Jim Tressel was once again in the dock this past week, getting pilloried by respected national commentators and tiresome hack sportswriters alike, after the NCAA issued their formal “notice of allegations” to Ohio State summarizing the violations committed by the Buckeyes’ head coach and the football program he serves.

Just as they were two months ago , when the facts of Tressel’s cover-up first made the news, the calls for his dismissal or resignation were everywhere in the sports media last week. And just as the media’s fickle attention turned quickly in March to tournament basketball or spring training, the latest flurry of national outraged finger-wagging at OSU and Tressel has already ebbed somewhat, a week on.

The NCAA, on the other hand, is focused like a laser beam - (though admittedly not one of your more fast-moving, speed-of-light type laser beams) - on its “process”. And it may turn out to be the agonizingly slow pace of that NCAA process that puts the loyalty to Tressel by OSU administrators to the test, and ultimately costs him his job.

If there was any good news for fans of Ohio State football in the NCAA’s bill of particulars to OSU, it was their statement that “the allegations are largely consistent with what the university self-reported to the NCAA". In other words, there were not any new disclosures to be made public. We are reasonably assured that we now know the “what’s” of the case, even if the “why’s” remain elusive.

More ominous was the NCAA language about Ohio State having used ineligible players during the 2010 season, making it a near certainty that the 11 non-bowl victories earned by the

Buckeyes last season will be vacated by the powers that be, a symbolic but nonetheless painful smackdown for the program. (The Pryor-haters will be distressed to learn that vacating the team victories will not wipe out individual statistics from the OSU career record books)

In addition, the recent (2009) violations occurred within the same five-year window that included the 2006 Troy Smith payments from a booster, and the 2004 recruiting violations that got basketball coach Jim O'Brien bounced out of his job. It is this kind of "repeat offender" circumstance of which bowl-game bans and scholarship penalties are traditionally made.

A Little Hint From the NCAA

Those kinds of sanctions might be avoided though, because the NCAA has found no systemic "lack of institutional control" in the OSU athletic department to this point. They take pains to concentrate their fire on Jim Tressel personally. He "failed to deport himself in accordance with the honesty and integrity normally associated with the conduct and administration of intercollegiate athletics as required by NCAA legislation". They note how he "withheld information" from his superiors, and how he "falsely attested" to have reported any knowledge of violations by his players when he signed off on routine reports to the organization.

The tone of the NCAA notice, focused as it is on misdeeds by the coach, while giving a relative pass to the athletic department as a whole, suggests strongly that the road ahead could be considerably smoother if the university were to sever ties with Tressel. Right now though, that would be an awkward position for a university whose president's last public statement on the question of whether he would consider firing Tressel was "No, are you kidding me?"

But the NCAA is not kidding, and President E. Gordon Gee has since expressed some regret for his remarks at the awkward press conference in early March. This only after he was rightly ridiculed for his fawning obsequiousness toward Tressel ("I hope he doesn't fire me!") in a moment that called for some seriousness and contrition. All that aside, the university has for the second time weathered the intense media onslaught and stood behind their coach, apparently determined to let the NCAA's process play out.

Interminable

Until last week's notice from the NCAA gave us a hint at the organization's timetable for their investigation, most OSU people were operating on the assumption that the sanctions on the OSU program would affect only 2011, with very little carryover beyond this coming season. The suspensions for players and the head coach would be served in 2011, and any potential post-season ban would likely be a one-year thing, affecting only this year. Sure, a worst-case scenario might involve the loss of five or ten scholarships down the road, which could be a longer-term hindrance, but this baby was going to be a one-year speed bump.

Now that is far from a sure thing.

Ohio State must now respond to the notice of allegations, and if you take a gander at the pdf document , you'll see that they are being asked to jump through a million hoops in their response, providing all manner of statements, documents, and information for the NCAA to digest and act upon. The official hearing is set for August 12th, a scant three weeks before the 2011 opener. Only after that hearing can the NCAA begin to review the information and formulate their final rulings and sanctions.

If there is one constant in the universe, it is that the NCAA doesn't do anything in a hurry. It it bound to be mid-season at the earliest, and more likely after the 2011 season is complete before the boys from Overland Park return a final verdict on Ohio State and Jim Tressel. It's quite possible he will have served his 5-game suspension and then been back on the sidelines for at least a few more games before he learns if he'll have to return to coaching purgatory for additional punishment. If they tack on additional game suspensions, they may have to carry over to 2012.

If that happens, there will be another full offseason to speculate, editorialize, and in general, bring bad publicity to the university's doorstep. The inevitable negative recruiting consequences would carry over to the 2013 recruiting class, and every minor development in the case would be yet another occasion for the same kind of media orgy of hand-wringing sanctimony we witnessed this past week, and back in March.

The initial vote of confidence that Gene Smith and E. Gordon Gee gave to Jim Tressel two months ago was based on what was then their sincerely held belief that having Jim Tressel as their head coach was a net positive for the school and for the program. Their calculation at the time was that Tressel's value to OSU football outweighed the damage that the school would suffer as a result of his dishonest actions of last year, and that his stellar track record had earned him a reprieve from what might otherwise have been a firing offense.

But the longer the case drags on, the more likely that calculation is to change.

In the last week of mulling over the ways that things could get worse for Jim Tressel and the ways that the outlook for his OSU career might get better, I am having trouble coming up with material for the latter. I think if he thought his continuing presence at OSU was causing more harm than good to OSU football, that he cares enough about the program, and he's enough of a "company man" to resign on his own. I don't think we're there yet, and I'm in the camp that hopes he survives this trouble. But I'm way less optimistic about that than I was a couple of weeks ago.

At first, Ohio State fans seemed to be split between those who thought he had sullied the OSU program to an extent that he should be fired, and those who felt he had earned forgiveness for these infractions, serious though they were. It appears now that the NCAA is poised to punish Ohio State for continuing to stand behind their embattled coach and reward them if they cut him loose. So much so that even Tressel's staunchest supporters are beginning to see this as a battle that might not be worth winning.

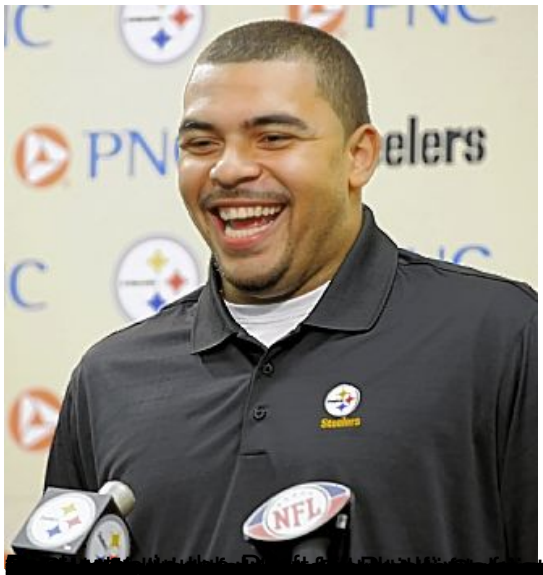
All the usual suspects on the national sports journalism scene weighed in last week as if the NCAA action had contained some new and damning disclosures. Most of it carried a "it's over for Tressel" kind of tone, as you'll see if you check out Pat Forde , Stewart Mandel , and Dennis Dodd
. Apparently desperate for a fresh angle, the usually coherent
Bill Rhoden

has decided Tressel's punishment should consist of being forced to stay at OSU...to stew in his own hypocrisy...or something.

Closer to home, the *Dispatch*'s Tim May and former Buckeye Chris Spielman commented on ESPN without flat out calling for Tressel's dismissal, as you might expect. Also more measured in their observations were the guys from The-Ozone, who combined for a column worth reading. See also Tony Gerdeman's other thoughtful take from last week.

ESPN's Kirk Herbstreit, another former OSU player, didn't do his reputation as a first-rate football analyst any favors last week when he advised that in order to "fix" OSU, they should "first stop recruiting players like Terrelle Pryor and Maurice Clarett". As if Herbstreit, as the defender of everything good and right about OSU football, had been standing at the city limits of Columbus at the time, trying to stop the nation's #1 high school players in their respective years from entering the city to play for OSU, rather than applauding their commitments along with every other OSU fan. The other 119 FBS schools would have been lined up to offer both of them free rides if Ohio State, with the benefit of the ability to see into the future, had seen fit to pass.

And besides, until Pryor violates some legal statute more serious than the speed limit, I think it's unfair to equate him with the ne'er do well Clarett. Why not single out Posey, Adams, Herron and Thomas for criticism, Kirk? They committed the exact same minor NCAA infraction as did Pryor. Should they not have been recruited? I don't expect you to be a shameless Buckeye homer, Kirk. Just make sense.



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