

A stepping stone for policy change

It's not easy to turn an emotional situation into a constructive dialogue.

We see those passions throughout the NCAA every day. Winning and losing is our core product on and off the field, whether the topic du jour happens to be eligibility, academics or financial issues. These days, it's hard to address any of them without incidentally igniting an inferno.

That's what made Sidney McPhee's comments in August so interesting as he toed a constructive line during an emotional perfect storm. The Middle Tennessee president stepped forward not only as a champion for the student-athlete he personally backed, but for the NCAA, as well. And he did it with a blend of constructive criticism, a little humility, and an unequivocal sense of team play.

You no doubt know the back story. Former Marine Steven Rhodes walked on to the Middle Tennessee football team over the summer after his discharge, moving on from five years of service to his country. He was married, had two children and was using the opportunity to play college sports as part of the foundation for the next phase of his life.

It's easy to root for such a tale. It's a Hollywood underdog script. And what coach wouldn't want a responsible, accomplished, married father setting the leadership example for his team?

Just one problem: Rhodes' participation in a military recreation league led to an initial eligibility ruling that would sit him out a year – a rule designed to guard against overseas professionals in amateur's clothing, not military rec ballers.

And you no doubt know what happened next. It's where the story so often goes so wrong. There was too much emotion wrapped up in the image of Rhodes to keep the conversation rational. There was too much bureaucratic stigma aligned with the rule. It was a lopsided, emotional flogging. Who is going to root for a bylaw over a Marine?

McPhee stepped publicly into that storm just as it was preparing for landfall. The national press was already taking up arms for Rhodes. The slightest suggestion of criticism from McPhee could've provided the match that ignited the firestorm.

Yet he soothed the fragile situation with calm words.

"It's become en vogue to pile on

the NCAA, but I'm not going to bash the NCAA," McPhee said. "It was a rule, and rules are implemented by the (NCAA) membership."

It was a critical misdirection play: Rather than the expected finger wagging about a bad rule, McPhee shifted to a rational explanation of how the rule came to be. He expressed frustration, but stayed sensible. He avoided blaming the faceless entity that the public perceives to be the NCAA, and instead placed responsibility on the faces of the NCAA — the membership.

It's easier to let frustration talk in such circumstances, particularly with an underdog figure like Rhodes. Such a figure draws natural allies. So whenever someone tries to explain the intent of a questioned rule, the words come out with a gravedigger's efficiency. People get confused, which makes them increasingly frustrated. The explanation can sound more like a bad excuse.

McPhee, a former member of the Division I Board of Directors and the Executive Committee, understands better than many how the system works. But he stripped down that knowledge to the most basic, digestible explanation. He didn't blamelessly point fingers at others, but he also didn't defend the rule. "I think this is a classic case of a rule that has produced an unintended consequence," he said.

But McPhee didn't throw up his hands, either. He defended Rhodes while at the same time reminding his peers that they, in fact, held the power to change the rules – something that is often left out when emotion and frustration govern these situations.

"These rules are passed by us," McPhee said. "Sometimes

we have to look in the mirror and say, 'What are we thinking?'"

And with those reasoned statements, McPhee seemed to connect with Rhodes' defenders. "I'm very confident common sense will prevail here," he said, and within hours of that remark Rhodes was cleared to play. With the case cleared and no lingering controversy to fuel the blaze, the issue quickly faded and was nearly forgotten by the end of the week.

But there are always new challenges in college sports. And in the next few months the Division I membership will discuss new approaches to its legislative system – potentially seismic shifts in governance that could trickle down to other divisions.

Millions of curious eyes will be focused on the discussions. There will be talk of special business sessions, legislative processes and reforms. Few outside the NCAA membership will understand what any of it means. The emotions will run high, and whatever is said will surely heat discussions that won't always promote a constructive process.

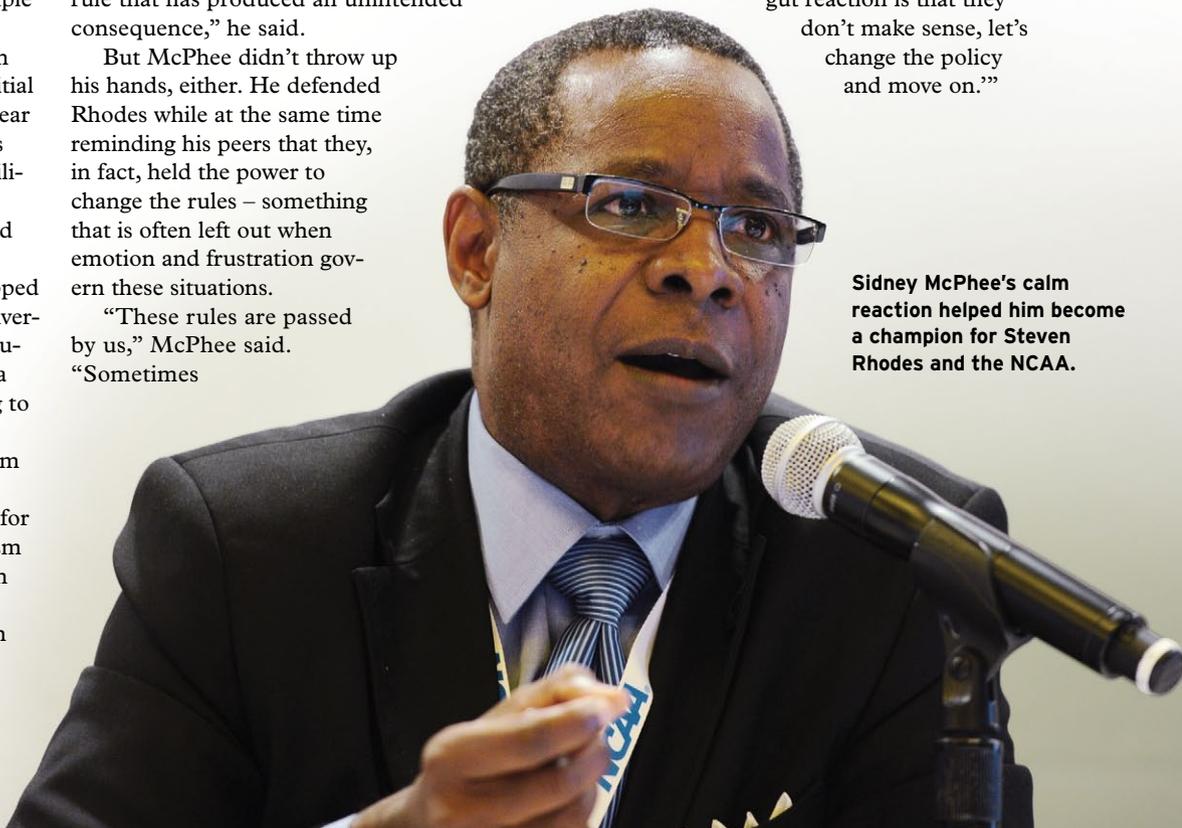
Those moments will present a good time to step back and consider McPhee's leadership example, and think about how calm words and a sensible explanation can help everyone move forward.

"We have policies for a reason," McPhee said. "At our school I frequently say, 'Just don't follow them blindly. Take a look and see if they make sense. If the gut reaction is that they don't make sense, let's change the policy and move on.'"



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FROM THE
EDITOR



Sidney McPhee's calm reaction helped him become a champion for Steven Rhodes and the NCAA.