

A Storm Swirls Over Eligibility at Iowa

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When Hunter Rawlings 3d, the president of the University of Iowa, announced his intention to bar freshman athletes from participating in or practicing any sports if the National Collegiate Athletic Association did not enact a similar ban nationally within three years, he caused a storm of controversy that swept the state.

Even the Governor, Terry E. Branstad, criticized Rawlings for proposing a move that could put the school at a competitive disadvantage. Prominent coaches at the school threatened to resign, and Rawlings was forced to soften his position, saying he would consult with others before making a final decision.
Testimony Proves Embarrassing

Since Rawlings's proposal was made public in a newspaper article on April 5, debate on the subject has intensified within Iowa's conference, the Big Ten. A majority of the school presidents are in favor of a ban on freshman participation, but they face objections from other presidents, coaches, athletic directors and alumni who are against any such policy if it is not enacted nationally.

Rawlings took his stand after the school was embarrassed by the testimony of Ronnie Harmon and Devon Mitchell, former football players, during the Federal trial of the sports agents Norby Walters and Lloyd Bloom in Chicago. Rawlings said a ban on freshmen playing or practicing by individual schools or conferences might be necessary to force national reforms that would restore a balance between athletics and academics. "We're not going to effect change on a national level without someone to lead, not to follow," Rawlings said. A Joke Makes a Point

A joke in Iowa typifies the power and influence of intercollegiate athletics in the state. The joke asks, "Name the most popular Iowans." The response lists Hayden Fry, the football coach; Dan

Gable, the wrestling coach, and Tom Davis, the men's basketball coach. "Oh, and don't forget the Governor," is the punchline.

Rawlings disclosed his intentions during an interview with The Des Moines Register published on April 5. The announcement surprised Bump Elliott and Dr. Christine Grant, the men's and women's athletic directors at the school. They were informed by Rawlings the day before the newspaper's article was published.

Rawlings told the newspaper that freshmen eligibility should not have been allowed 17 years ago. That, he said, "is where most of the errors got started,"

"It sends the wrong message to these young people when they arrive on a campus, and the message they are getting is that athletics comes first," he said in the interview. "Well, academics should come first."

The N.C.A.A. had prohibited freshmen from competing in varsity sports, except during World War II and the Korean War, until 1972, when the ban was lifted.

With no major-league professional sports teams in the state, athletics at the three state universities are followed intensely. Rawlings's announcement dominated the news, even overshadowing the State Legislature's vote against legalizing gambling on riverboats. The CBS television affiliate in Cedar Rapids produced a 30-minute special report about the controversy. Could Act Unilaterally

Although it is apparent he will face opposition, Rawlings could conceivably enact the policy and make Iowa the only school to bar freshman eligibility. Big Ten rules stipulate that the school's Board in Control of Athletics would have to approve it. The board, which is appointed by the university president, has gone on record in support of Rawlings's desire for reform nationally, but has not specifically addressed his freshman proposal.

Rawlings, a former basketball and football player at Haverford College in Pennsylvania, said one obstacle to a national policy has been that no one school or conference has been willing to take the first step to halt freshman eligibility, although a number of schools appear to be in favor of limits that would allow the young student athletes a period of adjustment to college life.

A majority of the Council of Ten, the presidents of Big Ten schools, is in favor of barring freshman eligibility in football and men's basketball, and the conference might soon act on the issue, said Stanley O. Ikenberry, president of the University of Illinois and of the council.

Ikenberry said the Big Ten has been working with the Pacific-10, the Atlantic Coast Conference and major independent schools to create a coalition with a goal of enacting a national policy for three years. Four Years of Eligibility

The proposed Big Ten policy, which was supported by James O. Freedman, Rawlings's predecessor at Iowa who is now president of Dartmouth College, while banning freshmen participation in football and men's basketball, would allow the athletes some practice time and a full four years of eligibility.

Some Big Ten athletic directors and coaches have called bans on freshmen by individual schools or by a single conference "suicide," arguing that a rule must be enacted nationally or not at all.

At Iowa, the reaction of the coaches was swift and negative. In the course of a two-hour news conference, Fry, the football coach, threatened to resign if the policy were enacted by Iowa alone. He also said he was angry about the attention focused on the academic records of Harmon and Mitchell in the trial of the sports agents.

Walters and Bloom were convicted of mail fraud and racketeering last Thursday. Jurors found them guilty of defrauding two universities, Michigan and Purdue, by signing athletes to contracts before their eligibility had expired. But they were acquitted of two other fraud counts involving Iowa and Michigan State University.

Jurors agreed with defense arguments that Harmon and Mitchell were enrolled at Iowa to play football, not to earn a degree. Testimony showed that courses the players took included water-color painting, karate, billiards, bowling, fundamental military organization and recreational leisure. Ban Would Go Too Far

Fry said he agreed with Rawlings's goal of achieving balance between academics and athletics, but he believes a ban on practice by freshman would go too far.

Furthermore, he said he does not see why participants in sports should be singled out for restrictions. "It's like asking a musician here on scholarship not to play the piano for a year. It doesn't make any sense," he said.

Gable, the wrestling coach who led the Hawkeyes to nine consecutive National Collegiate championships, told reporters that if the policy were enacted solely at Iowa, "there'd be no competitive athletics left at Iowa, no programs, no major coaches like Gable, Fry, Davis and those kinds of guys."

Tensions were defused when Rawlings told the state Board of Regents the day after Fry threatened to resign that he would seek advice before declaring freshmen ineligible and would consider the ban only for certain sports. He still did not rule out unilateral action, however.

The Regents supported Rawlings's call for national limits on freshman eligibility. And last Thursday, Rawlings met with Fry and Elliott to discuss the issue. Elliott, who favors freshman limits only if they are imposed nationally, said the three reached a "good understanding."

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