THE DAILY CLIPS

July 29, 2010

News, commentary, and opinion
compiled by the East Carolina University News Bureau from:

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East Carolina University News Bureau
E-mail to durhamj@ecu.edu  Web site at http://www.news.ecu.edu
252-328-6481
Pirates searching for assistant

By Ken Tysiac
Staff Writer

With preseason football practice scheduled to start Aug. 6, East Carolina suddenly is scrambling to fill a spot on its staff after assistant coach Mark Nelson admitted to breaking NCAA rules and stepped down.

Nelson is resigning after he admitted breaking NCAA rules by evaluating players during offseason workouts that were supposed to be voluntary, school athletic director Terry Holland announced Tuesday.

Nelson was hired in February to serve as defensive coordinator. The school has started an immediate search for an assistant to coach defensive ends, according to ECU sports information director Tom McClellan.

There is a chance the staff will reorganize its responsibilities and have one of the current assistants coordinate the special teams, McClellan said.

In a statement released by the university, Holland said East Carolina’s office of NCAA compliance has been investigating possible violations of an NCAA rule that prohibits coaches from evaluating players during the offseason.

“When a coach observes these normal activities, the NCAA considers the activities to be non-sanctioned, out-of-season practice,” Holland said in the statement.

McClellan said that by NCAA rule, only coaches on the strength and conditioning staff can watch the players train during the offseason. Once players stop lifting weights and running and break out the footballs to run drills, though, even the strength coaches can’t watch.

For safety reasons, medical personnel on the athletic training staff are allowed to monitor offseason workouts in their entirety. But assistant coaches such as Nelson are not allowed to watch offseason drills.

Holland said McNeill called in Nelson to discuss the possible violations.

According to Holland, Nelson admitted violations that Holland said are likely to be ruled “secondary” rather than “major” after the school’s formal report is filed with the NCAA.

“Coach Nelson and coach McNeill agreed that these violations would be a distraction to the team at this critical time of the year, and coach Nelson offered to step down from his position,” Holland said. “His offer to step down was accepted by coach McNeill pending negotiation of a severance agreement with the athletic administration and the university.”

Holland said the East Carolina compliance office will file a formal report and cooperate fully with the NCAA.

Nelson served as defensive coordinator and linebackers coach last season for the Canadian Football League’s Winnipeg Blue Bombers.

He has 23 years of combined coaching experience in the professional and college ranks, with coaching stops at schools in the SEC, Big 12, Big East and Conference USA.
Pirates react quickly to violation
By Nathan Summers
The Daily Reflector
Wednesday, July 28, 2010

College football has made nationwide news for the wrong reasons this summer, as the game’s governing body is conducting numerous investigations into the potential misconduct of teams and players.
Despite having its own brush with trouble this week, East Carolina football will likely not see any further repercussions for its violation other than joining an extremely large fraternity.
East Carolina head coach Ruffin McNeill accepted the resignation of defensive ends and special teams coach Mark Nelson on Tuesday night, just hours after McNeill learned his staff member had committed a secondary violation of NCAA rules.
Nelson was present during a players-only offseason workout recently and on Tuesday afternoon offered his resignation to McNeill.
Just more than a week in advance of the open of August camp and in the midst of a summer in which programs like the universities of North Carolina and Southern California are already embroiled in NCAA investigations, McNeill admitted Wednesday he was surprised to be faced with his own NCAA violation, but glad ECU addressed the problem immediately.
“With everything going on across the country — (UNC coach) Butch (Davis) and I spoke a week ago — and with everything going on at Southern Cal, my radar has been up, my dukes have been up,” McNeill said in his office Wednesday. “I’d like to be able to put them down here at home.” Chances are, McNeill can put his dukes down, at least as far as worrying about major backlash from the incident.
The NCAA does not comment on specific schools or violations, but according to NCAA spokesperson Stacey Osburn, secondary violations are far from uncommon, and are usually the result of single, unplanned cases of poor judgement.
“They are definitely more common than major violations,” Osburn said of secondary violations. “They are things that are isolated or inadvertent. They are mistakes, basically, that provide only a minimal competitive edge.
“Sometimes they happen just because the program is vigilant about watching for them, so if a school doesn’t report any over a long period of time, there is a good chance they aren’t monitoring as closely for them.”
Across the NCAA in 2009, there were 4,107 secondary violations reported, with 2,939 of those coming from Division I programs.
According to Osburn, the NCAA does not conduct investigations into secondary violations, but instead determines an action or a penalty based on the individual infraction.
Although violations can and do occur throughout the calendar year, Osburn said there are definitely peaks in their prevalence.
“I do think it’s something that can happen any time,” she said. “When you look at the type of secondary violation that occurs most commonly, most of them are spread out between a few key areas. In 2009, most of those violations were recruiting violations — when you’re in times that you’re recruiting heavily, or when you’re not supposed to be recruiting.” McNeill is now faced with finding a coach to fill two vital roles and having precious little time to do it.

Still, the coach said dealing with Nelson’s violation up front was better than risking additional problems with the NCAA, and with his team.

“The integrity of our program and East Carolina, it means the world and it is a high priority for me and the staff,” McNeill said, adding that he was in the process of locating Nelson’s replacement. “I expect our players to do the right thing and I demand that our coaches as leaders do the same. We’re moving forward now and moving past it.

“It’s a little difficult this late in the season, but after being in it a long time like I have, you make an adjustment and you improvise and adapt. As a staff we will and as a program we’ll do the same.”

Contact Nathan Summers at nsummers@reflector.com or (252)329-9595.
Ruffin McNeill finds the perfect fit for his first job as a head coach


Steve Irvine -- The Birmingham News

East Carolina head coach Ruffin McNeill

MEMPHIS -- Ruffin McNeill wasn't the perfect fit for the job he wanted.

So the former Texas Tech associate head coach, who auditioned to become Mike Leach's replacement by leading the Red Raiders to a Alamo Bowl win over Michigan State, found the job that fit perfectly.

"It's funny how things work out," McNeill said Sunday in Memphis during his first appearance at Conference USA Media Day as the head coach at East Carolina.

The 51-year-old McNeill not only found his first fulltime head coaching job at East Carolina, he returned home. He is a former defensive back and graduate of East Carolina and a native of Lumberton, N.C., which is about 100 miles from Greenville.

McNeill's father, a retired high school football coach, still lives in Lumberton. He had some health issues this spring.

"I was able to take care of him, get him out of the house and managed to check in on him instead of having to take a flight and rent a car from Texas. There's no price on that," said McNeill, who played for Pat Dye at ECU. "God had a plan and God's plan is bigger than man's plan every time."

McNeill had a plan to become Texas Tech's head coach after Leach was suspended and later fired by the university. It was a tough time for McNeill, who served 10 years under Leach and was good friends with his former boss. But he held the team together and led the Red Raiders to their bowl win. He then campaigned for
Ruffin McNeill finds the perfect fit for his first job as a head coach

a job that eventually went to former Auburn head coach Tommy Tuberville.

Many of the Texas Tech players publicly declared their support for McNeill. He was also a popular choice in the community.

Texas Texas Chancellor Kent Hance told the Lubbock Avalanche Journal after Tuberville was hired that Hance made an informal offer to McNeill to become an assistant athletics director for development.

It would be easy to understand if McNeill were bitter because of what happened at a school where his roles included defensive coordinator, special teams coordinator, linebacker coach and defensive tackle coach during various times of his tenure.

McNeill offers a different tale.

"It was disappointing when it didn't happen," said McNeill. "I have no hard feelings. I think that's hard for people to believe but it's true. I did everything I was supposed to do there and when it didn't happen a lot of people were disappointed. So were we, but I wish Texas Tech well, the kids there well. I think the new staff will do a good job."

He was not worried about finding a job after Tuberville chose not to retain him as the program's defensive coordinator, he said. In fact, he quickly accepted a job on Jim Harbaugh's staff at Stanford. He was preparing for his move to northern California when he received a call from East Carolina, which according to media reports was turned down at least once -- by MTSU head coach Rick Stockstill -- after Skip Holtz left for South Florida.

"When it became available, I said if they're serious, we're serious," said McNeill, whose 24-year tenure as an assistant coach included a stint as the linebacker coach at North Alabama in 1988. "Whether you were the first choice or the second choice or the sixth choice, it didn't matter."

McNeill, who will bring his team to Legion Field on Nov. 11 to play UAB, took over a program that played in four straight bowl games and captured back-to-back Conference USA championships under Holtz. The Pirates did that with defense and a ball-control offense.

McNeill not only brings Leach's offensive approach to Greenville, he brought in former Texas Tech wide receivers coach Lincoln Riley to coordinate the offense.

"He's bringing in an offense that makes the wide receivers happy," said ECU standout wide receiver Dwayne Harris.

McNeill acknowledges the new style was met by some resistance, especially considering the Pirates were successful with the old style. But he said "about 98 percent of the kids were excited about the change."
Now it's his task to continue the program's success, even though the Pirates lost 28 seniors and standout defensive tackle Linval Joseph, who gave up his final season to enter the NFL Draft. And he's doing that while learning about life as a head coach.

"When I was a coordinator, I could lock myself up in a dark room and watch film and maybe do an interview here or there," said McNeill. "Now as a head coach, you have to be a little more available."

"All the outside stuff is important, but the reason I'm here is to coach football."

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Group looks to reestablish sports club
By Tony Castleberry
The Daily Reflector
Wednesday, July 28, 2010

Mick Mixon proved Wednesday that he doesn’t need an audience of thousands to be an effective communicator.

Mixon, the radio play-by-play voice of the Carolina Panthers since 2005, delighted a crowd of about 40 people at a gathering for the Greater Greenville Sports Club (GGSC) in a meeting room at the Greenville Hilton. Mixon, a friend of WTIB-FM general manager Henry Hinton, was listed as the guest speaker at Wednesday’s luncheon, but Mixon referred to the event as more of a “business meeting” since the GGSC is still in its embryonic stage and he was simply serving as someone trying to help the club get on its feet.

“I’ve been to sports clubs all over the Southeast,” said Mixon, who called University of North Carolina football and basketball games with Woody Durham for 16 years before taking the Panthers job. “For Greenville, for eastern North Carolina, not to have a sports club, for you all to have called a timeout on that, seems like some kind of an injustice that I’m happy is being corrected.”

Greenville had a sports club years ago and for several years since its demise, Phil Dixon, an attorney who is the chairman of the GGSC, has been trying to bring it back. Dixon opened the meeting with some serious name-dropping from the old days, but followed that with a nod to the grassroots mentality that needs to exist for such a group to thrive.

“It was a wonderful organization,” Dixon said. “We had Willie Mays speak. Lou Holtz came down. Dean Smith, Jim Valvano, Frank Howard. ... We had great speakers.

“It turned out that some of our best speakers sometimes were actually (local) high school coaches or minor sports personalities and we really had a lot of fun.”

The GGSC is organized by the Greenville-Pitt County Chamber of Commerce and its mission is to "promote athletics as a means of strengthening the local economy and enhancing the overall quality of life.”

The club will host bi-monthly luncheons, like Wednesday’s, that feature guest speakers from all over the sports world, from area high school coaches to nationally-recognized personalities like Mixon. East Carolina football coach Ruffin McNeill is scheduled to address the club at a GGSC kickoff event Aug. 26 in the Murphy Center.
Visit www.GreenvilleNC.org/GGSC for more information on the club.
Contact Tony Castleberry at tcastleberry@reflector.com or (252) 329-9591.
Guest speaker Mick Mixon answers questions from the members of the audience during the first meeting of the Greater Greenville Sports Club at the Greenville Hilton on Wednesday. Mixon is the play-by-play announcer for the Carolina Panthers.
Justin Falls/The Daily Reflector

Greater Greenville Sports Club chairman Phil Dixon.
Justin Falls/The Daily Reflector