

Special Report

Can USM's "New" President Swim in the Deep End? A Look at Departure of Jeff Bower

Members of the "Southern Miss family," both near and far, were shocked to see the 26-Nov-07 news headlines indicating that long-time USM head football coach, Jeff Bower, had been fired. That news came less than 48 hours after Bower had polished off Arkansas State University by a score of 16-10 on Senior Day at M.M. Roberts Stadium in Hattiesburg. With the win, USM finished the 2007 regular season with a 7-5 record, and received an invitation to participate on the PapaJohns.com Bowl on 22-Dec-07 in Birmingham. With these accomplishments, Bower extended his streak of consecutive winning seasons to 14, and he had increased his Bowl resume to 10 bowl games over the past 11 seasons. As USMNEWS.NET reported on 26-Nov-07, Bower's bowl record includes invites to the All-American Bowl, the GMAC Bowl [2], the Houston Bowl, the Humanitarian Bowl, the Liberty Bowl [3], the New Orleans Bowl [2], and now the PapaJohns.com Bowl.

Shortly after the news had spread across the State and nation, USM athletics officials held a press conference (4:00pm, 26-Nov-07) to announce what was called "Bower's resignation."¹ There, Bower stood before the media alongside his wife, Debbie, and his daughter, Stephanie, as shown below in George Clark's photo for *The Hattiesburg American*.



George Clark | Hattiesburg American

USM head football coach Jeff Bower announces his resignation at a press conference Monday as he is flanked by daughter, Stephanie, left, and wife, Debbie.

¹ Famed Mississippi sportswriter, Rick Cleveland, puts it well by stating: "The university called Bower's departure 'a resignation.' But, clearly, it wasn't what Bower wanted, as we heard when Bower read from a prepared statement at a 4 p.m. press conference. 'There comes a time in any situation that you must move on,' Bower said, with his wife, Debbie, and daughter, Stephanie, standing at his side. 'I want you to know that there is a lot of fight left in Jeff Bower. I'm not done yet.'"

There, as the tears flowed freely from daughter Stephanie, Bower defiantly informed the Southern Miss family that his career was not done, that he would remain on the national scene.



George Clark | Hattiesburg American

Bower hugs defensive back Brandon Sumrall while congratulating all the seniors before their last regular season game at Southern Miss.

The Clarion Ledger's Rick Cleveland summed up the shock that Bower's decision inflicted on current members of the USM football program through his interview with USM gridiron star, Damion Fletcher:

Twenty-year-old Damion Fletcher walked out of the University of Southern Mississippi athletic complex late Monday afternoon, head down and a somber look on his face.

"It's crazy, just crazy," Fletcher, USM's sophomore football hero, answered, when asked about the day's stunning news that Jeff Bower's long, successful career as USM's head football coach is at end.

And, at about the time that Fletcher was being interviewed by Cleveland, former NFL MVP and Southern Miss star, Brett Favre, was telling media outlets that USM would most likely regret making the decision at some point in the future.

Many have asked: What was "new" USM President, Martha Saunders, doing while the State was being surprised by Bower's so-called resignation? On 26-Nov-07, during the middle of the episode described above, Saunders, who many USM supporters have taken to referring to as "Aunt Martha," penned the follow e-mail to USM faculty, staff, and students:

To the faculty, staff and students,

Today, Jeff Bower stepped down as head football coach at The University of Southern Mississippi. We thank him for his 17 years of service as Coach Bower has made important contributions to the growth of the football program. He has earned a prominent place in Southern Miss athletic history building a tradition of winning on the field and academic excellence in the classroom.

We look forward to the Golden Eagles playing in the PapaJohns.Com Bowl in Birmingham on December 22 as we continue to build upon our success in the years to come.

Martha D. Saunders
President

Not only is Saunders' e-mail above poorly written, it is distasteful in the sense that it grossly understates what Bower has meant to USM and to Hattiesburg. Saunders perpetuates what Rick Cleveland understands as misinformation by using the term "stepped down," and she provides false security in notion that USM's football program, like the University, will rise to that elusive, proverbial "next level."



Martha Saunders

Now, just 24 hours later, USM sits in the middle of a public relations quagmire. This is not surprising, given that one of the masterminds of 26-Nov-07 is none other than USM Athletics Director, Richard Giannini, the individual who ill-advisedly chastised Hattiesburg-area citizens, and particularly members of the Hattiesburg's African-American community, for not supporting USM's \$12 million bond issue in 2004. Now, many supporters of USM are calling for the firing of Giannini, a move that insiders say



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SOUTHERN MISS athletic director Richard Giannini addresses the media during Monday's news conference to announce that head football coach Jeff Bower had resigned.

may actually have to occur in the near future in order to mitigate some of the bad press that USM is currently facing.



GEORGE CLARK | Hattiesburg American

JEFF BOWER reads from a prepared statement after announcing his resignation as USM's football coach Monday.

As the hours pass by, more and more supporters are beginning to believe that Brett Favre's comment will seem prophetic, and sooner rather than later. Even with only the disastrous PR situation the institution now faces, one must now ponder just how much more the institution can take.