

A New Ball Game: Race, Power & Mizzou

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I attended Gary Pinkel's first game as the coach of the Missouri Tigers. It was in 2001 and they were playing Bowling Green, the archrival of his former team at Toledo. We lost. I remember thinking he was overmatched by the world of big time college football.

A year later, I attended the first game of his second year. This time the opponent was one of Missouri's big rivals – Illinois. He started a freshman quarterback, Brad Smith, over a popular and talented upperclassman. Once again, I thought he was in over his head. Then I watched what Brad Smith did in that game to lead the Tigers over our rivals – and I started to trust him.

This is not an article about college football or Gary Pinkel – it's about the politics of race and what is happening in the changing landscape of white American privilege. There is no denying that after the recent news of the resignation of the University of Missouri's President, Tim Wolfe, that the role of big time college football in general, and one big time, white college football coach in particular, played a big role in what came to pass.

I won't go through the timeline or chronology. Most of you have read it, and if not you can go here to find out the details: <http://cnn.it/1MRRR5y>.

What I want to point out is what just shifted here because of the courage of a white coach, Gary Pinkel - a man whom I thought at one time didn't have what it took to endure the spotlight (I say this knowing that countless others also showed great courage in this struggle.)

While the student protest was getting some notice and gaining momentum; while the black students of the football team themselves threatened to strike, and would then later be joined by the entire team; while the world watched and waited for a white president to step down because of his inability to

recognize the severity of what was happening on his watch; while literally millions of dollars in football revenue, not to mention additional fines and sanctions, were being risked; while all of that was unfolding around him, Gary Pinkel stood behind his players and said he supported their cause.

White men in positions of power don't often risk that when other white men in positions of power are called to accountability by non-whites. This is a remarkable moment.

Which leads me to a final point. This will end up being about a lot more than Gary Pinkel and the Missouri Tigers, much more than about Tim Wolfe and the leaders of this student movement. This is going to be about what happens when otherwise dis-empowered communities in a largely white, hetero-normative, male world develop strategies and skills designed to disempower those white, hetero males. This is, excuse the obvious metaphor, a whole new ballgame being played here.

As a white, hetero male in a position of power, I stand in awe and wonder -- about the implications for our church, and the implications for me in my position of privilege. And I applaud and ask for more.



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