Handful of Pirates hit hard by flu

By Nathan Summers
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A widespread case of the flu rocked the East Carolina football team in the days leading up to last Saturday's game at SMU, and continued for some even while in Dallas.

"I know this flu has been hitting a lot of teams across the country, and it's hit us the last two weeks," ECU coach Skip Holtz said.

Sophomore running back Brandon Jackson was stuck in Greenville along with reserve linebacker Austin Haynes, both sick. Five ECU players were pulled off the team bus last Friday, according to Holtz, while a few others, like quarterback Patrick Pinkney and running back Dominique Lindsay, were forced into isolated rooms after arriving in Texas while they tried to prepare to play sick.

"When we got there, there were four players that had developed over a hundred-degree temperature," Holtz said. "So we had to put them in their own rooms ... so it doesn't become something that affects your entire team."

Pinkney was in bed and receiving fluids in Dallas on Friday and Saturday. Although the senior took every snap in the game, Holtz said redshirt freshman Josh Jordan received some extra coaching and encouragement on Friday in case he was called into action for the first time in his career.

The ECU coach said he was hopeful the worst was behind the team in terms of sickness. He said it was unlikely Jackson would return for Monday night's practice, but said he would be coming back this week at some point.

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NCSU sacks head of alumni association

RALEIGH -- N.C. State University's interim chancellor has fired the head of the alumni association, saying the group was struggling financially and its membership had been stagnant for years.

Interim Chancellor James Woodward told the association's board of directors Friday afternoon about his decision to fire Dr. Lennie Barton, an associate vice chancellor.

"It's at risk financially," Woodward said in an interview Monday. "Most of that is not Lennie's fault, but not having a plan to address it is a failure of leadership."

Efforts to reach Barton were unsuccessful. Members of the alumni association's board declined to comment, including some who had written a letter in Barton's support last month when they heard the administration was considering firing him.

NCSU is the state's largest university, with more than 32,000 students. The alumni association's membership has been stable for a few years at about 22,000, Woodward said, even after Barton projected growth to 30,000 by fiscal year 2008-2009. The association has about 1,200 life members. The alumni association at smaller UNC-Chapel Hill, meanwhile, has about 70,000 members and 35,000 life members.

In a memo to Woodward released by the university, Barton wrote that, using a 10-point scale with UNC-Chapel Hill's alumni association at the top, NCSU deserved a 6 but was gaining. He said that NCSU's membership program was just 11 years old, compared to a century for UNC-Chapel Hill's.

Woodward said he was also concerned that the association has been using donations pledged for construction of the new Dorothy and Roy Park Alumni Center for operating expenses. When those pledges are all paid, he said, it's unclear how the association will make up the loss in its budget.

Barton is a former NCSU varsity golfer and has worked for the university for more than 30 years in various capacities. He has held his current post, associate vice chancellor for alumni relations and executive director of the alumni group, since 2003. His salary is $170,000 a year.

Woodward, who was chancellor at UNC-Charlotte for 16 years, called the decision the toughest call on a personnel matter he has ever made.

"Lennie Barton has long served this institution, and he has made some truly notable contributions," he said. "We have been told in so many ways, though, that we need to demand the highest level of performance from this organization."

Letter defended Barton

Some alumni association officials think Barton was fired for other reasons. In a letter obtained by The News & Observer, seven members of the association's board of directors wrote Woodward on Sept. 9 and asked him to reconsider the idea of firing Barton. They wrote that someone had told them Barton
was going to be fired because he hadn't censored a story in the fall edition of the alumni magazine about the Mary Easley scandal to ensure it didn't contain criticism of university leaders.

The story, an edited transcript of a roundtable discussion on the roles of campus culture, university governance and media relations in the scandal, was published recently. Participants include former UNC-system President Bill Friday and former NCSU faculty senate chairman James Martin, who has been a critic of administration behavior.

In the letter, the directors wrote they had been told that negative comments about the university administration by the panelists led the administration to feel that Barton should have anticipated such comments and kept some known university critics off the panel.

"At a time where the public, lawmakers, and alumni are clamoring for more openness, transparency and accountability in the administration of our public universities, we believe, if the above-stated facts are indeed correct, that to punish Dr. Barton for failing to censor voices critical of the University is in direct contravention of the best interest of the university," they wrote.

Barton, they wrote, had performed his duties "in an exemplary fashion." They said that firing Barton without consulting their board would not be consistent with "the spirit and letter" of the relationship between it and the university.

They attached a long list of association accomplishments under Barton, saying that it had raised $8 million for the alumni center and that Barton was personally responsible for raising $3 million of it.

In the letter, the board members noted several times that they had not been given all the facts. It's unclear whether any of them changed their views after Woodward gave them his reasons for the decision to fire Barton. Several who signed the letter declined to comment, saying that it was a personnel matter that they could not legally discuss.

Woodward's decision

Woodward, who is known for speaking frequently about the importance of openness and honesty, responded to questions from The N&O about the claim of censorship and provided e-mail traffic about the magazine story among administration and alumni association officials.

The Easley story, he said, played only a minor role in his decision, by bringing the association's problems to his attention after trustees and Barton's boss, Nevin Kessler, the vice chancellor for university advancement, began questioning the way Barton handled it.

Woodward said he didn't know about the plan for the roundtable until the day before it was held.

The association has a measure of independence from NCSU, and the editor of the magazine listens to suggestions and criticism from the administration on stories but doesn't have to follow them. Woodward said he asked for some relatively minor changes, some of it simply cleaning up numbers, and that some of the changes were made and others weren't.

The editor who handled the story, Rebecca Morphis, didn't return calls. Former faculty senate chairman James Martin said that the story reflected the nature of the conversation and that he had been happy with it.
Woodward said that the association will get an interim director, who will report directly to him.

"We've got to get some resources around this organization, and we need to invest in this organization," Woodward said. "We need to do it, and we need to know that investment is being used efficiently and in a way consistent with the association's stated goals."

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Blue Cross chooses a new president

Bob Greczyn, the top executive of Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina for more than a decade, plans to retire next year.

The state's largest health insurer on Monday promoted Chief Operating Officer J. Bradley Wilson to president. The move, which the Blue Cross board approved over the weekend, puts him in line to succeed Greczyn.

Greczyn, 58, will remain CEO for now. He indicated he will step down in 2010 after running the Chapel Hill-based nonprofit for 11 years.

Wilson, 56, is a well-connected Tar Heel native and lawyer who joined Blue Cross in 1995 after serving as general counsel for former Gov. Jim Hunt. Wilson, who holds degrees from Appalachian State, Wake Forest and Duke universities, is on the UNC system board of governors.

At Blue Cross, he will help run an insurance company with more than 3.7 million members and 4,800 employees. He begins his work as medical costs continue to surge and health-care reform promises to transform the industry.

Wilson also will face critics who say that Blue Cross holds too much power in the state's health insurance market, charges too much for its services and pays its executives too much money.

"The fact that we are a lightning rod doesn't mean we deserve all the lightning that we get," Wilson said. "We do lots of good things for this state. No individual or company is perfect, and we'll work hard in those areas we need to improve."

Blue Cross Chairman Jeff Houpt said a key factor in choosing Wilson was his commitment "to improving the lives of North Carolinians." Wilson was one of several candidates, and board members have been working on a succession plan for more than a year.

"Clearly the organization isn't looking for someone who will take the company in a markedly different direction," said Adam Searing, a frequent critic of Blue Cross as director of the N.C. Health Access Coalition, an arm of the N.C. Justice Center in Raleigh. "I think it will stay the course of acting more like a for-profit while reaping the benefits of being a nonprofit."

Wilson played a key role in Blue Cross' failed attempts to convert to for-profit status in 1998 and 2003, Searing said.

Wilson said trying such a move again "is not on the agenda."

But Wilson will play an important part as Blue Cross officials lobby North Carolina's congressional lawmakers who are considering ways to reform the health system. Blue Cross is especially concerned that potential legislation doesn't significantly raise costs for its members, Wilson said.
"We're engaged, and we're being a positive and productive partner for our members of Congress," he added.

Another challenge will be Blue Cross' large contract with the health plan that covers 667,000 state employees, teachers and retirees. Blue Cross has come under scrutiny for its expenses related to administering claims for the plan, which is struggling with rising costs. The Blue Cross contract runs through 2013, but a rebidding process is scheduled to start in 2011.

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UNC-CH pats itself on the back

CHAPEL HILL -- UNC-Chapel Hill Chancellor Holden Thorp is probably going to do well at his next annual work review.

His boss, UNC system President Erskine Bowles, made that abundantly clear Monday during UNC-CH's University Day ceremony, which celebrated the university's 216th birthday.

"Holden Thorp is doing a phenomenal job," Bowles gushed. "He is, without a doubt, the single best decision I've made in my life."

Since taking the top job in Chapel Hill last summer, Thorp has spent much of his time grappling with the effects of more than $60 million in budget cuts. But while the state's economic struggles and their effect on higher education funding were topics of conversation Monday, they didn't dominate.

Instead, the university used the day's events, as it does each year, to boast of its accomplishments and talk big about its plans.

Some highlights:

Featured speaker Gov. Beverly Perdue lauded the university, more than once suggesting that state government ought to take note of how UNC-CH operates.

She specifically made reference to the project headed by Bain & Co., a consultant hired to analyze the university's administrative and financial structures and suggest cuts or streamlining.

Said Perdue: "Leaders here have focused on how to make the university run more efficiently and effectively -- performing a broad study and putting it into action. And that's exactly what we must do across state government."

Thorp, in accepting Bowles' very public compliment, reminded his boss that word may get back to his wife, Crandall Close Bowles.

"The governor and I think marrying Crandall was the best decision you made," Thorp said. "We can debate that later."

Hannah Gage, who chairs the UNC system's Board of Governors, lauded the university's long history and perseverance during challenging times.

"Imagine trying to piece together a curriculum during the depression, when there was no money and no hope," she said. "But Carolina did."

Alumni honored

Five UNC-CH graduates received distinguished alumni awards. They included Janie McLawhorn Fouke,
a noted biomedical engineer; Santiago Gangotena, who founded the first private university in Ecuador; women's soccer great Mia Hamm; Arkansas newspaper publisher Walter Hussman Jr., and Bill Little, the longtime UNC-CH chemist and administrator who recently died.

Introducing Hamm, Faculty Secretary Joseph Ferrell began his remarks with this: "Charlie Justice. Michael Jordan. Mia Hamm. Think Mount Rushmore."

The crowd roared.

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Art is put in its place

"Bow," a sculpture by William Donnan, is installed by Aaron McDonald, left, and Jim Gallucci. The artwork is one of three by North Carolina sculptors that will be exhibited for a year at City Plaza on Fayetteville Street in downtown Raleigh. The plaza opens Oct. 24 during Raleigh Wide Open 4. Donnan is from Franklinville. Other artists chosen for 'Art on the Plaza' are Hanna Jutras of Gilmoresland and Adam Walls of Red Springs.