It used to be that the biggest thing the University of Michigan football program worried about was whether or not it had enough firepower to compete for a national title. Now its chief concern is whether it can effectively stay one step ahead of the law.

After the Detroit Free Press last fall published a series of stories about various potential NCAA infractions within the Michigan football program under new head coach Rich Rodriguez, followed by the usual official but vague denials and the requisite teeth gnashing by the Michigan faithful, it turns out that the smoke really was coming from a fire blazing inside the program.

After conducting its own investigation, the University of Michigan slapped its own self on the wrist with a bunch of mostly meaningless “sanctions” as a way of wiping away the mess that Rodriguez visited upon its football program starting about 20 minutes after he got the job in December, 2007.

The story started when some of Rodriguez’s own players outed him and his staff for a variety of matters including having them practice in excess of NCAA imposed time limits. Once the NCAA got done with its preliminary investigation, it determined that Rodriguez exceeded the number of authorized coaches by 5, permitted staff members to monitor and conduct supposedly voluntary summer workouts, and had a graduate assistant coach lie to NCAA investigators about his role. The NCAA also accused Rodriguez of not monitoring his program closely enough and for essentially bullying the university’s compliance staff into not nosing around.

At the time the university promised to investigate but mostly downplayed the seriousness of the

inquiry despite recent violations by its basketball program that threatened to turn the football allegations into a loss-of-institutional-control case. Rodriguez, ever the smarmy ne'er do well, admitted to nothing and said that hypothetically if violations occurred then it was all just one big misunderstanding.

Some misunderstanding. Fulfilling the prophecy of its knee-jerk reaction to the allegations in the first place, the university admitted that indeed infractions occurred, several in fact, but it's all pretty minor stuff. Now a cynic might suggest that Michigan is downplaying the seriousness of this all because it doesn't want to be labeled a repeat offender by the NCAA. But why be cynical? Let's just give the big fat benefit of the doubt and let the facts do most of the talking.

At the very least, the investigation Michigan conducted revealed some sobering realities. Michigan has never had any allegations in the 100+ years of its program, that is until Rodriguez arrived. Moreover, it's not as if Michigan admitted only to one or two items. There were multiple violations on a whole host of issues ranging from improper conduct of assistant coaches to poor recordkeeping to an internal compliance department that was subservient to the football program to an assistant who lied during the investigation. For all that to surface in the less than two years under Rodriguez doesn't speak well for anyone associated with the university no matter how minor you think the violations might be.

As a result, Michigan self-imposed a variety of very minor penalties such as cutting practice time, cutting the number of assistant coaches and putting itself on probation. What exactly probation means isn't quite clear because the university didn't bother to explain it any better than that. Let's just say that they didn't vow to keep themselves out of any bowl games or cut scholarships or do any other kinds of acts that are usually the hallmarks of substantive probation.

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