O.U. DRAWS PROBATION

As the result of an NCAA investigation into O.U.'s athletic practices, the University of Oklahoma was placed on 2-year probation. Here are the facts in the case as they are known.

By DAVID BURR, '52ba

SITTING as the high court of collegiate sports, the NCAA Council in session April 26 in Chicago reached a verdict. For certain specified athletic crimes, The University of Oklahoma was found guilty and sentenced to two years of probation.

What were the crimes? The high tribunal set forth the findings as follows:

"Whereas the NCAA Committee on Infractions has investigated alleged violations of NCAA principles, rules and regulations by the University of Oklahoma and reported its finding to the council,

"Whereas the Council has found the University of Oklahoma to have been in violation of Article 6, Section 1 of the by-laws in that University staff members offered prospective student athletes cost-free education beyond the athlete's normal period of eligibility this practice being in direct violation of Article 2, Section 13 (B) of the rules and regulations of the Missouri Valley Intercollegiate Athletic Association in which the University holds membership,

"Whereas the council has found the University of Oklahoma to be in violation of Article 3, Section 1 of the constitution in that it has followed the practice of paying medical expenses for the immediate families of student athletes, specifically the wives and children of such athletes,

"Whereas the council has found the University of Oklahoma to have been in violation of Article 3, Section 4 of the constitution in that University patrons have provided student athletes of the University fringe benefits in the form of clothes, miscellaneous gifts of cash and other gifts of relatively nominal value, and in the case of two athletes paid the charges of their periodic use of a rent-a-car vehicle.

"Now therefore be it resolved that the University of Oklahoma be placed on probation for a period of two years from this date (April 26, 1955), it being understood that the Committee on Infractions shall review the athletic policies and practices at the University prior to the expiration of this probation.

"Be it further resolved that the NCAA wishes to record its appreciation of the excellent cooperation and assistance extended to the Committee on Infractions by the University's executive and athletic administrations during the lengthy processing of this case . . ."

THE UNIVERSITY'S REACTION

As the news broke April 26 for consumption by the press, another release was made available. This one came from President George L. Cross and Athletic Director Bud Wilkinson. The release stated that they saw the NCAA Council's report as a vindication for the Sooner athletic program. They said:

"For years, we have been subject to repeated charges of professionalism. We are proud that this NCAA report failed to show that we were guilty of any of the flagrant recruiting practices named in the original allegations. Although the NCAA, employing its full investigative machinery, quite properly made an exhaustive, year-long investigation, they did not find a single case of fraud or dishonesty on the part of the University or the Touchdown Club.

"Despite extravagant public rumors accusing us of having made lavish advance promises to high school football players that violated Big Seven and NCAA rules, this wasn't shown nor proved.

"We are also pleased with the NCAA's public statement thanking Oklahoma for its complete cooperation with the investigation. Much of the evidence which we freely volunteered was used by the NCAA to find us guilty of their interpretation of the NCAA rules.

"One of the violations contained in the NCAA findings was our financial assistance through a work program for those of our players who had served out their eligibility but had not graduated.

"We have been proudest of all of the fact that our Oklahoma football lettermen are graduating at a 93.1 per cent pace. The primary goal of any University student should be to graduate in

his chosen field and we think that if we do not assist those of our athletes whose grades show they are making normal progress to graduate, then we are exploiting their football talents.

"We also admitted freely that we gave emergency medical assistance to some of the wives and children of our married athletes. We know of no other legal way for a married athlete to obtain this help. Athletes are unfairly handicapped in this regard whereas non-athlete students are not. Because our conference puts a definite ceiling on the amount an athlete may earn, our married athletes are prevented from procuring outside employment to earn these emergency medical expenses, consequently the University felt it would be proper to pay this cost.

"Regarding the NCAA's findings that some of our patrons had 'provided fringe benefits to athletes . . . of a relatively nominal value,' the evidence showed that when the Big Seven adopted its new eligibility code back in 1951, Mr. Wilkinson not only wrote to the Touchdown Club, emphasizing that no member of the club could give any individual aid to any athletes, but he has taken every other precaution to guard against over-zealous patrons bestowing favors upon our athletes. The fact that the NCAA called this aid 'relatively nominal' shows that we have done a good job of controlling this matter.

"It has always been our intention to comply completely with the rules of our conference and the NCAA. We will continue to press for rules changes we believe are needed but, meanwhile we shall take steps immediately to see that our institution complies in every way with the NCAA findings."

ORIGIN OF CASE

So much for the verdict and how it was received by O.U. officials. But the summary of the offenses and the verdict did not tell much of the story. It didn't mention, for example, the complaining party or parties and the evidence upon which the findings were based.

According to the NCAA's Committee on Infractions, the origin of the case dates back to September 1953, when allegations were submitted to the NCAA Executive Director that the activities of the Touchdown Club were in violation of NCAA requirements applying to recruiting and financial aid.

"Subsequently, information was received that University of Oklahoma athletes, particularly football players, were being promised and were receiving cost-free education beyond the athletes' normal period of eligibility; the immediate families of athletes were receiving free medical service provided by the University, and certain University of Oklahoma athletes periodically were the recipients of gifts of clothes and other illicit financial benefits provided by 'sponsors.' "—from NCAA Committee on Infractions report.

The Committee on Infractions voted at its meeting February 20, 1954 to initiate an official inquiry.

The investigation included correspondence from various parties, newspaper reports, reports by a special NCAA representative, a bulky document prepared and supplied by the University of Oklahoma covering its athletic practices, and a trip to the Norman campus by a special investigating committee.

On two of the major points of conflict—payment of medical expenses for athletes' wives and children, and assistance for athletes to complete degrees beyond period of athletic eligibility —the University readily provided the information that served as evidence. For third finding, "that University patrons have provided student athletes of the University fringe benefits . . . of nominal value," the evidence was secured through official reports and as a result of testimony of witnesses before the investigating committee.

The complaining party or parties were never identified.

ROOM FOR SPECULATION

The report raised some interesting questions for Oklahoma partisans.

1) Why did the NCAA slap Oklahoma with a 2-year probation on the basis of the evidence?

2) Does the University have the obligation to police her fans in order to restrain them from giving gifts to the athletes?

3) What effect does the probation ruling have on Oklahoma's athletic program?

The first question is of course impossible to answer beyond speculation. What thoughts occupied the minds of the NCAA Policy Council will have to remain theirs. Perhaps the Council members thought the punishment fitted the crime.

Oklahomans can be excused if they do not believe so.

John Cronley, sports editor of the *Daily Oklahoman,* summed up the reaction of a good many Oklahomans thusly: "The point that many Sooners are resenting in connection with the probationary period slapped on O.U. is this: If the National Collegiate Athletic Association had no major charges to press, then why dabble in those minor ones and expose the school to unfavorable publicity? . . .

"It was sort of like arresting a guy for spitting on the sidewalk or smoking in a bus. . ."

The second question is an excellent one. However difficult it may be to keep fans from becoming generous, the University has an obligation to handle the job. The University recognized the responsibility long before the NCAA investigation. The fact that the investigators unearthed "gifts of relatively nominal value" speaks well for the policing that has been conducted and will continue.

The third question is a little easier to answer. Some of the effects were spelled out. In the first place O.U. can attend the Orange Bowl if they win the conference title. The NCAA Council specifically stated that the probation would not keep Sooner athletic teams from competing. The major effect will be the pressure that the O.U. athletic department will feel for two years, and the reflection any disciplinary action would have upon the University.

WHAT PROBATION MEANS

What the probation ruling means was spelled out by NCAA President C. P. Houston when he said:

"The probation places the institution in jeopardy and the University must immediately correct all procedures which violate NCAA requirements. In event such action is not taken, I feel certain the Council would recommend expulsion to the Association's annual convention."

NCAA Executive Director Walter Byers also added an explanation:

"The probation is a notice that the University's athletics are under surveillance and one more mistake implies serious trouble. Probation is a penalty in that no school wants the publicity of being put on probation, and all that have been put on fight to get off."

That's the story of the NCAA's decision as the Council met in a trial session in Chicago, April 26. The University has stated it will bring its athletic program into line.

And that should be the end of the affair.

Wilkinson and Co. can be excused, if during the next two years, they have the feeling that an unfriendly stranger is reading the Sooner newspaper over their shoulders.