



Posted: Fri October 18, 2013 1:47PM; Updated: Fri October 18, 2013 7:57PM



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The inside story of what caused Grambling football players to revolt

GRAMBLING, La. -- Start with the floor.

Anyone who wants to understand why the players on the 0-7 Grambling State football team revolted this week -- walking out of a Tuesday meeting with the school's president and athletic director, boycotting practice and finally refusing to travel to Saturday's game with Jackson State -- should visit the weight room in the school's Stadium Support Building. Then look down.

Covering the concrete floor are large interlocking rubber tiles. They are light gray now but were almost certainly a different shade when they were installed years ago. Many of them curl at the edges or have corners missing, hazards that can cause an unsuspecting player to trip. In some areas, entire tiles are gone. Imagine hoisting 300 pounds while having to watch your step. In a sport where injuries are common, the last thing players need are physical hazards in their own weight room. That is how the Tigers' football players train.

The floor is not the only sign of the building's decay. There is rust around some windows and insulation droops down from where ceiling panels are absent. Southwestern Athletic Conference (SWAC) schools "are often asked to do more with less," says school president Dr. Frank Pogue, and that is indisputable. But the weight room floor represents more than the financial constraints that have long hampered Grambling and other historically black colleges. It also symbolizes the political infighting and mismanagement that have plagued the school in recent years, problems which precipitated the football program's rapid decline, and which helped spark this week's unprecedented protest by the players.

How can a floor stand for so much?

Near the start of the 2013 season, the Grambling Legends, a group unaffiliated with the school, put up \$11,000 to buy replacement flooring for the weight room. Doug Williams, then the Tigers coach -- as well as a popular alumnus, a former Super Bowl MVP and a member of the Grambling Legends -- helped arrange the purchase of the new rubber flooring, just as he had done last summer with new flooring for the team's locker room. Williams had a history of ruffling administrative feathers at the school -- in April 2012 he sued Grambling State for performance bonuses he says he was owed -- and he often circumvented the athletic department's chain of command. The funds to pay for the new weight room floor, which had not been filtered through the school's foundation as Pogue and athletic director Aaron James demanded, were yet another instance of that.

Pogue and James, however, refused to install the new floor and had it stored in another building near the team's practice field. A week after the large rolls of flooring were mothballed, they fired Williams from his job as the Tigers' football coach.

The players, unaware of any administrative politics, knew only the basics: One minute they were getting a badly needed new floor in the weight room, and the next minute they weren't; and one minute Williams, who had led the team to a SWAC title as recently as 2011, was their coach, and the next minute he was not.

The revolt of the Grambling players earlier this week was reportedly a protest of long bus trips, a lack of food on the road and a general decline in the university's support of the program -- and that is true. But as SI learned while with the Tigers as the events of the past week unfolded, the players' actions were also driven by the need for answers to questions they have long been asking: Why can't they get a new floor in the weight room, in addition to some of the other things they feel they need to win games? Why did Williams get fired? And, most importantly, What has happened to Grambling football?

On one finger of each hand, sixth-year senior safety Naquan Smith sports massive gold rings, one for each of the SWAC titles the Tigers have won during his career. In 2008, when Smith was a redshirt freshman and Rod Broadway was the team's coach, Grambling went 11-2 and won the conference title. When Broadway left for North Carolina A&T three years later, Williams was hired and, after an 0-4 start, the Tigers won seven consecutive games, culminating with a 16-15 victory over Alabama A&M in the SWAC championship game.

Since that victory, Grambling has gone 1-17, including losses in all seven games this fall. Theories abound as for why the team has struggled, with the team's youth commonly cited. There are only seven seniors on the current team and last year's squad had just two. But Smith and other players say inexperience is not the primary reason for the team's struggles. They say an erosion of support for the program has made it difficult for players to succeed. They lack adequate weight training equipment, they say, and the staff and materials to treat injuries properly. They don't even have enough supplements to replenish their bodies after workouts. "We got some Muscle Milk donated but we have to give it to certain people, like who needs it this week and who doesn't, kinda ration it," Smith says.

The team is down to six full-time coaches after interim coach George Ragsdale (who was unpopular with the players) was fired Thursday and replaced by defensive coordinator Dennis Winston. Players say assistants are stretched too thin and can't adequately prepare the team. "Other schools have one [coach] for each position," says sophomore defensive back Dwight Amphy. "On defense, we have only three coaches working three different positions. Our defensive coordinator coaches the defensive line. We have a linebackers' coach and we have one coach who coaches safeties and corners. And two of those coaches also do special teams." Positions coaches are so busy that they have little time to meet individually with players. "You don't get that extra help you need to make yourself better," Amphy says.

Grambling now buses to games as far away as Kansas City and Indianapolis, 650 and 750 miles away from campus, respectively. For the latter of those trips, the team left campus at 6 p.m. on a Thursday night and did not arrive in Indianapolis until 9 a.m. on Friday. Not surprisingly, the players appeared unprepared and listless in a 48-0 loss to Alcorn State. "It does something to your body, being on the bus that long," Smith says. "We were kinda upset other team got a chance to fly there. It wasn't fair."

"We knew what we were getting ourselves into when we came to Grambling. We knew we weren't going to have all this and that, the best stuff. We knew we weren't going to LSU," Amphy says. "But it could be better, even just a little bit better. Because it is not like we don't have the athletes to compete, not like we aren't trying to the best of our ability."

The football program's decline has coincided with the fall of most of the school's 11 other sports programs. The men's basketball team was winless last season (0-28); women's basketball went 9-23.

The women's soccer team amassed a 3-29 record over the 2011 and 2012 seasons and is 0-4 this year. The women's volleyball team is 9-48 over the last three seasons, including 2-11 in 2013. Other programs have similarly struggled; track & field is the one outlier.

The men's basketball team has been hindered by penalties levied against the program due to a low Academic Progress Rate and the unrest that comes with having four coaches in a five-year stretch. The other losing teams suffer from the same ills as football, primarily a lack of staffing and financial support. The soccer team started several games last season short-handed, including a playoff game. (They also wore jerseys that were little more than T-shirts.) "Some games we had only eight players," says junior midfielder Robblyn Branch. "Without scholarship money it was difficult for people to pay for school so they left. Others got injured and couldn't play. There is nothing you can do but make the best of it."

The tennis team has started matches shorthanded this year, and that program and others are also short on scholarships. Further, almost all the programs are operating with at least one less assistant coach than would be preferred, making it more difficult for those teams to prepare for games and recruit reinforcements.

"It is not just football. Everyone has been down," Smith says. "I've been asking myself since the start of last year, what is going on with all these teams losing. It affects the whole school, really. But football is kinda like the tone-setter. We've struggled and it is like everyone else has followed us down."

When the football players protested, some were quick to connect them with players at other schools who have put "APU" -- All Players United -- on their uniforms to advocate for NCAA reform. It is an imperfect comparison, however, as Grambling is not, say, LSU, a football factory that generates millions of dollars in profit while the athletes go unpaid. In recent years, Grambling's football program has run a deficit of between \$1.2 and \$1.8 million. That doesn't mean Grambling couldn't or shouldn't do more for its athletes, just that the image of school officials counting their millions while players bus 754 miles to a game is inaccurate.

Ask school officials why the football team and other programs are struggling and they quickly shift attention from personality conflicts and staffing decisions to the budget. Since 2007-08, overall state funding for Grambling has gone from \$31.6 million to \$13.8 million. The school has attempted to bridge that gap by increasing tuition, but it has fallen short, and cuts have been made across the board. Approximately 127 staff members have been laid off since 2008 and furloughs are common. Professors have also been asked to teach an extra class each year for free. Generally, the school has "cut to the bone," says Leon Sanders, Grambling's vice president for finance.

Athletics were mostly exempt from the cuts in the first few years of the recession, even as revenue generated by the department declined from around \$8 million in 2007-08 to about \$6.2 million last year. But that was unsustainable, school officials say. Like the rest of the university, the athletic department had to make sacrifices, and the sports programs are now feeling the pinch that the rest of the school has endured for years.

"Losing that money shows up in everything. It shows up in your recruiting budget, in the hotel you stay in, in the food you get. It means you take a bus to games like last weekend [in Indianapolis]," says James, the athletic director. "We could have spent another \$70,000 and taken a charter plane to Indianapolis or we can use that money to help some of the minor sports. Football coaches don't like that, they say they bring in the money and they want to spend it all, but we have to look at the entire athletic department."

Some accounting tricks have spared the athletic department even greater pain, at least for now. In past years, the school has moved about \$3.4 million out of its operating revenue to help pay for athletics. This year, the school had only \$1.8 million to transfer. The difference was made up, in part, by moving \$1.2 million in auxiliary funds over to athletics, but that cannot be repeated next year, Sanders says. Unless new monies are found, athletics could see its budget shaved by more than a \$1 million or more for the 2014-15 school year.

"We are functioning now in a financial emergency," Pogue says.

The school's plan to make up the difference relies on getting students to agree to a fee of \$100 per semester that would go to athletics and also an aggressive campaign to get more donations from alumni. The same student fee initiative failed to pass last year, however, and the school admits that there isn't a "culture" of giving among its small alumni pool. "We don't even budget for donations," Sanders says. "Not a penny."

Financials only go so far in explaining the state of the athletic department. After all, a lack of funds isn't the sole reason the school has had three different athletic directors in the last four years. Pogue, who fired one athletic director he inherited and another he hired prior to James getting the position, says of those moves: "One of an athletic director's responsibilities is to make people work well together, and when you discover that people can't work well together or flatly refuse to work well together, you make some changes."

Pogue and James clearly couldn't work with Williams. They feuded with him over seemingly trivial matters; Pogue once showed up a practice to scold Williams for having put up signs that designated parking spots for coaches. He then had them removed. The lawsuit Williams filed against Grambling and the University of Louisiana system frayed relations considerably. In the suit, Williams alleged that he and his staff were not paid promised bonuses for winning the 2011 SWAC championship, and that Williams had been told that the money would only be paid if he signed a reduced contract. "A series of new contracts have been presented to Williams in which his pay is lower, bonuses are dropped and additional onerous provisions have been inserted," the suit alleged. "He has been told to 'take it or leave it.'" The lawsuit was settled when Williams signed a three-year contract before the 2012 season, about a year before the flooring dispute boiled over and he was let go.

James and Pogue declined to discuss their handling of Williams, but when Pogue says that Grambling's next coach must be someone with a "willingness to honor university policies and procedures," it is clear why he felt Williams had to go. "The coach here is in employee of Grambling State University and the state of Louisiana," Pogue says. "He is not a free agent. He can't just do whatever he wants."

Asked if it is possible that he is difficult to work with, Pogue says he doesn't believe so, while adding that he has high expectations for his employees. Williams, when reached by SI, declined to answer the same question. His son, D.J., is the team's starting quarterback, and he says he wants to avoid and back and forth with schools officials. "This is Grambling, and I love Grambling. I don't agree with some decisions that have been made, but they are made and I have to deal with it," Williams says. "My biggest concern is for my son and the players. It has been an emotional time and some emotional decisions have been made."

Adjacent to Grambling's administration building, in the school's old basketball gym, sits the Eddie G. Robinson Museum, a shrine to the winningest coach in Division I history and the person most responsible for Grambling's rich football history. Walking through the museum last Tuesday, across the pecan floors original to the building, Dr. Mildred Gallot, the head of Grambling's department of history for 20 years, reminisced about Robinson, who died in 2007.

Gallot once interviewed the legendary coach for four hours, listening as he spun stories, some of which have now become legend. There is the tale of how he had to beg Louisiana Tech to give him old uniforms for his team. There is the story of how the Grambling president who hired Robinson in 1941 told him that he would surely not win right away, then watched as Robinson went undefeated in his second season.

Asked what it would take for Grambling football to thrive again as it did under Robinson, Gallot rubs three fingers together and says, simply: "Money."

Money alone won't fix Grambling. A broke school that fired a legendary alumnus, which just had its entire team stage a revolt, isn't primed for a turnaround. And what if the financial crisis doesn't subside, if students don't agree to the athletics fee or athletic revenue continues to dip? What then?

At a hastily called press conference on Friday, Pogue said of Grambling's future: "It is likely that it could take years to ever get back to the Grambling athletic image that it once enjoyed."

No one at the school is prepared to accept that Grambling may be changed forever and that there could be a time in the not-too-distant future when having a football program becomes financial untenable. For now, they've placed their hope in the search for a new coach, in the belief that it will turn up someone who can coalesce the players and the administration and the alumni, who can find new revenue streams, who can do more with less.

What has happened to Grambling football?

It is has gone back to the start, hoping that someone like Robinson, another miracle man, will come walking through the door.

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