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VINCE ELLIS

Fair play?

Detroit Cody, Inkster allow teens to continue playing football despite criminal charges

BY VINCE ELLIS • FREE PRESS SPORTS WRITER • SEPTEMBER 21, 2008

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DeShawn Maurice Williams pulled his shoulder pads over his head, the telltale sign of a player who had just put in a couple of hours of hard work on the field.

He took his No. 5 jersey off the pads and settled it back over his body as chants of "C-O-D-Y, Cody High!" filled the air at the Detroit Redford football field Sept 12.

Taking in the scene, Williams, an 18-year-old senior cornerback, flashed a big grin.

He had good reason to smile. His team, the Detroit Cody Comets, had just improved to 3-0 with a 20-7 victory over Detroit Finney.

Later that night, a 16-year-old starting offensive lineman might have experienced the same feeling as Williams after the sophomore's Inkster team thrashed Redford Thurston, 38-0.

But their high school careers could be in jeopardy because of a violent crime to which Williams has pleaded guilty and for which the juvenile is facing a bench trial.

Both players were still on the field for their respective schools this weekend, but that decision has raised an old dilemma: the choice between a second chance and immediate punishment.

While Cody and Inkster have taken the approach of letting the players continue to participate despite their legal issues, other school districts have policies prohibiting such athletes from



ANDRE J. JACKSON/Detroit Free Press

DeShawn Williams, center, who ran track during the summer, plays football for Detroit Cody, but his prep career could be in jeopardy.



Williams is scheduled for sentencing Tuesday at the Frank Murphy Hall of Justice after pleading guilty last month to unarmed robbery. The juvenile faces a bench trial Monday in Wayne County for multiple charges after being accused of taking part in the Dearborn incident with Williams. The Free Press generally does not identify juveniles accused of crimes unless they have been charged as an adult.

Detroit Mercy professor of criminal justice and sociology Daniel Kennedy doesn't see how the schools could allow their athletes to play under these circumstances.

"We're not talking about getting in a fight over a girl or an off-hand remark," Kennedy said Tuesday. "You're talking about robbery, which is a very serious crime because you are putting someone in fear of their life."

In early summer

Dearborn police say Williams, then 17, and the juvenile were hanging out on the evening of June 10 when they decided to go cruising to "try to hit a lick," -- slang for getting some money.

Police say Williams came up from behind a 42-year-old woman as she crossed Schaefer near Hemlock.

He presented a BB handgun, demanded her purse and then attempted to take it.

The victim was holding on when Williams pushed her to the ground and struck her in the head several times.

Police say Williams ran with the purse, which contained multiple credit cards, to a parked car on the northeast corner of Calhoun and Hemlock. He was followed by three witnesses and, as they approached the car, the juvenile got out and lifted his shirt, brandishing what appeared to be a weapon in his waistband.

The teens sped off in the car northbound on Calhoun.

The witnesses got a license plate number and the two were in custody the next afternoon.

Williams, who 11 days earlier won a 200-meter Division 1 state track



ANDRE J. JACKSON/Detroit Free Press

DeShawn Williams, 18, of Detroit Cody, running for the TDP track club, shares a moment with his sister Destiny Foreman, 3, before running the 100-yard dash in the Junior Olympics at Eastern Michigan in July.

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championship and finished second in the 100 meters, was charged with armed robbery and was ordered to wear a tether, which was removed in August. The juvenile was charged with armed robbery, receiving stolen property, marijuana possession and three counts of felonious assault. Police say he had three baggies of marijuana on him when he was apprehended. The felonious assault charges stem from his actions toward the witnesses.

The victim suffered abrasions to her elbows, two scratches on her nose, several bumps and bruises on her forehead and on the back of her head.

Police say Williams and the juvenile gave statements admitting their involvement. Court records indicate neither Williams nor the juvenile have prior criminal records.

Williams declined interview requests.

Longtime relationship

Cody coach Calvin Norman, who has known Williams since he coached him on a youth-league team seven years ago, thinks it's his and the school's duty to embrace students in times of trouble.

"Our role is to be a support system," Norman said. "That's the only thing we can do, and to let him know that we're here for him. And whatever service he may need, whether it's speaking to somebody or trying to find out the reason he got in this situation ... he needs to know we are here for him."

Norman was stunned when he learned of the incident.

"This situation to me is a big shocker," Norman said. "He's been over to my house and ate my wife's cooking.

"He's stayed over at my house. If I ask him to help me clean up, he will do that. He's never been a problem. I still think he's just a great kid."

Cody principal Johnathon Matthews learned of the situation shortly after he took the job July 1.

Since he deemed that Williams, a slender 5-foot-8, wasn't a danger to the student body, he fully supports Norman.

"What this school represents is that safety net for young people," Matthews said. "Though in society it's real easy to cast them out and say this person violated this crime and then they're thrown away.

"At the school level, our sole purpose is to develop young people, so it's not as simple as that."

Newcomer to Inkster

The juvenile transferred to Inkster in January during his freshman year at

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- You're nuts, the real beast is in the east.
- Hey, don't forget the UP.

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Detroit Southwestern.

The burly 6-2 teen with good athleticism quickly found his way into playing time with the Vikings.

Inkster coach Greg Carter learned the seriousness of the charges in late August, but said:

"We're not just here to coach him in football, we're here to make sure they're developing into fine young men. If they have a problem ... whether it's here, at home or on the weekends or whatever and we get knowledge of it, we're going to work with them. We're going to try to let them know and make sure they learn from their mistakes."

Carter was also quick to add that the juvenile has not been convicted of any crimes.

"He's innocent until proven guilty," Carter said. "When we determine what his role is, not only will we make a decision on any of our kids, but I'm sure his parents will and also the authorities. As far as know, it's just an accusation."

The juvenile's youth-league coach had nothing but good things to say about him.

"He's a solid young guy," said William Tandy, who has known the juvenile since the teen was about 8. "He was at practice all the time and he wasn't troublesome.

"If you ask (him) to pick up trash at the football field, he would do it. He was very respectful and responsive."

Other school districts

The Michigan High School Athletic Association only deals with residency and eligibility issues -- leaving conduct issues to local school districts.

The Detroit Public Schools Web site has a student code of conduct document from the 2006-07 school year that focuses on behavior at the school and during school activities, but nothing outside of the school domain.

Director of athletics Lafayette Evans referred questions to DPS spokesman Steve Wasko, who didn't return phone calls.

Inkster chief operations officer Manuel Wilson said Monday that the Inkster school code is similar to the DPS' code in dealing with behavior while in school or during school activities. But he echoed Carter's sentiments.

"If a person has been charged, but not convicted, you are in a gray area," Wilson said. "You don't want to jump the gun and the kid comes out exonerated."

The Flint school district faced a similar situation last football season when former Flint Southwestern coach Gary Lee allowed two teens to play who pleaded guilty to home invasion and had to return to jail after practices and games.

He didn't inform school officials and did not return to Southwestern this season.

However, there are clear policies for this type of situation for the Dearborn and Southfield school districts.

In Dearborn, student-athletes are required to sign a code of conduct contract that emphasizes honesty, respect for self and others, responsibility, integrity, courtesy and citizenship -- at all times.

"Playing athletics is a privilege," Dearborn Public Schools communications coordinator David Mustonen said. "To play at the high school level, you are representing the district.

"We expect all of our students to have these core values, and it's expected from kindergarten to 12th grade."

In the Southfield school district, there are no contracts to sign, but football coach Tim Conley, in his fourth season, went through a similar situation his first year at the helm.

The player was withheld from extracurricular activities until he was later exonerated. In most cases, Conley said, if a Southfield school district student is charged with a crime, they are suspended from school. The students are typically allowed to have school work sent home so they can maintain their studies, but no athletics are allowed until the case is resolved.

The next steps

Williams pleaded guilty to a charge of unarmed robbery Aug. 27. The felony carries a maximum penalty of 15 years in jail.

The juvenile, if convicted, could get probation or detention at a juvenile facility until he turns 19.

Wayne County Prosecutor's Office spokeswoman Maria Miller declined to comment on the cases, citing one of the defendant's juvenile status.

But one thing is certain.

Norman and Carter believe they are in the right.

"The courts have to do what they have to do, but when that's all said and done, we're going to be right here for the young man," Norman said. "It's not our job to throw him away. That's real easy to do."

Contact **VINCE ELLIS** at 313-222-6479 or vellis@freepress.com. Staff writer Naomi R. Patton contributed.

In your voice

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Newest first



dbeejer69 wrote:

I agree with the Dearborn Public Schools communication coordinator, "Playing athletics is a privilege". I also think that if you get kicked out of one school, your afterschool activities should be taken away for good. Afterschool activities is a privilege not a right.

09/22/2008 2:31:48 p.m. EDT

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bigesmom wrote:

You know when you're on the outside looking in you make dumb remarks, until you know exactly what the team is doing about the situation keep you assumptions and ignorant remarks to yourself. No one is condoning any wrong doing, but when you continue to throw away children, whether inner city or suburban you will never get a good result of a man. This story would have never been told if Cody the underdogs of PSL football were not currently 4-0 and working hard to be the best, no one said a word when they were 1-8 last year, no cared what they did. Just for the record this young man doesn't get that much playing time, but I'm gald that the coaching staff is taking a better approach and trying to be a positive in his life when our children live in a world of so much negative. Judge not lest ye be judged.

09/22/2008 11:06:31 a.m. EDT

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genengc wrote:

No wonder Detroit has one of the highest crime rates in the country! It's ok to be a thug as long as you can play ball. Detroiters keep it up, you are well on your way to 3rd world status! To the idiot who claimed coach Rod will bring thugs like that to Michigan...dream on fool! Rod will be gone in a heartbeat if he tries that kind of garbage recruiting at Michigan.

09/21/2008 10:40:50 p.m. EDT

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PIJER wrote:

EDW22

I have a big problem with what you said! Is there a typical white response? No I don't think so. So how could there be a typical black response. That is a racist statement!!! I am black and feel that neither of those kids should be on the field. But I appreciate you letting this site know how I feel about the subject. I do think that they should have some sort of support system to help keep them from doing this again. These kids are young and did something stupid, I'm sure that you didn't in your life time. I coached high school football for seven years(2 years in the DPS) and they would not have played for me. Next time you want to assume that something is a "Typical Black Response" you should just keep your opinion to yourself! It's better to be called a fool and remain silent, then to open your mouth and remove all doubt!

09/21/2008 9:18:53 p.m. EDT

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EDW22 wrote:

Great lesson to teach these two-as long as you can run fast or play football we have a spot for you. Typical black response to thuggery: "Embrace " them. I know some here will resent what I stated but it's true-it seem everyone in the black community wants to fall over themselves to prop up thugs and make excuses for them. What about holding them responsible for what they do? Since when is playing high school sports so important?

09/21/2008 8:13:28 p.m. EDT

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