



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on May 7, 2013

Was High School Track Squad Disqualified Because of Religious Gesture?

A Texas high school track team has been disqualified from the state championship after one of its runners pointed to the sky after crossing the finish line. Some critics of the ruling suggested the student athlete was being singled out because he was acknowledging God. But an investigation by the athletic ruling body appears to show otherwise.



Derrick Hayes, a member of the 4×100 relay squad for the Columbus, Texas, high school track team, was jubilant as he crossed the finish line a full seven yards ahead of the next competitor, a victory that would take the squad to the state championship meet. As he crossed the finish line he pointed his finger toward the sky, a gesture his father said was meant as a gesture of thanks to God. "It was a reaction," K.C. Hayes told ABC news affiliate [WFAA](#) in Dallas. "I mean you're brought up your whole life that God gives you good things, you're blessed."

But the gesture broke a state intercollegiate rule against "excessive celebration," and a referee for the race ultimately disqualified the four-man team for "unsporting conduct," ending any chance for the team to go to the state championship. "I think it's a travesty," said Hayes of the ruling against his son. "It's a sad deal. Those kids worked hard."

The Columbus, Texas, school superintendent, Robert O'Connor, appealed the ruling to the University Interscholastic League (UIL), the governing organization for high school athletics in Texas, but it appears that the body is sticking to the original ruling. O'Connor said that while the penalty may seem excessive to some folks, the student did technically break the rule. "It's a harsh consequence for what some people may deem a small gesture," O'Connor told [Fox News](#). "The rule states no celebratory gestures, including raising your arms."

In a statement after the ruling the UIL explained that, in the opinion of officials at the meet, Derrick Hayes had "behaved disrespectfully toward meet officials" after making the gesture. "In the judgment of the official, this was a violation of NFHS track & field rule 4-6-1. The regional meet referee concurred with this decision and the student was subsequently disqualified."

O'Connor noted that according to the rule, which is meant to discourage taunting of an opponent by a student athlete, "you can do whatever you want to in terms of prayer, kneeling or whatever you want to once you get out of the competition area. You just can't do it in the competition area. It goes back to the taunting rule. I can't taunt my opponent."

K.C. Hayes said he thinks the ruling sent the wrong signal to his son and the rest of the track team.



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“You cross a finish line and you’ve accomplished a goal and within seconds it’s gone,” Hayes told WFAA. “To see four kids, you know, what does that tell them about the rest of their lives? You’re going to do what’s right, work extra hard, and have it ripped away from you?”

Some critics of the ruling attempted to frame the team’s disqualification as a squelching of religious expression. That sentiment apparently made its way to the state’s highest office, where, reported Fox News, Governor Rick Perry “called for the UIL to investigate the incident and take whatever action is necessary to ensure religious freedom and expression is protected at competitions.” Perry told a local newspaper that he would “not tolerate the suppression of religious freedom anywhere,” adding, “It is unconscionable that a student athlete could be punished for an expression of religious faith or that an act of faith could disqualify an athlete in a UIL competition.”

For its part the UIL insisted in its original statement after the ruling that there was “no indication that the decision was made because of any religious expression. This was a judgment call, as are many decisions of meet officials in all activities.”

The [Texas Tribune](#) reported that upon investigating the incident the UIL determined that Derrick Hayes’ gesture was not meant to be religious in nature, and that his behavior toward the referees investigating the incident led to the team’s disqualification. “Based on the UIL’s investigation, the student athlete raised his hand and gestured forward at the conclusion of the 4×100-meter relay,” the [UIL’s investigative statement read](#). “The meet official approached the student-athlete in an effort to warn him of a possible disqualification should that behavior continue. In the opinion of the official, the student reacted disrespectfully. Based on his reaction, the student-athlete was subsequently disqualified.”

The UIL emphasized that at “no point during the discussions surrounding the disqualification at the meet was the issue of religious expression raised by any parties.” Derrick Hayes also submitted a letter during the investigation stating: “Although I am very thankful for all God has given me and blessed me with ... my actions upon winning the 4×100 relay were strictly the thrill of victory. With this being said, I do not feel my religious rights or freedoms were violated.”



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