

The New York Times
Reprints

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)



April 30, 2010

Off-Field Turmoil Causes Soul Searching at Oregon

By BILLY WITZ

EUGENE, Ore. — As the Oregon football team scrimmaged on a recent morning under overcast skies at Autzen Stadium, Jeremiah Masoli stood on the sidelines, his hands tucked inside the pouch on the front of his practice jersey and his helmet deposited under the bench behind him.

For more than 90 minutes, Masoli did not take any snaps at quarterback, did not fill in at receiver as he has done at some spring practices, did not do anything more taxing than try to stifle a yawn.

Masoli, the deft operator of one of college football's most innovative offenses last fall, when he [led Oregon to the Rose Bowl](#), was to have been a Heisman Trophy contender for a team that was expected to be [in the hunt for a national title](#). Perhaps, as it did for Joey Harrington nearly a decade ago, Oregon would have [plastered a billboard](#) of Masoli on a Manhattan building.

Instead, he is the face of Oregon athletics for a different reason: a program run amok.

Masoli has been suspended for the coming season after pleading guilty in March to a felony burglary charge for stealing a laptop from a fraternity house. He is one of six players who were arrested during a span of several weeks.

The problems at Oregon, which completes its spring practice Saturday with its annual spring game, have not been confined to the police blotter. The state attorney general launched an investigation into the \$2.3 million buyout of Athletic Director Mike Bellotti, the former football coach whose "contract" turned out to be a handshake agreement. Though [no](#)

wrongdoing was found, the attorney general, John Kroger, said the arrangement exposed the university to financial risk by not following procedures.

The hiring of a basketball coach was no more smooth. By the time Dana Altman was hired last Sunday, after fruitless overtures to Tom Izzo, Brad Stevens, Jamie Dixon and Mike Anderson, among others, the job search had taken six weeks, or long enough that three players had asked for their releases.

Now, Oregon must find an athletic director — one who will have to figure out how to make the bond payments on the new \$227 million basketball arena that will open next season, among other things.

“It’s time for the athletic department to do a little soul searching on how they can serve the university,” said Nathan Tublitz, a biology professor and the president of the university senate. “The athletic department is out of control here.”

The **tension between athletics and academics** has been longstanding at Oregon, since the university in the mid-1990s — with the backing of the donor Phil Knight, the Nike co-founder — began pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into its athletic facilities, which are among the most opulent in the country. Before Bellotti, the department had been run by its No. 2 benefactor, the booster turned athletic director Pat Kilkenny.

Football players, who a generation ago hung their backpacks on nails, now walk into a two-story, wood-paneled locker room with 60-inch flat-screen televisions and Internet ports at every locker. A new learning center — dubbed the Jock Box for its glass cube design — has been built for athletes only.

If athletes at Oregon want a top-of-the-line laptop, all they have to do is ask — Knight donated 550 specially engraved Apple notebooks for their use.

That twist, in the wake of Masoli’s arrest, has not been lost on many around campus. When guard Mark Asper, a sociology and Spanish major, has pulled his laptop out in class, he has had classmates admire it and then ask the inevitable question.

“Is that one Jeremiah could have gotten?” Asper said. “And I say, yes. They want to know: What was he thinking? I just have to humbly apologize. People say, ‘Oh, you guys are a bunch of hooligans,’ and it’s tough because you don’t have any evidence to the contrary.”

A case in point came in late February. Coach Chip Kelly called a team meeting after several arrests. He outlined the standards he expected his players to adhere to and then affirmed at a news conference that he had not lost control of the program. Less than 24 hours later,

linebacker Kiko Alonso was arrested for driving under the influence. The next day, receiver Jamere Holland, believing Alonso had been kicked off the team, unleashed an expletive-laced rant against Kelly on his [Facebook](#) page.

Kelly has dismissed three players, including Holland, and suspended two others — Masoli and Alonso — for the season. LaMichael James, the team's best running back, and kicker Rob Beard were each suspended for one game, possibly more, after pleading guilty to physical harassment in separate cases involving women.

So, rather than distancing themselves from the [behavior of LeGarrette Blount](#), whose nationally televised sucker punch of a Boise State player was one of college football's enduring images last season, the Ducks demonstrated in the early days of the off-season that birds of a feather do indeed flock together.

Kelly, who was promoted from offensive coordinator to head coach in 2009 when Bellotti was made athletic director, said he did not believe his message was getting lost. He pointed to the fact that there were no off-the-field incidents in his first nine months on the job.

"You have to understand — kids are 18 to 22 years old," Kelly said. "They're going to make mistakes and when they do, there will be punishment."

In his office last week, Kelly turned to his desktop computer and clicked on the college football home page for [ESPN.com](#). Of the nine headlined stories, five were about players in some sort of trouble. He also cited statistics well known around Eugene. Florida has had 27 football player arrests in five years; Alabama had 10 arrests in Nick Saban's first 18 months as coach; [Ohio State](#) had 14 arrests between 2001 and 2004; and [Penn State](#) had 46 arrests between 2002 and 2007.

"It happens everywhere, it happens in every sport," Kelly said. "The problem is we're a high-profile sport and we live in a fish bowl, so people know about it. And our players understand that. One is too many, but our players have to understand that they're looked at differently than a normal student and everything they do is going to be scrutinized, so you have to do the right things."

Curt Warner, the former Penn State running back who starred for the [Seattle Seahawks](#), attended practice last week with his son, who is a high school sophomore in Vancouver, Wash. He echoed Kelly, saying that Oregon's problems could have happened in any era, but said it was important for players to realize they were ambassadors, for better or worse.

“The question for everyone is whether this is a one-time incident,” Warner said. “I would think it’s one of those things, but time will tell.”

What troubles some is that Masoli and James had been arrested before arriving in Eugene. Masoli spent three months in juvenile hall in 2005 for his role in a series of robberies at a Bay Area shopping mall. James was arrested in 2008 and charged with battery and disorderly conduct after being involved in a fight, but the charges were dropped a year later. Masoli, through a university spokesman, declined to be interviewed. James said he had learned “big time” from his recent arrest, but that it was fair to wonder if someone who had been arrested twice could stay out of trouble.

“I can’t predict the future,” he said. “I’m 20 years old. I’ve had two incidents happen in my whole life. You can’t judge a person on an incident that happened in high school. I’m sure other kids have had incidents that have happened in high school.”

One person keeping a close eye will be Dr. Richard Lariviere, who last summer became the university’s president.

One of his stated priorities was to figure out a way to raise professors’ salaries, which lag behind national standards, despite increasingly tight state funding.

Lately, his focus has been on sports. Lariviere called the [spate of off-the-field troubles](#) “unacceptable” and acknowledged in a news conference that he pushed out Bellotti, who took a job last month with [ESPN](#). Last week, after The Eugene Register-Guard reported that [Kilkenny had also operated without a contract](#) for more than a year, Lariviere reassigned the university counsel Melinda Grier to the campus law school and announced that her contract would not be renewed when it expired in 2011.

The moves appear to highlight an acknowledgment of the gap between how the university and the athletic department have been run — one beholden to state lawmakers, the other a seemingly freestanding corporation.

And they raise further questions about the proper balance between athletics and academics here.

“We’ve really reached a tipping point,” said Dr. Steven Ungerleider, a sports psychologist in Eugene. “You have to have this homeostatic balance — you can’t just run athletics as an entity by itself. What I think is important is that the [University of Oregon](#) is a unique place — most alums and most donors want to see a healthy balance. They want to see a school jump up in the academic rankings and not just see a top-five football team. We are really at a

crossroads. I would hope the new administration would see this as a new opportunity and not a Band-Aid.”