

TFA ready to keep fighting after FHSAA upholds sanctions against football team

FHSAA denies TFA's appeals, upholds sanctions of a two-year postseason ban and forfeiture of wins for football team. Royals are 'prepared to seek remedies through the court system.'



The First Academy football takes the field at Warren Stadium.
Photo by Sam Albuquerque

The First Academy saw multiple appeals for [sanctions against its](#)

[football team](#) denied by the FHSAA, and as of Sunday, Nov. 10, the Royals will have to forfeit its nine wins from the 2024 season (meaning they wouldn't qualify for the 2024 playoffs), TFA would also be banned from the 2025 postseason and the school would have to pay thousands of dollars in fines.

Although TFA administrators have admitted to not complying with some of the FHSAA rules and regulations, specifically regarding allowing student-athletes who were not yet enrolled at the school to participate in athletics — TFA's Assistant Head of School Will Cohen told the FHSAA at one of the appeal meetings that the school did allow students to participate early and that they've learned from that, while football coach and athletics director Jeff Conaway said each of the students' enrollment processes into the private Christian school had different timelines and clearly he made some mistakes in that process — the school does not agree with the punishment and could take its appeal to the judicial system.

"On November 8, 2024, we faced a setback with a third appeal," said TFA School Board Chair Clark Keator and TFA School Board Attorney Charles Cramer, in a letter following the appeal ruling. "This appeal was upheld, leading to penalties that include forfeiting regular season contests from this year and ineligibility for postseason participation this year and next. While we respect the FHSAA's authority and acknowledge the mistakes that we made, we find the penalties harsh in relation to the allegations. Despite this outcome, we remain committed to ensuring that our students are protected and that TFA's values are upheld. Our commitment to justice for our student-athletes is unwavering, and we are prepared to seek remedies through the court system to safeguard their interests."

According to the [FHSAA 2024-25 Handbook](#), policy 37.3.1 states that if a school is found to have allowed a recruited student-athlete (policy 37.1.1) or student-athlete who received an impermissible benefit (policy 37.2.1) to participate in an athletic event, it will forfeit all contests and awards won that the student-athlete(s) in question participated in.

In the original sanctions notification letter written by FHSAA Executive Director Craig Damon, the association's investigation alleged The First Academy violated both policy 37.1.1 and 37.2.1, which meant the forfeiture clause in policy 37.3.1 could be invoked. The alleged violations of those two policies are the basis for the forfeiture sanctions that will see, barring further legal action, the 2024 Royals go from a 9-1 record on the football field to 0-10 in the record books and miss out on the 2024 playoffs.

Here's what the letter says about how TFA allegedly committed those violations.

First, the investigation alleges that the impermissible benefit policy (37.2.1) — which states that nobody associated or linked with the school may be involved in giving an impermissible benefit to any student or family member for the purpose of participating in sports — was violated because TFA allowed three student-athletes, who never enrolled at the school, to participate in summer football activities and seven others to participate in football activities prior to their enrollments.

This policy section in the handbook lists various specific prohibitions that would be categorized as impermissible benefits, things such as financial assistance of any kind, cash or like monetary items, gifts of clothing or other tangible items, free or reduced-cost transportation,

free or reduced-cost rent for housing, vehicles, or other items, and any other form of arrangement, assistance, discount, or benefit that is not generally available to other students based on athletic ability.

However, nowhere in the impermissible benefit section of the bylaws does it mention or categorize allowing students who did not or had yet to enroll in the school to participate in football activities as an impermissible benefit, as this is not a monetary item or gift, nor an arrangement not available to other students at that said school.

During the appeal process, the school also asserted that all 10 student-athletes who participated in football activities prior to being officially enrolled had all started the process of becoming students at the school and were not enrolled at any other school at the time.

The second alleged violation was of the improper contact policy (37.1.1) — which states that nobody associated or linked with the school may contact, a student or family member for the purpose of playing sports at a different school, AKA recruiting — when assistant coach Steven Moffett and an unspecified representative of the school's athletic interests communicated with student-athletes from different schools about TFA prior to their enrollment.

Moffett, at the appeal hearings, denied under oath the allegation of recruiting players, and a pair of student-athlete parents told the appeals board that there was no communication with the Royals assistant prior to deciding to enroll their children at TFA.

Beyond the school's reaction to the sanctions, Keator and Cramer announced that The First Academy will be implementing several changes to strengthen the athletics department's compliance and

transparency.

TFA Athletics's compliance and transparency changes:

- Utilization of a compliance officer: "This individual will operate independent of the athletics department and report directly to the School Board and Head of School, this will ensure strict adherence to FHSAA guidelines and add an additional layer of accountability," the letter said.
- Enhanced training for coaches and athletic staff: "We are implementing comprehensive training for all athletic personnel to ensure a thorough understanding of FHSAA policies and best practices," the letter said.
- Improved administrative processes: "We are revising our procedures for facilities use agreements, enrollment forms, and FHSAA-related documentation to ensure accuracy and alignment with FHSAA Bylaws and TFA's standards," the letter said.
- Updated enrollment contracts: "To prevent future issues, we have added safeguards, advance notice requirements, and additional approval layers to our enrollment contracts, ensuring accountability and oversight beyond the athletics staff," the letter said.
- Ongoing communication with the FHSAA: "We are committed to maintaining open and constructive dialogue with the FHSAA to clarify expectations and promote compliance," the letter said.

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A native of João Pessoa, Brazil, Sam Albuquerque moved in 1997 to

Central Florida as a kid. After earning a communications degree in 2016 from the University of Central Florida, he started his career covering sports as a producer for a local radio station, ESPN 580 Orlando. He went on to earn a master's degree in editorial journalism from Northwestern University, before moving to South Carolina to cover local sports for the USA Today Network's Spartanburg Herald-Journal. When he's not working, you can find him spending time with his lovely wife, Sarah, newborn son, Noah, and dog named Skulí.

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