



UM keeps mum on reasons for O'Day, Pflugrad firings



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Why?

Why were University of Montana Grizzlies football coach Robin Pflugrad and athletic director Jim O'Day fired?

One of the most frustrating things about UM President Royce Engstrom's actions Thursday was that he gave no reason.

No surprise there, said attorney Dylan McFarland of Milodragovich, Dale, Steinbrenner & Nygren.

When any corporation or large organization such as a university fires a prominent person, "the fact is that the corporation or the company doesn't want to be tried in the court of public opinion," said McFarland, who was a standout UM offensive lineman and was drafted by the Buffalo Bills in 2004.

"There's certainly a potential for legal ramifications and they're just trying to protect themselves," he said.

Pflugrad and O'Day already have lawyered up. Pflugrad met Thursday, the day he was fired, with Milt Datsopoulos of Datsopoulos, MacDonald and Lind, the firm that has represented several UM football players accused of running afoul of the law in recent years. The two also are longtime personal friends, Datsopoulos said Friday.

"The approach that the university used to dismiss or relieve these two gentlemen of their positions has created great ambiguity and rumors," he said.

O'Day has hired the Billings law firm of Edwards, Frickle and Culver. Cliff Edwards won a \$240,000 settlement for former Montana State University football coach Mike Kramer after MSU fired him. Edwards' son John, who played quarterback for the Grizzlies, said Friday he couldn't discuss any matters related to O'Day.

As with Pflugrad and O'Day, Kramer was fired after a highly publicized series of legal woes involving football players. After his firing, then-MSU president Geoff Gamble said: "We have this whole suite of criminal activities, but there are academic issues and compliance issues. They all are in the realm of leadership issues."

Kramer sued, alleging that statement damaged his career and reputation. And, he maintained that UM's Bobby Hauck, who preceded Pflugrad as Grizzlies head coach, was treated differently by the university system. Hauck was kept on even though several football players were arrested for violent crimes.

Neither Pflugrad nor O'Day has sued – yet. “As a practical matter, we’ve got to provide advice to Robin Pflugrad in terms of what his legal options are,” Datsopoulos said. “We’ve got to wait to see what the university says now as to what their reasons are to terminate him or for relieving him.”

UM needs to clarify the matter of Pflugrad's contract, he said. The coach's present three-year contract has a year left, and he'd been promised another three-year contract, Datsopoulos said.

Pflugrad cited that second contract when recruiting coaches and players, he said. “People relied on the fact that they would have jobs for at least three years, and made decisions to relocate their families and change the directions of their own careers,” Datsopoulos said. “The decision to terminate Robin Pflugrad has impacted the lives of many people and I hope that the university administration realized that before they made this precipitous decision.”

At some point, he said, the university will need to negotiate “some type of package that recognizes their legal obligations.”

The reason for Pflugrad's firing will be part of those negotiations, he said.

“Why didn't they just advise these people that they wanted to avoid any further fallout and these guys were going to be the people they were going to throw under the bus to avoid that kind of development? Be straightforward about it,” he said.

Which brings things back to why.

A Facebook site called “Demand Answers” asks that same question, as does a Friday editorial in the Montana Kaimin that termed Engstrom's silence on the matter “damning.”

It may be a while before any reason is forthcoming,” said Matt Thiel of the Thiel Law Office. Once you make a statement, he said, you own it.

“More likely, they will give you a very generic statement that will give them more room to adjust their strategy,” he said, “and buy them time to work on a buyout.”