Update on Recruiting Scandals: Ohio State Football

Over the previous year, the Ohio State football program has been scrutinized for its recent involvement in violating extensive NCAA rules. These recent transgressions have brought to light the ongoing issues of University policy becoming subordinate to maintaining athletic eligibility standards. Beginning in 2008, five Buckeyes began committing NCAA offenses by selling their own memorabilia to a tattoo shop owner, in exchange for tattoos and cash; these violations were concealed by Head Coach Jim Tressel. Then, the University was hit with additional infractions by another group of players, who were given cash to attend a charity event, and later given “excessive compensation” for working a summer job. In response the NCAA committee imposed significant penalties on the Buckeyes.

The first illegal transactions occurred when Fine Line Ink Tattoos and Body Piercings owner Eddie Rife accepted jerseys, Big Ten Championship rings, and even a Sportsmanship award from Terrell Pryor after the 2008 Fiesta Bowl. Acknowledged as the “Tattoo 5,” the group included star QB Pryor, leading rusher Dan Herron, No. 2 wide receiver DeVier Posey, All- Big Ten offensive tackle Mike Adams, and backup defensive end Solomon Thomas. The transactions occurred for two years until the arrangement was discovered.

Christopher Cicero, a former walk-on for the Buckeyes in the 1980s found out about these improper benefits and immediately reported them to Tressel through email. The two ended up exchanging a dozen emails on the subject. Tressel did not report this to the University; he said he didn’t address the violations from Cicero because he considered them to be "confidential".

“Tressel had signed an NCAA compliance form in September saying he had no knowledge of any wrongdoing by athletes. His contract, in addition to NCAA rules, specified that he had to tell his superiors or compliance department about any potential NCAA rules violations.” Failing to monitor and self-report, Tressel allowed under-the-table trafficking to continue for another nine months before it was unearthed by the NCAA.

Robert DiGeronimo, a local booster, provided a total of $2,405 in extra benefits to nine football players. Four players were paid $200 each to attend a charity event, and five players who were overpaid $1,605 for work they did not perform in summer jobs at DiGeronimo’s excavation company.

DiGeronimo admitted to giving a total of $200 to Pryor, running back Jordan Hall, cornerback Travis Howard, and defensive back Corey Brown. As a result each player was suspended for their involvement, while two additional players were assessed a 5-game suspension stemming from the-tattoo-scandal. With Tressel attempting to keep his superiors in the dark, the University went along with the infringements without self-investigating or taking...
action. A series of emails were sent out as warnings to Tressel from the athletic director, Gene Smith. There was no response back from Tressel.

The NCAA condemned the University with failure to monitor and take appropriate action charges\(^5\). This resulted in a post-season ban. The NCAA stated that Ohio State, “failed to educate football student-athletes about DiGeronimo, encourage them to cease interaction with him or inquire about their potential employment with DiGeronimo and attendance at the charity event”\(^5\).

The NCAA removed twelve wins from the 2010 season, including the win from the Allstate Sugar Bowl. Two-year probation was enforced along with the forfeit of $338,811 worth of share payments from the Sugar Bowl\(^5\). All players involved in the extra benefits scandal were required to pay back the amounts of money given to them. A 5-year show-cause order was issued against Tressel, temporarily banning him from coaching in collegiate games. The NCAA also demanded the University to disassociate itself from former player Terrell Pryor for a five year period\(^6\).

Ohio State President, Gordon Gee responded with regret to the department’s failure to monitor its own conduct. “Smith said in a statement that the school accepts “that we should have done more to oversee Mr. DiGeronimo’s activities…I deeply regret that I did not ensure the degree of monitoring our institution deserves and demands”\(^5\). The University disassociated itself from DiGeronimo, striped itself from five scholarships over the next three years, and submitted a self-investigation report to the NCAA after it was already condemned. After standing behind Tressel throughout the investigation process, the University asked him to resign from his position as head coach.

The NCAA announced in December that the Buckeyes, now under new head coach Urban Meyer, will be banned from any bowl game this next season\(^8\). The University will be continually monitored throughout its limitation period by the NCAA Division I Committee. Close watch will be adhered to on future recruiting, money distribution, and University self-auditing.

However, these restrictions have had no effect on recent recruiting for Meyer. Ohio State is currently ranked third on Scout.com for the upcoming recruiting class of 2012, ahead of any other BigTen school. “The 23-man haul includes four five-star prospects, three of whom are slated to play along the defensive line, and nine four-star recruits”\(^9\). In addition, the Buckeyes will welcome back 18 starters from last season’s,”scandal-rocked squad including their entire defense\(^9\). “Meyer also has recently hired a new defensive back coach, Kerry Coombs, to complete his staff\(^10\).

With the recent upsurge of University scandals taking light in the media, it is of great concern to the NCAA committee that universities are demonstrating serious lack of institutional control. Universities are setting aside academic and NCAA standards to remain athletically
eligible. Meyer said in a statement, “The NCAA penalties will serve as a reminder that the college experience does not include the behavior that led to these penalties.”

The Buckeyes will compete this year in the regular season. They will not have the ability to advance on to any bowl game, regardless of achievement or rank. Their restrictions from the NCAA will be retracted in time for the beginning of 2013 season, provided that this upcoming season goes without any newly found offenses.