Ohio State finally got their reckoning with the NCAA Committee on Infractions, and the primary penalty is a one-year ban on postseason play that will be effective for the 2012 season. The COI also added four additional scholarship losses to the five already self-imposed by OSU, for a total of nine, to be taken over a three-year period.

The penalty was a blow to the university, not so much because it was beyond what people thought possible, but more because their Athletic Director had become convinced that no ban would be imposed, and Gene Smith's assurances had guided the program's decision-making in recent months. Included in that process was their decision to play in a minor bowl game this season rather than self-impose a ban for this year, and possibly get it out of the way.

Also acting on confident assurances emanating from the athletic director's office, Urban Meyer took the Ohio State job, and several talented recruits bought into the prevailing wisdom. Meyer's not going anywhere, but he might lose a commit or two over this. For the particulars of Tuesday's events, here's
Doug Lesmerises story
in the PD, and
a report by Jeff Svoboda
of Buckeye Sports Bulletin. See also Rusty Miller's
AP account
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Miscalculating Ain't the Word

Gene Smith somehow managed to parlay his long-time connections with the NCAA and the Committee of Infractions into a thorough misunderstanding of what was going to hit the program. Smith said "We are surprised and disappointed with the NCAA's decision." Yes, Gene, the disappointment we understand and share...it's the surprise part we're upset about. That was your job.

To say that Gene Smith miscalculated is to put the very best face on the matter. From the initial disastrous Tressel press conference, to the final blow that he had assured people wasn't

coming, Smith has botched the aftermath of the Tressel scandal, and the department will not be fully purged until he too is gone. It shouldn't be long, though I see he is already getting yet another vote of confidence from President Gee.

It has long been understood that a one-year postseason ban was about the worst that OSU might expect to receive as a major penalty. It would have been a relatively painless one at that, had it been for the 2011 season just past. Now it's not going to be painless.

It is going to take the sheen off of the Meyer machine in its first season, and make the playing of the Big Ten conference schedule moot for the Buckeyes in 2012, as they are banned from competing in the conference title game. That's anything but a fair outcome for current players who have done nothing at all wrong.

But it's not an unfair penalty for Ohio State. The penalties were always going to be within a few, well-defined parameters of bowl bans, scholarship losses, and probation years. There was nothing shocking or unprecedented in the sanctions, although the most serious charge against the department, that of "failure to monitor", is not always punished with a postseason ban.

It Was About Tressel, Not Tats

In the OSU case, there was enough quantity of different violations to invite that ban. But the committee made clear that the ban was about Jim Tressel. Tressel was hit with a five-year show cause finding by the NCAA, making him radioactive to college programs during that period. This is not an unusual term for a serious violation like his. The COI chairman said that the one-year ban for OSU was decided as early as March, when it was determined that Tressel had not reported violations, after which the Buckeyes had played in the Sugar Bowl. How that reality managed to elude Gene Smith for the better part of a year is a testament to his cluelessness.

Clearly then, the COI gave more weight to the behavior of Jim Tressel in deciding on the one-year ban, than on the Bobby DiGeronimo booster involvement that led to the "failure to monitor" charge. The committee appeared to decide that even though Tressel had paid for his deception with his job, the program and the university should be punished further for his behavior.

Again, I take no issue with the severity of the sanctions, but using last year's Sugar Bowl participation as justification for the ban is weak stuff by the COI. Their own NCAA people had a seat at the table when the BCS, Ohio State, the Sugar Bowl people, Bobby Petrino and the University of Arkansas, all decided jointly to allow OSU's about-to-be-suspended players to participate in the football game. The player violations had been disclosed. Everyone at that table wanted to play the game with the Buckeyes at full strength...with Pryor, Posey, Adams and Herron...and not without them. Well, almost everyone...

Seems Tressel was the least enthusiastic of the bunch about the idea of playing his suspended stars. Indeed his motives may have been mixed, but among them, as he has publicly stated ,

was that he didn't want the guilty players to avoid the consequences of their actions. At the time he had no guarantees that they would be coming back to school for their senior seasons, to serve out their suspensions. Note too that before the Sugar Bowl was played, Tressel extracted those assurances from all five players as a condition of traveling to New Orleans with the team. Only Pryor, who was summarily dismissed, failed to honor that commitment.

The NCAA took some heat in the media, and hence in public opinion, after the decision was made to allow the Tat Five to play in New Orleans. Six months ago, this column said that even in the absence of hard precedent, a postseason ban on Ohio State might be more of a "mulligan" for the NCAA, embarrassed as they were after the fact by the Sugar Bowl decision. This penalty smells a bit like that kind of a public relations grab in the form of a payback to OSU.

It is equally arguable of course, that the penalties were fair on the merits of the OSU case, and the most avid Buckeye homer would have a hard time arguing that they aren't.

The Whole FBS is Watching

Gene Smith gambled that his relationship with the NCAA powers, and a department culture of self-reporting and high NCAA access would work to Ohio State's benefit. That he and the university were blind-sided by Tuesday's decision is final confirmation of his failure as an intermediary with the NCAA. And Smith may well be a capable administrator, but his finest moments have not been the ones in front of a microphone. He and his bow-tied sidekick of a president have been public embarrassments to the university as often than they have been a serious and steadying force for it.

It had been speculated in some quarters that Smith's last function as A.D. would be to shepherd this investigation through to its conclusion. This result practically guarantees that outcome. Gee said later that... "There was no guarantee if we had a bowl ban this year that we would not have had a bowl ban next year." So it may not be exactly right to say Smith could have prevented a 2012 ban if he had self-imposed a 2011 ban, but he might have.

My guess is that the NCAA didn't want their postseason ban to be "painless" for OSU, as it would have been this year...and so they made sure their timing resulted in a ban for 2012.

I wonder if Gene Smith ever considered that his close association with the NCAA , or maybe just the perception that he had one, might hurt, rather than help OSU. The committee cannot have reacted favorably to public suggestions that Smith's insider status with the NCAA bureaucracy would grease the skids for Ohio State. If anything they might tend to give harsher treatment to "one of their own", so as to avoid any public perception of favoritism. If that was their shot, Smith never saw it coming.

The NCAA action also tells other programs where self-reporting gets them. So much for cooperation. Maybe the lesson that can be taken by other schools is to lawyer up and clam up. We'll see what happens when the NCAA now turns its attentions toward Eugene...or Coral Gables...or Chapel Hill...

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