

Says UT-EP

Prayer and Sports Do Not Mix

EL PASO, TX (CPS)—University of Texas-El Paso football coach Bill Yung has agreed to keep religious practices off the playing field after he provoked the wrath of a number of spectators by holding a public team prayer meeting before a recent game against Baylor University.

"It was really a spontaneous thing," says Bill Walker, UTEP's communications director. "Grant Teaff, the Baylor coach, and Yung are good friends, and decided to hold a joint team prayer out on the field before the game."

But the incident subsequently drew the ire of spectators and observers who felt the religious service was out of place at a state school and an event which has no ostensible connection to religion anyway.

"We did receive some complaints, and some letters appeared in the campus and

local El Paso papers, in all cases condemning the prayer at the football game," Walker says.

"Our coach has told us it was a spontaneous, one-shot event, and likened it to a locker room prayer between the two teams."

The on-field prayer—in which athletes from both teams huddled in the middle of the field and recited the Lord's Prayer—also drew extra attention "because it wasn't broadcast over the p.a. system, and a lot of people didn't know what was going on," Walker adds.

"Bill Yung is a very religious man," explains a spokeswoman in UTEP's sports information department. "One of the players wanted to lead the team in prayer on the field. It's not a customary gesture on the field, but they may do it (regularly)

in the privacy of their own locker room before the game."

Yung saw this as a special occasion because he was once Teaff's assistant at Baylor, notes Maxey Parrish of Baylor's sports information office.

"Both men are dedicated Christians, and didn't see anything wrong with it given the circumstances (of their first meeting as opposing coaches)," Parrish says.

Baylor, however, is a private, Baptist-run institution, and regularly holds a "convocation" before its games, he notes.

State schools, of course, have been legally barred from mixing religion and events they sponsor since 1962, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against forcing people to pray in classrooms.

President Reagan, among others, unsuccessfully has pushed to "restore" group

prayer in public schools, but all efforts have been rebuffed by the courts.

In October, a federal judge overturned a New Jersey law which required a "moment of silence" in state schools.

U.S. District Judge Dickinson Debevoise ruled the law advanced "the religion of some persons by mandating a period when all students and teachers must assume the traditional posture of prayer of some religious groups."

The Supreme Court overturned a similar Texas community's school prayer ordinance earlier in 1983.

At UTEP, "there is no likelihood of (on-field prayers) happening again," Walker says, no matter how badly the team does. UTEP, incidentally, lost the Baylor game.

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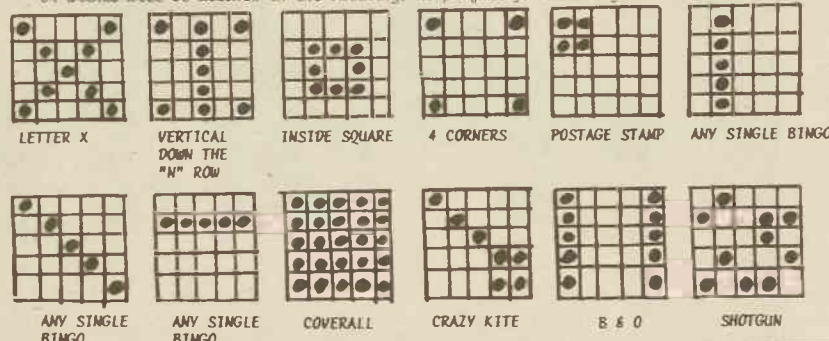
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