

Breaking News

Saunders is All Over the Place on Bower Firing Debacle

HATTIESBURG – About 72 hours after USM football coach Jeff Bower “resigned” his post, USM President Martha Saunders spoke on the matter before a gathering of Lions Club members in Biloxi. Fortunately, beat reporter Melissa Scallan of *The Sun Herald* was on the scene to capture what was said (see article below), because Saunders shocked many in the crowd with her responses to questions from Scallan and others.

USM AD on the hot seat now

USM chief: It's his responsibility

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STEVE COLEMAN/AP

Southern Mississippi athletic director Richard Giannini talks to reporters at a press conference about the resignation of head football coach Jeff Bower on Monday.

BILOXI --

The president of the University of Southern Mississippi said Wednesday the responsibility for correcting what's wrong with the football program belongs to the athletic director, and the pressure will be on as the university searches for a new head football coach.

Martha Saunders also said she plans to be involved in the selection of a new coach.

Jeff Bower, who has been the head coach at USM for 17 years, was forced to resign Monday because of apparent rumblings from fans and alumni over this year's 7-5 season.

Saunders spoke to the Biloxi Lions Club, and one member asked if Athletic Director Richard Giannini was responsible for some of the reasons Bower was forced out.

"It's all his" responsibility, Saunders responded. "We set goals for all of our programs, and the guys around the table are responsible for those goals."

After the meeting, Saunders said Giannini has her support, but he will be held accountable for righting what some see as wrongs in his department.

"It is the overarching responsibility of the athletic director to develop the fan base, make sure facilities get built and find resources," Saunders said. "I don't run the athletic department. I have someone who does that. I do have faith in him, but now the light's on and there's no question where the attention is."

Giannini said Monday there would be a national search for a new head coach but that "there will be no search committee."

On Tuesday, though, Giannini said he "might have been misinterpreted" and that he would work with the university's Foundation Board and a search consultant.

He also will work with Saunders, who said Wednesday she will be involved in the selection process.

"It might slow things down, but I will be involved," she said.

Like Giannini, Saunders said she has received an "overwhelming" number of calls from people interested in the coaching job.

"I've gotten a handful of e-mails and phone calls from people who are upset," she said, "but I've been overwhelmed with people who are interested in the job or who know someone who would be interested."

Saunders said there is no timeline to hire a new coach. Bower will coach the team in the Dec. 22 Papajohns.com Bowl in Birmingham.

As Scallan reports above, one Lions Club member asked Saunders if USM Athletics Director, Richard Giannini, was "responsible for some of the reasons Bower was forced out." Saunders replied "It's all his [Giannini's]. We set goals for all of our programs, and the guys around the table are responsible for those goals." Saunders' comments are important in at least two ways. First, her response to the question posed is an admission that Bower was "forced out" or "fired." USM officials, including Saunders via an e-mail to USM faculty, staff, and students, and Giannini via a press conference, have previously indicated that Bower had simply decided, on his own accord, to "resign" (or "step down" from) his position from USM. Second, and perhaps more importantly, unlike with some famous leaders in United States history, the proverbial "buck" does not appear to stop with Saunders. Saunders makes it abundantly clear in her responses above that she will not hesitate to lay the blame, and publicly so if necessary, for any failures at USM at the feet of her subordinates.

Saunders also told Scallan that she (Saunders) sees various "wrongs" in the USM Athletics Department that need "righting," and that she (Saunders) intends to hold Giannini's feet to the fire. Saunders also indicates that she will play a key role in the selection of USM's next football coach.

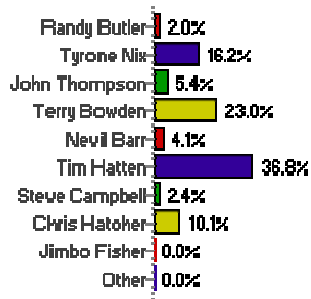
With regard to USM's next football coach, South Carolina television stations are reporting (on 29-Nov-07) that South Carolina defensive coordinator, Tyrone Nix, also a

former assistant under Jeff Bower at USM, has been offered the USM head coaching position. At press time, USM officials are denying that rumor.

According to a recent poll at *The Hattiesburg American*, the selection of Nix would not likely be popular among USM supporters.

POLL

Who would you like to see Southern Miss hire as its next head football coach?



Total votes cast: 296

Among the 296 people polled so far, about 37 percent want Tim Hatten, the current head coach at Pearl River Community College, to replace Bower. Only 16 percent favor the hiring of Nix. Oak Grove High School head coach Nevil Barr has received more than four percent of the vote thus far.