The Buckeyes football team reported and opened fall practice this week but were still not able to grab the media focus from the program's off-the-field goings on. The long-awaited hearing for OSU officials before the NCAA's Committee on Infractions took place Friday, and was over in less than four hours, a duration that was thought to bode well for Ohio State's eventual outcome.

All the major OSU officials, including former coach Jim Tressel and current coach Luke Fickell, made the trip to Indianapolis to plead their case to the NCAA. The university also announced that they would be returning the $338,000 they earned as part of the Big Ten share of the Sugar Bowl payout. Now the waiting for the final decision begins.

It does now appear that the worst is behind Ohio State, and that there will probably not be additional disclosures to prolong the months-long nightmare that has engulfed the Buckeye football program. But that's not because ESPN isn't trying their darnedest to keep it going.

Letter, Letter...Who Got a Letter?

In a press release this past Wednesday OSU denied an earlier report by ESPN that the university had received a letter from the NCAA saying that certain issues with the Ohio State football program remained under investigation by them. Ohio State administrators said the letter they received "concerned only procedural matters" related to the August 12 hearing, and that they didn't expect to address any additional issues in that hearing beyond those made public in the original letter of allegations.

As was then revealed Friday, the letter that ESPN reported on Wednesday was actually one the NCAA sent
to their own Committee on Infractions (COI) in mid-July telling them that there was one additional OSU violation to add to the list, but that
it didn't warrant
delaying

the August 12 hearing.

To make this as simple as I possibly can, here is what the letter was telling the COI..."You know those six OSU players who were suspended for selling merchandise for cash and free tattoos? Well, make that seven."

There were only two formal allegations against Ohio State by the NCAA. The first one was the original "player misconduct", the selling of merchandise in violation of NCAA regulations. The second, and far more serious one, was Jim Tressel's cover-up of his knowledge of said misconduct, and his lying about it by signing documents he knew to be false.

Just as the NCAA was packing up to leave Columbus this spring, the *Sports Illustrated* article by George Dohrmann was hitting the stands, alleging that nine additional OSU players had been involved in the merchandise-for-tattoos arrangement, and it cited the nine players by name. All nine players were immediately questioned by OSU and NCAA officials, and all but one (widely reported to be linebacker Dorian Bell) were cleared of any involvement. Bell has since been suspended for the entire 2011 season, and later announced his intention to transfer.

The NCAA letter to COI noted an "amended allegation" because there was "one additional violation related to the first allegation"...in other words...add Dorian Bell to the player misconduct allegation. Because Bell's involvement with tattoo parlor operator Edward Rife had not yet been investigated as fully as had the original six suspended players, the letter said the investigation was ongoing.

OSU officials also released a letter (pdf format) that was sent by the COI to Gordon Gee dated August 3rd, which was a short memo to document the timeline and the list of documents relevant to the OSU case. This is no doubt the one on "procedural matters" referred to in OSU's response Wednesday to the ESPN report. Clear as mud?

So....(and this may come as a shock to many of you)....it appears that the Wednesday report by ESPN was somewhat misleading and a bit sensationalized, appearing as it did on the sports media network's home page as headline news. Pat Forde's report was only accurate in the narrow sense that the letter to COI had been CC'd to OSU's compliance attorney, but the suggestion that it concerned some new or different violations or allegations was flat out wrong.

It's almost as if ESPN was engaging in wishful thinking rather than honest journalism, when they falsely reported that OSU had received a letter alleging further investigations, and speculated that "the result could be a second notice of allegations and a second trip through the NCAA justice system." Well....no...not really, guys.

Someone should write an article about ESPN's agenda-driven OSU coverage. Oh, wait...our own Gary Benz did that last week, and his nicely done piece has gotten some deserved circulation on the web in the days since. Check it out if you haven't already.

And *Buckeye Sports Bulletin* editor Mark Rea also has an excellent column today about

ESPN's curious vendetta. Of the network's last ditch Hail Mary pass this week, Rea says "Like the playground bully or jilted lover, ESPN continually screams, "This isn't over until we say it's over!"

Some of the reasons behind the months-long ESPN hatchet job on Ohio State athletics aren't too hard to figure out. The fact that the network got completely pantsed by *Yahoo Sports* on the Reggie Bush-USC case five years ago must have embarrassed the network's top brass. Surely they want to be seen now as "out front" on all college sports scandal coverage.

And the Big Ten Network is (so far) the only conference-run TV network competing with ESPN in college football TV coverage. So the conference itself, (and by extension its teams) is viewed as something of a rival....although it shouldn't be too much to ask of them to at least pretend to some journalistic integrity in the coverage of that rival.

If the treatment of Ohio State by the network were remotely comparable to the scale and the volume of their coverage of other serious college football scandals (i.e. Oregon, North Carolina, Alabama) around the country, then the zeal with which they pursue the OSU story wouldn't be so glaringly obvious. But is there anyone...anywhere...who cannot discern the difference?

Here is the formal Ohio State response to Friday's hearing with the NCAA Committee on Infractions (COI) in pdf format. It includes generic statements from President Gordon Gee and Athletic Director Gene Smith, but contains no specifics on the hearing itself.

On the Field...Finally

Incoming Buckeye freshmen reported Saturday, with returnees coming in the next day, and Monday was the first practice under new Head Coach Luke Fickell. My first opportunity to see practice in person won't come till this week, but from what I've been able to cobble together

from the media reports of those on the scene, I can report on some personnel developments that we have only been able to speculate on up to this point.

A few days of practice without full pads has not been enough of a sample to say that any one of the four candidates for the starting quarterback job has an edge yet. Freshman Braxton Miller had a couple of good days early, but struggled with consistency as the first week progressed. Some observers liked the way junior Kenny Guiton was throwing the ball by week's end, and Joe Bauserman still knows the playbook better than any of them. Taylor Graham has the strongest arm of the four, but he too has been erratic. Stay tuned.

At wide receiver, Verlon Reed and Corey "Philly" Brown *(#10 at right)* have been running with the 1's in practice, with Chris Fields the apparent starter in the slot receiver role. Redshirt freshman T.Y. Williams continues to have trouble catching the ball consistently, and both true freshmen, Devin Smith and Evan Spencer
(pictured below)
have performed well enough early to make people think that either of them could get on the field as first year players.

Carlos Hyde *(#34 pictured at top)* and Rod Smith have stood out among the running backs according to multiple reports. Hyde is powerful at 230 lbs, and yet his speed is comparable to any of the other backs. Smith is consistently described as "smooth" in his cuts and adjustments. Jordan Hall *(#7 below)* is lining up at receiver and at running back in roughly equal numbers of reps, and Jaamal Berry is always impressive with his quickness and speed.

The starting offensive line has been, (left to right), Andrew Norwell, Jack Mewhort, Mike Brewster, Marcus Hall and J.B. Shugarts. No real surprises there, with Corey Linsley, the other major candidate for one of the guard spots sitting out the first two games for an unspecified

rules violation. Several reporters have cited Hall as showing great power and drive. The health of these starters (plus Mike Adams after Game 5) may be the key to the whole season.

On defense, the starting safeties have been Orhian Johnson and C.J. Barnett, who is coming off of a knee injury, but looks very good according to the beat guys. Travis Howard is a lock at the field corner, and redshirt freshman Bradley Roby and sophomore Dominic Clarke are battling for the other spot, with Roby perhaps having the edge in the early going.

At linebacker, it looks like the Bucks will line up in the “base” defense with Andrew Sweat at the Will spot, Storm Klein starting in the middle and Etienne Sabino at the Sam strongside position. However, when Tyler Moeller comes on in the nickel, replacing the Sam backer, Sabino has been sliding over to the middle and Klein coming off the field. It is expected that Moeller will be on the field well over 50% of the time, so it appears that the coaches want to keep Sabino on the field as much as possible.

On the defensive line, Garrett Goebel has been the starter at the nose, with John Simon and Johnathan Hankins alternating at the strongside end and 3-technique tackle spots. Nathan Williams is the returning regular at the Leo end spot, and his backup has been sophomore J.T. Moore in the early practice sessions. Freshman tackles Michael Bennett and Joel Hale have stood out as possible early contributors. More next week after I get a first-hand look.

The Big Question

There’s only one major decision yet to be made on the sanctions that will be imposed on Ohio State for the Tressel/Tatgate scandal. Multiple years of probation are a given, and the possibility of a few scholarship losses remains, but the big question is whether or not the Buckeyes will be permitted by the NCAA to play in the 2011 postseason.

And this year, for the first time ever in the Big Ten, the definition of “the postseason” will also include a conference championship game in addition to the traditional bowl game invitation. That means the Big Ten Conference also has a decision to make on Ohio State’s eligibility for postseason play...quite likely one that they would like to make in conjunction with the NCAA’s ruling.

As you read this, the formal 8/12 meeting between OSU officials and the NCAA Committee on Infractions is history, and the school awaits the final determination of sanctions. It is widely assumed that if the NCAA hands down a 2011 postseason ban to Ohio State, the Big Ten will follow suit and rule OSU ineligible to compete for the conference title in Indianapolis in the event the Buckeyes finish atop the Leaders Division.

Who could blame them? Big Ten officials don’t want their inaugural championship game to be tainted by a potential victor unable to then represent the conference in the BCS Bowlfest in January.

It would mean a double-whammy for the Ohio State coaches and players...the ones who did

nothing wrong...punishing them twice by banning them from a bowl game, and then rendering their regular season record meaningless as well. But I suspect that conference image concerns will trump considerations of fairness to Ohio State players in this instance.

And maybe they should. Besides, the Big Ten will want to express their disappointment with Ohio State in some formal fashion.

Two months ago, when it began to look increasingly clear that no major institutional violations would be alleged against OSU by the NCAA, my best guess as to the ultimate sanctions was that a one-year postseason ban would accompany the vacation of the 2010 season that has since been self-imposed by the university. (Not so much because I thought it was warranted based on past precedent...it really isn't...but because the NCAA had taken so much media heat for last December's decision on the Sugar Bowl eligibility of the suspended OSU players.)

I am less convinced today that any postseason ban will be forthcoming, but either way, it would seem to me very awkward for both the NCAA and the Big Ten to allow this decision to drag out beyond the start of the season on 9/3.

They can move when they want to...

Conventional wisdom on the NCAA is that they are unable to decide much of anything without at least a few months of painstaking deliberation, so many OSU observers have been saying it could be mid-September or even October, well into the 2011 schedule, before the OSU penalties are announced.

But the NCAA also has a penchant for tidiness...for liking everything wrapped up with a little bow on top, with no lingering issues. There are indications that they have other (bigger?) fish to fry among their ongoing investigations, and despite the reputation, they *have* shown the ability to act quickly and decisively when it serves their interests to do so.

The Cam Newton case provides a good recent example of the NCAA lighting a fire under their

own butts when they have to. The Heisman favorite was first ruled ineligible for violations of his amateur status, and then immediately reinstated just in time to play in the SEC Championship, all in what seemed like about ten minutes, but was actually about two days , last December. With a great big BCS bow on top.

It would be anything but "tidy" for Ohio State (and their conference rivals) to face the beginning of the new season in their newly configured conference still in limbo about their postseason possibilities. And until Gene Smith suggested an 8-12-week window for a final NCAA decision on sanctions after Friday's hearing, I had been floating my own hunch that the NCAA would somehow find it in their power to rule on Ohio State before the Akron Zips come to Columbus on September 3rd. Smith's prediction of a two or three month wait on Friday really rained on my parade.

An early decision made sense to me for no other reason than that it would have allowed Jim Delany and the Big Ten to begin their season knowing who would be eligible for their championship game, and who would not. I realize that conference play doesn't start until October 1st, but this uncertainty would still mar the onset of the regular season. Otherwise, Big Ten 2011 will have to kick off with everything being all messy and unsettled. And nobody wants that.

The NCAA's glacial timetable may force the Big Ten to act unilaterally, and make a public statement on Ohio State's eligibility for the Big Ten Championship without regard to what the NCAA decides. The Buckeyes aren't in a position to whine about the cards they are being dealt by the college football powers that be, but it seems awfully unfair, not only to OSU people, but to the rest of the Big Ten as well, to be forced to wait until October or even November to find out officially if the Buckeyes will be allowed to play in December or January.

The wages of sin, I suppose.

On Twitter at @dwismar

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