Show's Influence Limited

By SUSAN LOVING
Staff Writer

Whatever influence Howard Cosell's television show on the death of Virginia Tech football player Robert Vorhies may exert, it apparently will not extend to the university or the grand jury which investigated the young man's death. “Well, you know Howard Cosell,” was the reaction of Montgomery County Commonwealth's Attorney J. Patrick Graybeal to Cosell's program about the New Jersey player who died in his dorm room at Tech Nov. 13 after a football practice and punishment drills. Graybeal said the show brought out no new facts as far as he was concerned and he thought Cosell was “kind of selective” in his choice of material for the show.

ABC sportscaster Cosell ended the show with a plea for an end to the practice of assigning punishment drills. According to Tech President William Lavery, the university does not plan to stop such drills.

According to reports by a special grand jury and the medical examiner, the death of Vorhies could not be linked with the punishment drills the young man ran the afternoon hours before his death.

However, on his show, Cosell emphasized the drills and although he said “we draw no conclusions” about Vorhies’ death, he ended the show with the declaration that “it is time forever more to eliminate punishment drills for every athlete in this nation.”

“I've talked with (football) Coach (Bill) Dooley,” Lavery said. “We're all obviously sensitive and concerned (about the issue)... but I don't think there's been any evidence of a need to change them (the drills).”

In fact, Lavery said he had received some calls from other university administrators indicating the drills Vorhies was forced to run weren't very serious in comparison to those used at other institutions.

Lavery said his reactions to the show were “mixed.” “I didn’t feel that the program was aimed at Virginia Tech,” he said. “It appeared to me, the program was aimed at pinpointing on a national basis the penalty drills.”

If the show was meant to focus on Tech, “it was pretty much slanted in one direction,” Lavery added. “since they didn't show anyone from Virginia Tech.” Lavery, as well as former football coach Jimmy Sharpe and team doctor Richard Bullock were interviewed for the program but did not appear on the air.

Another matter raised by Cosell was the testimony of Robert Wingo, a janitor who saw Vorhies in the field house running the drills. Wingo did not testify before the grand jury but told ABC that he saw Vorhies drop down while doing the bear crawl exercise, and “he (the coach) made him get back up.”

Although the grand jury did not question the janitor because he was sick at the time, it did have a written statement of his testimony for its use, according to Graybeal and grand jury members.

Only two of the seven grand jury members said they had watched the Cosell show, and all of them said they remained satisfied with their report as released in January. That report said that neither the university nor the coaches were guilty of any neglect or wrongdoing in Vorhies death, and that there was no evidence that exercise alone could cause death.

Special grand jury member L.D. Kinzer said he found the show “right interesting,” but that it did not alter his opinion of the jury’s findings as adequate. Vorhies’ father Jerome has vowed to continue to investigate his son’s death until “everyone responsible” is put in jail. “We couldn’t find anything that would substantiate any criminal charges,” Kinzer remarked.

W.H. Aldridge, the jury foreman, also watched the show, and said he had “no particular reaction” to it. If the lawyer that Vorhies has hired to look into his son's death has any additional information above what the grand jury had, “I'm not aware of it,” Aldridge said.

Jury member T.M. Hepler said he could understand Vorhies’ persistence in spite of the grand jury findings. “It's sort of a natural thing,” he remarked. “I would be real surprised if he found more evidence,” jury member C.W. Waiters commented.

Although Vorhies said ABC was planning to do a follow-up show on his son's death, producer Joseph Valerio said nothing further was planned unless “something very dramatic breaks,” in which case it would probably be handled by the news department.

In the meantime, Vorhies said he was continuing his efforts to keep the case in the news, with appearances on talk shows in the northeast. His lawyer, who has been investigating the matter for a couple of months, should be ready to make an announcement of what course they plan to pursue sometime in April. Vorhies said, “We intend to pursue this matter until conclusion.”

* Vorhies

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