part of the Notre Dame hiring process either, at least for football coaches.

In his farewell statement from Notre Dame O'Leary said "Due to a selfish and thoughtless act many years ago, I have personally embarrassed Notre Dame, its alumni and fans." The fact is that O'Leary repeated that thoughtless act every time he put his name forward for a job and presented his resume, most recently at Notre Dame just a few short weeks ago. O'Leary's claim sounds a lot like that of the Unelected One who claimed his alcohol and drug use was a youthful indiscretion even though he was in his early forties when that occurred.
So George O'Leary has destroyed his career. What of Notre Dame?

Many have claimed this past few days that Notre Dame has done severe damage to its reputation. I would suggest that Notre Dame's reputation had been fatally wounded the day they hired Lou Holtz to head the football program at the Golden Dome, proving they would pay any price, including integrity, to reclaim national football prominence.

Lou Holtz had left behind a record of winning football at Arkansas and Minnesota, but he had also left both programs in shambles. Holtz lost his credibility and violated his relationship with African-American athletes when he supported Sen. Jesse Helms for reelection. Holtz arrived in Minnesota and quickly wowed the gullible media and local boosters only to leave for the job at Notre Dame. What he left behind was a corrupted program, a trip to NCAA probation, and a mess to be cleaned up by the AD.

The loss of innocence at Notre Dame is thoroughly documented in Under the Tarnished Dome: How Notre Dame Betrayed Its Ideals for Football Glory, by Don Yaeger and Douglas Looney. In this latest episode there was no reputation left to be ruined, although there may still be a bit of the Notre Dame myth abroad in land among those who have not been paying attention. This episode should take more luster off the Golden Dome and raise a few more doubts among the believers.

What has not been discussed in all of this is the role of the Notre Dame Athletic Director, Kevin White, whose rush to hire O'Leary set up Notre Dame for the fall. Why had the records not been checked? What was the urgency to hire this coach? It is not like O'Leary was some sort of legend who was being sought by every major football institution in America. Why did White not press for interviews with other credible candidates? In his rush to hire, White must bear a major portion of the responsibility for the embarrassment that has hit the South Bend campus.

Several years ago I heard Kevin White give a small seminar on the do's and don'ts of building a Division I football program. I was struck by his thoroughness of approach, his emphasis on careful planning, his stress on the need for integrity. Kevin White was clearly a bright upcoming athletic administrator and I was not surprised when he was hired at Notre Dame.
Now somehow he has failed to follow his own principles and it has cost both him and his university and he should be held accountable for the events of last week.

Finally I want to mention public reaction. Steve Riess of Northeastern Illinois University wrote that he was dismayed by how many people on Chicago talk radio excused O'Leary's actions and seemed to think that lying on a resume was a legitimate way to get a job. He goes on to say:

"I always thought that integrity and honor were essential elements of any individual. When it comes to coaches, who are supposed to be teaching values, who are going into people's homes to recruit athletes, and are being asked to have parents trust them with their youngsters," it seems "particularly problematic."

Riess raises a good point but few, at least among those who see intercollegiate football as simply another form of public entertainment rather than an educational enterprise, would agree.

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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