

Colleges Perspective

A tragedy followed by a debacle: Maryland football to kick off without answers

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What we know is the University of Maryland's football team will open its season against Texas on Saturday. We know that interim coach Matt Canada will choose either Kasim Hill or Tyrrell Pigrome to be his quarterback. We know they'll kick off just after noon at FedEx Field.

From there, who knows?

"We're excited that it's finally game week," Canada said Tuesday.

When Canada spoke those words, he was four days from overseeing that kickoff against Texas, 92 days since he and other Terrapins coaches witnessed a workout at which a 19-year-old lineman named Jordan McNair collapsed, and 77 days removed from the day McNair died.

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It's a shame the young men who will pull on Maryland helmets and Maryland jerseys Saturday have to deal with this. But here they are, in a cesspool of uncertainty, with the people who lead them and are entrusted with their health and safety the subject of two separate investigations. The first is looking into what precisely happened the day McNair collapsed, and we already know the university made grave errors that cost McNair his life. The second inquiry is into the culture of a program in which such a tragedy could occur. Results from the first are due on or about Sept. 15. Results from the second are due . . . well, we don't know.

My gosh, there's so much we don't know. Canada is in an impossible spot — standing in for Coach DJ Durkin, who is on administrative leave while this mess is ostensibly sorted out. Canada said Tuesday he and the assistant coaches who were at the May 29 workout had met with both investigators from Walters Inc., a consulting firm that specializes in athletic training and is conducting the first inquiry, as well as people from the eight-member panel looking into the environment Durkin and his assistants created.

About that second group: The board of regents of the University System of Maryland hijacked both its formation and its oversight from University of Maryland-College Park President Wallace D. Loh last week. That was exactly the right thing to do, because Loh was president when Durkin was hired, was president when former athletic director Kevin Anderson went on leave under circumstances that are only now beginning to come to light, was president when Damon Evans was named interim athletic director, and then guided Evans through the process of becoming the permanent AD — at a cool \$720,000 annual salary, before bonuses. Loh can't be involved, not in the least, because every single misstep here happened on his watch under the direction of people he hired.

So here's what the board of regents did: It took the three members Loh named — two retired judges and an attorney — and added five more: sportscaster Bonnie Bernstein, former Gov. Robert Ehrlich, former U.S. congressman and Terrapins basketball star Tom McMillen, a noted professor of orthopedics and sports medicine, and Doug Williams, the Super Bowl-winning quarterback who once coached Grambling football and now serves as senior vice president of player personnel for the Washington Redskins.

Nice, balanced group, huh? How the heck are they going to get together and have the time to dig into this? Have they met? Will they meet?

“The commission is completely independent and does not report its day-to-day activities or plans to the University System of Maryland,” a spokesman for the university system wrote Tuesday. “As a result, we have no information to share regarding its operations.”

Oookaaaay, then. Let's take Williams's involvement. It's hard to say whether that reflects more poorly on Maryland or the Redskins. If this panel is digging into Durkin's program this week — and please,

please let them be doing just that, because anything else would be unconscionable — then how could Williams possibly have time to help the cause?

Williams has a more-than-full-time job with an NFL team entering a critical season, and he can't possibly contribute much time or bandwidth to a serious investigation at a school located 40 miles — and infinity hours, given Beltway traffic — from his office at Redskins Park.

A Redskins spokesman said Tuesday the team couldn't answer how much time Williams had put into the Maryland investigation, or how much he expected to. Alrighty, then.

This is the game-week environment that Canada must oversee. Waiting for kickoff is one thing, but it's so secondary as to not matter. Waiting for the results of these investigations is what matters.

About that, though: Be careful what you wish for. The Big Ten is the conference of preseason football controversy this summer. The other major investigation came, of course, at Ohio State, where Coach Urban Meyer had kept on staff — for years — an assistant coach who he knew had been accused of domestic abuse by his ex-wife and, for good measure, engaged in sketchy professional behavior.

There are no correlations between what happened at Maryland, where a player died, and what happened at Ohio State, where the most powerful man on campus harbored a reckless assistant out of loyalty. But it says here that Ohio State got exactly what it wanted from its investigation: enough to take some sort of faux moral high ground and suspend Meyer for three games, but not enough to fire the coach who has led the Buckeyes to a national championship and a 73-8 record over six years.

What the public didn't get: real answers. The report issued by the two "independent" investigators was released *after* Meyer faced reporters last week. Among the findings included: Meyer and an assistant discussed deleting text messages from Meyer's phone so journalists couldn't unearth them. Among the questions Meyer has not yet answered: Did you, in fact, delete texts, and why?

The point being that the people of Maryland should expect better. Not from Durkin, who should be fired. Not from Evans, who shamelessly tried to distance himself from the situation by calling himself the "new" athletic director at a news conference earlier this month, willfully ignoring the fact that he had been the top administrator in the department for 10 months — during both McNair's collapse and, later, his death.

It's worth remembering that the committee formed first by Loh and then enhanced by the board of regents is, in theory, asking questions about a program Evans has overseen directly since his arrival in College Park in 2014. Is Doug Williams, or Bob Ehrlich, or Bonnie Bernstein — or the entire lot — sitting down with him this week and, over hours, probing about what Evans had seen in Durkin's practices and workouts? Evans eventually found out enough, in the wake of an ESPN report bolstered by confirmation

in other outlets, that he ousted strength coach Rick Court, who resigned. The answers are there, somewhere.

Meanwhile, in the heat of Tuesday afternoon, the Terrapins practiced.

“Like everybody else in the country,” Canada said, “we’re excited for Saturday afternoon to get here.”

Like nobody else in the country, the result of that game Saturday afternoon will say little about the direction of the program. Maryland’s questions are far more serious than who will take the first snap from center. They include the most basic: How was Jordan McNair allowed to die? But they also include questions about the dual investigations and their level of transparency, both now and when the results are announced, whenever that might be.

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