

Education, vigilance keep system clean

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pages are devoted to NCAA rules and regulations, as compared with three pages concerning the student code of conduct.

"It is important to expose all athletes to NCAA rules and continue to stress them," said Dennis LeBlanc, associate athletic director for academic and student services. "We review everything (with the athletes) at the beginning of each year."

The basic tenet behind most of the NCAA's rules is that student athletes should not receive any special privileges or gifts, and an athlete's amateur status must be strictly maintained.

In case anyone involved with University of Nebraska-Lincoln athletics becomes careless about NCAA rules, headline-grabbing violations at other schools remind of the need for compliance.

The allegations of academic fraud at the University of Minnesota unearthed last spring are among the most scandalous in recent years.

The university's athletic department was purged, and the basketball coach resigned after a former office manager in the counseling office claimed to have completed more than 400 homework assignments for 20 athletes over five years.

Four players were suspended one day before Minnesota's first-round NCAA tournament game. The ensuing university investigation showed the violations were indeed widespread.

Though the university president banned his team from post-season play this year and has restructured athletic department oversights, the NCAA may impose harsher restrictions after completing its own investigation.

Byrne said scandals at other universities are a sobering reminder of the potential penalties his own team would face if scandal ensues.

NU also carries its own scandalous reminders from season's past. The university has historically avoided severe NCAA sanctions, but high profile players' run-ins with the law have haunted the school in the headlines.

In 1995, Husker I-back Lawrence Phillips was convicted of assault and trespassing after a dispute with his girlfriend, and Phillips was suspended for six games.

In the past five years, allegations against other players that have later proven false were used by the media to characterize Nebraska as a football team of thugs.

But disciplinary problems with college athletes are not new to the nineties.

In 1970, Nebraska receiver Johnny Rodgers was arrested for his involvement in an armed robbery.

Because it happened in the spring and Rodgers was sentenced to two years of probation, he did not lose any playing time, but the incident haunted Rodgers in the 1972 Heisman Trophy race, which he won.

"That has followed me 30 years," Rodgers said. "I've grown and matured over the years, but it still follows me."

These incidents also have become a part of the University of Nebraska's reputation in the news long after the players have moved on.

"It will take another ten years to live down Phillips," Byrne said.

Not Just Athletes

Hewitt booster club members pose another potential risk for the department.

Although booster club members are outside the direct control of the athletic department, the NCAA may impose sanctions against the university for rules violations.

To prevent problems with boosters, who are considered agents of the university, Byrne said a monthly column about NCAA rules is included in the booster newsletter. Notes highlighting the rules also are included with season tickets and other mailings.

Athletic department staff members are sent to annual NCAA rules

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Melanie Falk/DN

workshops, and coaches must pass tests on the rules before each season.

All of NU's efforts to abide by NCAA rules are coordinated through the athletic department's compliance staff, headed by Robert Burton, associate athletic director for sports administration and compliance.

Burton leads a staff of six dedicated to compliance issues, but the majority of the staff's work is teaching staff, athletes, coaches and boosters the ins and outs of NCAA regulations.

In effect, everyone involved with the athletic department becomes a compliance officer watching for potential violations in his or her own area.

"You can't legislate morality," Burton said. "If somebody breaks the rules, we have to be able to react to it and protect the institution."

All of the department's programs are reviewed annually for effectiveness, and the NCAA audits the department every five years as part of the recertification process. A UNL Academic Senate committee on intercollegiate athletics also serves as an outside review board.

Parental Responsibility

In many ways, the department's responsibilities extend beyond enforcing the rules. The coaches, tutors and other staff fill a parental role for the athletes.

"I think it is part of our responsibility to assist students to be successful (outside of their sports)," LeBlanc said.

Coaches said they try to teach athletes basic values to help them succeed long after they graduate from the game.

"When a player agrees to come here, they entrust their care to you," former Football Coach Tom Osborne said. "It is your responsibility to treat (athletes) like you were the father of a son going 2,000 miles away."

Rodgers said that both Coach Bob Devaney and Osborne, then an assistant, stood by him when he got in trouble.

"Devaney always taught that if you don't like how you are, you can change," Rodgers said.

"... Devaney would kick it with you for a while and kick you a few four-letter words when you got it wrong."

Nebraska's athletic department has prescribed heavy doses of education and prevention combined with firm, fair discipline to meet NCAA rules.

"There's no way they could know them all (NCAA rules)," LeBlanc said. "That's why we're here."

Coaches are on the front lines of the athletic department's battle plan — they deal with athletes daily. Coaches try to teach athletes responsibility as well as athletic skills. More than most other school officials, coaches' roles resemble parenting.

"You try to be supportive like a parent ... but you can't do it for them," Men's Basketball Coach Danny Nee said.

In his program, Nee said he tries to instill the same values a father would:

"Do what is right, treat people how you would want to be treated and give 100 percent."

And if an athlete gets into trouble, Nee said the coach is still responsible.

"You can't be with them in just the good weather," Nee said. "You recruit them, so you have to be responsible — not accountable."

Responsibility is a common theme that many of the coaches and counselors emphasize.

"We stress that (athletes) are responsible to themselves, but their actions reflect on themselves and the school program," Wrestling Coach Tim Neumann said.

In his experience, Osborne said his players gained a greater appreciation for discipline and how to apply it in their lives. Osborne said he stressed that players have three areas in which to grow: physical, mental and spiritual.

Rodgers said that even after he left the university, Devaney, and especially Osborne, continued to advise him.

"From the time I came there to today, the coaches have been part of my life, trying to help me do the right thing," said Rodgers, who completed his degree in 1997.

All three coaches agreed that a strict and fair disciplinary system is important to help athletes adhere to NCAA, school and team rules.

"You have to put some teeth in the policy," Osborne said. "If a player didn't go to class, he didn't play."

Nee said he stresses fairness in applying discipline and tries to treat all his players equally.

"Our athletes know right from wrong and know they must face the consequences," Nee said.

Many times, the relationship hinges on trust between the coach and athlete.

"If a player ever lied to me, I couldn't ever trust him again," Osborne said. "But I still cared about him."

Disciplining players can be difficult for coaches, who often develop close relationships with players.

"If I kicked someone off the team, it felt like I had failed," Osborne said. "It was my job to keep (athletes) here and make them contributing human beings."

On solid ground

Often, the media attention and accolades student athletes garner can prompt them to ignore responsibilities.

"It is very easy (for athletes) to get things out of proportion with the publicity and adulation," Osborne said.

LeBlanc agreed, saying athletes need to remember they are still students on campus.

"It's hard to convince student athletes that this is a fantasy world," LeBlanc said. "Everybody wants to know you as an athlete, but you have so many other talents."

"Athletics is something that is recognized early, but you have to realize that once you hit college, it's over in two to three years (for most athletes), and you will have to rely on other skills."

That is why academics are stressed throughout the athletic department. Athletes are encouraged to graduate, not just remain eligible, Neumann said.

"Our program has a duty and responsibility to provide an atmosphere to succeed," Neumann said. "(Athletes) have to provide the will."

Nee's players know that games and practices are never an excuse for neglecting academics. Tutors accompany the team on the road and vast academic support resources are available on campus.

"The only athlete that doesn't graduate from Nebraska is the one who doesn't want to," Nee said.

At the University of Nebraska, the goal is excellence, Neumann said. Any NU sport not among the top five or 10 in the nation is considered to be having a bad year.

"There's not any cynicism anywhere," he said. "Everyone wants to run the best program in the nation."

Law & Order

Three men take ATM from Kwik Shop

A clerk was left speechless after three men made off with an ATM on Friday.

At 3:20 a.m., the men entered a Kwik Shop, 1111 N. Cotner Blvd., with their faces hidden behind hoods with cut-out holes for their eyes, Lincoln Police Ofc. Katherine Finnell said.

They went into the store, unplugged the ATM, picked it up and loaded it into a late-model gray Chevy pickup that was waiting out-

side.

The clerk, Diane Kolarik, 50, said she did not say anything to the men as they were taking the machine, but she reported the incident to the police.

The men were described by the clerk as 5-foot-9-inches to 5-foot-10-inches tall and about 180 pounds.

The ATM was from Martell State Bank.

An undisclosed amount of money was taken, and the value of the ATM is unknown.

Compiled by staff writer Michelle Starr.

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