

College Athletics

UNC set to move past academic probe, not celebrating ruling

By AARON BEARD
Associated Press

North Carolina can move forward, closing one of the most embarrassing chapters in the school's history now that the long-running NCAA academic case has ended with UNC facing no penalty.

Still, even with what had to be the best possible outcome — a weight being lifted that has loomed over the Chapel Hill campus for years — school officials greeted the news more with cautious relief than exuberance.

"This isn't a time of celebration," chancellor Carol Folt said Friday in a conference call with reporters.

The NCAA said an infractions committee panel determined it "could not conclude" there were academic violations by the school in the scandal focused on irregular courses featuring significant athlete enrollments.

The school had faced five serious charges — including lack of institutional control — and the possibility of major sanctions such as postseason bans or vacated wins and championships. Yet the case full of starts, stops and twice-rewritten charges reached a best-case-

scenario conclusion with the panel's Friday report.

"I think it's important to understand the panel was in no way supporting what happened," said Southeastern Conference Commissioner Greg Sankey, the panel's chief hearing officer. "What happened was troubling. And I think that's been acknowledged by many different parties. But the panel applied the membership's bylaws to the fact.

"Albeit at times positions shifted and we were skeptical of positions taken, the panel couldn't conclude violations. That's reality."

Ultimately, the panel said it found only two violations: a failure-to-cooperate charge against two people tied to the problem courses in the formerly named African and Afro-American Studies (AFAM) department.

Former AFAM chairman Julius Nyang'oro faces a five-year show-cause penalty through 2022 in what amounts to the sole penalty imposed in the case. Nyang'oro had refused to interview with NCAA investigators after the case was reopened in 2014.

The other person, retired AFAM office administrator Deborah Crowder, initially

refused interviews but reconsidered and interviewed with NCAA investigators in May as well as attended the school's hearing with the panel in August. Crowder — who had enrolled students, distributed assignments and graded many of the papers in the courses — was not punished, but the NCAA said it is making note of her initial lack of cooperation.

Elliot Abrams, Crowder's attorney, said in a statement the ruling affirms her account that she treated all students equally. Bill Thomas, Nyang'oro's attorney, declined to comment to The Associated Press.

North Carolina also faced an improper-benefits charge tied to athlete access to the problem courses, while former professor and academic counselor for women's basketball Jan Boxill was charged with providing improper help on assignments.

"Sometimes the behavior that you're not proud of just doesn't quite fit into a bylaw or a rule or something, and that's what we've been talking about for five years," UNC athletic director Bubba Cunningham said. "We're not proud of the behavior but we didn't think it violated the bylaw, and

today the Committee on Infractions revealed to us that they came to that same conclusion."

Michael L. Buckner, a Florida attorney who has worked on compliance cases, called it "definitely a best-case scenario" for UNC.

"The NCAA is not an academic accreditation agency," Buckner said. "So I appreciate the fact that the committee did not act like a pseudo-accreditation agency in its decision, because they easily could have and tried to go underneath and behind the university's own interpretation of its courses.

"But that's the role of ... the regional accreditation agency that UNC belongs to, not the NCAA."

It's a long-awaited step for both the school and NCAA. Investigators first arrived at UNC more than seven years ago in a football probe that ultimately spawned into this case. Major penalties could have led UNC to appeal or even pursue legal action, potentially stretching a delay-filled case for several years more.

Instead, the case reached resolution roughly eight weeks after UNC appeared before the infractions panel in Nashville, Tennessee,

for a two-day hearing that included Folt, Cunningham, men's basketball coach Roy Williams, football coach Larry Fedora and women's basketball coach Sylvia Hatchell. No coaches were charged with wrongdoing.

The focus was independent study-style AFAM courses that were misidentified as lecture classes but didn't meet. They required a research paper or two for typically high grades.

In a 2014 investigation, former U.S. Justice Department official Kenneth Wainstein estimated more than 3,100 students were affected between 1993 and 2011, with athletes across numerous sports making up roughly half the enrollments.

On a conference call, Sankey said it was "more likely than not" that athletes received fraudulent credit and that counselors used courses to help maintain eligibility, but the organization's bylaws leave it to the schools themselves to determine academic fraud. He said the panel could not use "those strong possibilities" to determine whether violations occurred as UNC maintained the courses were legitimate — though easy — and benefitted non-athlete students, too.

After sanctioning the football program in March 2012 in the original case, the NCAA reopened an investigation in summer 2014, filed charges in May 2015, revised them in April 2016 and again in December.

UNC had challenged the NCAA's jurisdiction, saying its accreditation agency — which sanctioned the school with a year of probation — was the proper authority and that the NCAA was overreaching in what should be an academic matter.

UNC has argued non-athletes had access to the courses and athletes didn't receive special treatment. It also challenged Wainstein's estimate of athlete enrollments, saying Wainstein counted athletes who were no longer team members and putting the figure at less than 30 percent.

Sankey said the school successfully challenged elements of the Wainstein report, noting there were "factual inaccuracies" that led the panel to discount some of Wainstein's findings. Sankey also said the panel would report its findings to the accreditation agency "so that it is aware of the NCAA's final decision and North Carolina's updated positions."

Auto Racing

Ford teams head to Talladega aiming for restrictor plate race sweep

By JENNA FRYER
Associated Press

TALLADEGA, Ala. — Ricky Stenhouse Jr. was all over the scoreboard at Charlotte Motor Speedway. His Roush-Fenway Racing team worked all day to salvage a strong finish in the opening race of the second round of NASCAR's playoffs, and a speeding penalty was threatening to ruin the chance.

Stenhouse had one restart to save his day Sunday, and he picked off about six drivers to squeak out a 13th-place finish.

His reward? Well, Stenhouse is still last in the playoff standings. But the race this weekend is at Talladega Superspeedway and Stenhouse is probably the only driver looking forward to Sunday's critical race.

Stenhouse scored his first career Cup victory at Talladega in May, and followed it with another win in July at Daytona. He's won the last two restrictor-plate races of the season, and figures his

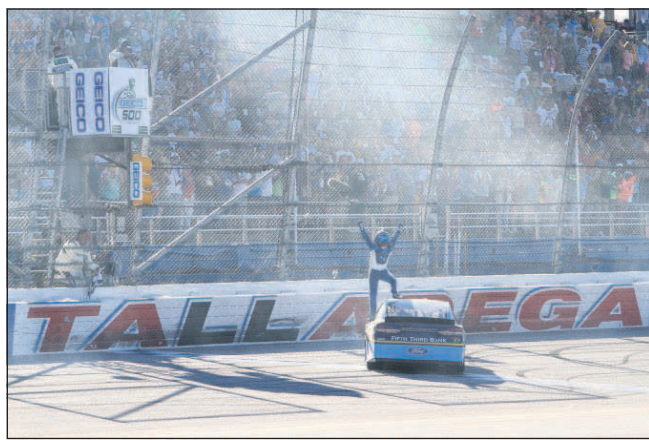
best shot at making it into the third round of the playoffs is by making it 3 for 3 to land an automatic berth.

"I know we're going to have a fast car. I'm not really worried about the speed in our car," said Stenhouse, who is in the playoffs for the first time. "The biggest thing for me is you've got to have these things play out exactly right. I feel like the last two played out really well for us. I feel like we're capable of doing it, but I'm definitely just not counting on it."

Nope, Stenhouse has to have a backup strategy because there are so many variables in a plate race. It takes luck, skill, precision and being in the right place at the right time.

Talladega for the first three years of this playoff format was an elimination race, but it was moved this season to the middle of the second round. It's placement in the playoffs takes the pressure off of Stenhouse to win or else.

If he can't win the race,



AP Photo/Ron Sanders, File
In this May 7, 2017, file photo, Ricky Stenhouse Jr. (17) celebrates at the start/finish line after winning a Monster Cup series race at Talladega Superspeedway.

he'll take what he can get in stage points. Although he's last right now in the 12-driver field, Stenhouse is just 10 points behind Jamie McMurray at the cutoff line.

"If I can win two stages and get 20 points, I could vault ourselves ahead of the cutoff line," Stenhouse said. "I think you're going to see at least 10 of us racing really hard for that."

And for the first time

in these playoffs, the Ford drivers might have a fighting chance.

Toyota drivers Martin Truex Jr. and Kyle Busch have combined to win the first four races of the playoffs, and Truex's win at Charlotte moved him into the third round of the playoffs. That victory was a relief for Truex, who was eliminated from the playoffs a year ago at Talladega after an engine

failure. An accident during the spring race here led to a 35th-place finish.

"There are so many unknowns at Talladega, and you can run up front all day long and finish 25th," said Truex. "You can run up front and run 20 laps and get destroyed. You just never know. There is so much out of your control. To go there and not have to worry about all those things is definitely a good feeling."

In Friday's first practice, Ford drivers took the first nine spots on the speed chart; in the fastest 10-lap averages, five Ford drivers led the charge. In the second practice, the Chevrolets picked up some speed and Kasey Kahne and Dale Earnhardt Jr. went 1-2 to lead their Hendrick Motorsports Chevys to the top of the board.

But, considering Kurt Busch won the Daytona 500 in a Ford, the Doug Yates-powered blue ovals will be trying to give the manufacturer and its engine

builder a season sweep.

"We work hard at making sure we work with other Ford drivers," Stenhouse said. "I think Doug's engine package fits these race track really well. We work hard on our cars. I think a lot of the crew chiefs on the Ford cars really have always taken a liking to speedways and take pride in it and really pay attention to all the small details,

"And then we always meet on the weekend. All the Ford drivers get together and figure out a game plan of what we're going to do and how we're going to work together and make sure that one of us succeed."

NASCAR Monster Energy Cup Series
Alabama 500 at Talladega
Race Sunday, 11 a.m. (TV: NBC)
Playoff Standings
Through Oct. 5

Driver	Points behind
1. Martin Truex Jr.*	-
2. Kyle Larson	-34
3. Kevin Harvick	-37
4. Chase Elliott	-47
5. Denny Hamlin	-50
6. Kyle Busch	-51
7. Jimmie Johnson	-55
8. Jamie McMurray	-62
9. Matt Kenseth	-63
10. Brad Keselowski	-64
11. Ryan Blaney	-67
12. Ricky Stenhouse Jr.	-72

*clinched spot to next round

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