Once again this year, college football's September centerpiece will be the Ohio State-USC game. But the national spotlight may be focused more on the USC athletic department and school administration than on the Trojans' performance on the field. Three years of sports program scandals at the university appear to be finally coming to a head, and there are widespread expectations that USC will soon be slapped down hard by the NCAA. Buckeye Dan talks about it in his latest.

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The glacial pace of NCAA investigations is legendary, but even by those elevated standards, the ongoing Reggie Bush-O.J. Mayo probe of USC is already long in the tooth. (On the plus side, it *is* long enough to allow last year's column ideas to remain timely.) At this rate, Bush could be drawing an NFL pension before the NCAA rules on his case.

Started over three years ago, the NCAA recently merged the investigation into payoffs to Bush with the inquiry into illegal payments involving the recruitment of basketball star Mayo. The reporters from Yahoo Sports, who have been on the story from the outset, suggest that the change in strategy

by the NCAA...from investigating specific violations to a focus on the overall institution of USC, lends credence to a possible finding of "lack of institutional control" by the NCAA. That's the direction taken in the questioning by NCAA investigators, and the thoroughness of the probe suggests they are taking pains to document every detail, since the burden of proof required to reach such a serious finding is difficult to achieve.

Charles Robinson, one of the Yahoo Sports reporters who broke the original Reggie Bush story, is interviewed here , and below are some of his comments on the parallels between the two cases, and the ways that the lack of institutional control at USC could be demonstrated:

Robinson: As far as parallels, yeah, I think it's pretty clear from what we're being told from sources, the way the NCAA is going about asking questions, that they see parallels in the two situations. They see with Reggie Bush a number of different people who were allowed to get close to the USC football program. Through their ability to get close to the program, they were allegedly able to provide benefits, cash and things of this nature. In the same vein with Rodney Guillory and USC basketball, this was another individual allowed to be very close to the program. Through having that access, he was able to allegedly roll out benefits that would violate NCAA rules.

One of the strong themes when we talked to people who have been questioned was: Where was the compliance department in all this? Who was overseeing the conduct of these athletic teams? How were individuals who could do harm to these programs able to get so close? Who keeps these people at bay? The answer to that is that probably the coaches could be culpable, the compliance people could be culpable, the bosses of the compliance people. Ultimately, even (Athletic Director) Mike Garrett could be culpable. When the NCAA talks about institutional control, it's very much a top-down thing. The questions for the NCAA are where did those breakdowns occur, why did they occur and how widespread were they.

The interminable investigation, together with an abundance of fan cynicism, have for a time created a sense in the public consciousness that USC may be above punishment after all....the fair-haired boy of college sports cannot be seen to be

seriously scandalized. There has been a lot of that talk about...some of it by me. But it does look now like the hammer is coming.

In an article in the Seattle Times , Jerry Brewer says there are no sacred cows for the NCAA enforcers, and that the Trojans' day will come....and he hears it might be soon .

One of the reasons the probe has dragged on for so long is that there are so many concurrent investigations going on. The feds are involved with a Justice Department look at possible federal charges in the Bush payments, and the parties to the various investigations, (including separate ones by the PAC-10 and the USC administration) have been watching each other for new information.

The alleged violations themselves are serious, and should result in at least some probation, game forfeitures, and penalties in scholarships and/or bowl appearances. Included are alleged direct payments to Mayo handler Rodney Guillory by USC Coach Tim Floyd, and the over $300,000 worth of cash and other considerations allegedly provided to Bush while he was winning the Heisman for the Trojans.

Proving that the USC athletic department or the coaches knew about these violations and allowed or sanctioned them is quite another matter though. While there's plenty of evidence that they run a slightly looser ship out there than other schools would ever tolerate, there's something of a "Hey, it's L.A.!" resignation that explains if not excuses some of the conduct. The eventual penalties for USC are now expected to be harsh, if only because of the combined malpractice committed in two major scandals in the two major sports at the same school.

We won't see NCAA "Death Penalty" suspensions of either the USC football or basketball programs. That punishes today's athletes for the sins of yesterday's players or coaches, and it might not be warranted in this case anyway, even if all the allegations are proven true. I'm sure these kinds of abuses take place elsewhere too, though I'm not as convinced as some that the USC scandals are merely the 'window' to a kind of payoff system that exists throughout college football.

Elite college players who project future multi-million dollar signing bonuses, and those who are close enough to influence them, will always be targets for agents

and their bagmen representatives. And as long as Pete Carroll is recruiting elite players, his school and his program will have to guard against the kinds of violations that gave them the black eye this time.

But it does seem now that the NCAA has to act decisively to make an example of the Trojan program, in order to avoid the rather unsavory conclusion that one of its signature institutions is permitted to operate outside of the rules that apply to everyone else. Advance speculation is 100% guesswork, because leaks from the NCAA are non-existent, but whatever they decide, we should know fairly soon. In the interview linked above, reporter Robinson says he expects a letter of infractions sometime this fall.

And considering an investigation that's been in progress since 2006, that's not just the NCAA's idea of soon.