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## It's a question of leadership and Bellotti didn't show it

**BYLINE:** John Canzano, The Oregonian

The head football coach at the University of Oregon could have blamed his blind spot when it comes to ACL injuries on greed. Or pressure from influential boosters.

Mike Bellotti could have just said that sending a spread-option quarterback into a football game with a torn ACL was a terrible decision, one that he'd rethink given another opportunity.

If he wanted to make sense of this for the rest of us, Bellotti could have said he made a mistake. Or that he got bad advice. Or that he realized he'd never get this close to another national championship and had so many people telling him he had to start Dennis Dixon, that he didn't stop to realize that there's more than football at stake here.

Instead, Bellotti said of the Dixon decision: "I took myself out of it." Then, during a weekly conference call, he snapped at one Ducks beat reporter who asked a question about university responsibility. Then, after being second-guessed about the decision, Bellotti threatened, as apparent punishment, that he'd alter policy and not discuss injuries anymore.

So I have just one question for the rest of us today:

Would you let this guy coach your kid?

We understand that Dixon is an adult. And we all understand that he was in the Heisman race and badly wanted to play against Arizona, even after injuring the ligament in his left knee 12 days before against Arizona State. And we get that doctors fulfilled their "informed consent" requirements and explained to Dixon that he was risking further injury to his ligament, joint and surrounding cartilage by playing.

What we might never comprehend, though, is how Bellotti, the state's highest-paid employee, doesn't understand that he had an obligation to be involved in a decision with high stakes not only for Oregon's football program, but also for a student-athlete. It's called leadership.

National title? Heisman trophy? Fame? Fortune? Glory?

Wonderful, sure. But at what cost, coach?

The handling of the Dixon decision could tarnish Bellotti's reputation, and he knows it. There's no other reason for his attempt to diminish his role in the process. There's no other need for the flimsy plausible deniability he's created. Or the contempt for anyone who dares to suggest that he was wrong.

When I learned of Dixon's injury, I half wondered if this signaled that we'd officially entered "The Friday Night Lights" era at UO, starring Dennis "Booby" Dixon.

Not exactly the stuff of "Chicken Soup for the Coach's Soul." Hey, winning big is one thing, but trampling on your values and risking it all to do so stinks.

Dennis Dixon Sr., who was in the locker room at halftime against Arizona, said Monday that his son was walking around while the Ducks prepared for the second half and saying, "I feel good." It's a wonder that Bellotti didn't helicopter a specialist into the stadium, get quick clearance, and start the second half with his senior running the plays.

This is the same coach who recruited Rodney Woods, despite a then-felony assault conviction and the strong objections of a district attorney in California. And Bellotti's the same coach who brought Richie Incognito onto campus when the University of Nebraska recognized he was a talent on the field, but a terror to the student body off it. Which is only to say, if your kid can play, Bellotti wants him on the field.

The guy wins football games, and has staying power with the right boosters, but would you want your kid in Bellotti's care?

If you're looking for a coach to teach your child, you want him or her to possess good leadership skills. The ability to make good decisions, or quickly reverse bad ones, is valuable. Also attractive are accountability, courage, passion, integrity, honesty, inspiration, vision and patience.

And while Bellotti tried to win a few more games on Dixon's legs, he would have gained much more by demonstrating to the rest of the team that it could win without Dixon the same way that it won without playmakers Jeremiah Johnson, Cameron Colvin and Brian Paysinger.

Far as we know, none of those Ducks were offered the opportunity to play through their injuries.

Bellotti took himself out if it?

What Bellotti really means is that he doesn't want to be held responsible. He wants you to believe that Dixon and the doctors acted alone. And also, Bellotti wants to skate free after misleading the public. In the days before the Arizona game, Oregon officials said Dixon had a knee sprain. On Sunday, Bellotti said, "Actually, a tear of the knee is a sprain."

Actually, it's a headache, coach.