

Grambling State University football program goes on strike

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On Friday, the football team of Grambling State University, a historically black university in northwestern Louisiana, refused to board buses taking them to a road game against Jackson State, leading the university to forfeit the game later that day. The team is demanding improved facilities and funding as well as the resignation of university president Frank Pogue.

Unrest had been building since the administration fired head coach Doug Williams, one of the most distinguished alumni of the football program and the first black quarterback to win a Super Bowl Most Valuable Player award, in September of this year. Williams had been popular among the players, particularly after leading the team to a conference championship in 2011. When, over a month later, the administration elected to meet with the football program to attempt to ease their concerns, the football team walked out of the meeting in protest, and refused to practice either Wednesday or Thursday, culminating in a vote Friday afternoon to return to their respective hometowns for the weekend rather than play in Saturday's game.

Significantly, that game was to be the homecoming game for Jackson State, a tradition amongst American high schools and universities designed to drum up support for the school amongst its alumni. The Southwestern Athletic Conference, to whom both schools belong, has indicated that Grambling will be fined \$20,000.

While the university has maintained a conciliatory public face and even agreed to replace the head coach with someone favored by the players, privately they have sent out letters to the football team threatening them with the loss of their scholarships if they do not end their strike.

Although the immediate cause of the strike by the

football team is the head-coaching situation, players are also protesting deteriorating conditions in the athletics department, many of which result from savage cuts to higher education by the administration of Louisiana governor Bobby Jindal. Grambling State, a public university, has seen its share of funding from the state fall by more than half since the 2007-2008 school year. The sharpest effects began to be felt by the athletic department in the 2012-2013 academic year, when the football team went 1-10 and the men's basketball team went 0-28, in what is considered by some the worst men's basketball season in NCAA history.

The results are chronicled in a letter sent to the administration obtained by ESPN: "the [athletic] complex is filled with mildew and mold. Mildew and mold can be seen on the ceiling, walls and floor, and are contributing to water leaks because of faltering walls and ceilings. Grambling student-athletes are not the only ones complaining about this particular hazard. When Lamar University came to play our team they refused to go in the locker room for half time due to mold and mildew... the weight room and care of game and practice gear are in bad condition, in areas where the floor is coming up, it causes players to trip while lifting large amounts of weight. Equipment in the weight room is falling apart, as well as workout benches are tearing and ripping apart... the uniforms are poorly cleaned and contribute to the multiple cases [of] staph infection. Several players have been infected with staph multiple times." *Staphylococcus* ("staph") is a category of serious bacterial infections often associated with unsanitary conditions. An infection may require hospitalization and can even be fatal.

Other complaints include lack of Gatorade and housing during summer camp, having to travel by bus for up to 17 hours round-trip for road games (despite

the fact that administration officials routinely take planes for such games), and rejection of donations to the athletic department.

The history of the Grambling State football program makes this protest all the more significant. When the NCAA vacated over a hundred wins by Joe Paterno in the aftermath of the Penn State pedophilia scandal, former Grambling State head coach Eddie Robinson reclaimed his record as the “winningest” head coach in NCAA football history, with 408 wins.

For 56 years, from 1941 to 1997, Robinson transformed the Grambling program into a football powerhouse, winning 17 championships in the Southwestern Athletic Conference and 9 black college football national championships during that time. Their annual game with Southern University, a historically black university in Baton Rouge, is held in New Orleans before a large and raucous crowd in the Superdome and televised nationally by NBC. That a football program with such a proud tradition is now in severe crisis is one indication of the larger crisis affecting higher education since the economic crisis of 2007-2008.

Significantly, the protest by the football program is resonating with the larger student body, who are facing similar conditions, and to whom the football players are directly appealing for support. A rally held Thursday on campus attracted over a hundred students, and was addressed by Naquan Smith, a senior on the football team and spokesman for the team during the strike, who repeated the demand that president Frank Pogue resign. He also responded to threats by the administration, declaring that the team was prepared to hire lawyers if their scholarships were revoked. During the demonstration, students were invited to record their grievances on a whiteboard.



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