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One College Used Football to Win Fame. But What Has It Lost?

By Emma Pettit OCTOBER 19, 2018 INDEPENDENCE, KAN.



Joseph Rushmore for The Chronicle

Spectators fill the bleachers at an Independence Community College Pirates game. Above, cameras film the action for a documentary called "Last Chance U."

The football players pour out of the inflatable pirate skull, and the crowd lets out a holler. On the sideline they fasten their gold helmets and swing their legs, flashes of light glinting off their gold-plated cleats.

Off the field, roving film crews tail key players. A producer directs traffic from the bleachers. Dressed in dark skinny jeans and sneakers, she scans the crowd and spots a boy with a cast on his

arm in the front row. She signals for her cameraman, who hunches down to the boy's level, the camera trained on him. The producer hovers behind, mock-cheering for the child to mimic.

The Independence Community College Pirates are used to cameras. For two seasons now, the football team has been the subject of *Last Chance U*, a Netflix documentary that follows NFL hopefuls at two-year colleges. For the most part, those students don't want to be there. Community college is merely a launching pad to a four-year program, and maybe the NFL after that.

On this late summer evening, the stakes are smaller: Beat Hutchinson Community College. For the reigning conference champion, that should be no problem.

What happens tonight will reach an international audience when the show's new season debuts. But residents of Independence, Kan., don't want to wait, and have turned out en masse. Fans sit shoulder to shoulder on concrete-slab benches, some sporting T-shirts with "DREAMU" printed across their chests.

Eager cheerleaders try to coax the crowd into joining their chants, but few do. They sit quietly. Celebrating Independence football is still unfamiliar.

And it's controversial. Some people love the Saturday-night pageantry, the cameras that pan through the lively parking-lot tailgates. They love that the show injected life into this shrinking Midwestern town.

For others here, the college's star turn was the final blow. Before the cameras arrived on the small campus, instructors were leaving rapidly amid whispers of a president dead-set on aiding football's rise. And as word traveled, townspeople got ever more frustrated with what was happening at one of the last community institutions they had.

When the show aired in July, everybody in town watched it — at least, that's what it felt like. A new lens on the divided community revealed unwelcome depictions: A podunk town. A team of kids from far away. A head coach who swore and belittled higher learning. All in service of Independence Community College, a newly minted football factory.

The fault lines were old. But now new ones appeared, spreading like spiderwebs from campus to the town that was forced to weather the aftershocks.

For decades, Independence football stank. At one point it lost 21 games in a row. Even in a town with little else happening on a Saturday night, tailgates were a pitiful exercise: a dozen people and a couple of trucks.

Then came Jason Brown.

The cigar-chomping showboat of a head coach was once described by the college's president as a "creature of pure testosterone." Bearded with a shaved head, Brown is a monument to profanity. When he's berating a player, he doesn't let a sentence leave his mouth without a few of his favorite four-letter words. His cursing can sound downright poetic; some rants leave his players cracking smiles.



When Brown gets on the subject of community college, watch out. Two-year colleges, he says, are "football jail." Imprisoned at the junior level, ambitious athletes long to break free. Brown knows all about that. Before becoming a coach, he made it out himself. Born and raised in Compton, Calif., Brown played at the city's community college and spent time in the NFL before he was lured to Independence at the end of 2015.



Dion Lefler, The Wichita Eagle, AP Images

Greg Whiteley (left), director of "Last Chance U," watches with Jason Brown, coach of the Pirates, during a practice. For the TV show, Whiteley sought a coach who was willing to be both candid and vulnerable on camera.

When Brown got here, he brought a high profile and a knack for recruiting. Just months after he arrived, his Cadillacs in tow, a change in conference rules allowed him to take full advantage.

For 50 years, Kansas community colleges were limited in how many athletics scholarships they could give to out-of-state students. But in 2016, the cap was eliminated, and the floodgates opened. Independence could go after phenoms wherever they lived. So Brown and his staff began targeting big-time players who had fallen out at big-time institutions.

Some hadn't been able to pass their classes. Some had gotten caught smoking weed too many times, had been arrested, or had broken team rules. Some had nowhere else to go. One recruit drove to Independence with \$80, a Tupperware of spaghetti, and little else.

To his prospects, Brown sold Independence as a slingshot: a small step backward to launch them into futures far away. With grit and luck, players could rehabilitate their grades, and sometimes their reputations, for another shot at a four-year scholarship and, eventually, hopefully, an NFL

paycheck. The pitch worked. On this year's roster, two of the college's players are from Kansas. The other 77 are from somewhere else.

With Brown at the helm and a stable of talent, in 2017 Independence seemed primed for a breakout year. And *Last Chance U* wanted to be there.

The first two seasons of the show had followed a community-college football dynasty, East Mississippi Community College, in Scooba, Miss. Independence represented the opposite, a chance to watch an underdog claw its way the top. The show's creator and director, Greg Whiteley, also wanted candor and vulnerability from its head coach, which Brown was more than willing to give. And Whiteley wanted free rein to shoot intimate moments, which he also got. In return, the college got \$30,000 per season in exchange for full access to its staff, students, and facilities, according to the contract obtained by *The Chronicle*.

That August, cameras arrived. For months a crew watched Brown do his thing. They watched ICC morph from the conference doormat to the conference Goliath. They watched Shulthis Stadium, the only one in town, fill up. They watched athletes struggle to keep their grades afloat and avoid trouble. "I sleep at night 'cause of how many kids I graduate and don't go to jail," Brown said in a recent interview on a Netflix podcast, "not 'cause of how many wins I have."

That season, Brown got both. More than 20 of his athletes secured offers to four-year institutions. Independence clinched the conference championship and won its first-ever bowl game.

Success didn't come easy. While racking up W's, Brown's players had what he called the worst grades he'd ever seen. Assistant coaches would trail players to classes, chastising them if they skipped or walked in late. Staff hosted study halls. They tracked grades. And still the GPAs were abysmal.

On the show's third season, Brown prints out transcripts and ticks off the many Fs. He yells, curses, and yells some more to motivate his players to do better. For Brown, an Independence education is a means to an end, a hurdle his players have to clear if they want to detach themselves from the trouble that brought them here. Graduate so you can move forward, he tells his players. "I know you guys can't comprehend half that shit," he says about the classroom. "It is a *game*. If you go to class, stay off your fucking phone, sit in the front, turn in your homework, you'll get a C."

Brenda Sanchez watched in her living room, annoyed. College is much more than just a hurdle.

Sanchez spent her career pushing students to improve. Twelve years ago, she moved to Independence to teach English courses at the college, where she began building a reputation as strict but accessible. Sanchez baked cupcakes for her students and painted her office pink. She let students rent rooms in her house if they needed an option cheaper than the dorms. But she held high standards. She'd set a precedent in one class that if her students didn't come prepared with their books, notebooks, and pens, they couldn't come back to class without writing an apology letter first.

As years passed, Sanchez made a home in Independence. She bought a house on a cul-de-sac and painted the trim a berry hue. She made friends at the local VFW. She took an active role with the college's faculty association, enmeshing herself in the campus culture.

As at many colleges, faculty and the administration didn't always get along. Years after year, professors and higher-ups locked horns. Some faculty members began to notice a pattern:

Administrators would come in, build their résumés, and leave, which left faculty members feeling disillusioned. Then, when administrators were replaced with new hires, veteran professors weren't the most welcoming. That ruffled feathers. The cycle continued.



Joseph Rushmore for The Chronicle

Brenda Sanchez looks at things she brought home from her office at Independence Community College, where she taught English for 12 years. In March the president told her she could either be terminated or resign.

And a few years ago, Sanchez started hearing stories about Daniel W. Barwick, the philosophy professor turned fund raiser who'd become president of the college in 2011.

Barwick had garnered a reputation in some circles as vindictive. Hoite Caston, a former board member, described him as "duplicitous." Last year Caston, who acknowledged that he is frequently a thorn in the president's side, received a cease-and-desist letter from Barwick's lawyer, demanding that he stop defaming the president in letters to the editor of two local newspapers. If Caston didn't stop, the letter said, Barwick would "seek maximum damages and penalties allowed by law."

Critiques of Barwick's leadership style began to surface in the local press. He can be like Harold Hill in *The Music Man*, selling people on an idea with a song and dance, said Andy Taylor, editor of the *Montgomery County Chronicle*. He's often philosophical, a good talker, Taylor added. But when Barwick doesn't get his way, "he acts like a middle-schooler," said a current Independence professor who insisted on anonymity out of fear of job loss. "He takes his ball home."

Sanchez had never clashed with Barwick herself. And with her feet firmly planted in the college's faculty association, she knew where she stood. But in December the tension escalated.

At a meeting of the association, professors voted no confidence in Barwick. The college's cash reserves had declined during his tenure. Enrollment was unstable. Barwick himself had been evasive and self-serving, the group said. Perhaps most important, ICC had recently been put on notice by its accreditor, the Higher Learning Commission, which cited a lack of long-term planning and appropriate record keeping.

Yet Barwick wouldn't release the accreditor's initial site report with all the details.

To Sanchez, the treasurer of the faculty association, that felt dishonest. "We need to improve ourselves," she remembers thinking, "but how can we improve ourselves if we don't know exactly what it is that they're looking for?"

But weeks after the vote, they walked it back with another vote. People disagree on why. Sanchez said the association realized that if it didn't back down, things would get worse. And Barwick seemed to have gotten the message. The president said he received complaints saying the process was hurried and fraught.

Either way, the relationship between top brass and the faculty, while far from perfect, appeared to be on the mend.

So when Sanchez was called into a meeting with the president in March, she didn't feel too worried. She had tenure, and her student reviews were positive. Still, she recorded the meeting secretly, just in case.

In his office, Barwick handed Sanchez a 14-page packet and began reading a prepared statement. Based on recent complaints against Sanchez from students and employees, as well a statistical analysis of her grading, Barwick said, the college had determined that she had violated "the federal rights of our African-American students."

Based on the data, Barwick said, he would recommend that Sanchez be fired.

She was stunned. Where were these allegations coming from? When Sanchez flipped through the report Barwick had handed her, she got a better idea.

The first substantive complaint listed in the report was made not by a student or a colleague — but by the athletic department.

In September 2016, Brown's first season at Independence, someone in the department complained about Sanchez's strictness. The book, notebook, and pen rule, for one thing, struck the department as unfair. And things she'd said to football players, including a suggestion that she could arrange for them to lose scholarship eligibility, were marked as inappropriate.

According to the report, one student offered the following complaint: "She does not really try and help you if your doing bad in her class and don't teach how a teacher should teach she is very disrespectful and talks back to the students if I stay in her class I will not pass to me she is just not a very good teacher for me her explaining is not very good."

The report included other complaints against Sanchez. An unnamed faculty member had criticized her tone when she spoke with African-American students. An unnamed African-American student had complained about Sanchez's not changing a grade when she said she would. And an African-American English instructor complained that Sanchez had said the instructor had been hired because she's black. (That is the only complaint Sanchez corroborated. It was more complicated,

she said. She said she'd meant it as a compliment, only to realize afterward it was offensive. She reported it herself to human resources.)

The report against Sanchez didn't rest on anecdotes alone. There was also data, data that Barwick said made the college's case "very strong." But when Sanchez examined the report, she found reasons to be suspicious. The scales of the graphs had been formatted to exaggerate the difference between her grading trends and others'. In most comparisons, she'd been compared with only two colleagues. (At *The Chronicle*'s request, a statistics professor at American University reviewed that analysis and found that it ignored a wealth of variables and was "sufficiently flawed" to not show racial bias.)

But Sanchez hadn't had time to review the report before Barwick gave her a choice. She could be terminated. Or, Barwick told her, she could resign, get 15 paid weeks of salary and benefits, and nothing would appear in her personnel file.

"I urge you to consider resignation," he said.

If Sanchez had accepted, she would have been in good company.

In the past five years, four instructors and a theater director have all reached separation agreements with ICC, according to records obtained by *The Chronicle*. The college has paid, or agreed to pay, at least \$215,000 for those agreements, most of which include nondisparagement and/or nondisclosure clauses.

Five such agreements in five years is "extraordinary" for Kansas, according to Tony White, a field representative with the Kansas National Education Association. White negotiates on behalf of ICC faculty members and those at 25 other unionized school districts and community colleges in the area. Though the college accounts for about 2 percent of White's members, he said, in recent years it's reached more such agreements than all of his other clients combined.

Turnover, in general, is a common theme at the college. A steady stream of instructors have cycled through in the past five years or so. Some left for greener pastures: jobs at four-year universities or better-paying private gigs.

But the pace seems to have accelerated. In the past year, about a quarter of the college's full-time instructors have cut ties with the college, including Matt Carter, a former band director who arrived with high hopes in 2016. But over the past two years, Carter said, his department had to "beg, steal, and borrow" to attend professional conferences. Resources for the fine arts dried up, he said, while those for football seemed plentiful. At a certain point, Carter said, it felt like no matter what he tried to do, it'd be done in vain.

It seemed that football had become the college's guiding light.

Reviewers with the college's accrediting agency reached the same conclusion in its report, the one that the faculty association hadn't been allowed to see. That report, a copy of which was obtained by *The Chronicle*, questioned the college's focus on athletics. Investigators heard claims of special treatment and possible "ethical lapses." Multiple athletes said they'd been told that "attending class was not important because their grades would be 'taken care of.'" There was a perception of "preferential treatment of athletes, watered-down courses to accommodate athletes, coaches trying to influence athletes' grades and the hiring of staff who might favor athletes," said the report, which

also described a "pervasive fear of retribution for speaking openly" and questioned the college's spending priorities.

Administrators repudiated the findings, especially the one about a culture of fear. That finding was the handiwork of one disgruntled employee who rigged the responses, the college argued. (Reached by *The Chronicle*, that now-former employee said she was told she was fired because of declining performance reviews.)



Joseph Rushmore for The Chronicle

Residents of Independence watch the ICC Pirates take on Hutchinson Community College.

Sanchez watched as more colleagues packed up their offices. Right after her meeting with Barwick, she'd done the same. Boxes of notebooks, pompoms, and sparkle pens sit packed in one of her side rooms.

At a hearing, probably in December, Sanchez will challenge the allegations. In the meantime, she's banned from campus and from having any contact with African-American students or employees, so long as her case is still pending.

So Sanchez shops at the Walmart during dead hours. She bakes cookies she'd normally share with her students, but gives the batch to her garbage collectors instead. She watched *Last Chance U* between completing chores, readying her house for sale.

On good days, she busies herself with craft projects and chores. On bad days, she drags out each task. Her anxiety spirals. She's paralyzed between wanting to stay in Independence and wanting to move on. It feels, she said, "like I'm in limbo."

On *Last Chance U*, Independence is presented as a kind of limbo. Do your time here, you might get to heaven someday.

It looks like limbo, too. Netflix introduces viewers to Independence through a ramshackle covered wagon. In an opening shot, two horses pull it past a one-story flea market while the opening notes of "Home on the Range" play. There's not a lot going on here.

But that wagon and the decrepit storefront are actually in Coffeyville, residents grumble, a blue-collar town 20 miles south. In a place where, as one resident explained, "nobody can fart without somebody knowing about it," word spread about how Independence was being portrayed.

Independence has seen its population dwindle and its institutions close since the local oil boom ran dry. People take pride in their community college. But for the past year, skeptical residents have identified the focus on football as evidence of irresponsibility run amok at the college, one of the only pillars of stability the community has left. When the show's third season dropped in July, it was a match in the powder keg.

The community college is one of the few institutions left in this shrinking Kansas town.

The anger had been building. In April people protested after learning that the college's baseball program had been abruptly canceled. Neither parents nor players were given notice. The decision was made, the college's board said, because of Title IX compliance and financial issues. Critics saw football's fingerprints. "You've made a decision here that it's football or die," Ron Denney, a local youth baseball coach, told the board. He'd coached hundreds of local kids, he said, many of whom he'd sent to ICC. Until now.

Then the college approved a new turf practice field in June. The roughly \$600,000 project will be paid for, in part, by the college's foundation, which was originally established to support academic endeavors only, said Tim Emert, a local lawyer who helped start the foundation. "So much for loyalty to the purpose," he wrote in an email.

And on July 20, when the TV show made its debut, "mouths dropped across town," said Taylor, the newspaperman. That disingenuous opening shot made Independence look "wrecked up and hokey," he said. And it made the college look foolish for allowing so much access, especially to Brown, who cusses with abandon, Taylor said.

The college had invited the cameras in. Those cameras didn't show the town's ornate churches or its technicolored carousel, still revolving at 5 cents a ride. They didn't portray the town's history, a source of pride for many residents, or local lore. There's no mention of Mickey Mantle, who, legend has it, once hit a home run so far here that it sailed into the zoo, landing on Monkey Island. And there's no mention of the fact that, years later, a monkey born on Monkey Island was launched into space, zooming 300 miles into the atmosphere.

Newly insulted, residents made themselves known at board meetings. The college had recently released its budget. Amid a financial crunch, faculty positions and a retirement-fund contribution for instructors were cut, and academic programs saw steep reductions. By contrast, football's budget was trimmed by just \$335.

And that budget included a tax hike to shore up the college's cash reserves. It's estimated to cost the average homeowner \$15 to \$20 more per year — not much, but not nothing. Even if they didn't agree with the college's new turn, the people of Independence would be paying for it.

Residents aired their grievances directly to the board. "By making bad decisions, you answer it by increasing our taxes to pay for your mistakes," Fred Schulz, father of the college's former baseball coach, told the board. "It's simple math."

But the decision to invite *Last Chance U* to Independence, Barwick said in an interview, had little to do with the college itself. In fact, there was substantial risk in allowing a film crew that kind of access. Instead, he said, it was all about raising the fortunes of this wonderful but not-well-known town. "*Last Chance U* was the only way that I could think of to bring the beautiful town of Independence to literally tens of millions of people."

So when news broke at the end of August that Barwick, the man behind Independence's big bet on football, was one of five semifinalists for a college presidency in North Dakota, critics saw an opportunist getting out while he still could. In his application for the job, Barwick sold his ability to transform a "laughingstock" of a football program into a gridiron behemoth. "When people see the revenue and community involvement that comes from fielding competitive athletic teams," he wrote, "support follows." (He wasn't selected.)

The *Independence Daily Reporter* ran an editorial cartoon of a ship, labeled Independence Community College, manned by a crew of pirates and Pirate football players. As the vessel tilts, threatening to capsize, Barwick leaps for a life raft.



Ask Barwick about all this anger, and he's thoughtful. If his leadership at Independence is perceived negatively, "I believe that I should shoulder that responsibility," he said.

But anecdote alone is too thin to prove that football is taking priority at Independence, Barwick said. He sends along data the college compiled last year showing that Independence spends less on football than every other nationally competitive team in its conference. (More recent federal data suggests that the college is in the middle of the pack, not the bottom, spending \$609,453 on football from July 2016 to June 2017.)

There's always been an unappeasable peanut gallery in Independence, said Valerie DeFever, the board chair. "When we didn't have a winning team, the gripe was we didn't have a winning team," she said. "Then you get a winning team, and they gripe because they think it's costing them too much."

And many residents love the show. To Diane Spencer, a local teacher, Independence can feel as if it's slowly dying. Something like this, she said, breathes new life into it. Amy Bloomfield, another fan, loves the whole concept of *Last Chance U* — that young men are given a fresh shot to alter their trajectories. "I love that they're getting a second chance," she said. "Doesn't everybody deserve that?"

A boy and his mother try to decide if it will fit as they shop for merchandise at an ICC Pirates game.

Ask other townspeople what they dislike about the Netflix era in Independence, and they don't talk about money or professors or the baseball team. They talk about the football players.

They're disrespectful.

They always have their headphones in.

They've been arrested.

They're lazy.

In much of the discontent that's greeted Independence's football powerhouse, racism is a steady undercurrent.

Kansas has a low African-American population, about 6 percent (the United States is roughly 13 percent black). And before two years ago, Independence's football program was mostly Kansas kids. If someone was a decent-enough athlete in southeast Kansas, he could expect to get some scholarship money at Independence or one of the other nearby junior colleges, said Mark Andrews, a high-school football coach in Coffeyville. He might ride the bench, but he'd have a slot.

But in 2016, a coach and some Kansas community-college players filed complaints with the NAACP. Eight colleges threatened to leave the conference if its rule about out-of-state scholarship players was not changed. The original aim, they said, was to keep Kansas white. A Kansas sportswriter who supported the rule change wrote that after nine months in a town of 27,000, he probably saw seven black people. "One I worked with," he wrote, "and the others I might've imagined."

After the cap was lifted, ICC brought in dozens of out-of-state athletes — most of them African-American, many of them from places that bear little resemblance to rural southeast Kansas.

In front of the camera, black athletes talk about adjusting to an overwhelmingly white town. In a book club, they discuss how it feels to be stereotyped. A player said strangers on separate occasions approached him at the Walmart, asking to buy weed. Hanging out at Walmart is one of the only times players interact with many of the residents. The college's main campus is south of Independence, and many players don't have cars. The locals seem to be "real fond of us," said Arin Reynolds, an offensive lineman, but the players don't get into town all that much.

On a popular online message board, language about the team can be overtly racist. They're called "thugs" and "hoodlums" for sleeping during their classes, or for "stealing" the town's "hard-earned tax dollars" with their presence. There are lies about the length of their criminal records. Screeds erupt from trolls who claim that these players don't appreciate the chance they're being given.

Gossip around town is more coded. When discussing football, the athletes' race is often the elephant in the room, said Emert, the local lawyer, who was born about six blocks from what would become his office. As a longtime Independence resident, he said, he doesn't think race bothers people the way it used to. But of course, he added, there are "redneck bigots everywhere."

On countless screens, Independence stands for second chances. It's a way station, a proving ground, the slingshot that can send you far away. But to many people who live here, watching *Last Chance U* was like staring into a broken mirror. This was their community college. And they wanted to like what they saw.

Jerry Wilson was once the young football player itching to leave. Now he's the adult who hung around. Sitting shirtless on his porch in southeast Kansas, with his seven-month-old daughter on his shoulder, Wilson recounted how he got here.

Raised in a town 30 miles to the east, Wilson thrived on ICC's football field, helping the team win its first conference championship in 1987. If things had gone differently, that victory could've sent Wilson far from southeast Kansas, which is what he'd wanted all along. He didn't need to go professional. He just wanted to go anywhere else.

Jerry Wilson, shown here with his daughter, Piper, played football for ICC until he injured his knee. Now he's a coach and a teacher living in Independence, where his neighbors have sometimes made racist comments about him and his family.

But a broken knee ended those dreams, and now he's made a life here: a town where his race makes him an outlier. His neighbors make that painfully clear. There are the people across the street who whispered the N-word, not quietly, when he moved onto their block. Once a man down the street announced that he'd found one of Wilson's family members, and raised a stuffed raccoon over the fence.

Wilson has also found fulfillment here. He discovered that he loves to garden, and to mentor young men as a high-school football coach and substitute teacher. His players confide in him, and his black students see themselves in him.

As the sun drops low and his bulldogs roll in the dirt, Wilson thinks about the players on *Last Chance U*, who hope, as he hoped, to make their names somewhere else. Players who got trounced by Hutchinson that warm Saturday night, starting a five-game losing streak. Players who now have no shot of replicating last year's success story.

That show, cataloging the young athletes' dreams, their triumphs, their heartaches, is telling one truth, Wilson said. Harder truths await outside the stadium walls.