

Lombardi got more than slap on wrist

Written by Jim Ecker

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At first blush, it may seem that Tony Lombardi escaped with a fairly light penalty for his transgressions at Cedar Rapids Washington.

The Iowa Board of Educational Examiners charged Lombardi with four ethics violations, yet his only real penalty was sacrificing his coaching license for eight months when he wasn't planning to coach during that time frame anyway.

He also has to pass an ethics course and undergo anger-management counseling, but the penalties could have been more severe. The BoEE could have permanently revoked Lombardi's teaching and coaching license, or it could have suspended his licenses for multiple years.

Instead, he got an eight-month suspension and was not forced to plead guilty to any of the charges, other than acknowledging that he inadvertently disclosed a student-athlete's GPA at a football banquet.

The BoEE could have thrown the book at Lombardi. Instead, they reached a settlement agreement and avoided a public hearing that could have gotten nasty with witnesses called to testify for both sides.

In light of all that, it's easy to say Lombardi got a slap on the wrist and lived to coach another day, but that would be missing the greater message.

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Lombardi's name and reputation have been dragged through the mud. He lost a good job at Washington, where he was a successful coach, and his name will be added to the national clearinghouse database by the National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification.

Lombardi can retrieve his coaching license in August, but he might have considerable trouble landing another job as a head football coach in Iowa or anywhere else. School boards are pretty skittish about who they hire, and Lombardi is now a two-time loser.

Don't forget, Lombardi was fired as the head football coach at Hinsdale Central High School in Illinois prior to getting the Washington job in 2006. He was fired, in part, for using harsh language in front of players and assistant coaches, similar to the charges he faced at Washington.

Lombardi sued the Hinsdale school district and was given a settlement, but the settlement had more to do with "how" he was fired instead of "why" he was fired, apparently because Hinsdale officials did not follow proper procedures.

Lombardi has a brilliant football mind and is a charismatic coach, but he's gotten himself in trouble over and over again. He offended Washington parents, Washington teachers and other Washington coaches. He also insulted a Cedar Rapids Prairie football player after a game, leading to a one-game suspension by the Cedar Rapids school district.

It's a sad case. There's no question about his ability to coach a football team and lead it to victory, sometimes against stiff odds. Many former players speak in glowing terms about Lombardi and treasure their years on his team. Many parents admire him as well.

Lombardi had numerous warnings about his language and some of his behavior, which was out of bounds according to school rules. He chose to ignore those warnings, or perhaps he simply couldn't force himself to bite his tongue at the right times.

The man's reputation has been sullied, perhaps beyond repair. It's a shame, because he has a

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lot to offer young men during their formative years, if only he could have tamed the less attractive parts of his coaching style.

Don't for a minute think he got a slap on the wrist. Tony Lombardi has paid a severe price for what happened during his seven years at Washington, whether everyone wants to acknowledge it or not.