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Rutgers Leaders Are Faulted on Abusive Coach

By **STEVE EDER** and **KATE ZERNIKE**

Rutgers made an unconventional choice for an athletic director four years ago when it selected Tim Perneti, a television executive who had extensive experience presenting college games on national broadcasts but had never run a college program or coached a major team.

With the business of college sports becoming more crucial to a university's prominence — not to mention its bottom line — the choice of Mr. Perneti seemed to pay off. Sports at Rutgers were on the rise and, in November, the university received a coveted invitation to join the Big Ten, an athletic conference that guaranteed vast exposure and huge television revenue.

But now, with outrage growing over the abusive behavior of Mike Rice, the university's men's basketball coach, Mr. Perneti and the university's president, Robert L. Barchi, find themselves under scrutiny for their handling of the case. Their jobs may be in jeopardy, and their university is once again attracting unflattering attention just two years after Tyler Clementi, an 18-year-old gay student, killed himself after a bullying incident.

On Wednesday morning, Rutgers fired Mr. Rice, a day after video surfaced of him berating players during practice, throwing basketballs at them, kicking them and taunting them with vulgar language, including homophobic slurs. The firing came four months after Rutgers learned of the abuse allegation and punished Mr. Rice by suspending him for three games, fining him \$50,000 and ordering him to take anger management counseling.

College sports analysts noted that the video of Mr. Rice first surfaced just as Rutgers was engaged in sensitive negotiations with the Big Ten, when the university would have been especially wary of attracting negative attention of any kind.

"They had a lot of things going on," said Tyrone Thomas, a Washington lawyer who advises universities on N.C.A.A. matters. "Any type of controversy would have been poorly timed for them.

"They had to be sensitive to anything that could rock the boat publicly, in any way, at that point," he added.

In a statement Wednesday, Mr. Perneti said he regretted how the initial disciplining of Mr. Rice was handled.

"I thought it was in the best interest of everyone to rehabilitate, but I was wrong," Mr. Perneti said. "Moving forward, I will work to regain the trust of the Rutgers community."

That was not good enough for state officials in Trenton who said they would hold hearings into how Mr. Perneti and other Rutgers officials responded to initial reports of the abuse, after a video was provided to Mr. Perneti by the former team assistant Eric Murdock. Stephen M. Sweeney, a Democrat and the president of the State Senate, said officials should “strongly consider” firing Mr. Perneti.

Sheila Y. Oliver, a Democrat and the speaker of the State Assembly, said, “I want to know what role everybody took in the whole fiasco.”

Gov. Chris Christie, a Republican, said he supported Mr. Rice’s dismissal, adding, “The way these young men were treated by the head coach was completely unacceptable and violates the trust those parents put in Rutgers University.”

At least 10 faculty members, including the dean of the Graduate School at Rutgers in Newark, signed a letter calling for Dr. Barchi, just seven months into his term, to resign for his “inexcusable handling of Coach Mike Rice’s homophobic and misogynist abuse of our students.”

The faculty members accused Dr. Barchi of covering up the coach’s behavior by neglecting to tell them and the student body about the extent of it in the fall. “In the meantime, in December, President Barchi reviewed Coach Rice’s \$700,000 contract — and renewed it,” the letter said.

Top Rutgers officials held an emergency meeting Wednesday afternoon on the university’s New Brunswick campus.

Last year, under pressure from Mr. Christie, the Legislature passed a law reorganizing Rutgers and its three campuses. The plan, bitterly debated among students, faculty, lawmakers and university trustees, gave Rutgers control of the medical schools of the long troubled University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, which officials believed would attract more research money, and therefore more prestige to Rutgers.

The basketball scandal “didn’t explode on a day when there was nothing else in the headlines here at Rutgers,” said Ruth Mandel, a professor and the director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers.

“It exploded in the midst of enormous change and enormous self-reflection. I don’t know about how much upheaval will result, but the shock waves will be with us.”

Rutgers has had less state support than most public universities, and has tried to increase its stature to attract higher-caliber students, and higher tuitions from out-of-state students.

The sports program, led by Mr. Perneti, has been at the center of that effort and the invitation to join the Big Ten was by far his biggest coup.

A spokesman for the Big Ten said its commissioner, Jim Delany, was not available for comment. Mr. Perneti and Dr. Barchi did not return requests for comment.

Dr. Barchi, a physician who previously ran a medical school in Philadelphia, was brought in last fall to

oversee the merger involving the medical schools. He released a statement Wednesday describing his decision in November to put Mr. Rice “on notice that his behavior would be closely monitored” and suspend him for three games. He said that he had relied on Mr. Perneti’s descriptions of the videos and on “the advice of internal and external counsel,” but that he had not personally reviewed the videotape until Tuesday.

“I have now reached the conclusion that Coach Rice cannot continue to serve effectively in a position that demands the highest levels of leadership, responsibility and public accountability,” he said.

Some of Mr. Perneti’s supporters said he had revolutionized the athletics program and should not be judged solely on his handling of Mr. Rice.

“He is incredibly well situated and suited to lead the program, but nobody is perfect,” said Chris Bevilacqua, who worked with Mr. Perneti at CSTV, a college sports channel. “These last 48 hours have shown that.”

ESPN broadcast video on Tuesday from practices from 2010 to 2012 that showed Mr. Rice kicking his players and throwing basketballs at them.

The video also showed him taunting his players with slurs used against gays, something especially problematic for Rutgers considering the suicide of Mr. Clementi in 2010. It followed his discovery that his roommate had used a webcam to spy on him in an intimate encounter in his dorm room with a man.

On Wednesday, Mr. Rice spoke to reporters outside his home for the first time to apologize “for the pain and hardship that I’ve caused.”

“I’ve let so many people down,” he said. “My players, my administration, Rutgers University, the fans. My family, who’s sitting in their house just huddled around because of the fact that their father was an embarrassment to them.

“It’s troubling, but I will at some time, maybe I’ll try to explain it. But right now, there’s no explanation for what’s on those films. Because there is no excuse for it. I was wrong. I want to tell everybody who’s believed in me that I’m deeply sorry.”

Ariel Kaminer contributed reporting.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: April 3, 2013

An earlier version of a picture caption with this article misstated the day Mike Rice was fired. It was Wednesday, not Monday.

