

LIONS TRAINING CAMP

Army throws Marinelli a curve on opening day

By NICHOLAS J. COTSONIKA • FREE PRESS SPORTS WRITER • July 23, 2008

λ

λ

λ [Print this page](#)

λ [E-mail this article](#)

λ Share this article:

λ [Del.icio.us](#)

λ [Facebook](#)

λ [Digg](#)

λ [Reddit](#)

λ [Newsvine](#)

λ [What's this?](#)

All he could do was laugh.

ADVERTISEMENT

Entering his third season as Lions coach, Rod Marinelli finally was free of controversies and distractions.

Then came a bombshell from the Army.

On the day players reported to training camp, the Lions learned Caleb Campbell, a seventh-round pick out of West Point, would have to report to military duty instead. The Army revised the policy that would have allowed Campbell to play pro football while on active duty.

“I thought I was going to get in clean,” Marinelli said.

So much for that.

“Obviously nobody likes surprises, but you’ve just got to salute and move on,” said Marinelli, an Army veteran.

When the Lions used the 218th overall pick on Campbell in April, it was a national story. Campbell was at the draft at Radio City Music Hall in New York, and fans chanted, “USA! USA!” The Lions hoped Campbell, a safety in college, could compete at linebacker and on special teams. He at least had a shot at making the practice squad.

But the story was controversial. There was debate about the policy as Campbell participated in the Lions’ off-season program.

News broke that the policy was under review. Marinelli said the Lions checked with West Point as late as last week.

“We were assured everything was fine,” Marinelli said.

The Lions agreed to a contract with Campbell on Tuesday, but he never signed it.

President Matt Millen received a call late Tuesday night that there was a problem, and the Lions got official word Wednesday morning. Millen broke the news to Campbell.

“He’s a soldier,” Lions chief operating officer Tom Lewand said. “He’s a heck of a person, and he took it like a soldier would take it.”

It wasn’t until Wednesday afternoon that Millen received a letter from Army Lt. Col. Jonathan P. Liba that explained the situation.

Liba wrote that a subsequent defense department policy superseded the Army policy instituted in 2005, and the Army policy had been revised to align and comply with it.

“Campbell has been directed to cease full-time participation in professional football to perform full-time traditional military duties,” Liba wrote.

Campbell, who trained at West Point to be an air defense artilleryman, may apply for release from his active duty obligation in May 2010 to play pro sports. Navy and Air Force graduates must serve two years before the possibility of early release.

“We apologize for any hardship that this causes the Lions, but please be assured that Caleb was allowed to enter the draft in good faith,” Liba wrote.

Campbell was unavailable for comment. Army and NFL officials did not respond to messages.

Lewand said the Lions will retain Campbell’s rights as an unsigned draft pick for now. That option gives them the most flexibility, in case something changes again. The Lions must sign Campbell before next year’s draft or they will lose his rights.

“Don’t feel cheated,” Marinelli said. “The rules were one thing, and the rules were adjusted. I adjust. The worst thing is to hang your head and feel you got cheated and, ‘Oh, woe is me.’ I’m not into that. Just, ‘Here we go. Next guy up.’”

Marinelli has experience dealing with problems. He faced various issues entering his first two camps with the Lions. That took a toll.

“When I deal with an issue, I want to deal with it right and correct,” Marinelli said. “I’ve got to get things exactly right. That’s just the way I am. So I put a lot of energy into something like that, time and energy, and it does take away from football.”

This year, there were no such problems until this. No quarterback controversy. No major contract holdouts. No malcontents. No one out of shape. Marinelli said for the first time he doesn’t anticipate fining anyone for being overweight.

The Lions have cleared out the locker room and brought in players with the attitude Marinelli wants, and that’s his main reason for optimism this season.

“I do feel good about that,” Marinelli said. “There’s very few problems right now for us.”