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### **Ohio State's Sports Program Aims to Play It Straight**

**After a scandal, the Buckeyes supersized their rules-enforcement staff. Will that work?**

*By Brad Wolverton*

Columbus, Ohio

As captain of Ohio State University's basketball team in 1999, Jason Singleton helped lead the Buckeyes to the Final Four. Now he has a ninth-floor office in the athletic department, where, alongside photos from his storied college years, he keeps a pair of binoculars to watch over the university's vast sports complex.

Since graduating, Mr. Singleton has held an unusual mix of jobs: kindergarten teacher, money-laundering sleuth, NCAA tough guy. This past summer he returned to Columbus as an associate director of compliance, where he hopes to use his local connections and investigative savvy to help put the athletics program on a straighter path.

When Mr. Singleton played ball here, the Buckeyes had just one full-time person monitoring some 1,000 athletes. (The university added a second rules enforcer in his senior year.)

Then came two highly publicized violations of National Collegiate Athletic Association rules. One wiped out the team's 1999 Final Four record. The other, a costly tattoos-for-memorabilia scandal, was brought to closure last December, when the association handed the program a one-year bowl ban. That penalty prevents the Buckeyes' football team, which just completed an undefeated season, from playing for the national championship.

Ohio State has since supersized its rules-enforcing staff: As of this month, it has 14 full-time compliance officials, seven of them hired following the recent NCAA case. In addition, the university has added a new chief compliance officer, to whom the athletics-compliance unit now reports (before, it reported to the athletics director). That change, which many other colleges are contemplating, signals the growing risk that sports programs can pose to colleges' bottom lines and reputations.

Ohio State now spends \$1.1-million a year just trying to stay out of

the NCAA's doghouse. And it's not the only program spending big. Athletics departments everywhere are ramping up oversight amid a national crisis in violations.

The rise of social media—and the voracious appetite fans have for news about their teams—has led to unprecedented scrutiny of players. That environment has prompted the NCAA to propose broad changes in its byzantine rules and in how they are enforced. The switch puts more responsibility on coaches and top college officials to run clean programs and 'fess up to problems. And the association has promised steep punishment for violators.

As Ohio State knows, programs that slip up can suffer harsh consequences. Its tattoo scandal cost it more than \$1.6-million, not to mention a public-relations stain that is only beginning to fade.

The debacle led university leaders to set an ambitious goal: They want to build the best compliance system in the country. But some observers say all the money in the world might not be enough.

"You could invest incredible money creating your own oversight process," says Dutch Baughman, executive director of the Division I-A Athletic Directors' Association. "And after creating all that, you're not any more protected."

#### Street Cred

To hear him tell it, Mr. Singleton is an unlikely choice to help his alma mater restore its reputation. "I was not a saint here," he says one Saturday in October, while patrolling the sidelines of a Buckeyes' football game. "I gave the compliance people a run for their money."

As a student, he charmed his way to a coveted faculty-parking decal and acquired a long-distance telephone code that he and teammates used to charge calls to the university. (The players repaid the charges after the calls were traced to the basketball locker room.) That background, along with the maturity to admit his missteps, helps give him credibility among players and coaches.

After a brief stint playing overseas, he followed his mother's path into education, but he longed for a career in sports. In 2007 he landed at the NCAA, beating out hundreds of other applicants for a job helping elite high-school athletes navigate the sleazy world of amateur-league basketball.

In 2010 he moved on to the NCAA's basketball enforcement staff, traveling around the country two or three times a month—sometimes to neighborhoods where he wouldn't want to take his own children—to help the association blow the whistle on bad actors

and campus violations. Having grown up in inner-city Detroit, he has lived through some tough situations in his 36 years. But he's never seen anything like the greed and corruption that have overrun the game he loves.

He reserves his greatest contempt for the parents of certain elite players. "Everyone's got their hand out. And the kids, they don't know who they can trust," he says. "Even their loved ones are using them for their athletic ability."

It was that experience that caught the eye of Doug Archie, head of athletics oversight at Ohio State. "Jason really understands what goes on in that culture," he says. "When we start naming prospects, he is familiar with them and their backgrounds, and can tell us if there are any reasons to be concerned."

Many former NCAA investigators go on to lucrative careers helping athletics departments defend themselves against alleged violations. But Mr. Singleton believed he could do more good by returning to his roots.

"I have a passion for this place," he says. "I'm here because I want to protect the school."

His job is twofold: First gain the trust of coaches and players and educate them on the rules. Then get tough if they don't heed his advice.

He did much the same thing at the NCAA, where he used his soft-spoken, introspective style to develop relationships with coaches, but then had to turn around and investigate some of them. "I tell people, 'Don't put yourself in a bad situation where I can't help you,'" he says.

At Ohio State, he expects to devote about two-thirds of his time to teaching players how to stay out of trouble and building contacts in the local community.

"We want him to create a list of every place players go—barbershops, night clubs, tattoo parlors," Mr. Archie says. "And we want him going in those places educating people about potential NCAA violations."

#### Red Flags

On game days, like today, Mr. Singleton does much of his work behind the scenes. Wearing a red ball cap so fans aren't as likely to recognize him, he shows up at the stadium three hours before kickoff and checks in with a team policing the players' entrance.

Even at 9 a.m., this spot is brimming with fans, some of whom carry

jerseys or helmets, hoping to score players' autographs. University officials refer to some of these followers as the "eBay people," since many are here just to make a quick buck.

In the past year or so, Ohio State's trademark and licensing office has clamped down on those sales, helping to pull some \$2-million of black-market merchandise offline.

Officials here are even more worried about the access to players that agents, boosters, and others try to gain. While many of those relationships are formed outside the university's gates—some before players even arrive on campus—Ohio State leaders try to make sure that no untoward influence happens under their noses. (They say they are not aware of any current major violations.)

The ticket office, where Mr. Singleton stops later, is where much of the monitoring takes place. Each player is allowed to give out four complimentary tickets per game, with most going to family and friends. Players are not permitted to give passes to employers, agents, or boosters.

Pre-tattoo scandal, Ohio State performed random spot-checks on about 10 percent of the names on players' lists for tickets. After that, officials started placing calls to all 4,000 or so people set to receive free tickets every year. This season, more than 100 didn't check out.

Even if those people don't get in the stadium, they still hang around, so Mr. Singleton spends a good chunk of game days with the team. Hours before kickoff he walks with the players, who are dressed in matching black suits, as they cross the campus in a slow procession. They are headed toward St. John Arena, where thousands of fans have gathered for a pep rally.

Mr. Singleton stays a few steps behind Braxton Miller, the star quarterback, making sure he stays clear of contact with outsiders (other than the occasional high-five). Later, as Mr. Miller comes off the field in uniform before the start of the game, Mr. Singleton softly slaps his hand.

"What's up, Big Time?" he says quietly. "Have a good one."

Players may not always welcome such coziness, as Mr. Singleton plans to spend about a third of his time doing investigative work. His role is designed in part to relieve Ohio State's other rules-checkers of some of the more confrontational probing.

"When they find red flags, they pass things to me," Mr. Singleton says. "I run it out and see if it's something we need to address."

Jessica Olms, a senior compliance official who works with men's

basketball and football, welcomes the support. "I can hand something to Jason and not have to destroy all the good will I've spent time building," she says. "Jason has gone a long way in addressing the strain between the two roles we have to play."

That strain is one that many athletics departments struggle with: Are the rules enforcers there to serve coaches and athletes, or to protect the institution?

"The right answer is both," says Christian Spears, deputy director of athletics at Northern Illinois University and president of the National Association for Athletics Compliance.

"But coaches have to believe you're on the same team. Otherwise they'll find ways around you," says Mr. Spears, who worked in Ohio State's athletics-compliance office when he was a graduate student here.

Mr. Singleton appreciates the lessons he learned at the NCAA, where he had the opportunity to present a case before the Division I Committee on Infractions. But he worries how some Buckeyes' athletes and coaches might perceive that experience.

"It's like the Big Bad Wolf," he says of the NCAA's reputation. "I don't want people to think I was only hired to investigate them and get them in trouble."

That's not how Thad Matta, Ohio State's men's basketball coach, views him. He met Mr. Singleton years ago on the summer basketball circuit, and saw his hiring as an important step in the university's turnaround.

"I honestly think you're getting a tremendous person, one who cares about other people. He understands what student-athletes are going through on a daily basis," Mr. Matta says. "And because of his background, he understands the difference between right and wrong and is smart enough to express that to our players."

Running a clean program, Mr. Matta says, depends more on coaching staffs than on any enforcement presence.

"The job starts at the top," he says. "That's me and how we do things and the caliber of kid we recruit."

#### Checkbook Challenges

The university, too, is expecting more of coaches. Starting this season, each assistant football coach is responsible for ensuring that every player has a checking account and a personal budget (players can't suit up otherwise). The coaches are required to monitor players' spending habits to make sure they don't get in financial

trouble. They must also keep tabs on where players spend the holidays and other breaks, and how they're getting from place to place.

Those moves bother critics who say the university has no business meddling so much in students' personal affairs. Leaders here say they are mostly just trying to help players learn to spend responsibly and stay out of trouble with boosters.

"Some of our guys from low socioeconomic environments were getting a \$3,000 Pell Grant, and all of a sudden they're spending it on an iPhone and whatever else today's bling is," says Gene Smith, the Buckeyes' athletic director. "Now, we're teaching them about their cars, their apartment leases, and how to have a budget. An assistant coach is engaged—not just the compliance office."

Just as important, he wants coaches knowing about players' potential money troubles early so they can help ward off problems, including possible NCAA violations.

"We want coaches saying, 'Help me understand why you have a hold on your account, why you're delinquent in paying your apartment lease,'" Mr. Smith says. "It gives us a chance to see if they're going to get into financial problems, and that they don't go find another way to take care of it."

Ohio State has also faced criticism over its handling of players' vehicles, another area where it has stepped up scrutiny. Twelve times a year now, Mr. Singleton and his colleagues plan to walk the perimeter of a gated parking lot adjacent to the football practice facility to make sure players are driving cars that are properly registered with the university—and that are within their means.

On one cold, rainy night in October, far removed from the cheering crowds, Mr. Singleton peers at the windshield of a Mercedes-Benz with temporary tags.

"This one doesn't have a permit," he says to Adam Tate, a colleague in his office. "Let's find out if it's a loaner."

Later, Mr. Singleton spots another car that is improperly registered, and uses his cellphone to snap a picture of the vehicle-identification number. It may be a borrowed ride, he says, but you can never be too careful.

As he starts to walk away, he glances back at the wheels: "I doubt if his girlfriend has rims like that."

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Lets go Buckeyes...lets do out best to get it right on and off the field!  
OH...

1 person liked this.

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**bkprof** 2 days ago

I-O!!!!!!

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**midtree** 3 days ago

I think it is great what Ohio State is doing for the Athletes. It will definately help keep the programs clean. I just wish this statement:

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would be applied to all students attending. Why not teach other students this same thing in the introductory course. I know we can't keep track of everybody but at least it might stick on a few non-athletic students

2 people liked this.

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**Michael Massberry** 3 hours ago

Helping students in this way seems virtuous. Student athletes at universities like Ohio State enjoy many other services as well, such as special tutoring, computer facilities, living quarters, dining halls, athletic facilities. The general student population, too, sees greater and greater attention from student services--my university has a staff of "student retention specialists" who step in at email or webform notice when a student stops showing up to class.

Can we say all these services and their growing staffs are bad? Maybe not. But this layer of administration is expensive, a prime reason why tuition is criminally high. Ohio State goes from a staff of one in this office to seventeen nearly overnight. (No academic department can match that hiring.) And what should we expect of students? Shouldn't 20 year olds know what is right and wrong and accept the consequences themselves when they do wrong? If a student under Mr. Singleton's care breaks a rule, as will inevitably happen, whose fault is it? And if this happens should more administrative "specialists" with large offices, training programs, and even more paternal and maternal intervention into student life be hired?

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**Adam Grams** 2 days ago

Great article about the "new-look" compliance dept. OSU got a good one in Jason. He was a great guy to work with at the NCAA and truly cares about SA well-being. Congrats Jay!

1 person liked this.

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**graddirector** 2 hours ago

I am torn about this one. Yes, it is important that they are enforcing rules and trying to protect athletes. But when I see a million dollars just for rule enforcement, let alone the enormous cost of running the sports program, I think of all of the freshman sitting in 500 seat or larger stadium classrooms with a single instructor who could be in smaller classes receiving a better education. I also think of all of the students who dont play sports who have large amounts of loan debt or can not participate in those unpaid internships etc necessary to get jobs in this economy. I can not help but think this is a major mis-direction of priorities.

1 person liked this.

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