

Swarbrick: Te'o Victim of 'Elaborate Hoax'

Written by Sean Stires

Wednesday, 16 January 2013 22:36



NOTRE DAME, Ind. – It is the hoax of the century. It is maybe even the hoax of a lifetime. That is the essence in which Notre Dame Athletic Director Jack Swarbrick described the current situation surrounding Manti Te'o.

The Notre Dame All-American roped-in the hearts of football fans and non football fans alike across the nation in September when word spread that first Te'o's grandmother and then his girlfriend, a woman he knew as Lennay Kekua, had died within hours of one another. Te'o helped his team beat Michigan State that week and then Michigan the next in the wake of his personal tragedy.

Deadspin.com reported on Wednesday that Kekua never existed. The web site went further by saying that Te'o had fabricated the entire relationship with the 22-year old woman, whom he said he "met" after Notre Dame's game against Stanford in 2009.

Te'o has not yet publicly commented (he is expected to on Thursday), but Swarbrick did in his stead Wednesday night in a hastily called news conference inside the Guglielmino Athletics Complex on the Notre Dame campus. Swarbrick detailed what he called an "elaborate and sophisticated hoax" perpetrated by several people at Te'o's expense.

Swarbrick compared the dupe perpetrated on Te'o to a movie documentary and an MTV derivative series called "Catfish".

Swarbrick: Te'o Victim of 'Elaborate Hoax'

Written by Sean Stires

Wednesday, 16 January 2013 22:36

“It is a scam that follows the exact arc of this hoax against Te’o,” Swarbrick began. “It’s perpetrated with shocking frequency for me. Shocking as an older guy who’s not as versed in the on-line world, but it is just as in this one – an initial casual engagement, a developing relationship on-line, a subsequent trauma (such as) traffic accident (or) illness, and then a death. As hard as it is for me to get my arms around this, there is apparently some sport in doing this and being able to do it successfully.”

“Kekua” was reportedly in a traffic accident in Los Angeles and then later diagnosed with leukemia after her long distance relationship with Te’o began. Swarbrick says Te’o never met “Kekua” in person. All of his contact with the woman came in either on-line fashion through social media or on the telephone.

The AD said Te’o had scheduled several in person meetings with the woman, including in Te’o’s native Hawaii, but she was a no-show every time. Te’o went from mid-September until early December believing the woman he knew as his girlfriend had died. That changed with an eerie phone call.

“On the morning of December 26th, very early morning, Manti called his coaches to inform them that while he was in attendance at the ESPN (college football) awards show in Orlando (on Dec. 6) he received a phone call from a number he recognized as having been that he associated with Lennay Kekua,” Swarbrick recounted.

“When he answered it, it was a person whose voice sounded like the same voice he had talked to, who told him that she was in fact not dead. Manti was very unnerved by that, as you might imagine.”

The woman continued to attempt to contact Te’o for the next several weeks, but the linebacker never responded. Head coach Brian Kelly and defensive coordinator Bob Diaco were the two coaches Te’o shared the information with nearly three weeks after the shocking phone call. Swarbrick says he waited to tell his coaches, because he wanted to tell his parents about the call in person while he was home in Hawaii for Christmas.

Swarbrick: Te'o Victim of 'Elaborate Hoax'

Written by Sean Stires

Wednesday, 16 January 2013 22:36

Swarbrick then met with Te'o on Dec. 27 and asked him to review every detail of his relationship with the woman. They met again the next day to continue the fact finding and checking. Swarbrick then informed other members of the university, although the authorities were never notified by either Te'o or Notre Dame.

"We believed that was the victim's decision to make," Swarbrick responded when asked why the school never called authorities. "And Manti was the victim here. He and his family, in consultation with whomever they choose to consult with, had that decision to make. We (the university) were not the victim. We had been impacted, but I don't want to confuse this at all – Manti Te'o was the victim of this scam."

While the university never called authorities, an independent investigative firm was hired to look into what they believed to be an "elaborate hoax". That firm was able to root out of cyber space evidence to support Te'o's story.

"(They) were able to discover on-line chatter among the perpetrators," Swarbrick said. "(It) was sort of the ultimate proof of this – the joy they were taking, the sort of casualness with which among themselves they were referring to what they had accomplished and what they had accomplished and what they had done."

"All that comes through it is a sort of casual cruelty," Swarbrick continued. "You know, they're enjoying the joke. "It's these shockingly casual comments about what they were doing and how they were doing it.

The elaborate scheme that stretched back three years included more than just the woman Te'o called his girlfriend. Swarbrick says that while an exact number of accomplices is not known, several people were involved. They were known to Te'o as relatives, from a brother and cousins, of "Kekua".

The "Catfish" reference by Swarbrick had already gained validity by the time his press conference ended at around 9 p.m. ET. Nev Schulman (@NevSchulman), who was the subject of the original *Catfish* documentary, Tweeted "*I am working on finding out more about this @MTeo_5 story. I have been in contact with the woman involved and will get the truth.*"

Swarbrick: Te'o Victim of 'Elaborate Hoax'

Written by Sean Stires

Wednesday, 16 January 2013 22:36

There will, and already are cynics lining-up to discredit any account Te'o has of his relationship with the woman and her death. Some have already speculated that the story was part of his Heisman Trophy campaign. Swarbrick says anyone who would make such a claim does not know Te'o.

“For those who are suspicious that can happen in sort of a virtual environment, I think there are a lot of examples out there that suggest otherwise,” he commented. “This documentary (*Catfish*) chronicles one of them, but as we've gotten into this I have been surprised to learn the frequency with which it exists and the cautionary tale it affords to those same young people. The people who will be least skeptical of this are the people who live their life with social media as an important component of it.”

The loudest critics though are those who have likely never stepped within five feet of No. 5. Te'o has lived his life at Notre Dame, especially 2012, as an open book. His now tortured saga with the woman began in 2009, and the world thought it ended with her death last September, but instead of the feel good story we all thought it was it has turned into a nightmare that will haunt Te'o – possibly for the rest of his life.

“There's a lot of tragedy here,” Swarbrick said just before choking-up with tears. “There's a lot of sorrow here, but the thing I am most sad about is (Swarbrick needed 20 seconds to fight back his tears so that he could speak) that the single most trusting human being I've ever met will never be able to trust in the same way again in his life. That's an incredible tragedy.”

It's also a story that has just begun to be told.