

## **Northeastern calls an end to football**

*Andrew Ryan*

*Becoming successful is deemed too costly.*

Northeastern University plans to announce today that it is ending its football program after 74 seasons, saying it is unwilling to invest the millions of dollars needed to improve the team to meet the school's ambitions.

President Joseph E. Aoun and the board of trustees endorsed the move Friday after an extensive, two-year review of the athletic program by its director, Peter Roby. The decision to eliminate football follows six straight losing seasons and sparse game attendance at a school whose ice rink often sells out for hockey.

Northeastern football did not fall victim to the recession or a fund-raising crunch, university officials said. Instead, school officials came to terms with the hard truth that the \$3 million-plus annual program needed more help - millions more each year - than Northeastern wanted to give.

"Northeastern has always been guided by the principle that we should focus on our opportunities for leadership," Aoun said in a statement. "This approach ultimately leads to difficult choices, but leadership requires that we make these choices. This decision allows us to focus on our existing athletic programs."

The 87 players and 10 coaches learned their fate last night at a meeting on campus with Roby, a day after the Football Championship Subdivision team won its final game, 33-27, at the University of Rhode Island to finish 3-8. Officials also planned to quietly notify key alumni and donors before issuing the official announcement in a letter scheduled to be released today at 6 a.m., informing the university that Huskies football would be no more.

"This is a very emotional decision. I'm sure that people are going to be angry, and disappointed, and confused," Roby said in an interview, stressing that losses alone did not compel officials to cut the program. "My biggest concern is with our current players and their families, and our coaching staff."

The roughly 65 players with full or partial athletic scholarships will keep their financial aid and are encouraged to complete their degrees, college officials said. The school also plans to "do everything we can" to help any players who wish to go to other colleges to play football, and the NCAA will waive a requirement that typically forces transfer students to sit out a year, Roby said.

The move evokes memories of 1997, when Boston University cut its losing football team after 91 seasons and redirected the money to build an athletic complex and boost women's sports by funding more scholarships for female athletes. The decision to kill the program at BU was announced before the end of the season on a Saturday night, after the team had lost its homecoming game, 28-7, to Northeastern. The players were not notified in advance, according to news reports at the time.

At Northeastern, officials said they timed the announcement carefully. They did not want to distract the players during the final few contests, and the team was able to win its last home game, nipping Hofstra, 14-13, at Parsons Field. School officials realized, however, that players and coaches needed as much notice as possible, especially underclassmen who may want to compete for football scholarships at other schools. Recruiting also needed to be halted well before high school athletes signed letters of intent in February.

Northeastern first took to its gridiron in Brookline in 1933. The program produced more than a dozen NFL players and boasts three undefeated seasons, including an 8-0 run in 1963. The last highlight came in 2002 when the Huskies racked up a school record 10 wins, a share of their first Atlantic 10 title, and a trip to the NCAA playoffs.

But the team has not posted a winning record since coach Rocky Hager took over in 2004. If the school did field a team next year, college officials said, it probably would have involved an expensive national search for a new coach and stepped-up recruiting.

An even more basic financial problem festered at Parsons Field, a facility with so little locker room space that visiting teams had to arrive dressed in cleats and shoulder pads. The aluminum stands hold 7,000 fans - half the Colonial Athletic Association average - and the team averaged fewer than 1,600 fans per game as it went 2-4 at home this season.

The overhaul of Northeastern's athletic department Roby initiated when he took the job in 2007 has included a \$750,000 upgrade of the indoor turf and track in the Cabot Center and a renovation of Matthews Arena that cost more than \$10 million. The same treatment for a football stadium would have been "a multimillion investment in the future that I was not comfortable making," Roby said, noting that Parsons Field was "just not appropriate for a level of play that we were aspiring to."

The \$3 million-plus the school will save by cutting football has not been earmarked for anything specific. It could be used to bolster other athletics or for academic programs, officials said.

"Since 1933, that's a lot of people that have represented Northeastern on the football field," Roby said. "I hope that people will not see this as a lack of appreciation for what all those student-athletes did for us, because that would be unfair. Those teams, whether they had winning records or not, they played their hearts out, they wore Northeastern colors proudly. Nothing that we do from here on in should change that."

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