

## Chapter 25 Athletics' Challenges

One of the most disturbing meetings I have ever had was with a number of prominent citizens of the state. These included the attorney general of the state (appointed by Governor Herschler), a gubernatorial candidate, a legislator, and several other equally prominent people. With such a powerful group I set the meeting in the board room of the trustees. They asked to see the athletic director and myself. George McCarty and I sat at the head of the big table and we opened the meeting. I could see that the entire group was very agitated. After complaining bitterly about the lack of success of our football program, they all rose up, actually "glassy eyed", and stated that if you have to cheat to win that they demanded that we cheat! George and I in unison stated flatly, "No way" and walked out of the room. I heard later from one of my "jock" trustees that the "Cowboy Joe Club" gave me a no confidence vote which was never transmitted to me officially. I suspect that they canceled my "Lifetime Membership" in the club as well.

Several things led up to our problems in fielding a winning football team. The first was the Western Athletic Conference adapting the 1.6 academic prediction rule reported earlier and the "black 14 incident" discussed in this chapter.

### Cowboy Joe Club

The Cowboy Joe Club was one of the biggest mistakes I made while president of The University of Wyoming. Athletic Director, Red Jacoby, warned against its formation. I wanted to confirm my support for athletics at UW and when a group of athletic boosters approached me about starting such an organization, I encouraged them provided that the head of the organization was a university employee. I felt that by this the university would have a degree of control over the organization. At first we worked closely with the group. However, they had a board of directors which eventually moved towards independence in philosophy even though the director was paid by the university. Jack Taylor, the freshman football coach during the Lloyd Eaton years was the first director. He kept the club close to the university. Later after he left, we lured one of our beloved basketball coaches and past star players for Wyoming to be head. He was having a difficult time winning enough to keep the citizens happy. I believe that he was happy about being able to step aside as basketball coach and knew it was time. The club continually moved away from the university to a point of essential independence. Many members were livid with the university for not having continuing winning teams in basketball and football. The club provided a powerful platform for them to vent their anger. The club raised funds for the athletic programs; however, we were never in need during my time due to the generous appropriations from the legislature and budgeting by the university. To my knowledge there was never an illegal act actually performed by the club, because we kept a very tight rein on all activities of our coaches and players, but the potential was always there. I discuss the club's part in my situation as president elsewhere. I am confident that clubs such as the cowboy Joe club have been the root of serious breaches of rules, some of which when caught have resulted in NCAA penalties in other universities. The University of Wyoming did not need the cowboy Joe club and has in many ways paid the price of its existence. In summing up the organization, when things went well and we were winning

there was no more congenial more supportive group, but when we lost, things went to hell.

#### Louisiana State University Coach's Philosophy -1997

He stated that an athlete kept eligible but not working towards graduation is exploitation and making millions for the universities. For the athlete: education, being a good father and citizen, and making a positive impact in the community should be the goal.

#### **"Black 14" Incident**

I find this a very difficult incident of which to write. I am saddened about the whole affair. No one won, everyone lost as far as I can see. At the beginning of the season the football coach, Lloyd Eaton had informed the team that he would tolerate no demonstrations within the team. This policy had been explained to the trustee athletic committee in August of that year before the football season. Coach Eaton talked about all of the problems surrounding black athletes at the different campuses. He stated that he wanted assurance that he was completely in charge of team discipline and the rules to be followed. The trustee committee approved his position loudly and clearly. In essence, the administration was effectively precluded from questioning any rules the coach might lay down. We were very concerned that this could cause a real problem in the future. It is a delicate balance between runaway dissent approaching lawlessness and the freedoms that we cherish. One must remember that at this time the higher education system throughout the country was in turmoil and student and faculty unrest was rampant. As I found in attending the President's Council meetings of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, no one had really discovered how to satisfactorily handle these issues. In addition, Wyoming was philosophically a "law and order" state and there was little or no tolerance for this kind of activity. Coach Eaton adamantly informed the team that, "If any of you demonstrate, you are off the team!" In September, 1969 in the middle of the week before the football game with Brigham Young University (a Latter Day Saint (Mormon) university) being played in Laramie, the spokesman for the 14 black football players told the coach that they all were going to wear black arm bands during the game to protest the Mormon Church not allowing a black person to rise to the highest level of priesthood in the Church. Coach Eaton asked them, "Do you understand what that means on this team?" They informed him that they would wear black arm bands or not play. He dismissed them from the team, "on the spot." Thus, the stage was set.

I was shocked to learn that Joe Williams, a fine person and a star tailback, was the "spokesman" for the black players. On Monday of that week I had ridden with him over to the Cheyenne Quarterback Club where he was a student football player guest of the club. We were sitting in the back seat of the university car and I had time to visit with him. He told me with great sincerity, I believe, his goal was to be an elementary school teacher, because he felt that he could do the most good for mankind at that level. He said that he probably would have to settle for secondary education teaching, because of the time constraints of athletics. He then talked about his younger sister who was in college.

He was helping her by sending her money from his summer jobs. He was very proud of her and was dedicated to assure that both made good for his family. He was soft spoken and sincere in this lengthy discussion. This was no revolutionary person but an honest American with solid goals using the means available to be a success for his family. I asked Joe some time later when he delivered to me other demands from the "Black 14" group, "Joe, this just doesn't figure with your goals and aspirations for yourself and your sister." He shrugged his shoulders and said softly, "I just carry the messages I am given." We found out much later from members of the black community in Cheyenne that the protest was perpetrated by the Black Panthers in Denver. Further, that the Black Panthers had tried the year before (1968 - the fall after the Sugar Bowl Game), but that Gene Huey, a team captain and a great player on the Sugar Bowl team, had put a stop to this type of activity in 1968. Gene Huey had graduated and was an Assistant Coach at the University of Nebraska in 1969. In 1997 he was a coach with the Indianapolis Colts National Football League team.

The University of Wyoming was an excellent target for such a blowup, because of the national visibility of a small university's team being in the Sugar Bowl. Part of the selection of Wyoming for this demonstration was the known "hard nosed" discipline as part of the coaches success.

On Friday, the day before the game and one day after the dismissal, the trustees gathered in Laramie including Governor Stanley Hathaway upon my call to try to work out a compromise between the coaches and the 14 black football players. The trustees met separately with the black players and with the coaches. The coaches were adamant that if any players demonstrated, they would not play. They stated that if they gave in they would lose all discipline in the team. Between meetings the 14 black players waited in an office in the president's suite. Elliott Hays and Joe Geraud stayed with them and got them to agree to meet with the coaches provided the coaches met with the whole group. Elliott and Joe told me these were extremely tense moments. The administration could not budge the coaches. The coaches insisted that they would only meet separately with each player. There was no give and no leverage since the coaches were heroes in the state. The alternative would have been dismissal of the coaches which would have blown up the state and not accomplished anything as far as the players and the football program were concerned.

The trustees during their meeting with the players saw a "glimmer of hope" and late at night turned them over to me and the governor. We moved to my office and talked to the players for two to three hours past midnight. We told the players that the university had to back the coaches, because they were legally and morally correct. The coaches had agreed that if the 14 black players would play in the game and not wear black arm bands, that they would reinstate the players on the team. It looked to the governor and me that many times we had the players ready to agree to the compromise. Each time it seemed that an unknown force crept in and we couldn't consummate the reconciliation. We heard much later that there were only a few "hard-core" members who somehow controlled the group. Further, we also were told later by a reliable source that a number of the black players were threatened by the Black Panthers. Some were seriously intimidated by threats against members of their families. I suspect that Joe Williams and his sister might have been among these. Can I prove any of this. No. But,

it is the only logical explanation for the team members that I knew personally who were thrilled to play for Wyoming and considered it a chance of a lifetime and who had been totally loyal for so long. I might add that we kept in touch with the black community in Cheyenne throughout. I had casual meetings regularly with an agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation assigned to the state, because this issue appeared to cross state lines. We did confirm later that the behind the scenes perpetrator was a non-Wyoming ex-airman from the air base in Cheyenne who was a graduate student at the university at the time of the incident.

During all of this, things were "exploding" public wise. We had been brought a message by a trusted faculty member that there was planned a mass demonstration during the game by ten bus loads of people from Denver. What do you do now? We knew that the people of Wyoming would not tolerate a mass demonstration on the field by outsiders and that the potential for a lot of people to get injured or worse was a real possibility. We decided to request a large contingent from the National Guard to stand by ready to maintain order or take control of a mass riot. The Guard was quietly called out and several hundred were immediately available if needed. We essentially kept this secret to avoid this in itself precipitating a riot with so many people "on edge" anyway. By this time the situation was getting into the national news and becoming a national issue.

On the day of the game signs appeared in some windows of the high rise dormitories, "Welcome Black Brothers from Colorado". We felt that we were "sitting on a powder keg" ready to go off. Just before the game one bus showed up. Those aboard quietly marched around the bus with placards. They then left the signs behind and with quiet dignity went into the stadium and occupied their seats. They never moved during the game. The National Guard was quietly sent home after the game with few citizens ever realizing that they had been "called out". We were certainly not out of trouble by any means. A national Public Television team fully equipped with trucks of equipment and cameras arrived for a 2 week stay to follow the events. The University of Wyoming was on the front page of the "New York Times", in a major article in "Sports Illustrated" and in many other national news stories. Ironically when I grew up I always wanted to be in "Sports Illustrated".

Faculty rightfully were very concerned about the situation and were holding meetings with me and my administrative staff and well attended public meetings. Students held meetings. Rallies were held sometimes with as many as 700-800 people. We had a member of the clergy in a speech to one of the huge rallies justifying violence if required to obtain justice. This infuriated me and others that were trying to get the university through this crisis without a "blow-up" resulting in people getting hurt. There was great empathy among the faculty and students and others in the university community for the black football players. On the other hand, we were getting long petitions from groups in the state supporting the coaches and their actions. We understood that the majority of the long time black community in Cheyenne either supported the university's position or remained neutral. Petitions were received from outside the state supporting our position many fold. I tell of this not to justify what was done, but to demonstrate how nearly impossible it was to consider backing away. We also had a few letters from national sports figures deploring our actions.

We did not stop working with all parties involved to try to get some resolution. Later, the coaches did agree to accept without prejudice any of the "Black 14" players who would come back on the team. Several did. Most did not, we believed because of threats against them and their families. Sadly, many of their football careers were over. Some transferred to other schools with as much help as we could give them from the president's office. An example was Tony McGee, later a star with the Washington Redskins championship team. My office intervened helping him transfer to Southern University. The administration also agreed to continue the scholarships of those team members dismissed that wished to stay at the university. I personally felt very strongly that we had made an educational commitment to them if they wanted to finish their degree.

The aftermath of all this was felt for years. The faculty and administration relationships were hurt. The student and administration interaction was suspect. And the citizen and university relations were tarnished. Many people in Wyoming would do anything for a winning football team, and felt terribly cheated that the team was damaged. As I stated earlier, there were no winners, we were all losers.

On a personal note, we brought the dialysis machine for Earl to Laramie and set it up in the president's house that weekend. This was a very stressful time for our family; because, the dialysis had to be run for at least eight hours three times a week to keep Earl alive, regardless of anything else going on. One of the beautiful things that happened during this period of great turmoil, that we found out later, was that all leaders of rallies, mass meetings, etc. determined the times that we ran the dialysis and declared a period of silence and put a moratorium on all protest gatherings during those times.

Two of the original 14 players were brothers from a fine family in Denver, Colorado. They were among those that had agreed to return to the team. The parents as a gesture of good will asked if they could put on a "Soul" dinner for the team, all dorm residents (several thousand) and special guests including my family. They worked with our chefs and food service staff and we had a wonderful "Soul" dinner which was really appreciated by all and certainly contributed to returning to a peaceful campus. I cannot say enough good about this wonderful, thoughtful family. Sadly after graduation of their sons, one of the brothers was shot and killed by someone in a Denver theater which was determined to be a case of mistaken identity. My heart went out to them.

Some of the things that we learned from this incident included the fact that we were bringing black athletes to campus and there were few black girls on campus. Wyoming has some blacks in some of the towns but not a large number. Therefore, we did not enjoy many black students outside of the athletes. Upon suggestions from the athletes, we created special scholarships and actively recruited black female students throughout the country and especially from Wyoming. This program had only limited success.

The "Black 14" crisis was a result of a hard-nosed rule, possibly too harsh at that period of time in universities, which was exploited by outsiders to accomplish certain "political goals" at the expense of a lot of innocent people. It was unfortunately turned into a racial issue, whereas, if the players protesting had been white, they would have been dismissed by the coaches just as fast.

A few weeks later on the team plane from a game (we lost, of course) I was sitting with one of the assistant coaches. He casually remarked that the "Black 14" blow-up was the best thing that could have happened to the coaching staff. I was rather shocked and questioned what he meant. He said that since the Western Athletic Conference had adopted the higher academic standards (1.6 prediction in grades), the UW coaches had a terrible time recruiting and generally had bombed out. This meant that next year they were facing disaster. Now this will be blamed on the "Black 14" loss of players. What a sad situation.

### **"Black -14" Aftermath**

Events like the "Black-14" exposed us to the unknown. There was no experience upon which to draw. The following week Brigham Young University (BYU) was to play at Arizona State University. The President, Dr. Harry Newburn, called me for advice. I wasn't yet 40 years old and this was his third presidency. We were all facing a "new ball game". He told me that rumors at Tempe, Arizona were that masses of blacks were going to occupy the football field and all lie down during the half-time of the game. This would cause a mass riot with many people likely to be injured or even killed. President Newburn asked me, "What do I do?" I told him that I had asked that the Wyoming National Guard be called out and held in readiness. It should be understood that it is very serious business and costly when the National Guard is called out, a last resort. I understand that President Newburn followed my advice and had the guard called out. Fortunately nothing happened at the Arizona State University - Brigham Young University game as in our actual game with BYU. As time went on, we concluded that one of the tactics of the disrupters was to start rumors about horrible things that will take place. This, of course puts the responsible administrators, as they say, "between a rock and a hard place." If the disrupting riot does occur, you are held totally responsible and your conscience will never heal if people are hurt. On the other hand, you can't respond all out to every rumor.

The "Black-14" incident being our first major unrest problem, my staff was correctly overcautious in light of the violent incidences across the country at universities, such as armed occupation of the Student Center at Cornell University shown in news media with bandoleers of bullets across the dissidents chests. Also, almost daily, university president's offices were being forcefully occupied. My staff insisted that we have an armed guard at the president's house for two weeks for the protection of the president and his family. The week end of the Brigham Young University game my family and I actually moved out to a motel for safety. This meant that we had both of our children, a Native American girl living with us at the house, and Tudy's little dog in our room. I am convinced in retrospect that we over reacted, but who really knows. After all, it was my innocent family being protected. Aftershocks of the Black-14 incident were felt for some time. The Western Athletic Conference's Athletic Council, made up of

athletic directors and faculty representatives, meeting that fall in Denver at the Commissioner's office was disrupted and had to be postponed, because many blacks occupied the meeting room. The President's Council meeting scheduled for Denver was secretly moved to Las Vegas, Nevada and had no disruptions. The major topic of the

President's Council meeting was a move to remove Brigham Young University from the Conference. I took a strong opposing position in that the issue was a matter of Freedom of Religion. This was the position taken by the State of Wyoming's Attorney General, Jim Barrett, in defending a law suit brought against the university by national groups supporting the black football players. In the end the President's Council backed away from asking Brigham Young University to leave the Conference.

The Civil Rights suit was tried in Federal Court in Cheyenne, Wyoming. An attorney from Detroit was sent to represent the remaining "Black-14" players that didn't return to the team. As stated, the university's and the State of Wyoming's position was based on the constitutional issue of freedom of religion. The Federal Court upheld the position of the university and the state. Later the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the ruling.

Incidentally, this was one of only two court cases in which I was involved during my tenure. In both cases the university's position was upheld. The other case involved dismissal of a non-tenured professor.

As mentioned before, coach Lloyd Eaton resigned. The new coach selected was Fritz Shurmer, one of the assistant coaches. Naturally one of the great concerns of coach Shurmer was whether after the "Black 14" problem would he and his staff be able to recruit new black players to UW which was and is essential for a successful team.

Coach Shurmer related to me this story about a recruiting trip to upstate New York. The coaches had been heavily recruiting an excellent black running back in this area. In a meeting with several players, alumni and friends, coach Shurmer looked over to one side of the room and this top prospect was "pigeon holed" by a couple of the dismissed "Black 14" players. Fritz's first thought was are we going to be plagued with these people trying to keep talented blacks from us. In a few minutes the two "Black 14" players with the recruit in tow came up to coach Shurmer and stated that this star running back was coming to The University of Wyoming. "We paid our own way to come up here and tell him that contrary to what he might have heard, we have concluded that The University of Wyoming is one of the best places for a black athlete to go to school." Can you imagine the coaches feelings. In reality we were one "family".

#### Theft of Coaches

One of the frustrating dilemmas of a university like UW with respectable athletic programs is that successful coaches are very visible. In part this was due to the occasional success enjoyed by basketball and football teams over the last four to five decades. Before I arrived, coaches such as Bob Devany who had gone to Nebraska were lured away and had incredible success elsewhere. Others included Bowden Wyatt to Arkansas and Phil Dickens. While I was in Laramie, Fred Akers went to the University of Texas. Winning coaches were still leaving long after I left.

In basketball we were able to attract Don DeVoe as our coach. He was quite successful and our team had great potential. Very soon coach DeVoe was taken from us.