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News

Cut and Run Athletics

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This might not have been what President Myles Brand had in mind when he initially championed a dramatic set of academic reforms at the National Collegiate Athletic Association.

In recent weeks, several universities have cut teams that have underperformed in the classroom, specifically to avoid harsh and unprecedented penalties from the NCAA -- the most severe of which would have cost entire athletics programs their Division I status.

Men's wrestling programs were eliminated at Portland State and Delaware State Universities because of their low [Academic Progress Rate](#) (APR) -- a nationally comparable score the NCAA uses to judge teams based on their athletes' ability to remain in good academic standing, stay enrolled from semester to semester and ultimately graduate. Though the measure was introduced more than five years ago, the NCAA first began penalizing teams for their poor academic performance last year.

Teams are judged on the four-year average of their APR. The score of all Division I institutions and their teams is updated annually and publicly released by the NCAA every May. Teams whose APRs are less than 925 -- a perfect score is 1,000 -- are subject to "immediate penalties" that can dock up to 10 percent of their athletics scholarships.

As teams continue to have unacceptable APRs through the years -- after the "immediate penalty," this benchmark shifts to 900 -- they become susceptible to "historical penalties." After two and three years of unsatisfactory scores, teams can lose more scholarships, be forced to reduce their number of practices and lose the ability to play in the postseason. During this process, vulnerable institutions have to submit written plans to the NCAA outlining how they intend to improve their academic rates. Once a team has logged four consecutive years with a substandard APR, its institution will lose its Division I status and must leave the NCAA. The NCAA can, however, override an APR score, electing to give an institution more time to correct a problem and keep it at a certain penalty level before advancing it to the next, harsher rung. The goal of the entire APR system, of course, was that the threat of penalties would prompt colleges to take the necessary steps to improve their teams' classroom performances.

This year's APR scores, to be released May 6, will be the first for which the NCAA can levy "occasion 3 penalties," or those for teams that have underperformed for three consecutive years. If the actions of Portland State and Delaware State are any indication -- both of their wrestling programs would have faced the second-year "historical penalty" had they not been cut -- more institutions could also find the second- and third-year penalties a tipping point and cut teams to avoid further punishment.

No Way Out

When the NCAA first began keeping track of the APR in [2003-4](#), Portland State's wrestling team scored a 923 -- two points shy of the current penalty threshold. At that point, the average for all Division I wrestling programs was 936. Over the next four years, however, the division-wide average steadily rose while Portland State's score took a steep dive. Using the latest APR data from [2006-7](#), the Division I average for wrestling teams was 941, and Portland State's wrestling team scored an abysmal 858.

Last year, Portland State's wrestling team was docked 0.27 scholarships. Though this might not seem like a harsh penalty, it was for a team that initially only had three scholarships to spread among its [22 wrestlers](#). For a team that was already underperforming on the mat -- it has defeated only one Division I opponent in the past three years -- the scholarship cut was the last straw.

Torre Chisholm, Portland State's athletics director, said the institution was left offering its remaining wrestlers athletic scholarships for anywhere between \$600 and \$2,000

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"While that's a nice chunk of money -- when times get tough, grades get hard and finances get tight -- we weren't providing enough scholarship support for an athlete not to walk away," Chisholm said. "Some would move on to better scholarship offers, some just didn't like the school and some struggled academically as well. When you combine all of those factors together, our retention was really poor and became a significant issue for us. We really cannot attract the best quality kids, who are good wrestlers and can get it done academically without these scholarship dollars. We were taking kids that were higher risk."

In March, a Portland State task force reviewing the wrestling program came to the conclusion that the institution could do little to reverse the academic fortunes of the team. Though the [task force report](#) lauds the team for its improved grades in the prior semester and the retention of all its athletes, it acknowledges that even if the team were to receive a perfect APR for the next two years it would still be unable to raise its four-year average to the point at which it would not suffer further penalties. By this logic, the team would put the entire athletic program at risk of losing its Division I status -- a fate Chisholm and others were not willing to risk.

"We had a tough decision to make," Chisholm said of cutting the team. "There was such an immense amount of pressure on team members not to leave and to get it done academically if they didn't leave the program. There was such a narrow margin for error. Still, we did have three years of students who had poor success academically. If it wasn't one issue it was another, and this was a hole that was hard to get out of."

Leading up to the cutting of wrestling, Portland State made a number of academic reforms within its athletics program. Chisholm noted that the program added two more academic advisers, bringing the total to three for a program with nearly 350 athletes. The tutoring and study hall programs were also revamped to encourage more individual and group work. Still, Chisholm said he was unsure whether implementing these measures earlier would have saved the program.

Lamenting the decision to cut wrestling, Chisholm said that he did not think it was within the "spirit" of the NCAA's academic reforms to make such a move to avoid penalties. He argued, however, that his institution had no other choice.

Although Chisholm might have done things differently to avoid them, he said he still has problems with the way the "historical penalties" are levied by the NCAA. For example, he suggested that the scholarship deduction penalty should only apply to "headcount sports," or those, such as football and basketball, where there is a scholarship for every individual athlete. In those sports, he argued, scholarship reductions make a significant difference. For other sports with few dollars to spread around, he said, such a cut can be a death knell.

"Penalties have to have bite, and I appreciate that," Chisholm said. "The intent of the APR is certainly good, but I don't think it intended for schools to eliminate sports."

Lack of Preparation

In [2003-4](#), Delaware State's wrestling team had an APR of 907. Like Portland State's team, it had fallen further by [2006-7](#), to 894. Though it did not have any scholarships cut last year, Delaware State's team did receive "[public notice](#)," or a formal warning, for its "immediate penalty." As a result, it was able to retain 5 full scholarships for its [19-man squad](#) this season.

Still, in the face of forthcoming second-year penalties this May, which would have reduced the team's scholarship offering to 2.28 and limited its practices, the institution buckled under pressure and cut wrestling. As did those at Portland State, Delaware State officials argued that, even with perfect scores for the next two years, they would be unable to keep from receiving the NCAA's ultimate academic penalty, revoking the institution's Division I status.

Candy Young Sanders, newly minted acting athletics director at Delaware State, said the initial APR recovery plan her program submitted to the NCAA for its forthcoming penalty was rejected and returned for further review. Although Sanders would not share the report, she did disclose a few of the reforms Delaware State was planning to make. She said that the team would have expanded study hall, and that the wrestling coach was planning to mandate that the first two hours of the team's bus trips be devoted to studying.

"We ultimately asked [the NCAA], 'If we were going to look to cut the program, where would we put that in our next plan?' " Sanders said. "You could see that they were taken by surprise."

Although Sanders admitted that earlier action might have saved the team, she argued that her institution was not sufficiently educated or prepared to take such action. Delaware State was one of a number of historically black colleges and universities to lobby the NCAA for further financial support to help boost its academic services for athletics. Last year, it was awarded a small grant by the NCAA, which the

further financial support to help boost its academic services for athletics. Last year, it was awarded a small grant by the NCAA, which the institution had to match. While the funds will help the cash-strapped institution make the improvements it needs to improve its APR in other sports, it is too late for wrestling.

"We were definitely not prepared for the APR," Sanders said of her predecessors. "It was a totally new concept for us. Basically, if a sport reached the second or third penalty, it's time to cut. We could have kept it for one more year, but we would have needed to cut it the next to avoid the last penalty. For the wrestling program, it was too little, too late. Only when coaches were faced with penalties did they get it."

Like Portland State officials, those at Delaware State admitted that their decision to cut a sport to avoid a penalty was counter to the intent of the NCAA's academic reforms. Still, Sanders said she would like to see the harshest "historical penalty" changed so that others would not make the same decision.

"I'd rather have them say, 'If you can't get this one team together, then that team has to be cut,' " Sanders said. "I think that's fair. Saying, 'If you can't get this one team together, then all of your teams will be in jeopardy,' that's unfair. I think you'll see a lot more schools bailing out as a direct result of not being able to recover from these penalties."

Unfortunate Side Effect?

Wallace I. Renfro, an NCAA vice president and senior adviser to Brand, the association's president, said the NCAA was aware when it adopted the academic penalties associated with the APR that some institutions might cut programs to avoid the harsher penalties. This did not dissuade officials, though, of the wisdom of the overall goal and purpose of the program: improving academic performance.

"Just because a school might chose to make a decision like this doesn't mean, therefore, that you shouldn't try to improve student-athletes and sanction in any possible way for that reason," Renfro said. "This was an initiative to increase the performance of these student-athletes, and [it is clearly doing so](#). The gross results, not the mention the net results, are that student-athletes are doing better across the board.

Still, no, dropping a sport when facing a penalty does not fit the spirit of these reforms."

— **David Moltz**