

Football Team Forced to Remove Christian Crosses From Helmets

Football players at Arkansas State University were ordered to either remove a Christian cross decal from their helmets or modify it into a mathematical sign after a Jonesboro attorney complained that the image violated the U.S. Constitution.

The cross decal was meant to memorialize former player Markel Owens and former equipment manager Barry Weyer, said athletic director Terry Mohajir. Weyer was killed in a June car crash. Owens was gunned down in Tennessee in January.

Barry Weyer Sr. told me that the players and coaches voluntarily decided to memorialize his son and Owens.

"The players knew they were both Christians so they decided to use the cross along with their initials," he said. "They wanted to carry the spirits of Markel and Barry Don onto the field for one more season."

It was a decision that had the full support of the university's athletic director.

"I support our students' expression of their faith," Mohajir said. "I am 100 percent behind our students and coaches."

However, the athletic director said he had no choice but to remove the crosses after he received a message from the university's legal counsel.

"It is my opinion that the crosses must be removed from the helmets," university counsel Lucinda McDaniel wrote to Mohajir. "While we could argue that the cross with the initials of the fallen student and trainer merely memorialize their passing, the symbol we have authorized to convey that

message is a Christian cross.”

According to documents provided to me by Arkansas State, McDaniel gave the football team a choice—they could either remove the cross or modify the decal. And by modify—she meant deface.

“If the bottom of the cross can be cut off so that the symbol is a plus sign (+) there should be no problem,” she wrote. “It is the Christian symbol which has caused the legal objection.”

The team had been wearing the decals for two weeks without any complaints. That changed after last Saturday’s nationally televised game against the Tennessee Volunteers.

Jonesboro attorney Louis Nisenbaum sent McDaniel an email complaining about the cross decal.

“That is a clear violation of the Establishment Clause as a state endorsement of the Christian religion,” Nisenbaum wrote. “Please advise whether you agree and whether ASU will continue this practice.”

Ironically, the university’s legal counsel admitted in a letter that there were no specific court cases that addressed crosses on football helmets. Nevertheless, she feared the possibility of a lawsuit.

“It is my opinion that we will not prevail on that challenge and must remove the crosses from the helmets or alter the symbols so that they are a (plus sign) instead of a cross,” she wrote in an email to the athletic director.

The Wisconsin-based Freedom From Religion Foundation fired off a letter congratulating the university on cleansing the helmets of the Christian symbol.

“The crosses appeared to confer State’s endorsement of religion, specifically Christianity,” the FFRF wrote. “The inclusion of the Latin cross on the helmets also excludes the

19 percent of the American population that is non-religious.”

FFRF co-presidents Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker went so far as to suggest alternative ways for the football players to mourn.

“Many teams around the country honor former teammates by putting that player’s number on their helmets or jerseys, or by wearing a black armband,” they wrote. “Either of those options, or another symbolic gesture free from religion imagery, would be appropriate.”

That suggestion set off the athletic director.

“I don’t even kinda-sorta care about any organization that tells our students how to grieve,” Mohajir told me. “Everybody grieves differently. I don’t think anybody has the right to tell our students how to memorialize their colleagues, their classmates or any loved ones they have.”

While Mr. Weyer told me he supports the university “100 percent,” he said he took great offense at the FFRF’s attack.

“The fact is the cross was honoring two fallen teammates who just happened to be Christians,” he wrote on his Facebook page. “I just have a hard time understanding why we as Christians have to be tolerant of everybody else’s rights, but give up ours.”

I do, too, Mr. Weyer. I do, too.

Liberty Institute attorney Hiram Sasser told me he would be more than honored to represent the football team in a lawsuit against the university.

“It is outrage that the university defacing the cross and reducing it to what the university calls a plus sign,” he told me. “It is disgusting.”

Sasser said the students are well within their rights to wear

a cross decal on their helmets and accused the university of breaking the law.

“It is unconstitutional viewpoint discrimination to force the players to remove or alter the cross on their helmets that they chose themselves simply because the cross is religious,” Sasser said.

These young men were simply trying to do a good deed. They were standing up for their fallen teammates. It’s really too bad the university could not stand up for the team.

“The university and others want football players to be positive role models in the community, but as soon as the players promote a positive message honoring their former teammates—the university discriminates against them in a blatant violation of the Constitution.”

Mr. Weyer said he’s not a political man—but he is a Christian man. And he’s tired of having to kowtow to the politically correct crowd.

“It’s time that we as Christians stand up and say we’re tired of being pushed around,” he said. “We’re tired of having to bow down to everyone else’s rights. What happened to our rights? The last time I checked it said freedom of religion—not freedom *from* religion.”

Well said, Mr. Weyer. Well said.

Todd Starnes is host of Fox News & Commentary, heard on hundreds of radio stations. Sign up for his American Dispatch newsletter, be sure to join his Facebook page, and follow him on Twitter. His latest book is God Less America.