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What was the Reaction to the  
Cancellation of Intercollegiate Athletics  
at Ricks College?

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April 23, 2004

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Transcript copied by Victor Ukorebi October 2005

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President Gordon B. Hinckley of The Church of Jesus of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints stood on a bright June morning not only as president of the Mormon Church but as president of its educational system. The year 2000 had brought on a new century and many new changes along with it, especially for the Mormons. On this morning, President Hinckley appeared to make one such change. He announced, to the surprise of many, that the church-owned Ricks College in Rexburg, Idaho would change from a two-year junior college to a four-year university known as BYU-Idaho. Along with that change came another proclamation even more shocking than the first in the minds of some: the new BYU-Idaho would no longer participate in intercollegiate athletics. The exact statement was, “BYU-Idaho will phase out of its involvement in intercollegiate athletics and shift its program to a year-round activity program designed to involve and meet the needs of a diverse student body.” As can be expected, community, students, coaches, and other colleges who were affected by this change in Ricks College and its sports program reacted to this announcement in several different ways.

Ricks College started out as a church funded academy in 1888. No mention of sports at the academy is made until 1906 in a monthly student publication called *Student Rays*. The article reads, “The season is now opening for field sports let us wake up and take advantage of it.”<sup>1</sup> It continues on with a call for students to get teams for practice as well as some advice to help teams be successful. In its beginnings, Ricks College athletics were simply games between two grades or even between students and faculty. At first, the school did not own a gymnasium. Getting one built was quite a miracle in itself, as the community rallied together to donate money toward the cause. An estimated cost of \$10,000 was given for the building of the new gym in 1916. Unfortunately when

it was not built by the end of that year, disappointment arose and it was discovered that the cost of construction would be more like \$55,000 to \$60,000. Despite this dramatic increase each church ward within the district of the school came up with the difference and the gym was finally completed in 1918.<sup>2</sup> So it was from the beginning that the community expresses a concern for sports at Ricks College and decided to invest in it.

When athletics was in its infancy evidence showed that it was well[worth] investing in. Starting with basketball as their only sport, Ricks began a tradition of fierce and competitive athletics which proved to have the ability to win at least one title almost every year it was in existence. Coach Clyde Packer's attitude was one example of the general attitude about sports at Ricks Academy, "Other high schools in the upper Snake River Valley will have to fight, and fight hard, until the last whistle blows to win from us."<sup>3</sup> Coach Packer, the coach of all the sports at Ricks at the time, stuck to his word and when he ended his career at Ricks he left with three football titles, twenty basketball titles, four track titles, and one tennis title.<sup>4</sup> From then on the tradition was kept steady year after year. Even in the Great Depression of the 1930s when funds were getting low Ricks College Sports held on. Jerry Roundy stated, "Money for (all) teachers' salaries had been \$31,380 for 1932-33 school year, but for the 1933-34 year that amount was reduced to \$14,568." Amazingly, that year was not so bad as the football team won its third consecutive championship and basketball won the Utah-Idaho league title.<sup>5</sup> As the years past, the legacy of the early years continued. Football was ranked second nationally four times from 1981 to 1994 and lost in the championship game in 1998.

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Men's basketball was ranked in the top ten in the nation seven times from 1981 to 1991, and women's basketball did just as well with the same amount of top ten rankings only it was the years from 1993 to 2001.<sup>6</sup> The list drags on and on. The statistics are boring but a careful study of them gives greater perspective for why people acted the way they did when the disintegration of sports for Ricks College was announced.

Looking at the history of athletics at Ricks College gives good insight into why some community members acted the way they did. The sensitive nature of the subject makes it difficult to get personal feelings from community members on the subject, but plenty of Rexburg citizens were willing to give their comments to the area's weekly newspaper, the *Rexburg Standard Journal*, as well as other local newspapers. The *Salt Lake City Tribune* quoted former Mayor Nile Boyle, speaking of city booster clubs, "They were happy to have a university. They just were not happy about dropping the athletics."<sup>7</sup>

How could that be? Changing the school to a university undoubtedly brings more damage to a city than does taking [a]way that school's sports program. What about the growing number of college students? More and more jobs in Rexburg were taken over by nineteen and twenty year olds as the number of college students increased. Surely that is frustrating for Rexburg residents who are also searching for jobs to support their families. Councilman Paul Pugmire said of the growing population of Rexburg in the Idaho Falls *Post Register*, "If we as a community do not decide what we want our community to look like, those who do not share our vision will make those decisions for

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us. And we would not like the results.”<sup>8</sup> For this reason city government officials took action to try to make sure that as new buildings pop up that they had nice landscaping and did not completely strip Rexburg of the hard work done to make it more than sagebrush in the first place. However, the councilman’s comment was only on[e] of a few that express the concern for population growth. It seemed that sports were the issue. Sort of like the soccer games in South America, Ricks sports were life and nothing else mattered.

It was likely that the reason there was so much complaint was because many of these fans had spent hundreds of dollars attending and supporting sports events at the college. Rexburg is at least a half hour from any kind of entertainment. As far as recreation in the city goes, all that existed was a couple of bowling alleys and cheap movie theatres. Not much for a city that was not only growing in the general population but in the number of college students also. So, what happens when the supreme form of entertainment goes away? Exactly what did happen, complaint after complaint and promises to never support the college again. Watching the competitive sports events at the college was one of the best things to do as a family, with a date, or with a group of friends. Taking away that aspect of the town greatly decreased the morale of the city dwellers as well as the city’s economy as “Rexburgers” went looking for entertainment somewhere else. Trent Shippen, former women’s basketball coach for Ricks College and BYU-Provo reiterated why the community reacted in such a negative manner:

Ricks had done so well [...] Private school, good solid sports program, good kids, you don’t have people getting in trouble with the media, citizens in the community. It’s just a stellar program. They finished nationally ranked in all their sports programs year after year after year. Probably one of the strongest junior college programs in the country, if not the strongest. Then to just drop the program’s like whoa [...] Why would they do that?<sup>9</sup>

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It was obvious to everyone that the Rexburg community was going to take the loss of Ricks College Sports like they would the death of their first born child.

Another group of people who mourned and were forced to stretch for entertainment and athletics opportunities outside of the city of Rexburg were the college students themselves. Cole Cooper, a former football quarterback for Ricks, said, “The two years I was up there, we played for the national championship. They have a nice stadium and it’s always packed. There is so much local support for athletics.”<sup>10</sup> Cooper is obviously in confusion as to why the school would get rid of a program that always had a fan packed stadium. Why wouldn’t he be? A school with a long history of extremely successful athletes dropping its sports program could only be explained as absurd. Sports at Ricks College helped the school and its students develop a sense of identity. They had pride in their nationally ranked teams. That pride then spread to school spirit. When sports disappeared a part of that spirit vanished also. Athletes with incredible potential for success in sports were forced to attend somewhere else if they wanted to pursue their sports careers.

One main concern had to do with the students who already had promises to scholarships. The thought was that those promises would not be honored making athletes stranded with no warning. President of the college, David A. Bednar, in a press conference on 21 June 2000 assured that, “We are not going to pull the rug out from under (the students).”<sup>11</sup> Scholarships were honored and accommodations were made for the athletes already involved in sports at Ricks College.

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Getting rid of the sports program at Ricks not only ended sports for the athletes but for their coaches too. Shippen gave this account of his reaction to the disintegration of Ricks College sports:

I was in Provo at the time...I was in the Smith field house doing something up there on campus when I heard about. 'Hey did you hear that they just dropped their sports program?' I said, 'What?' It[I] just thought it was a rumor you know...My initial reaction was, 'Whoa!' My colleagues, friends, coaches that were coaching here at Ricks, I thought, 'Whoa!' What are they going to do for their jobs now?'<sup>12</sup>

Surprisingly, most of the coaches stayed up at Ricks College and took on new roles with the new student-run sports programs that the school had developed. Doug Stutz (cross country), Justin Garner (track), Peter Stilling (soccer), and Lori Woodland (basketball) all stayed at the school and took on different responsibilities.<sup>13</sup> For these faculty members there was no arguing the decision. Coach Woodland, although devastated at the thought of not being able to coach anymore, stated, "Initially I was stunned. Throughout the day I had a lot of time to contemplate the future and what this might bring. I had someone say (to me) 'Lori, you've affected so many lives and had such a positive affect on so many lives,' so maybe now this school can have a positive effect on more lives."<sup>14</sup> She took the positive side. She was then able to possibly influence more students in the school['s] new program as she took her place as the athletic director and what was able to give speeches and inspirational thought to hundreds of students. She sided with Shippen and saw no reason to fight. "The biggest thing is (the announcement) comes from the Prophet and the Board of Trustees. It must be the

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right thing. Things work out, I think that's the attitude we should take."<sup>15</sup> For Woodland, Shippen, and others, there was no reason to dwell on the negative because to them the decision came from someone of much greater authority than their own.

Unfortunately there were some faculty members that did not have the same approach as these two basketball coaches. Football Coach Ron Haun gave several statements to local newspapers in which he was quite infuriated. "I'm heartbroken, I'm just sick," he said.<sup>16</sup> He couldn't believe what was happening to him and his spectacular football team. Later on he gave a somewhat brighter statement when discussing his plan for the 2001 season, "We are going to take it one game at a time and try and win games. Before we go we want to carry out the tradition of being a classy program that represents the school, the church, and our community."<sup>17</sup> Haun decided not to do anything more about his situation than make his last season at Ricks the best that it could be. Other coaches like Wes Christensen, former wrestling coach, took more initiative. Christensen, in a letter to President Hinckley, Elder Henry B. Eyring, and the Board of Trustees expressed his concern that sports were needed at the college for the purpose of preparing young men for the responsibilities that lie ahead of them like missions and church or family duties. He states, "It worries me what will happen to some of the young men if we do not have intercollegiate sports."<sup>18</sup> His letter asked for a bold reconsideration from the school dictators but is[was] seriously let down when the reply came that the issues have already been discussed and the decision made. Pretty much anyone who decided to disagree and peacefully protest, like Christensen, received the same answer, "We've

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talked about every issue that could come up and we are sticking to our decision.” Those who couldn’t deal with that answer left and pursued careers elsewhere.

Other people that responded quickly to Ricks College canceling their sports programs were the coaches at fellow junior colleges in the area. Snow College’s athletic director, Ken Beazer, made several comments much relating to the changes. “I don’t see how this can be viewed at all as a good thing for athletics in general,” he states.<sup>19</sup> His complaint was that Ricks College used to be Snow College’s rival; a rival that existed for many years. Dixie State coach, Greg Crowshaw, made the same complaint:

They were our biggest rivals, along with Snow. It used to be we’d have one great rivalry game at home every year, with either Ricks or Snow. Now, we only have that big rivalry at home every other year. There were two games on the schedule everyone wanted to know about – Ricks and Snow.<sup>20</sup>

Snow and Dixie held great competitions with Ricks College. Both competed with Ricks before and after their games as well as on the playing field. In the 1995-96 football season, Snow beat Ricks by three with a score of 26 to 23 and later on Ricks beat Dixie by three with the final score at 30-27. Those were very close games by football standards, the kind of games that every football fan loves to watch and every coach loves to direct on the sidelines. Crowshaw mourned even years after the initial absence of Ricks’ sports: “We used to battle Ricks for a lot of the same kids, along with Snow. On our team, we have six or eight kids Ricks would have gotten. Snow and Dixie are splitting those players Ricks used to get. They’ve made a big impact for us and for Snow.”<sup>21</sup> Of course, with one more junior college gone from the areas around Utah and Idaho, more athletes opened up for the sports coaches at Dixie and Snow to choose from.

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The result is that these two colleges got better skilled teams. Most sports fans would think that coaches like Beazer and Crowshaw would not complain about that, but people are amazing and will pull out surprises every once in a while. Crowshaw stated his concern, “If I wasn’t coaching at Dixie, being LDS, Ricks would have been the place I would have sent my own kids. Now, kids and their families are looking are looking for a place as close to that environment as possible.”<sup>22</sup> Ricks had a special atmosphere that parents wanted to send their athletic sons and daughters to and like Crowshaw said; they now have to look elsewhere. They almost have to disappointingly settle for the next best thing. Ricks College’s sister school, BYU in Provo, was one of those schools that some parents are trying to rely on as the next best thing. Also a church run school, the same atmosphere existed. The difference was that BYU had a little more prestige in academics and athletics. It made it a little bit harder for an athlete in Idaho and Utah to get into the program as more students started competing for the same position. Former football kicker Aaron Roderick explained the difficulties that students had at the transition:

School was an easy transition. I was prepared for that. When I first arrived, I felt totally prepared by my experience at Ricks [...] The offense Ricks was running was almost exactly the same offence as BYU’s [...] For players who transferred from Ricks College to BYU, you walked in and knew what was going on from Day One. Ricks was unique.<sup>23</sup>

So not only was Dixie and Snow mourning then loss of Ricks College, so was BYU. Ricks College gave opportunities for athletes to be recognized by a higher ranking school like BYU and then prepared them to play with that school. BYU and the athletes at Ricks were given a head start and that was often the key to success on both sides. BYU sports suffering only added to that of the student athletes and the reaction to it. As

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more and more athletes ended up turned away at the chance of attending another religious school the reaction again was, “Why?”

The campus at Ricks College was known for its spiritual, friendly, positive environment. They called it the spirit of Ricks. That is the reason why parent[s] were so decided about their children going there to participate it[n] sports, but by the end of the 2001 school year at BYU-Idaho, it had become overwhelmingly obvious that the overall feeling toward Ricks College and its sports program disintegrating was negative. The community, students, faculty and competing schools all had something to say about the change going on at Ricks. It was a disappointment to all who had ever experienced the thrill of seeing the football team with a bowl game in Pocatello or watched as the cross country team race[d] on to victory for the sixth year in a row. Ricks athletics did as Coach Haun had wanted for his football team: they made their last year the best they could almost making fact that athletics was not returning even harder. Fans, whether student or resident, found it hard to say good-bye to their football games as the winter field no longer sounded with cheerleader shouts and band songs but with sounds of the blades of skates on an ice rink. For students who were only beginning their university experiences, and have never experienced Ricks College sports, could sense that something was missing on the campus and in the city. The way everyone in the area of Utah and Idaho reacted, they want Ricks College athletics back. When asked if he ever saw the school turning back to the old program Trent Shippen made clear that, “The only way it would change is if the Prophet came back and said, ‘Ok, we’re gonna have athletics again and we’re traveling off campus.’ Then I would believe it at that point.

Otherwise we're going to continue like we're doing right now." To him, despite the unanimous negative reaction sports at Ricks would not return any time soon.

<sup>1</sup>Steven Moser, *The History of Athletics at Ricks College* pt 1, Ricks College, Rexburg, Idaho, 2001, pg 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 44-45.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pg. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Kristen Moulton, "Growing Pains," *Salt Lake City Tribune*, Salt Lake City, Utah, 9 March 2003, sec. A p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Sackley, "Rexburg Works on Draft of New Plan for Growth," *Idaho Falls Post Register*, 19 January 2004, sec. A, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Trent Shippen, interview by author, audio recording, Rexburg, Id., 4 March 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Staff and Wire Reports, "Ricks College Will Drop Sports Programs," *Spokesman Review*, 23 June 2000. sec. C, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Moser, *History of Ricks* p. 596.

<sup>12</sup> Interview, Trent Shippen.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Moser, *History of Ricks*, p. 596.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 597.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 596.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 599.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 598.

<sup>19</sup> Staff and Wire Reports, “Ricks College Will Drop Sports Programs.”

<sup>20</sup> Jeff Call, “Ricks Football is Still Missed,” *Deseret Morning News*. 9 January 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

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