

Byrne brings high profile attitude to Athletic Department in trouble

Athletic Director faces tough choices for funding problems in coming year

By Paul Morgan
Emerald Reporter

Many things have changed for the Oregon Athletic Department since Bill Byrne became Athletic Director in 1984.

Along the rim of Autzen Stadium one can see sky suites and a new press facility. The recent \$1.9 million renovations at Hayward Field have lifted Eugene and the University out of the dark ages in track and field.

In what formerly was a section of gravel parking lot outside Autzen Stadium, now stands probably the largest accomplishment in Byrne's tenure - The Len Cassanova Athletic Center.

Phase II was completed this summer and has provided complete facilities for weight training, sports medicine, and new locker room and equipment facilities to replace inadequate rooms in Autzen.

All are symbols of a new, high profile attitude in the Athletic Department. And Byrne has done most of it without help from the state.

Besides bringing new facilities to reality, Byrne has also succeeded in attracting attention to the issue of athletics funding.

In much of this interview, the 44-year-old Boston, Mass., native laments the lack of state funding for the non-revenue athletic programs at Oregon, and how the absence of funding has put the Athletic Department in a very tight situation.

ODE: Last spring, the Oregon State Board of Higher Education voted to raise the enrollment caps at the state universities. How will that decision benefit your department and how do you feel about it?

BYRNE: I understand we are going to receive about \$600,000 worth of tuition waivers from that, but I haven't seen any money yet. That's what I understand and I'm thrilled about it. Our actual cost of tuition is

more than that, but any time you can get some relief it is a terrific help.

As far as the rest of the impact it has, I'm sorry that the faculty has a few more students to teach, and I'm sorry it was the only alternative the state felt it had. It is a short term solution, and one that I hope the legislature will address in the very near future.

ODE: How do you think the Legislature should address it?

BYRNE: I think they should use tax dollars to fund collegiate athletics, just like every other state in America.

There was a proposal to fund women's athletics in 1979 and the Legislature killed it... State Rep. Vera Katz to be specific. And my hope is they will realize they made a mistake, and that, in particular, young women deserve the same opportunities as young men. So we are trying to make a case.

On the other hand we did a good job making a case for ourselves with Ballot Measure 5, because at least then we got some relief with the Sports Action Lottery, even though we haven't seen any of the money. At least the Legislature is aware of the need, and that's why we think we have a better chance this time around.

ODE: Do you think a successful football program will help out the bid to the Legislature?

BYRNE: Actually, it may work in just the opposite, in that some people may think we are trying to buy our way into the Rose Bowl. I think that was the term Katz used last time. And I know that people, when you read letters to the editor, think that all of this money is going to the football and men's basketball teams. But in reality those teams generate a lot more money than we spend on them. Where the money is really going is the 12 non-revenue sports.

ODE: How do you counter the argument between funding athletics or academics?



Bill Byrne

BYRNE: I certainly wouldn't want to say that we are as important as cancer research, or even curing the common cold - because we are not. What we offer is a well run, well managed program that represents the University well and offers a different window for outsiders to view the institution.

If people would rally around a chemistry class the way they rally around the football team, there probably wouldn't be any need for a football team. But they don't. So we provide one of the best public relations vehicles the school has. I couch that by saying it has to be well run and well managed. If we were causing embarrassment like they were at Southern Methodist University, or if we had the same kind of ongoing problems like they have at Kentucky or Oklahoma, then I probably wouldn't be out beating the bushes the way I am.

But we have done a good job, and have done it the right way. Somebody has to make the point that we can't continue to have football patrons subsidize track and field. The success of the women's volleyball team shouldn't rest completely on how the men's basketball team does, but that is what is happening now.

ODE: Last year you had to do some heavy lobbying to get the Ducks into the Independence

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