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## SPORTS

# Urban Meyer and the God Complex in College Sports

With another university entangled in controversy, a call to humanize the leaders in charge



Ohio State head coach Urban Meyer acknowledges the fans after winning the Cotton Bowl on Dec. 30, 2017. PHOTO: SCOTT STUART/ZUMA PRESS



By Jason Gay

Updated Aug. 2, 2018 4:47 p.m. ET

Urban Meyer is suspended from Ohio State. Yes: the university says it has placed its head football coach on “paid administrative leave,” and surely there are crucial bureaucratic differences between *we’re putting you on leave* and *we’re suspending you from work*, but let’s not argue the impact. Meyer—one of the most celebrated coaches in college sports—is officially, stunningly, on ice.

The issue is whether or not Meyer protected an assistant coach, Zach Smith, after domestic violence allegations were made against Smith. Meyer dismissed Smith last month after Smith’s ex-wife, Courtney Smith, obtained an order of protection against the former Buckeyes assistant coach. In the aftermath of the firing, Meyer admitted he’d known of a prior domestic violence allegation involving Smith and his former spouse from 2009, when Smith worked for Meyer at the University of Florida, but he said he’d been unaware of later allegations against Smith from 2015.

Now Meyer’s account is under scrutiny. Former ESPN college football reporter Brett McMurphy reported Wednesday on a series of alleged texts and photos dating back to 2015 between Courtney Smith and Meyer’s spouse, Shelley, that detailed an alleged episode of

violence. These new allegations—plus an interview of Courtney Smith by the digital sports outlet Stadium—challenge Meyer’s claim that he did not know about any of the 2015 allegations. It also raises the question as to whether Meyer failed to appropriately respond and report the case to school officials.

It’s now on Ohio State to determine whether Meyer appropriately handled the matter, or knew about it at all. By Wednesday evening, at least one betting house was tackily predicting he’d be fired. Assistant Ryan Day will handle coaching duties in the meantime.

There’s a lot that needs to be sorted out here, and Meyer has yet to be heard from, other than a statement saying he looked forward “to the resolution of this matter.” But whatever happens, this case is yet another reminder of a continued cultural blind spot: we spend far too much time deifying college sports coaches.

Meyer’s spent a generation being presented as a towering figure in modern college football, practically a living statue. For years, both the media and the college football ecosystem have lionized his intensity, his work ethic, his meticulousness, his devotion...I could go on. Meyer is an undoubted success on the field—he’s brought national championships to both Ohio State and the University of Florida—but the characterization is almost mythological. Moments of personal vulnerability—a heart attack while at Florida—are presented as rare human aberrations, like slivers of Kryptonite.

This is not just the story of Urban Meyer. This has been happening forever in big-time college sports. Some of it is structural—players come and go, but the coaches remain, the most victorious of them staying for decades. These living statues become a permanent part of campus, a flesh-and-blood version of a vine-covered library.

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Millions get made. Administrators bow. Alumni get nostalgic. Media partners develop pets, entangled with their subject, selling the fuzzy image, instead of presenting college sports for what it is in 2018: another cutthroat business, where the bottom line

is the bottom line.

Think of how often you’ve watched a college football or basketball game and heard the announcers rhapsodize about the coach as a virtual God. It’s absurd, a ludicrous standard.

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It's also fraught. Over time, the powerful college coach may evolve into his or her own self-policing nation state. They become hard to discipline, much less fire. It's an attractive status for a coach to aspire to, but in the end, it's a disaster for everyone. We've seen it again and again—a literal statue went up and came down at Penn State—and we may see another falling to earth in Columbus. Did another college program believe it knew best?

There are allegations in Courtney Smith's account—her claims in her Stadium interview that her abuse was met with inaction by people close to her—that are truly heartbreaking. But they're painfully familiar. Domestic violence is an epidemic, and yet silence is too often the response. It's not hard to see the conflict between a serious allegation and a workplace incentivized to protect itself. That's not merely a college football thing. That's everywhere.

The good news is that the rest of the culture is showing signs of accelerating past the slow-crawling sports world. I don't want to give us too much credit for evolving—as the past year has shown, in case after case, from the allegations against Harvey Weinstein to the conviction of Larry Nassar, this remains a culture sadly conditioned to doubt or diminish women on matters of abuse and violence. But there's a growing recognition that allegations need to be treated seriously, with urgency, by leaders prepared to act.

That's it. That's the human standard that college sports—and everyone else—needs to live up to. Meanwhile, let's stop building statues.

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