

Sunday, August 26, 2007

A death in Texas

Twenty years after the NCAA handed out its harshest penalty ever, the once-powerful SMU football program still struggles to regain its relevance.

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The Kansas City Star

DALLAS | Lance McIlhenny quarterbacked SMU football through the glory years. Unlike his teammates, he stuck around to watch the funeral.

McIlhenny lives two blocks from campus, and if it weren't for the shirt-and-tie combination or the graying goatee, he could pass for a student. He rides a scooter to the steps of Dallas Hall, jumps off and settles underneath a shade tree on a balmy August afternoon.

He wants to talk about the old days. From 1980 to 1982, McIlhenny joined Eric Dickerson and Craig James in the famed "Pony Express" backfield.

"It was a good time to be at SMU," says McIlhenny, who works in commercial real estate. "It'll get back there. I believe it."

McIlhenny doesn't say those words with conviction. How could he? For the last 20 years, this place has been a football graveyard, the stench of greed, shame and an institution gone wild resonating over the Hilltop.

Twenty years ago, money killed the SMU football program. The NCAA handed SMU the first and only "death penalty," eliminating football for the 1987 season; the school would later tack on '88 as well.

Signs of life have been fleeting at best. It's been 23 years since the Mustangs last played in a bowl game. Living so close, it's been hard to watch for McIlhenny, who believes that SMU should have higher goals than just making a bowl game. The way he remembers it, SMU was like a Southern Cal, a private university with a football program that could pass for an NFL franchise.

In McIlhenny's four years, SMU won 39 games. But those wins came at a cost. McIlhenny knows that from personal experience.

After a game, McIlhenny noticed a teammate taking money out of a locker. He scolded the teammate, saying, "I'm busting my ass just like you are." A few weeks later, McIlhenny found a surprise waiting for him in his dress shoes.

"It happened twice," McIlhenny says. "I succumbed to the pressure as well. If you're a sophomore in college, and you come in and you put your foot in your topsiders and

there's two \$100 bills in there, what do you do? You don't say, 'Somebody lost 200 bucks. Whose is this?' You just kind of go on down the road."

If only it could have been that easy for the SMU program to move on.

"When the death penalty happened," McIlhenny says, "everyone's attitude was, 'We're going to be without a program for a year or two, and we'll crank it back up.' Twenty years later, it just hasn't been the same."

From the top of the steps at Dallas Hall, the school's signature building, you can see the Dallas skyline only 3 miles away. It's a symbolic view, because SMU truly is nothing without Dallas.

It's no coincidence that SMU was founded in Highland Park, where Dallas' elite settled in the early 20th century to escape city taxes and the growing working class.

"It was a place where they could draw up the moat," says Michael Phillips, a Dallas historian at Collin College in the north suburb of Plano. "SMU has always been the place that Dallas elite send their children. It's very much a self-contained universe."

Dallas and SMU grew together. Long before the Dallas Cowboys existed, the city rallied around the SMU football team, a member of the Southwest Conference. The Mustangs won the 1935 national championship and played in the Rose Bowl. Doak Walker won the Heisman in 1948, and future Cowboys quarterback Don Meredith was an All-American in 1958-59. Dallas, thanks in part to SMU, was a city of winners.

The Dallas Cowboys, founded in 1960, would only fuel that perception. They became America's Team in the 1970s, at the same time that America needed oil and found that Texas had plenty. There were real-estate deals, too, lots of them. Developers inflated the value of land so much that every sale became a windfall. Just as planned, Dallas had become a budding metropolis.

It wouldn't be long before the men who ran Dallas decided it was time for SMU football to join the party. Word was that to win big in the Southwest Conference in the early 1980s, you had to give players a little something extra. Money, of course, was no object for the boosters at SMU. So they took a dip. At first, slowly, but then to the point where there was no turning back.

Even before McIlhenny received his payment, he knew what was going on. Many SMU players, some from poor backgrounds, were cruising in the new hot car of the day -- a Datsun 280ZX.

Sure enough, the wins came. The Cowboys weren't winning Super Bowls anymore, so Dallas made room for Mustang Mania. SMU even played its home games in Texas

Stadium. In 1982, SMU beat Texas and won the Cotton Bowl over Dan Marino's Pittsburgh team for an 11-0-1 season. The Mustangs finished second in the polls behind one-loss Penn State. Dallas, of course, said that was hogwash.

SMU football had become the pride of Dallas, built in the city's own image, by men who were more J.R. Ewing than college administrator. The hit TV drama "Dallas" portrayed the city as a place where sleaze translated into success. At SMU and all over Dallas, life was imitating art.

The rich men on the SMU Board of Governors enjoyed every second of their creation, but their time puppeteering would soon come to an end.

Somebody was watching.

The SMU program had shown quite a commitment to lawlessness over the years. So it was really no surprise when the NCAA put SMU football on three years' probation in 1985 for paying players. The surprise is what happened next.

The SMU Board of Governors, led by former Texas governor Bill Clements, decided SMU would continue making the payments. He rationalized that it would be unfair to the players for SMU to not follow through on their original contract.

The SMU president at the time, L. Donald Shields, was powerless. Clements reportedly told Shields that the board would take care of everything and that "we have a payroll to meet." That payroll, it would later be discovered, amounted to around \$61,000.

In 1986, SMU linebacker David Stanley blew the whistle on the program to a local TV news station, revealing that he had been receiving \$750 a month through SMU's recruiting coordinator. Reports then surfaced that tight end Albert Reese had been living in a rent-free apartment provided by a booster who was already implicated back in 1985.

That signaled the beginning of another NCAA investigation, which discovered a slush fund that reached to the highest levels of the university. Overall, 21 SMU players had received payments during 1985-86.

In February 1987, NCAA lead investigator David Berst went to Dallas to hold a press conference. When announcing that SMU would receive the death penalty, Berst fainted in front of the cameras.

"It just adds to the legend," Berst says.

Berst would recover and continue delivering the bad news: SMU football would not have a season in 1987.

"The culture of violations was so ingrained in the program," says Berst, now the NCAA vice president for Division I, "there simply didn't seem to be any options left."

The SMU Board of Governors had lost their toy football program, and they would lose more than that. The oil and real-estate booms of the early 1980s were about to become busts, sending Dallas on an economic decline.

"It's this weird confluence that all these things are happening at the same time," Phillips says. "The death-penalty era reflected what was going on in the oil industry and the banking industry. They are coming from the same business environment."

In the wake of what was considered a tragedy for the university, the board was dissolved, and the men removed from their posts. The president, athletic director and football coach Bobby Collins all resigned. Reached at his Mississippi home, all Collins could offer was, "I don't discuss that. That's behind me, and I'm living my life."

Calls made by The Star to Clements and several other members of the old Board of Governors went unreturned, continuing a vow of silence the men have shared for two decades now.

The university had no choice but to pick up the pieces. A committee of students, alumni and faculty was formed to address whether SMU should remain in Division I athletics. Chiefs owner Clark Hunt, a soccer player at SMU during 1983-86, was on the board.

"That's probably difficult to believe that a school that has such a rich sports history like SMU would consider that," Hunt said. "But that was just the mood. Thankfully, at the end of the day, it made the most sense to remain Division I."

For two years, autumn was quiet. No buses came to pick up students for the trip to Texas Stadium. The pomp and pageantry of Saturdays, the school pride, had vanished.

So had all the players, the NFL talent that filled the SMU roster. Days after the death penalty was announced, college recruiters purged the campus, leaving only a handful of players. Wide receiver Mitch Glieber was one of them. Glieber didn't plan on a pro career, so he decided to stick it out. SMU had decided to add a year to the death penalty, so that meant two years without playing in a game.

"I knew that when the team did come back," Glieber says, "they were going to need some upperclassmen."

Under the guidance of new head coach Forrest Gregg, who left his job as coach of the Green Bay Packers to return to his alma mater, the SMU stragglers started practicing again in 1988. They trained for the length of that season, despite playing no games. Lord knows they needed it.

"You're going from playing with guys who are elite players," Glieber says, "to guys that you question whether some of them actually played in high school."

When 1989 finally came around, SMU -- playing back on campus at Ownby Field -- wasn't supposed to win a game. In their first game against Rice, the Mustangs were run off the field, 35-6. The next week, SMU came from behind and beat Connecticut, then a Division II team, 31-30, in what would forever be known as the "Miracle on Mockingbird."

The miracles were rare, though. The SMU faculty made sure of that. For many faculty members, the death penalty confirmed what they had always believed, that college athletics undermined the integrity of the university.

The SMU Faculty Senate had news for any football supporters who thought the team would jump right back into national prominence. If that was going to happen, SMU coaches would have to find some really smart NFL-caliber athletes.

SMU would hold potential football players to the same standards for admission as any other student. There would be no more special treatment. Also, high school players couldn't visit the campus unless they already had gone through an intense, academic-screening process, which hindered the coaches' ability to recruit.

"There's a huge amount of distrust, and rightfully so," says Pat Davis, the president of the Faculty Senate for the 2000-01 academic year. "The faculty felt like it had been absolutely abused."

Combined with the negative perception of SMU after the death penalty and the disbanding of the Southwest Conference in 1995, the Mustangs didn't have much of a chance to compete. When SMU joined the Western Athletic Conference, attendance began a steady decline. Dallas had already pulled out after the death penalty, but even SMU alums and students couldn't get up for Hawaii and Fresno State.

Something had to be done, and the first step was moving SMU's games back on campus from the Cotton Bowl. In 2000, SMU opened Gerald J. Ford Stadium, a 32,000-seat beacon of hope. With the new stadium came the invention of "Boulevard," SMU's tailgating setup on Bishop Boulevard that was modeled after "The Grove" at Ole Miss.

SMU was at least putting some shine on its product, but that wouldn't be enough to bring the program back from the dead. They had to start winning games. The Mustangs needed a coach who could convince the faculty to let the football program breathe again.

They would find him in Manhattan, Kan.

Phil Bennett's friends told him, "Don't do it." SMU was where coaching careers went to die, and Bennett had a good thing going as Kansas State's defensive coordinator.

But Bennett took the job. He may have regretted it after his first spring at SMU. Bennett had to be frank with his president and athletic director.

"I said, 'We're looking at four to five years until we're back,' " Bennett says. "They didn't like it, but I was honest."

When Bennett says "back," he means going to a bowl game. When McIlhenny and other SMU supporters say "back," they mean playing for championships and being a top-25 program.

In Bennett's first three years, the Mustangs won a total of six games and went 0-12 in 2003, his second season. Bennett was still operating under the same recruiting restrictions that had hampered every coach since the death penalty. So Bennett and athletic director Jim Copeland went to work, opening a dialogue with the Faculty Senate and its offshoot, the athletic admissions committee.

"We had to be able to get some of what SMU considered at that time to be at-risk kids," Bennett says. "And I had to prove to them that education was important to me, that I wasn't a guy who was a fly-by-night. I talked to the Faculty Senate, to the provost, and I said, 'We can do this. We can graduate them.' "

It was a tough sell.

"Once you've been burned on a tea kettle," Bennett says, "you're a little more cautious every time you get around it. But for me to do anything that would circumvent the rules or the integrity of this university, it won't happen. I'm never going to sell my soul to the devil on talent."

Slowly, Bennett convinced the university administration to let him recruit what SMU calls "Category C" student-athletes. If the athletic admissions committee decided a kid could succeed academically with tutoring help in SMU's new Learning Enhancement Center, he was cleared. They also allowed coaches to bring athletes on campus before they were admitted.

Those two things opened a new world to SMU in recruiting. Bennett brought in talented players from winning programs, kids such as sophomore quarterback Justin Willis.

Willis, a local product out of Denton, Texas, chose SMU over the likes of Kansas State and Arizona. Last year, he led SMU to six wins, one away from that elusive bowl berth.

With each year that passes, SMU inches further from its clouded past. Take Willis. He was born in 1987, the year the gavel came down.

"All I really know about the death penalty is that it's the worst thing you can get," Willis says. "A lot of people really don't like talking about it to this day."

Having some talent again is nice, but the question remains: does anybody care? SMU averaged 15,428 fans per game last year, a number you could see at numerous high school games on Friday nights in Dallas.

"This is a difficult place to mean something," says Richard Sweet, the head of SMU's new athletic marketing team. "The SMU brand has deteriorated to really almost nothing in the last 25 years. The key is to get this campus fully engaged, and it hasn't been for years and years. It was to the point where it was uncool to go to an SMU game."

SMU is spending big bucks marketing the team to students, alumni and Greater Dallas. But winning -- sustained consistently over time -- is the program's only hope to gain footing.

All signs point to this year marking the end of the bowl drought. In the meantime, Bennett has no choice but to point to the only trophy in his office, the one that lauds last year's senior class for a 100-percent graduation rate.

Just outside Bennett's office, Ford Stadium sits empty on a blistering hot day. Will this place ever see glory?

Twenty years later, the Mustangs haven't risen yet. The death penalty sticks around, a grim friend, always there to bring them down.

"It's a scarlet letter," Bennett says. "They'll never give it out again. I compare it to the atomic bomb that we dropped on Japan. They didn't know what it would do."