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## **‘Miss-conduct,’ revenge and litigation form a toxic mix at Ole Miss**

By Adam J. Glazer

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The University of Mississippi football team will not appear in a bowl game during the upcoming 2017 season.

This punishment, which includes forfeiting millions in Southeastern Conference post-season revenue, was self-imposed in response to a hard-driving and expansive NCAA investigation of the Rebels program.

The investigation culminated in allegations of academic fraud, booster problems, making illicit payments of cash, merchandise and other benefits to recruits and the dreaded “lack of institutional control.”

While integrity and college football coaches are often strangers, the improprieties attributed to successive Ole Miss coaching staffs stand out, even by notorious SEC standards.

Evidence of the Ole Miss misconduct was never on greater display than after its star offensive tackle, Laremy Tunsil, was selected in the first round of the 2016 draft by the Miami Dolphins. At the ensuing news conference, Tunsil was asked whether he had received money from the school’s coaching staff. “I would have to say, yeah,” he answered.

Coach Hugh Freeze promoted faith-based football at Ole Miss since his arrival in 2012 and established a public image for himself as a religious man, regularly tweeting biblical verses.

Freeze further won the hearts of Rebel fans by prevailing in the school’s first Sugar Bowl since 1970, when Archie Manning was the quarterback, and perhaps more importantly, by beating Alabama twice.

So when the NCAA leveled serious rules violations against the football program in April 2016, and later added more, for a total of 21 charges, the majority of which are reportedly Level I, the highest classification, the school stood squarely behind Freeze.

Not any more.

Freeze was forced to resign from Ole Miss just last month after its administration was alerted to a call placed from his university cellphone to an escort service. Although Freeze originally claimed the call was a misdial, when the school dug deeper into his phone records, his fate was sealed.

Athletic Director Ross Bjork acknowledged that Freeze's departure was not occasioned by the NCAA investigation, but by his acknowledged "pattern of personal misconduct inconsistent with the standards we expect from the leader of our football team."

That's only the beginning of this tale.

According to USA Today, Ole Miss learned of Freeze's calls from the attorney for its former coach, Houston Nutt. Coach Nutt led the Rebels from 2008 through 2011, just prior to Freeze, and after getting fired at the University of Arkansas.

Just as with Freeze at Ole Miss, the Razorbacks' on-field performance did not lead to Nutt's ouster. Nutt took his Hogs teams to seven bowl games in 10 years, including two Cotton Bowls and one Capital One Bowl. In 2006, the year before his firing, Arkansas finished 10-4 with the Heisman runner-up Darren McFadden at tailback, and Nutt won his second SEC coach of the year award.

Instead, FOIA requests made by a lifelong fan while the married Nutt was in Fayetteville revealed more than 2,000 texts with a local news anchor. Nutt denied having an affair, and his wife even blogged in his defense:

"The 'haters' North of us have their armies busy 24-7, attacking us and constantly blindsiding us every chance they can. It doesn't take much to generate the 'mob mentality' these days. At this point, I have lost track of the false allegations against Houston and the number of resignation/firing deadlines that have come and gone. I know that anyone with any intelligence can see through all of this every time a new story rolls around. And NO, Houston has not had an affair with Donna Bragg!"

Apparently, Nutt's conduct was not so transparent for he was forced out nevertheless.

The experience evidently haunted Nutt. He carried a grudge against Freeze, who earned early fame coaching Michael Oher in high school, as depicted in the hit 2010 movie ironically titled "The Blind Side," starring Sandra Bullock in an Oscar-winning role.

When the NCAA launched its probe of Ole Miss, it fueled Nutt's fire. While 17 of the 21 charges Ole Miss faces involve Freeze's staff, four are targeted at Nutt's regime, including the troubling allegation that his staffers assisted in fixing recruits' ACT scores.

Yet, Nutt sued Ole Miss, claiming his former employer, in violation of his severance agreement, disproportionately blamed him for the recruiting violations through "a carefully orchestrated misinformation campaign" intended to "mislead the media, Ole Miss boosters and potential recruiting prospects" about the investigation.

Nutt alleges that Freeze “knowingly lied to the journalists and recruiting prospects by saying that the NCAA’s investigation had little, if anything, to do with him or his coaching staff and was instead focused on alleged rules violations by Coach Nutt’s staff.”

His complaint, filed in a federal court in Mississippi, claims that Bjork and Freeze conspired “to smear him” and contributed “to his difficulty finding another coaching job.” Nutt seeks to recover for emotional distress, embarrassment and lost wages as well as attorney fees and punitive damages.

In a unique twist, the complaint also asserts that Freeze invoked his religious faith to defend against the NCAA allegations by comparing himself to Jesus getting nailed to the cross. Freeze allegedly told a recruit that “when you’re that big and out there with faith in Christ,” persecution follows.

Not satisfied with utilizing the same approach that undid him in Fayetteville, when a third-party accessed his own suspicious cellphone records, to oust Freeze with phone records showing some decidedly unholy conduct in Oxford, Nutt continues with his legal action urging that Freeze’s term comprised the darker coaching chapter.

The NCAA’s disciplinary decision is expected imminently. In the meantime, the manner in which Nutt exposed Freeze brings to mind Ole Miss alumnus John Grisham’s novel “The Confession,” where the narrator wryly observed: “The irony was almost comical. A confessed murderer and serial rapist condemning violent men.”

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