

ADVISING AN SEC INSTITUTION ON THE ELIGIBILITY OF ITS HEISMAN-WINNING QUARTERBACK.

Our Client's Challenge

When an SEC institution faced allegations in 2013 that its star quarterback had accepted money in exchange for autographing memorabilia, the school engaged Lightfoot's NCAA Compliance and Investigations team. The university fully supported its student-athlete, a Heisman Trophy winner, and sought out Lightfoot's counsel and advice as the NCAA investigated the potential violations involved and any resulting eligibility concerns.

"[The University]...has retained the services of one of the most respected legal firms in the country, Lightfoot, Franklin & White, to assist us," the university's athletic director said at the time.

Our Approach

This was a highly publicized investigation, with many media outlets predicting almost certain ineligibility for the quarterback and potential sanctions for the school before a thorough review was even conducted. Lightfoot's focused on the facts of the case and ensured that the results of the investigation, whatever they may be, were driven by actual evidence, rather than public perception and rumor.

Because of our experience handling high-profile, time-sensitive NCAA investigations, we were able to work quickly and efficiently to clear this matter up for the university and its quarterback. The Lightfoot team narrowed down the nature, scope and source of the autographed material at issue and then presented that indisputable evidence to the enforcement staff along with its application of those facts to the allegedly violated bylaws. Based on the evidence Lightfoot developed and the respective burdens outlined in the bylaws, Lightfoot argued that there was no factual basis to support substantive violations.

The Result

After its review, the NCAA reported it had found no evidence that the quarterback had accepted money in exchange for autographs, and that the violations, if any, were inadvertent. The NCAA and institution agreed to simply withhold the quarterback for the first half of that year's season opener. There were no institutional penalties.