



Football Team Penalized for Gesture to Heaven

The Ohio School Athletic Association seems to be taking the non-constitutional maxim of “separation of Church and state” a bit too far. The Association, along with one of its referees decided to penalize the Louisville High School football team’s receiver for making a gesture to heaven, and is now facing harsh criticism as a result of that decision.



The team defended the gesture for which they were penalized by explaining that it was intended to commemorate a friend of theirs who had been killed a week earlier.

The Blaze reports:

After scoring what would have been the game’s winning touchdown — putting the team up 26-24 — Alex Schooley, along with his teammate Gavin Lovejoy, pointed their fingers toward the sky in a commemorative gesture for their friend, Dom Wilgus, 16, who was killed in a car accident the week earlier. It so happened Schooley had also been pallbearer at Wilgus’ funeral that very morning.

Still, the referee, unaware of the motivation behind the gesture, declared that the gesture was “excessive celebration.” Careful inspection of the video, however, reveals a gesture that is so minute it virtually goes unnoticed. The referee penalized the team, which gave the opposing team, Walsh Jesuit, field advantage that resulted in Walsh Jesuit scoring a 29-yard field goal to win the game.

Naturally, the penalty garnered outrage from parents and students alike, but the school’s athletic director Rich Venuto defended the official, asserting that he was simply doing his job.

“He had no idea and nor would he have and I don’t think the officials can bring in that type of emotion to what they call on the field,” said Venuto. “They have to call the game as they see it, that’s what their charge is according to the Ohio Athletic Association, and that what we would want them to do as administrators and athletic administrators.”

Venuto contends that the referee is fair in claiming that the team called too much attention to itself after the touchdown was scored, and sympathizes with the referee for all the criticism he has faced.

“His interpretation was that we called attention to ourselves after the touchdown was scored and during the celebration we did draw attention to ourselves and that is against the rules,” Venuto states.

Additionally, Venuto asserts that the referee had made it clear that he would punish the players if they engaged in any behavior perceived to be attention-seeking.

“According to the National Federation of High Schools, you are not allowed to draw attention to yourself and, in fact, [the referee] even told me that he had asked our players not to do so, but then we did that again and that’s when he threw the flag,” said Venuto. “The gentleman who made the call is a very well known and respected official, someone we certainly hope has another one of our games this



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year because he has a great reputation.”

He continued, “The crew chief engaged me in conversation after the game and told me that this year the celebratory rule as far as drawing attention to yourself is a point of emphasis with the Ohio High School Athletic Association and at the rules interpretation meeting that the coaches and officials have to attend that was one of the things that was brought out, a very strong point so officials do not allow that to happen, so officials are looking out for that and rightfully so.”

Likewise, the Ohio High School Athletic Association continues to defend its decision. The Assistant Commissioner, Henry Zaborniac, said that the rules ban “any excessive or prolonged act by which a player attempts to focus attention upon himself.”

Many others disagree, however. Fans of the team contend that the gesture was both simple and dignified and could not, nor should not, be construed as celebratory or attention-seeking.

Venuto, who claims to sympathize with the fans, concludes, “I think that people’s emotions have spilled over and certainly I think unfairly for that official and the crew, and we don’t feel that way towards the official or the crew at all. You know what, we have benefited from calls in the past. This one we didn’t.”

The grandfather of one of the players on the team defended the players’ gestures, saying it was “a simple gesture to heaven” paying homage to a friend.

Even in the NFL, however, players have been fined for such a thing. When Pittsburgh Steelers safety Ryan Clark drew the number 21 in his eye black as a tribute to his former teammate Sean Taylor in 2008, he was fined \$5,000.

Similarly, when Chad Ochocinco planned to wear the jersey of Chris Henry of the Cincinnati Bengals after he passed away, the league warned that he would be fined.

Still, this is high school football. The scene is [reminiscent](#) of one that took place in December of last year at Turnwater High School, when the running back for the football team, Ronnie Hastie, received a penalty flag for pointing to the heavens after scoring a touchdown.

Hastie indicated that it was a gesture he always performed after scoring, and typically lasted one to two seconds long, but the referee claimed Hastie violated the rules of sportsmanship by drawing attention to himself. To that, Hastie was surprised and explained, “That wasn’t the point [of the gesture], so I guess I was a little confused. I do that to give glory to my heavenly father, Jesus. He gives me strength. He’s the one who gives me these abilities in the first place.”



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