

Another Stain on Michigan

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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There will come a point when the University of Michigan acknowledges that the hiring of Rich Rodriguez as its head football coach was an abject mistake, but apparently that time is not right now.

On the heels of the NCAA issuing a notice of five potential major violations committed under the auspices of Rodriguez, all incoming athletic director David Brandon can say of relevance at the moment is that Rodriguez will remain the football coach. We'll see.

To put these allegations into context, remember two salient points. First, the University of Michigan football program had never previously been accused of committing NCAA infractions. Second, Rodriguez has been with the Wolverines for a mere two seasons. As the kids like to say, you do the math.

That means, of course, that in his two short seasons, Rodriguez has dropped the program to historic lows both on and off the field. Ohio State fans can surely gloat because, well, it is something to gloat about. Watching Michigan get its comeuppance will always be satisfying. But at a much different level, seeing a storied program like Michigan sink to its current depths tarnishes the greatest rivalry in college football. That's to neither Ohio State's nor the Big Ten's benefit.

The allegations against the Michigan program and Rodriguez in particular are serious stuff. Let's run down the list:

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- From January 2008 through September 2009, a time period which essentially covers the moment Rodriguez stepped on campus to the moment the Detroit Free Press outed him, the Michigan program exceeded the permissible limit on the number of coaches by 5 when quality control staff members, supposedly noncoaching staff members, were actually engaged in on-and off-field coaching activities. The NCAA gives 4 specific instances. You could, maybe, rationalize exceeding the limit by 1, but 5?

- From January 2008 through at least September, 2009, the football program violated NCAA legislation governing playing and practice seasons when it permitted football staff members to monitor and conduct voluntary summer workouts, conducted impermissible activities outside the playing season, required players to participate in summer conditioning activities or face discipline and exceed time limits for football-related activities. The NCAA lists 10 separate incidents. One might be a misunderstanding and two a mistake but 10 sounds an awful lot like a pattern.

- A graduate assistant football coach under Rodriguez, Alex Herron, allegedly provided false and misleading information to both university and NCAA investigators about these incidents. In particular, the coach in question claimed he was only briefly present at the beginning of certain "voluntary" summer conditioning sessions but in actuality monitored and conducted the activities. When the dust settles, it will be Herron will become the convenient scapegoat, just watch.

- The allegations in #1 and 2 above demonstrate that Rodriguez failed to promote an atmosphere of compliance within the football program and failed to adequately monitor the duties and activities of the quality control staff members and various assistant coaches.

- Based on the allegations in #1 and 2 above, the athletic department failed to adequately monitor its football program to assure compliance with NCAA requirements. The NCAA gives two specific examples, the most damning of which is that shortly after Rodriguez was hired, the university's compliance staff became aware of and concerned with the employment of the so-called quality control staff members but didn't adequately follow up.

- When you look at the last two allegations it makes you wonder how Rodriguez can survive the inquiry. Not only is he personally attacked for running a program that plays fast and loose with NCAA regulations, but he also is attacked by implication for essentially running roughshod over the university's compliance staff so that they wouldn't inquire further about their concerns.

The usual disclaimers of course apply. These are only allegations and neither Rodriguez nor the university has been found guilty of anything at the moment. But given the specificity of the allegations and the fact that the university has tacitly admitted, though downplayed, certain key aspects of the allegations, it's fair to say at this point that there is more than smoke emanating from the Michigan campus at the moment.

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Following the release of the allegations, university president Mary Sue Coleman said all the right things about taking the allegations seriously, but you have to wonder if that's really the case.

According to the Associated Press account, Brandon admitted that mistakes were made though he didn't get specific and seemed to take comfort, oddly, in a kind of "the sun will come out tomorrow" sort of way, that the university at least wasn't charged with a loss of institutional control. But given that a few years ago the basketball program was found to have violated certain NCAA regulations, it basically is charged with being a repeat offender. I guess it's a fine line between the two but it doesn't seem like anything Brandon should be bragging about at the moment.

Rodriguez wouldn't even go as far as Brandon, couching his remarks in the hypothetical, as in "if violations were made" it was just, essentially, a silly misinterpretation of the rules. In a nutshell this is exactly why Rodriguez shouldn't be allowed anywhere near a college football program, let alone a storied, tradition-rich program like Michigan.

In short, Rodriguez just doesn't get it. He would have people believe that his reading of the rule book allowed assistant coaches to oversee supposedly voluntary summer conditioning drills while letting players know that if they don't volunteer for these drills there would be consequences. These are about as basic as the rules can get.

If the various Michigan Wolverine blogs are any indication, Michigan fans have already sloughed this off as much ado about nothing. They've parsed the allegations, concluded that they sound worse than they really are and, hey, doesn't everyone do the same thing? Well, no, but I understand their point of view. It's why they're fans.

When the Maurice Claret allegations hit, almost none of which ever panned out, Ohio State fans went into the same bunker mentality. But there is a difference and it is the difference between Jim Tressel and Rich Rodriguez and that's the larger point.

Standing outside a maize and blue haze a much more reasonable conclusion to draw is that

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immediately after arriving Rodriguez looked for every shortcut to success he could find. Maybe that's exactly what Justin Boren meant when he left the Michigan program for Ohio State shortly after Rodriguez was hired citing, essentially, an abandonment of values. From this vantage point, Boren looks positively prescient in his description.

The hard truth that Michigan hasn't yet faced and apparently Brandon doesn't want to face even as he awaits his first official day on the job next month is that hiring Rodriguez was a mistake of colossal proportions and that's never going to change. Rodriguez has an ugly course of conduct that's firmly established. He stands for nothing, falls for everything and as he's done so, he's taken the university down the same drain.

And while apologizing and minimizing every transgression from Rodriguez might feel good, all the university and its fans are really doing is becoming complicit in putting the university and the football program in further jeopardy. Mark my words. If Michigan continues to stick with Rodriguez, whatever success he might find on the field (and he's found none yet) will come at a huge cost. They may escape this time with a hard slap on the wrist but the next time, and there will be one, Brandon might not get to brag that at least the university wasn't charged with a loss of institutional control.