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Could college sports scandals happen at faith-based schools?

Mike Sweitzer-Beckman | Dec. 8, 2011

Usually I go to the sports sections of newspapers to get past all the depressing news of the front page. The sports section has stories about athletic feats. But lately, the sports section has (rightfully so) been burdened by college sports scandals.

First it was pay-for-play stories about Auburn University quarterback Cam Newton (now in the NFL with the Carolina Panthers), and then the stories of Ohio State University football players selling merchandise. More recently, the crimes have been much more egregious, beginning with former Penn State University football coach Jerry Sandusky allegedly sexually molesting several young boys on and around the Penn State campus. Head coach Joe Paterno, who was always thought of as a stand-up guy you wanted your kid to play football for, admitted that he wishes he done more with the knowledge he had of the situation. And even more recently, Syracuse men's basketball assistant coach Bernie Fine was fired for allegedly sexually molesting young boys.

These are all secular schools making the news. I think these situations could unfortunately happen just as easily at Catholic and other faith-based institutions of higher education.

As Maureen Dowd of the *New York Times* was quick to point out in her Nov. 8 column, "Personal Foul at Penn State" [1]:

> Like the Roman Catholic Church, Penn State is an arrogant institution hiding behind its mystique. And sports, as my former fellow sports columnist at The Washington Star, David Israel, says, is "an insular world that protects its own, and operates outside of societal norms as long as victories and cash continue to flow bountifully." Penn State rakes in $70 million a year from its football program.

Sports programs at Catholic institutions are no different. One of the first things that comes to mind for most people about the University of Notre Dame is their storied football program. The men's basketball programs at Marquette University, Georgetown University and Gonzaga University are paramount.

The men's basketball program at DePaul University (my alma mater) has been a team that other teams circle on their calendars for ending a losing streak, yet the games are still the big ticket at DePaul. These programs are ripe for the picking for small and possibly large immoral actions to take place.

All institutions have student athlete handbooks where the gist for a secular school is, "Our athletes will be taught to aspire to be better people not just on the athletic field, but also off the field." And the gist for student athlete handbooks at Catholic schools is along the lines of, "By teaching the faith of the Catholic church and Catholic moral values, our athletes will be taught to aspire to be better people not just on the athletic field, but also off the field."

More specifically, the University of Notre Dame student athlete handbook reads [2]:

> As a Catholic university, Notre Dame espouses Christian values and principles. These include the

> development of the human person -- spirit as well as body -- the pursuit of excellence in all endeavors, the nurturing of Christian character, and the call to personal integrity and responsibility. By providing a general description of the structures that support these endeavors, this document articulates the central values and expectations that guide Notre Dame's participation in intercollegiate athletics.

This is a similar section in the student athlete handbook at the University of Wisconsin-Madison [3]:

> The primary purpose of the University of Wisconsin-Madison is to provide a learning environment in which faculty, staff and students can discover, examine critically, preserve and transmit the knowledge, wisdom and values that will help ensure the survival of this and future generations and improve the quality of life for all. The university seeks to help students to develop an understanding and appreciation for the complex cultural and physical worlds in which they live and to realize their highest potential of intellectual, physical and human development.

There is a spiritual component to the training that the University of Notre Dame is providing its student athletes compared to a secular, state school like the University of Wisconsin. However, all the programs want their athletes to succeed, become better people and build a foundation so that student athletes can contribute in life beyond the athletic field.

This leads me to believe that the morals and values that a school espouses will not prevent a tragedy like what has allegedly happened at Penn State University and Syracuse University. It seems it can happen anywhere, such as Marquette University, a Jesuit institution in Milwaukee.

The *Chicago Tribune* shed light on some claims that a woman made [4] that she had been raped by a student athlete. She reported it to campus security officers, and they did not take the step of referring her to the Milwaukee Police Department. Marquette's faculty members are not shy to voice concern about how the university handled this and other incidents at the hands of student athletes:

> "I have been told by people that no one had bad motives in all this, that nobody was trying to cover anything up, and I find that hard to believe," said philosophy professor Nancy Snow, who recently chaired a committee to help establish a gender resource center on campus. "I find it hard to believe that trained professionals would do this. I'm very disappointed in the way the university handled this."

As of November 2011, the U.S. Department of Education continues to investigate the situation at Marquette [5].

It all points out to us that our beloved Catholic institutions are not immune to some of the most heinous crimes by student athletes and their coaches.

Going back to Maureen Dowd's commentary on comparing the sex scandal and cover-up at Penn State to what we've seen in the Roman Catholic Church, the situation at Marquette seems to fall in line. The private, Catholic institutions out there are no different than the public, secular institutions.

The one thing all the schools share is a need for a deep reflection on what values are most important: covering up to win some extra football and basketball games and keep the revenue churning or take a long, reflective look at how we address issues of sexual violence that take place within the institutions we hold dear?

[Mike Sweitzer-Beckman helped launch the blog youngadultcatholics-blog.com/ [6] in 2008. He also blogs at sweitman-solutions.com/ [7] about technology.]

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