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HIGHER STANDARDS

Stanford teams finding it's hard to win if athletes can't get in

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Stanford will soon wrap up its 13th straight Directors'

Cup, which recognizes overall success in intercollegiate sports. Many Stanford alumni, however, consider the cup a booby prize, won mainly because the school excels in non-revenue producing sports.

They and some former coaches fear that the football, basketball and baseball teams in particular will be hard pressed to compete unless they get more help from the admissions department.

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Tom Williams, a former standout linebacker for the Cardinal who was an assistant coach under head coach Buddy Teevens, thinks Stanford's future in football is "scary." He said, "I see Stanford being a I-AA program if things don't change."

"They can't keep raising the bar," said Dave Tipton, a former All-America defensive tackle at Stanford who served as an assistant coach there for 18 years under five head coaches. He said the admissions standards for football players are "markedly" higher than they were 10 years ago. "Hopefully it will go back to where it was, which was tough but at least doable. Some of these kids are getting admitted to the Ivy League but not at Stanford."

A former Stanford administrator who asked not to be named said that beginning around 2000 the admissions department began to sharply reduce the weight it gave to athletic excellence in assessing applicants. "I think it's a shame, a tragedy," he said. "You see it in a total lack of support for the football team."

It's not just a football problem. Don Shaw, the men's volleyball coach who last year ended 26 years at the school, most of them as women's coach, said, "There were three years (recently) when we couldn't get a top recruit even though they were great students. They raised the bar without telling us. ... It was like somebody turned off the faucet on us."

School officials insist that there's been no intentional effort to downgrade athletics. They point out that the admission process at Stanford has always more subjective than at other schools. Moreover, they say the bar has risen for everyone because the number of applications has skyrocketed. It's possible, however, to draw a connection to the admissions department based on what has happened in several sports:

-- Five straight losing seasons in football culminated last year in Stanford's first one-win season in 23 years. The two head coaches during those five years, Teevens and Walt Harris, were fired.

-- Stanford, previously a regular participant in baseball's College World Series, hasn't made it the last four years. The Cardinal had to get hot at the end of the season to finish .500 overall and escape the Pac-10 basement. Their 28-28 record was the second-worst in coach Mark Marquess' 31 years.

-- The men's volleyball team was 3-25, its worst season in the sport's 31-year history at the school.

-- In men's tennis, a program that has produced 17 national championships, Stanford didn't even make the NCAA regionals. It hasn't reached the finals since 2000.

-- The men's basketball team was wiped out in the NCAA Tournament in a 20-point blowout in the first round, a year after not making the tournament at all.

-- Since reaching the NCAA final in 2002, the men's soccer team has a 21-39-14 record with no NCAA berths.

The common denominator is the rosters of those teams were largely determined during the 2000-05 tenure of Robin Mamlet as dean of admissions. She came from Swarthmore, a small liberal arts college near Philadelphia that competes in sports on the Division III level. She had not worked at a Division I school previously and apparently had little experience dealing with applications from elite athletes.

"She was tough on athletics," Tipton said. "Before her, the admissions people were easier to deal with."

"You started to see a difference in (football coach) Tyrone Willingham's last year (2001)," Williams said.

With Mamlet manning the gate, says Shaw, "suddenly we were getting rejections on kids that previously we would have gotten in, or a good percentage of them."

Former men's soccer coach Bobby Clark, who left in 2001 for Notre Dame, said, "Two kids, one in each of our last two years, were turned down, and both got into Harvard. One was our top (recruited) player."

To make matters worse, the coaches complained that Mamlet and her staff wouldn't give them any explanations for the apparently changing standards. Former men's basketball coach Mike Montgomery said, "We wanted to meet with them -- 'What do you want us to do? Let's find some common ground.' We never could get that done."

Harris declined to comment as "part of my agreement with the university," and Teevens, now head coach at Dartmouth, didn't return phone calls.

Mamlet, who could not be reached for comment, resigned in 2005, saying she wanted to spend more time with her family.

Some alums think former athletic director Ted Leland should have battled more forcefully against rising standards for athletes and for more of a commitment to athletic success. "Lowering the standards to admit athletes just so you can win games is not going to work on the Stanford campus," said Leland, now a

vice-president at Pacific. "I would say we want to go to the Rose Bowl, and people would agree. But if I said lower the criteria, they'd throw you out of the room."

A dean of admissions can be a convenient scapegoat when teams struggle. In her book about the job, former Stanford dean of admissions Jean Fetter wrote, "As someone once noted, when the Stanford team performs well, the coach gets a lot of credit; when the team performs badly, the dean of undergraduate admissions is held responsible."

If school officials held Mamlet responsible, they aren't saying, but their choice to replace her, Richard Shaw, had considerable experience dealing with Division I athletes at Colorado, Cal and Michigan.

"Since he came in, there was a change for the better," said Don Shaw (no relation), the ex-volleyball coach. Several other ex-coaches agreed.

Richard Shaw wouldn't comment on Mamlet's tenure. "That's a matter of people's perceptions," he said.

As for his own approach, he said, "I think it's important that we sustain the standards. Scholarship and athletics are equally celebrated here. We have a unique position in the nation." He added, "I care about winning. I care about the role that athletics plays at this great institution."

Whether applicants are athletes or not, Richard Shaw's response is usually: Just say no. Of slightly fewer than 24,000 applicants for next fall, only 2,464 were accepted. There are only 1,744 spots available, but not all accepted students will come and the school probably will reduce the number of transfers it admits.

Letting in superior athletes can lead to bowl games and basketball titles, but it can be painful too. In 1991, Shaw's office at Michigan admitted basketball star Chris Webber and the rest of the so-called Fab Five, who twice reached the NCAA final. Years later the school had to forfeit 113 victories when it was revealed that Webber and three other players had taken \$616,000 from a booster.

It's far-fetched to think a similar scandal could occur at Stanford. For that matter, not even its own wealthy benefactors and its most rabid alumni envision the Cardinal as a national title contender in football or basketball. But they want the school to stay competitive in the Pac-10. To do that, they think admissions will have to help.

When Montgomery left in 2004 to take a lucrative deal from the Warriors after his teams made 10 straight NCAA Tournament appearances, he was having enormous difficulty getting his top recruits admitted. "It got really difficult toward the end," he said. "You couldn't really find the kids. I didn't want to get into a situation where you just don't think you could succeed. It was starting to look like we were stuck a little bit."

While many of the men's teams have struggled lately, the women's teams have felt the admissions squeeze too. Basketball coach Tara VanDerveer says there are now only a half-dozen high school juniors in the country who could help Stanford someday and be admitted.

At the same time, she says she has had "a smooth relationship with the deans of admission. I might go home and cry and complain to my dogs, but I don't try to do their jobs."

She said her job has gotten tougher over the years not only because Stanford's "bar has been going up steadily" but because some of the country's most prestigious academic schools -- including Cal, Duke and Vanderbilt -- have sharply raised their profile in women's basketball.

With two national titles and 20 straight NCAA Tournament appearances, VanDerveer knows she won't win much sympathy. But she said she and her assistants will have to widen their net. "We have to go to Australia and Canada," she said. "We're going to spend more money going there."

Trent Johnson, who replaced Montgomery, insists he's had no problems with the admissions people. "There are enough excellent students who want to play at an elite level," he said. "I tend to worry about the things I have control over."

His views are echoed by Jim Harbaugh, the new football coach, and by Marquess, the longtime baseball coach.

"We have the highest standards in the country," said Harbaugh, just back from a whirlwind recruiting trip that took him to 23 cities in 24 days. "It's something we proclaim when we're going after scholar-athletes. One of our main objectives is to graduate our athletes, and another is to win. We want to do both."

Marquess admits it has gotten "overall a little bit" harder to get players admitted, but this year nine of the 10 high school seniors he submitted were accepted.

He said this year's struggles had nothing to do with admissions problems. "In all honesty, that's not the case," he said. "I've had lean years before. We haven't pitched as well. We've underperformed. That's my responsibility as a coach. We didn't do a very good job this year."

Of course, incumbent coaches at Stanford or any other school are unlikely to publicly castigate their admissions departments. Their careers may depend on fostering friendly relations with the people who will determine whether the next John Elway or Mike Mussina is admitted.

Some former Stanford coaches, free of such constraints, criticize the admissions department for making it too hard for teams to compete.

"I don't want Stanford to lower their admission standards for athletic success," said Williams, now a special-teams coach for the Jacksonville Jaguars. "But I probably couldn't get into Stanford anymore. That's disappointing because they're turning down guys who could be successful there."

He cited the case of wide receiver Mark Bradford as an example of a player who came from a difficult background but who had the drive and intelligence to get good grades from Stanford. "We had to fight tooth and nail to get that kid in school," Williams said.

Bradford, who will be a senior in the fall, "is maintaining a 3.3 GPA," Williams said. "He's thriving." But many other athletes with similar credentials have been denied, he said.

If that continues, Williams said, Stanford won't be able to compete in football at the top level. "Every year you need 25 guys who can qualify and help you win the Pac-10," he said. "In any given year, across the country, there are only 75 guys who can do it, maybe 85 to 100 in a great year. If you get one of three of

those guys, you have a chance. Stanford will get one of six; that's not going to cut it."

Whether Richard Shaw can or will help Harbaugh rescue the football program is anybody's guess. Bob Bowlsby, the former Iowa athletic director who took over as Stanford AD last summer, says he's convinced the school can compete in the revenue-producing sports even with the current admissions standards.

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't think we could compete in football and everything else we sponsor," he said.

Soon he'll collect the Directors' Cup, although legions of Stanford alumni and fans would gladly trade it for the school year enjoyed by Florida, a cup also-ran despite winning national titles in football and men's basketball. In the point calculations used to award the cup, all sports count equally.

Looking out at the plush new football stadium from a seat in the press box, Bowlsby said, "Winning the Directors' Cup is a wonderful thing, but I don't think you can call yourself the best program in intercollegiate athletics if you can't win in the sports the media covers and that people covet."

Admission rates

Stanford admissions for the fall of 2006:

-- Only 10.9 percent of the freshman applicants were admitted. For comparison, Duke admitted 21.2 percent while Harvard accepted 9.3 percent.

-- Only 17.4 percent of applicants with an SAT verbal score of 700 or higher were admitted.

-- Only 14 percent of the applicants with an SAT math score of 700 or higher were admitted.

Sources: www.stanford.edu; admissions.duke.edu; news.harvard.edu

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/06/03/SPGRQQ6G8V1.DTL>

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