

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

P.O. BOX 750 | MADISON, WI 53701 | (608) 256-8900 | FFRF.ORG

July 17, 2015

Re: Coach Prohm and Knowing Your Rights

Dear Iowa State basketball players:

We are writing regarding concerns that your new head coach, Steve Prohm, may be planning to preach and push his personal religious views upon his players. We have already contacted the University.¹ This letter is intended to inform you of your rights. The Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) is a national non-profit organization that works to protect the separation of state and church. Reports suggest that Coach Prohm will attempt to influence his players to engage in prayer, bible readings, and other religious practices consistent with Coach Prohm's evangelical Christian religion.

We would like to inform you of the rights you have as a student athlete at a public university:

1. You have a right to participate in University athletics free of religious proselytizing, promotion, or bias from school employees.

As a public university employee, Coach Prohm is required to follow the law. Under our First Amendment, public officials and employees may not endorse religion to students under their charge or otherwise encourage students to develop religious beliefs. A coach may not adopt annual bible themes for the team or encourage players to read the bible. Coach Prohm is a coach at a public school, not a preacher.

2. You have the right to be free of University-sponsored religious rituals.

This includes any prayer before games or practices, whether conducted by coaching staff or at the direction of coaching staff. Whether to pray or not is an intensely personal decision protected under our First Amendment as a paramount matter of conscience. A state school may not violate its duty to remain neutral on religious matters by instituting or endorsing religious rituals.

¹ See July 16, 2015 FFRF Letter: <http://ffrf.org/images/IowaStateUniversityBasketballCoach.pdf>

3. You have the right to have different opinions on religious matters than the coaching staff or your teammates.

When it comes to matters of conscience, majority does not rule. Courts have reaffirmed that religious and non-religious minorities have constitutional protections that go beyond the reach of majorities. Your team may include persons from various religious backgrounds, including persons who have no religion. Nationally, about 35% of young adults are non-religious and 44% in total are non-Christian.² School staff must not encourage group prayer, and you always have the right to not participate in prayers organized by students.

4. You do not have to accept excuses for violations of your rights.

Any claims that school-sponsored religious activities are merely “voluntary” or are not “forced” on players do not trump constitutional requirements. Given the authority that coaches have over student athletes, there is coercive pressure to participate in such activities even if supposedly “voluntary.”

5. You have the right to complain to the University about violations.

If you believe that coaching staff members are violating your constitutional rights, you may direct complaints to appropriate University officials, including the Athletic Director and the University President.

Please keep these rights in mind as the upcoming season approaches.

Courtesy of the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

² *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, Pew Research Center (May 12, 2015).