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News

Righting the Ship

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After years of perceived leniency, the message of the National Collegiate Athletic Association's new, stern line on academic reform is becoming all too clear to sports teams whose athletes have been underperforming in the classroom: get better or get out.

Last year at about this time, 26 teams at 22 Division I colleges were subject to the second level of punishment in the NCAA's four-tier penalty system for their athletes' poor academic performance. Either their scholarships were reduced, their number of practices was limited, or both.

If the teams in question did not quickly reverse their academic performance, they could have been subject to the harshest of the third-level penalties, a yearlong ban from all postseason play. And if these prior penalties were not motivation enough, any team that reaches the fourth and final tier could be subject to a yearlong ban from all activity not only for itself but for its entire athletics program, the so-called "death penalty."

This reform system issues penalties based on a team's [Academic Progress Rate](#) (APR), an NCAA-developed score that assesses athletes' success in remaining in good academic standing, staying enrolled from semester to semester, and ultimately graduating. Teams are subject to specific punishments in this tiered system for each year they remain below the 900-point threshold. (A perfect score is 1,000, and teams are judged annually on the four-year average of their APR.) There are, however, various other ways to avoid certain punishment, including self-requested waivers or proof of dramatic short-term improvement in scores.

Under the gun of these unprecedented penalties -- the NCAA [banned its first teams from postseason play](#) for poor academic performance just this year -- coaches and athletics directors representing these 26 academically troubled teams have been trying to alter just about everything in their power to reverse their fortunes and avoid further punishment. Some institutions have even abandoned ship, [cutting academically troubled teams](#) for fear that their susceptibility to penalty might endanger their entire athletics department.



Photo: UTC Athletics Communication Office

Tennessee-Chattanooga's football team has been banned from the postseason in 2009 because of its poor APR.

Still, those teams on the brink that are not cut must submit detailed plans to the NCAA, outlining changes they plan to make to improve the known weaknesses in their academic structures and subsequently improve their APR. Sometimes, these plans mention such simple changes as requiring athletes to attend all of their classes or to sit in certain areas of the classroom. More often, however, the plans outline sweeping changes in the recruiting process and method by which athletes qualify for scholarship money.

This article is based on a review of some of these teams' plans for getting out of trouble with the NCAA. In response to questions about their improvement plans, many officials at institutions facing penalties complained that the APR system is complex and sometimes unfair in how it levies punishment. They, however, do concede one thing: It is changing their behaviors, for better or worse.

More-Selective Recruiting

Nowhere, perhaps, is the APR's influence most evident than in the often dog-eat-dog world of recruiting men's basketball and football players. For example, it used to be common practice at a number of institutions to conditionally admit underperforming athletes who either did not quite meet their institutions' admissions standards or the NCAA's initial eligibility standards, with the understanding that they would have to meet certain academic benchmarks before they could play. At least among those institutions that have faced harsher APR penalties, this practice seems to have all but vanished, based on a review of their improvement plans. For example, the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga recently made the decision to stop letting in provisional admits, partially because of its low APR in many sports.

In the wake of receiving harsh NCAA penalties, many of these institutions have also recently adopted formal recruiting policies outlining whom they consider to be "risky" prospects to be avoided. Weaker or penalized basketball and football programs had routinely been recruiting community college athletes, since these programs are often less successful than their higher-profile peers in recruiting top athletes directly out of high school.

Community colleges athletes, however, are often perceived to be "risky" recruits because their two-year institutions have bare-bones initial and continuing eligibility requirements, causing some to overload on non-academic courses like physical education so that they stay enrolled but **make little progress toward any degree**. As a result, once these athletes arrive at a four-year institution, they have a significantly reduced chance of staying enrolled and graduating.

The new coaches of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga's football team -- currently one of only three teams to be banned from postseason play this year as a result of third-tier penalties -- recently decided that they will no longer recruit community college athletes. Russ Huesman, the head coach who took over the troubled program **eight months ago**, admitted that the decision might reflect an overly sweeping conclusion about community college athletes, but said the team was in such dire straits with its APR that the move was necessary to improve its score.

"When you recruit junior college kids at this level, either they were not recruited by a Division I institution prior because they were not ready athletically, or there might be something socially or academically keeping them from it," Huesman said. "There are so many risks that you have to take, and I just didn't think this was worth it. To fall in love with a place, you've really got to be there four or five years. We're going to recruit only high school kids. We want them to love the university and have pride in getting a degree here. You can mold them academically, athletically and socially in a way that you can't with junior college kids."

Though they aren't taking as dramatic a step, officials representing the men's basketball team at California State University at Fresno -- which, after facing scholarship reductions last year, avoided further penalty this year by improving its APR from 816 to 891 -- said they would look twice before recruiting community college athletes in the future.

"Dealing with these penalties gave people a bad perception of us," said Steve Cleveland, the head coach who has **presided over Fresno State's turnaround** since 2005 and is, himself, a former community college coach. "No high school student-athlete's mother or father would even let us into their home, so we had to go the junior college route which complicated our success. You have to really, really have an attention to detail when evaluating those transcripts and finding transferable credits. There's very little margin for error when recruiting at two-year colleges. I mean, we might take a few junior college athletes, but when you already have issues in your program, it's hard."

Although Fresno State officials did not have figures to back up their assertion that community college recruits are less likely to graduate or stay in good academic standing than are high school recruits, its basketball team's changing demographics appears to

have had some positive impact on its APR. Thomas Boeh, Fresno State's director of athletics, noted that five years ago more than a third of the players on the basketball team were community college recruits, and the team's single-year APR was in the mid-600s. Now, he added, there are far fewer community college recruits -- typically just one or two -- and the team's single-year APR is in the low 900s.

Aside from singling out certain types of prospects, other teams report simply making sure players have academics goals that align with those of the team and the institution.

"From a football standpoint, our admissions standards have not changed, but what has changed is the philosophy of our coaching staff," said [Al Golden](#), head coach of Temple University's football team, whose APR improvement plan and progress impressed the NCAA enough to qualify the team for a waiver from third-tier penalties, after it suffered from major scholarship reductions last year.

"When we sit down with parents, we ask them if they want the same thing we want: students that are committed on and off the field and want to graduate. We don't want kids whose parents act like agents and ask, 'Do you think he can play in the NFL? Can he start as a freshman? Can he wear number 6?' We don't want them. It eliminates risk and uncertainty."

Keeping Up with Classwork

Not all of a troubled team's problems can be solved by bringing in new, more academically motivated athletes. Realistically, coaches have to discipline the athletes they already have on their rosters, presumably including some whose negligence in their studies has contributed negatively to their team's APR.

To combat his basketball players' inconsistent academic performance, Cleveland, at Fresno State, has now required that they meet weekly with either him or another member of his coaching staff to discuss grades, study habits and time management. The new policy was a hard sell, Cleveland said, but he believes the improved coach-player relationship can only help his students' performance in the classroom.

Additionally, Cleveland has required his players to have a "progress check" signed by all of their instructors at least once every semester to ensure that they are on track to pass their courses and advance toward graduation. While there is a standardized format, procedure and timeline for these checks, not all of the players' professors have been eager to help the cause.

"Among some faculty, department heads and deans, the perception remains that our basketball program has not always been committed to doing things the proper way," admitted Cleveland, noting that some professors simply do not feel as if it is their job to check up on an athlete's progress. "There's been a real lack of trust between athletics and the faculty, and I'm not just talking about basketball here. Recently, however, faculty have been more supportive."

Some of the faculty anxiety likely stemmed from the rocky tenure of [Jerry Tarkanian](#), head men's basketball coach at Fresno State from 1995 to 2002. In 1997, Tarkanian's team was the topic of a [federal point-shaving investigation](#). Tarkanian also had a penchant for recruiting "at risk" students, several of whom ended up in trouble with the law on charges ranging from drug abuse to domestic violence. Before taking over at Fresno State, Tarkanian was head coach at California State University at Long Beach and, famously, at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, both of which were punished by the NCAA while he was there.

Now at Fresno State, Cleveland noted that the newly implemented "progress checks" have been particularly helpful keeping athletes in line when the playing season is over and most have their minds on getting in workouts to stay in shape or acquiring an agent if they are eligible for the professional draft. In fact, all draft-eligible basketball players at Fresno State must submit these forms every month prior to receiving their scholarship check. This is a major departure from the method of distributing funds before Cleveland's arrival.

"In the past, checks were given out without any academic pretense," Boeh said. "There was a time when some folks would simply pass out a check that was intended for room and board at the beginning of the semester with no questions asked. What motivation is there? You've got the money. You're no longer accountable to anybody. You need a system where everybody stays in rhythm and student-athletes have these progress checks."

Members of Chattanooga's football team do not have to submit instructor-validated paperwork, but they are now required to sit in the first two rows of all of their classes or face punishment from the coaching staff. As with the recruiting changes at Chattanooga, this policy is laid out in the team's APR improvement plan in hopes of boosting its score.

"It's important to build relationships with professors," Huesman stressed. "If a professor sees how important it is to a student to do well academically, it certainly helps that student. If I'm coaching a football player and I don't think he cares about what I'm trying to coach or teach him, then I don't care about him or his future because he doesn't care about it."

Still, attendance checks and seating requirements can only go so far. Some teams struggle to find the happy medium between lending their students an occasional helping hand to reach their academic goals and providing them with a silver spoon to meet their every need.

"We really want our student-athletes to graduate, but we also have to make sure we're not hand-holding either," said Rick Hart, Chattanooga's director of intercollegiate athletics. "You can't have it be to the point where, when that net is pulled out from under them, they can't be successful in life. Still, when we talk about programs like these, I think they're really intended to get the attention of those student-athletes who have problems transitioning into college; because, if too much time goes by, you're in a hole that's too big to dig out of, and that hurts them and us."

An Imperfect System

Though coaches and athletic directors at academically troubled institutions acknowledge that the threat of NCAA penalties has changed their behavior and talking points -- for example, Cleveland said his coaching colleagues talk about the APR as much as they talk about zone defense -- they all say that the system has its faults and unintended consequences.

Golden bemoans that he cannot cut players that either simply do not gel with his team or whose poor classroom performance poses a grave risk to its Academic Progress Rate scores. For instance, if a player who is not in good academic standing is either removed from a team or decides to leave, the move will hurt a team's APR.

"There were so many players from the previous staff that there was no way for us to institute our policy and our culture right away," he said of his Temple football squad. "We knew we just couldn't get rid of them because of the APR losses. Ten or 15 years ago, if people didn't want to be part of a program, they could just move on. Now, there's this residual effect that can make it hard to rebuild a program."

In a similar vein, Hart even says that some players at Chattanooga who were in poor academic standing have threatened to drop off the football team or transfer to another institution, with the knowledge that their actions would cost the team APR points.

"Kids are smart and savvy, and they're learning how to leverage with the APR," he said. "They understand that they're in the driver's seat. For instance, in the fall, about four or five students came forward and said they didn't like the coaching change we were going to make and that they understood if they dropped out they would hurt our APR. Now, what you'll see is student-athletes, if they're disgruntled -- either they felt that they weren't playing enough or whatever -- they'll understand that if they don't leave in good academic standing or had not designs to return that they can hurt the program."

Hart also said some athletes have even used their poor academic standing and the threat of lowering the team's APR to lobby the institution to pay for summer classes, a luxury not traditionally covered for scholarship athletes at Chattanooga.

Perhaps what irks most penalized teams about the APR system is that it appears to disproportionately punish colleges and universities from "mid-major" conferences, often defined as those conferences in Division I that do not belong to the prestigious [Bowl Championship Series](#). Officials from these institutions argue that they simply do not have the financial resources to upgrade their academic services for their athletics programs to be judged against wealthier institutions.

"I don't want to be negative, but places like Chattanooga simply don't have the resources and money that the BCS schools have," Huesman said. "We've got to work so much harder than they do; there's no question about it. [The University of] Tennessee [at Knoxville], for example, has millions and millions of dollars to build academic resource centers for their athletes and pay tutors. I'm not begrudging them for that, but for us, we have fewer resources."

Upon announcing this year's APR figures, Myles Brand, NCAA president, acknowledged the gap between the haves and the have-nots in Division I. Still, when it comes to academics, he seemed to offer little sympathy for the latter.

"The truth of the matter is that if you're going to participate in high-level intercollegiate athletics, you have to provide for academic opportunities for the students," Brand said at a [May press conference](#). "And that's not inexpensive."

Some in the "mid-major" ranks have taken issue with this attitude, but still defend the necessity of the APR in improving academic performance among athletes.

"I think that's an elitist attitude," Cleveland said of the notion that less-wealthy institutions should not be allowed to remain in Division I if they cannot compete head-to-head academically with wealthier institutions. "The way things are in this economy, we're all doing everything we can do academically. I do understand Myles saying, 'If they want to be successful, then you have to take care of both athletics and academics.'"

"But, to say that we can dedicate just as much money to this as other [wealthier] schools is unrealistic. I hope that the NCAA will be

more sensitive to finances. Still, even though all things aren't equal, I think we need the APR and I believe it's working."

— **David Moltz**

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