

## Colleges Digging A Little Deeper

### Screening Incoming Athletes An Ongoing Issue

By SHAWN COURCHESNE  
Courant Staff Writer

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Willie Williams became the face of all that is wrong with college football recruiting when the University of Miami admitted him into the school in 2004 despite a rap sheet that included 11 arrests.

He left there after the 2005 season, had to sit out a season by NCAA rules, but is expected to begin playing in the Big East at Louisville in the fall.

No need for Louisville to do a background check on Williams. His criminal history was well-publicized.

But in a time when highly publicized arrests of college football players at top-level institutions have become an occurrence seemingly as regular as the release of the weekly polls, administrators are faced with the challenge of knowing who they're letting in their doors.

At most schools, that responsibility falls to the coaches who spend time with the kids, parents and high school coaches. But some schools are taking things a step further.

Schools such as Oklahoma, Kansas, Kansas State and Baylor have started doing criminal background checks on different segments of incoming student athletes.

At Oklahoma, all incoming student athletes have criminal background checks. Kansas and Baylor screen all student athletes transferring from another school, and Kansas State screens in selected cases.

"It's an effort on our part to get as clear a picture as we can on individuals we're bringing on campus," Oklahoma associate athletic director Kenny Mossman said.

At UConn, it's a step athletic director Jeff Hathaway isn't quite ready to take.

"At this point, I think all my colleagues throughout the country have thought about this issue and are wrestling with the question of how do you find out the most accurate information on incoming students [whether] they're freshmen or transfers or whatever it might be," Hathaway said. "I think because of a variety of circumstances involving sealed records and the cost of this, people have not delved into this real deeply at this time. But it's a topic that, any time athletic administrators come together to review current issues, this is one that does come up."

### Taking It The Next Step

Oklahoma's system for background checks has been in place for three years. The school uses the resources available through the Oklahoma University police department to check the criminal histories of incoming athletes.

"We're not hiring private investigators," Mossman said. "We haven't launched a real high-dollar program. It's a very sensible approach using the means that are available to us. I don't think that any system is foolproof. If you wanted to engage a private investigator on an individual, if you had those kinds of resources, you could probably get a little more in-depth look. We're just trying to use publicly available documents that will provide us with a clearer picture of the people that we're recruiting."

Kansas and Kansas State use a company called Validity Screening Solutions of Overland Park, Kan., to conduct their checks.

Kristin Smith, manager of client services for the academics division at Validity Screening, said Kansas and Kansas State are the only schools for which they handle screenings of athletes, but that they've had inquiries about the service from a

handful of others.

Smith said the service offered to Kansas and Kansas State costs about \$40 per student screened.

"What we do for each is we run a social security number trace on each applicant and that gives us an address history of everywhere that they've resided," Smith said. "We'll take each of those jurisdictions and we'll send live criminal researchers into each jurisdiction to search out felonies and misdemeanors. So whether a student has lived in one place or 10 places, they get a person searching in each of those areas. We also do a multistate sex offender registry search for each case."

Kansas instituted its policy for checks Jan. 1. Kansas State has been doing the checks for a year.

Baylor uses school employees to conduct searches through public means.

Athletic director Ian McCaw said a task force formed in the wake of a basketball team scandal recommended the school institute the screenings. In the 2003 incident, junior Patrick Dennehy, a transfer from the University of New Mexico, was shot and killed by teammate Carlton Dotson, a transfer from Paris (Texas) Junior College. Dotson pleaded guilty to the murder in 2005 and was sentenced to 35 years in prison.

McCaw said they have yet to deny an incoming transfer on the basis of criminal discoveries.

"We have uncovered some issues that have been raised," McCaw said. "But we have not denied anyone admission based on what we've found."

### **Checks And Balances**

UConn football coach Randy Edsall believes traditional measures can yield a lot of information.

"The thing that we try to do, we'll Google their names and use the Internet and we'll have guys take a look at [myspace.com] and see if there's anything on there that you can pick up," Edsall said. "The one thing is, maybe I might be a little naïve, but I would hope that by us going in and talking to a coach and asking a coach or guidance counselor or the people that we deal with that if there's anything we need to know, they would be up front and honest with us. The one thing is, if all of a sudden you get somebody from a place and maybe something hasn't been disclosed and you find out about it later, that could be a situation where that particular school or that particular coach loses their reputation with the school recruiting their student.

"Maybe there will come a day that the NCAA will mandate it or maybe they'll do it themselves. But if you're hiring a company, you're talking about added expenses and all the NCAA is talking about all the time is cost containment. We're here trying to do as much due diligence with the things that we have available to us to try to find out the character of every young man we look at."

The only Big East football school that does any sort of formal criminal checks is South Florida, which conducts screenings on selected recruits.

Administrators from Oklahoma, Kansas and Kansas State said what is uncovered by the checks doesn't always constitute grounds for not admitting a student.

"When something arises we have a committee that is set up to include the faculty athletics representative, senior associate AD, the head coach and possibly a couple of others depending upon the discretion of the athletic director," Jim Marchiony, associate athletic director at Kansas, said. "They will discuss the report and any considerations involved and make a decision."

None of the administrators at Oklahoma, Kansas, Kansas State and Baylor has had issues with athletes protesting or questioning the legal issues of the checks. Mossman said that, to his knowledge, there have been no complaints of privacy invasions from incoming athletes being screened or their parents.

"The response that we've had has been largely, I would say, neutral," Mossman said. "The one thing that I have heard is that there is appreciation by parents because I think they recognize that their son or daughter is going to be on the same campus with these people and I think there's at least some peace of mind for the parents to know that we've taken the steps to make it as safe as possible."

University of Hartford president Walter Harrison, the NCAA's chairman of academic performance, said he is on the fence when it comes to conducting checks.

"It's sobering that the world has come to this," Harrison said. "On the one hand I think schools should reasonably assure themselves that the student athletes they're admitting do not have criminal records, or if they do have criminal records, that they've disclosed them. Of course people make mistakes and that's what the criminal justice system is for. Lots of young people have made mistakes and corrected them and gone on to live very productive lives. So I presume the real issue is whether somebody hasn't disclosed a criminal past.

"On the other hand, part of me says that I don't know why you would treat student athletes different than all students. I don't know of any university that does background checks on all the students they admit, so what's the difference? I suppose the difference is that student athletes are more visible, but I'm not sure that's enough justification."

Mossman said the justification lies in protecting the reputations of athletic departments, which at most Division I schools come under constant media scrutiny and create huge revenue streams.

"There's just a tremendous amount of scrutiny that befalls student athletes that you don't see in other areas of the campus," Mossman said. "As much as we all love the marching band, if one of their members is arrested for a DUI, it's highly unlikely that there's going to be any sort of negative publicity generated in the newspapers. With the added scrutiny of the public at large on athletes, so comes the added scrutiny in the recruiting process. It makes sense for us to head off as many of those problems as we possibly can."

Contact Shawn Courchesne at [scourchesne@courant.com](mailto:scourchesne@courant.com).

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