

Smrt Carves Out a Successful Niche, Helping Institutions With Their Compliance Issues

In an article in the *Louisville Courier-Journal* last February, Ohio University Professor David Ridpath, an expert on NCAA compliance issues, had this to say about Chuck Smrt of The Compliance Group:

“What a guy like Chuck Smrt brings to the table is he knows the dance.”

Ridpath is hardly alone in his opinion. Smrt is one of a handful of household names in the industry, who have separated themselves out as worth their weight in gold in the big-money world of collegiate athletics. For that reason, we interviewed Smrt.

Question: *You played football at Indiana University prior to the existence of NCAA compliance staffs. Any compliance issues that you recall?*

Answer: No issues that I was aware of (I also was not sufficiently talented to be considered for such benefits, if they were occurring). Interestingly, Lee Corso was the head coach for my last two years, and he hired the first female assistant football coach in the nation— Buzz Kurpius. However, she was devoted entirely to the academic success of football student-athletes and was a forerunner of current athletics academic staffs.

Q: *You started at the NCAA in 1981. How large was the staff?*

A: The staff totaled 61 employees. I was one of seven investigators on the Enforcement Staff. There was no AMA Staff, so the Enforcement Staff did the interpretations. Due to the volume of “interps”, in the early 1980’s, the policy was adopted to limit the number of callers from an institution to reduce the likely of “interp shopping.”

Q: *What was the biggest challenge in starting The Compliance Group?*

A: The challenge was overcoming the fear of going from a salary for the last 18 years at the NCAA to strictly income based upon consulting fees.

Q: *How have the compliance issues evolved over the years?*

A: The issues routinely change. In the 1980’s, boosters were a major problem. In the 1990’s, due to compliance staffs beginning to examine other departments of the university, more eligibility certification and financial aid cases arose. These issues were the result of lack of institutional systems as opposed to a lack of integrity. The past 10 years has seen a rise (in part due to closer examination and focus by the Enforcement Staff) in amateurism issues. The result has been more vacation of records penalties than in previous years.

Q: *How has the evolution of issues affected the universities’ compliance staffs, and what does the future hold?*

A: Besides increasing the number of personnel, it has required a change in attitude that it is not solely the responsibility of the compliance staff to develop an atmosphere of compliance. Institutions need to develop an attitude that compliance is a shared responsibility with all personnel involved with NCAA legislation assuming some responsibility. The saying is “compliance is an attitude, not an office”. Athletics department personnel, such as sports administrators and institutional, non-athletics department personnel like financial aid and registrar, need to accept more responsibility for the institution’s overall compliance program even if it is not in their specific area.

Also, most institutions have written and effective policies and procedures, and the knowledge base of coaches and other staff is well-developed. Over the next few years, as risk management becomes more important to compliance supervisors to assign staff duties, rules education will become more focused on new legislation (and orientation for new staff) and auditing of records or

processes will become a more important monitoring function. In essence, at the almost 30-year mark of NCAA compliance staffs, a good base of NCAA knowledge exists and policies and procedures are in place. The issue is whether they are being followed. There is less opportunity now to plead ignorance of the applicable legislation or process. The majority of the violations in the future will be based upon a lack of desire to follow the legislation or process. This results in a necessity to focus on more monitoring activities, and auditing will be an important component of the monitoring activity.

Q: *A lot of competition has come into the industry, what separates The Compliance Group from others?*

A: Some of our clients previously have used some of our competitors, and the most common compliment is our ability to turn around/produce the work in a timely fashion. Further, besides our work assisting institutions in inquiries, I believe we perform more compliance reviews than any of our competitors. This knowledge of issues resulting in infractions cases assists TCG’s abilities in focusing our compliance reviews. Also, I am involved in all of the projects in some manner. ■

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