12-19-1999

Notre Dame On Probation: The Cost of Selling Your Soul and the NCAA as Judge

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Recommended Citation
https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/536
Can we say that the final blow to the concept of intercollegiate athletic integrity has now been delivered? With the announcement Friday that Notre Dame has been placed on two years probation and lost two football scholarships, seemingly the last bastion of intercollegiate athletics has been tarnished. A sense of shame walks the campus beneath the Golden Dome.

The moral compass located somewhere near "First Down Moses" has been spinning for some time now, but it has taken the NCAA to make the loss of integrity official. This is a history-making event because it is the first time Notre Dame has been placed on probation by the NCAA. University officials have acknowledged their shame and for that we are all well and truly grateful.

Notre Dame has been the bastion of virtue since arriving at the upper echelons of intercollegiate athletics. Getting to the top for the first time was not necessarily done on the Cardinal Newman model. As Oscar Levant once said of Doris Day, "I knew her before she was a virgin." Certainly there are those out there who knew Notre Dame before it was a bastion of intercollegiate athletic integrity.

Be that as it may, for the last several decades Notre Dame has been held up as the model of all that is good about intercollegiate athletics. It had student athletes who really were students, it had exemplary graduation rates, and its image especially under Ara Parseghian was said to be impeccable.

Things began to turn sour when in its frustration to win a national football championship Notre Dame turned to the master snake oil salesman Lou Holtz. This was the first sign to me that integrity was no longer an issue under the Golden Dome. It was the football equivalent of selling your soul to the devil and now the price has proven to be high.

At Notre Dame where boosters had never been allowed to run amok and corrupt athletes on a large scale the protective shield dropped. At Notre Dame where the highest academic standards were maintained, corners were cut. Nothing illegal mind you, just a trimming of those very high standards that had once been in place. And as long as it
was done in the midst of winning seasons and hidden behind a barrage of quips and jokes and one-liners, who could or would complain?

To the surprise of absolutely no one Lou Holtz denied all knowledge of wrongdoing during his tenure in the shadow of "Touchdown Jesus." The NCAA report says that Holtz had full knowledge that Ms. Dunbar, a booster, had taken a Notre Dame player on an all-expense paid trip to Las Vegas. Ms. Dunbar had been embezzling $1.2M from her employer and then using at least part of the money to entertain Notre Dame players in such places as Vegas and Hawaii. In addition Ms. Dunbar gave jewelry, clothes, and other gifts to Notre Dame players.

"I can say with all sincerity that I had no knowledge of any type of impropriety that may have occurred," said Holtz. One wonders if he could say that in "all truth" as well as "all sincerity." One wonders because this is exactly the pose taken by Holtz when he left a trail of NCAA violations behind at the University of Minnesota on his departure to Notre Dame.

How long will Lou Holtz continue to get a free pass from the press? His activities at Arkansas, at Minnesota and at Notre Dame certainly are enough to raise serious doubts about the man. This year's attempt to attack an official during a South Carolina game would have been considered a serious breach of standards by many other coaches, but not Holtz. Instead it was just another manifestation of his competitiveness.

One other aspect of this case is more than a little intriguing. Ms. Dunbar was romantically involved with at least one of the players who fathered a child by her. In making their ruling on the Notre Dame violations the NCAA confronted a difficult problem. If two people were romantically involved would it be legal for one of them to give the other one gifts even though one is a college football player and the other is a member of a booster group?

These are the kinds of difficult decisions that the NCAA faces daily in their constant and vigilant battle to maintain the integrity of intercollegiate athletics. The ruling is Solomonic in character. If a booster is romantically involved with an intercollegiate athlete then
gifts are not considered an NCAA violation. If there is no romance there can be no gifts.

Can you spell "loophole" boys and girls?

Cupid will now be working overtime in the service of intercollegiate athletic programs everywhere. Need a running back at Enormous State University? Give him a new car, but make sure that it is a gift from a man or woman in the booster organization with whom the athlete is first seen at several local hot spots obviously romantically involved. Note: Public sex is the best way to firmly establish proof of such a relationship for the NCAA investigator.

It is so simple and the possibilities are so numerous that the mind boggles. The permutations and variations on relationships of any number of kinds seem to approach infinity.

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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