

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

August 18, 2015

Re: Your rights when a coach or chaplain is preaching or promoting religion

Dear student athlete:

We are writing about the influence of religion within the football program at your public university and 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. Based upon our research, your school has allowed coaches to have improper and unconstitutional influence over players' protected and personal decisions related to religion.

Your team may include persons from various religious backgrounds, including students who have no religion. Nationally, about 35% of young adults identify as non-religious and 44% in total are non-Christian.¹

As a student athlete at a public university, you have rights:

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

Your head coach is a coach at a public school, not a preacher. Under our First Amendment, public officials and employees may not endorse religion to students or otherwise encourage students to develop or profess religious beliefs. Because of the unique power dynamic between coaches and student athletes, influence by coaches on religious matters is especially coercive. As public university employees, coaches and athletic staff are required to follow the law.

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

This includes any prayer before team meetings, practices and games, whether conducted by coaching staff or at the direction of coaching staff, including through a school "chaplain." 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 *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, Pew Research Center (May 12, 2015).

3. You have the right to hold opinions on religious matters that are different 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 majorities cannot touch. School staff must not encourage group prayer, and you always have the right to not participate in prayers organized by students. You also have the right not to attend chapel services or any other religious worship services. Keep in mind that your team includes athletes from various religious and non-religious backgrounds. Being a good teammate means allowing others to hold diverse opinions about religion.

4. Your school may not officially or unofficially have a “chaplain”

Athletic departments may not hire or appoint a chaplain or an assistant whose primary job qualifications or duties are religious. As a state institution, public schools are not legally permitted to create religious positions within their programs. People who are not legitimately affiliated with the athletic department, including “volunteer chaplains” associated with campus ministries, may not be given special access to players.

Student athletes who wish to receive religious or spiritual counseling, may, on their own, seek religious programming that is generally available to students. You should consider seeking trained and professional counselors if you are struggling with serious issues.

5. 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 make such activities legal. Given the authority that coaches have over student athletes, there is coercive pressure to participate in such activities even if supposedly “voluntary.”

6. You have the right to complain about violations.

If you believe that coaching staff members are violating your constitutional rights, you may direct complaints to appropriate university officials, including school administrators such as the president of the university. You also may confidentially inform FFRF of violations at your school by emailing athletics@ffrf.org.

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

Sincerely,



Dan Barker & Annie Laurie Gaylor