

Grand theft charge may cost FSU receiver grand prize

(AP) - Hours before Florida State risked its No. 1 ranking against Miami, a car pulled out of the parking lot of a Tallahassee hotel with a message painted on the rear window:

"Hilfiger or Heisman? U make the call."

Less than a week ago, the call was simple: Peter Warrick, the Seminoles' sensational wide receiver, was the clear favorite to win the Heisman Trophy, college football's grandest individual prize.

The choice is not so easy anymore. Warrick was suspended indefinitely last week following his arrest for felony theft - underpaying for designer clothes at a Tallahassee department store. He missed Florida State's 31-21 win over Miami and is expected to sit out Saturday's game against Wake Forest.

And as he waits for his lawyer to sort out his legal mess, Warrick's Heisman chances have all but slipped away.

A sampling of several dozen Heisman voters nationwide indicate Warrick has little or no chance to win the award presented by New York's Downtown Athletic Club on Dec. 11.

"Peter Warrick is out of it, in my mind," voter Steve Kirk of the Birmingham News said. "And not because of the moral issues. He missed a big game, and there's only 11 of them. You can't miss a big game."

Ron Bracken, sports editor of the Centre (Pa.) Daily Times, said he would have a tough time voting for Warrick because, "you want that guy standing up there getting that trophy to be somebody that can be looked up at and admired and a youngster can say, 'I want to be like him.'"

Warrick may be the nation's best player whether he misses one, two or more games, but Heisman voter Bruce Hooley of The (Cleveland) Plain Dealer adds, "I also think the Heisman stands for something more than what he stood for at Dillard's."

By winning the Heisman, a player is guaranteed lifelong recognition by football fans everywhere. Now, Warrick is likely to be remembered as the first player to lose it because of his alleged misadventures in a mall.

With Warrick on the sideline, the leading Heisman contender looks to be Georgia Tech's Joe Hamilton, the nation's top-rated passer with 1,347 yards and 12 touchdowns. He has also run for 321 yards and six touchdowns for the eighth-ranked Yellow Jackets, whose only loss came against Warrick and the Seminoles.

Also moving up on voters' ballots is Alabama's Shaun Alexander, who averages 203.6 all-purpose yards - second in the nation - and has 14 touchdowns. Others still being considered by the 921 Heisman voters are Purdue quarterback Drew Brees, Wisconsin running back Ron Dayne and Warrick's teammate, quarterback Chris Weinke.

"Everyone seems to think Warrick being out has automatically given the award to Joe Hamilton," Heisman voter Andrew Bagnato of The Chicago Tribune said, "but I don't think that's a given just yet."

Vinny Testaverde, the 1986 Heisman winner from Miami now with the New York Jets, has reserved judgment on Warrick, but says, "if it's true,

"Peter Warrick is out of it, in my mind. He missed a big game, and there's only 11 of them. You can't miss a big game."

STEVE KIRK
Heisman Trophy voter

I'm sure it will hurt him, but if it's not true, he's right up there."

Warrick may be the first to lose the Heisman because of a felony theft charge - Florida State policy calls for an automatic suspension if an athlete is charged with a felony - but at least one player has won the award without playing every game.

In 1957, Texas A&M's John David Crow missed three games with an injury and won by playing in just seven games. He ran for 562 yards and six touchdowns, threw for five scores, caught two touchdown passes and had five interceptions.

"I don't think Warrick's out of it, but he's got to come back and miss only two games," Tony Barnhart of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution said. "I think that's the magic number. The fact that he's apologized, and if he plays

well, I think enough Heisman voters will give him a second chance."

Says Lee Barfknecht of the Omaha World-Herald: "I've suspended Warrick from my ballot."

So has Bob Smizik of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette: "I will not vote for Peter Warrick, even if he is cleared of criminal charges and returns to play. I thought what they did last week by putting him on TV, having him address the team and be on the sidelines, they were trying to make a celebrity of him, and I thought it was an outrage."

By Heisman rules, Warrick remains a candidate, but William J. Dockery, president of the award, said the receiver would become ineligible if convicted of a felony. Should he win the Heisman and then be convicted, the award can be taken away.

PSU players quiet this week

(U-WIRE) UNIVERSITY PARK, Pa. - Going into its game this week against Ohio State, the Penn State football team has enough to worry about on the field. To help his squad deal with things off the field, Nittany Lions Coach Joe Paterno has cut off contact between players and the media.

"I think they need a little time to themselves," he said Tuesday at his weekly press conference. "This thing has gotten a little ridiculous with the amount of time they've had to give up to it."

Paterno said his players have complained to him in previous weeks that, with the number of interviews they have had to do, keeping up with schoolwork and practices has been difficult.

When asked if some of the major

networks, in particular ESPN, ABC and Sports Illustrated, would be able to interview players, Paterno said all interviews would need to be cleared through him.

"You'd be amazed at how much harassment some of them get," Paterno said. "Even now, it's to the point where, when I leave practice, there are people outside with helmets to be signed. You can't move, and they're going through the same kind of things."

During the past few weeks, Penn State players have been victims of numerous injuries. This week, however, Paterno said, he is optimistic about his team's health.

"Unless something happens during the week, we'll be in the best shape all year since the start of the season," he said.

Tailback Cordell Mitchell and wideout Corey Jones look to return to action. Despite their experience, Paterno didn't want to play them against Iowa, fearing another injury. Now that they're 100 percent, he said, they would be pushed in practice as hard as they have been all season.

Not everyone was aware of Paterno's media embargo. Senior hero Derek Fox, who originates from Canton, Ohio, has been spending the week acquiring tickets for family and friends. He was clueless as to why Paterno has barred the media from speaking to his teammates.

The stalemate has had little effect on some players.

"I never get many calls anyway," Lions offensive tackle John Blick said with a smile, "so it's no big deal to me."

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