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HEADLINE: TOO MUCH, TOO SOON?;

Burnout and injury concerns bubble up as more young athletes specialize earlier and earlier

BYLINE: James Sullivan, Globe Correspondent

#### ABSTRACT

The proliferation of athletic programs such as camps, clinics, travel teams, and Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) tournaments has heightened an emphasis on individual excellence — at the expense, some critics say, of the health and well-being of the nation's youth, particularly those 12 and under.

In his best-selling book "Outliers," Malcolm Gladwell famously detailed the so-called "10,000-Hour Rule," the principle that the key to success involves amassing at least 10,000 hours of focused practice in your chosen field. In few places has this notion seemingly become more apparent than on the fields of youth sports, where there's been a dramatic rise over the past 15 years or so in "hyperspecialization" — players who focus on one sport year-round.

By definition, not every kid is going to be an "outlier." But the proliferation of athletic programs such as camps, clinics, travel teams, and Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) tournaments has heightened an emphasis on individual excellence — at the expense, some critics say, of the health and well-being of the nation's youth, particularly the younger members of that group.

The rise of injuries among developing athletes — especially those who specialize — has been widely noted. Sports medicine professionals estimate that overuse problems account for about half of all pediatric sport injuries. Studies show that year-round baseball training has led to a drastic increase in so-called "Tommy John" surgeries among this group. Similar repetitive strain injuries have been on the rise, including hip problems for hockey goalies and ligament tears for progressively younger basketball and soccer players.

"There are lots of forces here, and not a lot of hard statistics on it," said Dr. Mininder Kocher, associate director of the division of sports medicine at Boston Children's Hospital. "Kids 12 and under, both boys and girls, are still in their growth stages. Their growth plates are still open. Their bone and soft tissue biomechanics are different than a 14- or 16-year-old. They're also still developing neuromuscularly — balance, coordination."

Beyond the potential physical fallout of early specialization is the psychological and emotional toll on young athletes who feel pressured to perform at high levels, says Brooke de Lench, an advocate for youth sports reform.

"Parents are more intense, pushing kids more at an early age, than they were 15 years ago," says de Lench. That's when the Concord mother established the MomsTeam Institute, a watchdog resource for parents of "sports- active" children. She recently produced and directed "The Smartest Team," a PBS documentary about reducing the number of concussions in youth football.

She often hears from parents who regret the amount of family time they've devoted to their children's practice schedules: "They'll say, 'We as a family never really slowed down. We were on a treadmill.' . . . That is a very vicious cycle. It's damaging to the family unit. The kids will look back and say, 'Where did my time go?'"

In some cases, the drive toward overspecialization reflects the ambitions of a generation of helicoptering parents. Tiger Woods's early success inspired a wave of tiny kids swinging golf clubs year-round, and many parents have heard of peers who have been dragging their sons and daughters to AAU tournaments since they were learning to write in cursive.

There are also practical concerns. Amid rising college tuition rates, there are parents who are hoping to alleviate some of their impending bills through scholarships.

"There's definitely a case here and there where the parents just want the best for their kids," says Scott Dubben, a three-sport athlete who played baseball at the State University of New York at Oneonta and now directs the indoor/outdoor baseball program at Seacoast United, a network of multisport facilities based in Southern New Hampshire. But he says he tries to make it clear from the outset that "a very small percentage of high school athletes become scholarship athletes, or even college athletes at all."

Other parents say their children are making their own decisions to specialize. On a recent Monday holiday, Penny Rabatsky, a sixth-grader from Sharon, attended a softball clinic run by Division 1 college coaches at Dirt Dawg Sports, a three-year-old indoor baseball and softball training facility in Canton. Penny has committed to softball full time after playing some basketball.

Her father supports whatever decisions she makes. "I tell her straight-up — as long as you're having fun," said Dan Rabatsky, who has been coaching his daughter's recreational softball teams.

But Rabatsky admits that "it kind of bummed me out" when his daughter announced her intention to quit playing basketball. "I always played multiple sports growing up," he said. "It's good for development."

In fact, many orthopedic experts recommend that active children play more than one sport to reduce the likelihood of repetitive strain injury. Additionally, coaches and sports psychologists often note the benefits of learning to play multiple sports. Play-making creativity typically increases when an athlete has more than one frame of reference to draw upon.

Many experts say that specialization becomes less of an issue at the high school level, when young bodies have grown bigger and stronger and elite athletes may be preparing to play a particular sport in college.

Still, recreational diversity might be preferable for all but the most truly gifted athletes. At Dirt Dawg, coach Todd Usen watched as several members of his "college showcase" softball team participated in the clinic. The team, sponsored by the facility, has been invited to play in Europe next July as part of the America's Team ambassador program.

After the clinic, the coach noted that while Division 1 softball programs might be looking for young women who have specialized in the sport, "a lot of colleges in Division 3 will tell you they're recruiting 'athletes'" rather than single-sport specialists.

For girls playing for their high school teams in fall and winter sports, Usen insists that those schedules take priority over the obligations of his softball showcase team. Yet some high school coaches have been trying to restrict players from committing to off-season teams like the Dirt Dawg Sports'. One of Usen's players said she was told last year that she wouldn't make the basketball junior varsity if she continued to train with the softball team.

"She's been playing both since she was this high," said her disappointed mother.

With the rise of indoor training facilities, one-on-one coaching sessions, school vacation camps and AAU programs, there are now pay-to-play opportunities to participate in virtually any sport year-round.

In fact, wealthier families may be more likely to have children who play more and to specialize sooner. While there isn't a lot of research on the subject, one recent study found that the rate of serious overuse injuries of young athletes from families that can afford private insurance is 68 percent higher than that of families on Medicaid.

The idea that children should concentrate on a single sport from the time they're in elementary school will often backfire, says de Lench. In fact, she believes it can be the quickest way to get your child to burn out on a particular sport.

Most importantly, she says, parents need to listen to their kids and let them decide what sports they think they'd like to play.

"It's a very complex issue," she says. "You almost have to look at it kid by kid."

That's what she did with her own sons. She had triplets, all boys. By the time they were fully grown, they ranged in height from 5-foot-10 to 6-foot-6. Counter intuitively, it was the shortest one who was fanatical for football; the tallest of the three tried his hand at basketball but couldn't jump very high and eventually quit.

"He ended up playing squash," says de Lench, "and doing amazingly."

Ultimately, says de Lench, the question covers the bigger picture: "What does the whole health of a child look like?"

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HEADLINE: A Year Later, Trying to Comprehend a Young Player's Suicide

BYLINE: PETE CROATTO

Willy Alexander Thomas, a star junior forward, helped revive the hockey program at the Pennington School in New Jersey. He was also an integral part of a nationally ranked youth hockey team.

Willy, whom his family and some friends called Zander, was, by all accounts, confident, fun-loving and outgoing. He was not the most skilled athlete, but "he was an amazing competitor," said Nolan Stevens, a former player for Team Comcast, the youth club, based in Pennsauken, N.J.

Jeremy Hall, Zander's last Team Comcast coach, said, "He had a personality about him that, in the locker room, everybody just kind of flocked to."

Yet on Oct. 27, 2013, Zander drove about 70 miles from the Hamilton, N.J., home of his girlfriend, Avalon Bastecki, to the George Washington Bridge. He parked his 2003 Volkswagen Jetta midspan and wrote text messages to her and his parents at about 6 p.m. Then he jumped to his death. He was 17.

His parents, Cathy and Graham Thomas, were at a birthday party. The message from Zander read, in part: "If it didn't happen now, it'd be an endless cycle of madness. It's not either of your fault." They rushed to their home in Yardley, Pa., and tracked Zander's phone to the bridge. The

Thomases alerted the Port Authority police.

Bastecki, then a Pennington School senior, had just finished soccer practice when she read Zander's text, urging her to be successful and absolving her of blame.

Earlier that day, she said in a recent phone interview, Zander told her, "If I were to die, you are the person I would want to spend my last moments with."

To try to make sense of Zander's suicide, the Thomases turned to science and hindsight. Zander, who his parents said had been taking medication to treat mild depression for about a year, received his first concussion diagnosis a month before his death. After sitting out three weeks, he was cleared to play for a college showcase tournament in New Hampshire in late October.

"He did everything that we needed him to do in terms of showing that his brain was recovered," said Dr. Christina Master, a sports medicine specialist at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, who then monitored concussions for Team Comcast.

The wait to be cleared was too long, in the opinion of Zander and his parents. Yet Zander had complained of unabated headaches, taking ibuprofen or acetaminophen most days for more than a year before the concussion, the Thomases said. He twice said he had blacked out on the ice; his parents said they thought he did not know the meaning of the term.

The Thomases now believe that Zander must have sustained numerous subconcussive injuries, trauma to the brain that does not produce the symptoms associated with concussions. They also suspect he had multiple undiagnosed concussions throughout 15 years of playing hockey and soccer.

All of those injuries, the Thomases concluded, contributed to Zander's depression and pain. But they will never know for sure. Zander's body was not retrieved from the Hudson River for two weeks, and, his parents said, his brain was no longer suitable for study.

His friends and teammates seemed unaware that Zander was hurting. If they had known, "there are 1,500 people that would have stepped up to the plate," said Rich Brusco, a veteran team manager for Team Comcast.

"Every time I saw him, he was laughing," said Ryan Bailey, then the hockey coach at the Pennington School.

"You good, man?" was Zander's usual greeting.

"It didn't really seem like anyone took the time to ask him if he was O.K.," said Ethan Samuel, Zander's friend since third grade and a Pennington classmate. "And that's something I regret not doing."

The Thomases do not blame hockey or the doctors for his suicide. They have stopped blaming themselves. What Zander did was "illogical and nonwillful," Graham Thomas said.

Besides, the Thomases have their hands full, raising three other children and supporting a cause: preaching the discretion they did not exercise.

They are working with the Sports Legacy Institute, a nonprofit organization whose mission includes studying and treating brain trauma in athletes, to introduce concussion education to Philadelphia-area schools. Eventually, Graham Thomas, 46, who runs an insurance brokerage firm, and Cathy Thomas, 47, an elementary school teacher, want to devote all their time to the Untold Foundation, which they started to educate parents, coaches and athletes about concussions and to raise money to prevent teenage suicide.

Cathy Thomas now advises: "You don't have to get back into the game. We were so anxious: 'Oh, my gosh, Alexander has to play this weekend.' Let your brain rest and be safe about it."

In an email, Chris Nowinski, a co-founder of the Sports Legacy Institute, wrote, "There are many variables involved with suicide, and so little research has gone into the concussion connection that we do not know which variables are more significant than others."

Regarding concussion research, Master, the Children's Hospital physician, said, "We really still are at the tip of the iceberg."

Team Comcast and the Pennington School defended their responses to concussions. Pat Ferrill, the president of Team Comcast, said the organization's goal was to emphasize player safety regarding all injuries.

Bill Hawkey, the Pennington School headmaster, said Zander's death had made the school more aware of its response to concussions.

Zander's family wants his life to stand for more than instructional pamphlets and mournful what-ifs.

"He's so present in the whole house," his mother said. A battered metal hockey goal sits in the driveway. His equipment bag and three hockey sticks stand by the front door. His photos are everywhere. In the Thomases' kitchen, Zander's last recorded height, in 2011, is marked in pencil. Above it, someone wrote, "10/27/2013."

The Thomases -- including Culley, 15, Elias, 12, and Maddie, 10 -- speak of Zander all the time: Look how beautiful the sky is; it must be Alexander's doing. He's sending us a sign.

"We talk about it so freely, and I think so openly, that it becomes part of their new normalcy," Cathy Thomas said, referring to Zander's siblings. "He's not with us on the actual earth, but he's with us in spirit. We've instilled it in a very loving kind of way."

Zander's suicide has had a lasting effect on the young people he was close to.

"I feel I had to grow up really fast, because it's something no one knew how to handle," said

Bastecki, his girlfriend, now a freshman at the University of Central Florida, where she is pushing herself to be more outgoing. "It did take me out of that high school girl fantasy."

Kevin Kerr, a former Team Comcast player, is with a junior hockey team in Kearney, Neb. Initially, he was bored. Then he thought, What if Willy were here? Now, he goes fishing and hunting.

Zander continues to inspire current Team Comcast players.

"I think of him every shift I take, every stride I take on the ice," said Ryan Conlin, who tattooed Zander's uniform number, 20, on the back of his left shoulder, with hockey sticks forming a cross. He dresses at the stall that Zander used.

Overlooking a pond on the Pennington School's 54-acre campus, a wispy willow tree was planted in Zander's memory on Oct. 1, which would have been his 18th birthday. A solitary puck sits by its slender trunk.

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HEADLINE: Selling a Smaller Soccer Ball

BYLINE: CLAIRE MARTIN

At age 12 or 13, many soccer players around the world graduate from the soccer balls designed for children to the larger ones used by professionals. But when a Danish youth soccer coach named Majken Gilmartin watched her daughter's team make that transition in 2007, she was alarmed by what she saw.

As soon as the girls started using the larger ball, Ms. Gilmartin detected a difference in how they played. "They got fatigued," she says. She worried that the ball might increase their risk of injury.

"I thought, 'Why are we training with that size ball in this age?' " she recalls. "This is a ball that we play with when we are adults. Why are young girls playing with it?"

Ms. Gilmartin, who at the time was a Copenhagen-based filmmaker and organizer of soccer tournaments, knew some elite female soccer players with persistent knee and ankle injuries. She was also a lifelong soccer player herself, with her own history of soccer-induced knee surgeries - seven in all, starting at age 16. She believed that the balls were at least partly to blame.

So, in 2008, she decided to develop a smaller, softer soccer ball for girls and women. She now sells the ball through Eir Soccer (pronounced "air"), a nonprofit she founded in Copenhagen. The organization is named for the Nordic goddess of health.

The Eir ball, which is made in India and Pakistan using materials from Korea and Japan, weighs 13 ounces and has a circumference of 26.4 inches. It is one to three ounces lighter and a half-inch to one and a half inches smaller in girth than a professional-size soccer ball.

It's also made of softer materials, including foam on the inside that provides extra bounce, and a polyurethane outer layer that Ms. Gilmartin says prevents the ball from absorbing water or expanding, which would make it heavier or more rotund.

The Eir ball costs \$58. High-quality balls used in soccer games, by contrast, can range from about \$35 to \$160. So far, soccer clubs and individual players throughout Denmark have bought 16,000 Eir balls through the company's website, according to Ms. Gilmartin. Last year, she brought on Angel Gambino, an American executive and former soccer player, as a business partner. They're looking for retailers, investors and partners in the United States.

An expert who advised Ms. Gilmartin on the design was Thomas Bull Andersen, an associate professor in the sport science department at the University of Aarhus in Denmark. Mr. Andersen found that women's more slender legs and ankles mean that they have to kick a standard soccer ball at a higher velocity, on average, than men to make the same shot. The Eir ball's design adjusts for that difference.

The Eir ball also safeguards against a type of danger that Ms. Gilmartin wasn't aware of initially: concussions.

In the past several years, research has emerged that women who play soccer, basketball and ice hockey are two to three times more likely to receive concussions than men in those sports, according to Dr. Robert Cantu, clinical professor of neurology and neurosurgery and co-director of the CTE Center at the Boston University School of Medicine, and co-founder of the Sports Legacy Institute in Boston.

For girls, soccer poses the highest concussion risk of any sport, Dr. Cantu says. Only a small percentage of soccer concussions are caused by contact with the ball, but some of those injuries could be avoided with a ball like the Eir, he says. He notes that a shift to softer balls in Little League baseball has resulted in fewer head injuries in that sport.



Some rules and equipment have been tailored to female athletes in other sports. In basketball, for instance, a smaller ball is used in the W.N.B.A. and in the N.C.A.A. than in men's competition. USA Track & Field, the national governing body for the sport, recommends shorter hurdles for female runners in a majority of age groups.

"Almost all sports have adapted to give female players the best chance to succeed," Ms. Gilmartin says. She believes that soccer ball size should be determined by age and stature, and that girls, boys, women and smaller men would benefit from a smaller, softer soccer ball.

She is working to make inroads with the sport's governing bodies. The Danish Football Association, Denmark's governing body for soccer, approved Eir balls for use in girl's and women's recreational games four years ago. She recently asked the association to make it the standard ball for Danish women in the sport, and says she hopes that FIFA, the worldwide organization, will do the same.

According to U.S. Youth Soccer, which oversees youth soccer associations in every state, a league could use a smaller ball if every club in it agreed to do so. But players in interleague or interstate games would need to follow U.S. Youth Soccer rules, which call for the larger ball starting at age 12 or 13.

Brandi Chastain, who played in the Women's Premier Soccer League and is a former member of the United States women's national team, says she doesn't think professional female players should switch from the larger ball. But she agrees that boys and girls would benefit from the Eir version: "It just doesn't make sense," she says, "that you're having a 12-year-old use the same size ball as a 6-foot-4-inch, 195-pound man uses."

Dr. Cantu says children's thinner skulls and weaker necks make them more susceptible to head injuries. A sudden movement of the head, which is what causes a concussion, has a "bobble-head-doll effect" on children, he says.

Last year, Ms. Chastain, who coaches her son's youth soccer team, threatened to have her team leave the field when the coach of an opposing team refused to use a smaller ball. And this year, Ms. Chastain teamed up with Dr. Cantu's institute and the Santa Clara University Institute of Sports Law and Ethics to start the Safer Soccer Initiative, which calls for children under 14 to stop heading soccer balls. The proposed change is intended to reduce concussions.

Others in the sport have also expressed concern. In August, a group of soccer players and parents filed a class-action lawsuit against six organizations, including the United States Soccer Federation, the American Youth Soccer Organization and FIFA, contending that 50,000 high school soccer players sustained head injuries in 2010. The plaintiffs want changes in rules regarding how concussions are monitored and treated, and how many times players under 17 can head the ball.

Yet changing ingrained attitudes in any sport is a challenge. Operating as a small nonprofit in the multibillion-dollar soccer gear and apparel market certainly isn't easy for Eir Soccer. And as Ms.

Gilmartin notes, "women's soccer doesn't make money and we don't have a real fan base."

According to Ms. Chastain, the Eir ball has something working in its favor: It's faster. "It could be better for scoring goals because it would be harder for goalies to pick off," she says of the ball, which she has tried out. "And I think most people, especially in American culture, feel that soccer needs more goals."

Q&A: Should soccer players wear helmets? Top neurosurgeon weighs in on concussion risks

BY [PBS NewsHour](#) *October 25, 2014 at 12:19 PM EDT*

<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/qa-soccer-players-wear-helmets-top-neurosurgeon-weighs-concussion-risks/>

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## TROUBLE IN SAYREVILLE

By Steve Kallas

By now you probably know that seven members of the Sayreville High School varsity football team have been arrested and charged with serious crimes in the alleged sexual assaults of at least four freshman football players. This week, SNY TV produced a one-hour special, ably hosted by

Chris Carlin, to discuss numerous angles in this “Scandal in Sayreville” (that’s the title of the show, which will be re-aired on SNY at 6:30 PM on Friday and 7 PM on Saturday – full disclosure, this writer is one of the panel members on the show).

There are, of course, emotions running high on both sides: those who are furious that the varsity, junior varsity and freshman football seasons were cancelled and those who are shocked and appalled at the notion that, if the allegations are true, kids were sexually assaulting other kids with, apparently, no coach with knowledge that anything was going on.

### TRIED AS JUVENILES OR ADULTS?

From a potential criminal liability perspective, specifically in terms of potential sentencing, arguably the biggest battle is whether these kids, ranging in age from 15-17, will be charged as juveniles or adults.

As you might imagine, the differences in potential sentencing if convicted (remember, all are innocent until proven guilty) are astronomical. At the high end of the charges, for crimes like aggravated sexual assault and aggravated assault (the accused are charged with holding down and digitally penetrating freshman football players), if tried as adults, players can be sentenced for up to 10 or even 20 years in prison. If tried as juveniles, the sentences are far more lenient.

Three of the seven are charged with the most serious crimes; but the other four are also charged with various crimes that have a huge disparity in potential sentencing. For example, the crime of criminal restraint comes with a three to five-year sentence if one is tried and convicted as an adult, but only up to a 60-day sentence if one is tried and convicted as a juvenile.

Middlesex County Prosecutor Andrew Carey has stated that the factors he must consider in making this decision include the seriousness of the crime, the history of the juveniles involved (first-time arrest?) and the wishes of the victim(s).

Most telling for the Sayreville case, Mr. Carey told CBS 2’s Christine Sloan the following: “If you put somebody in jail for a significant time, they’re not going to come out of jail a better

person. There's a chance we can help everybody involved and help Sayreville to heal and to move on from this."

That's a very strong statement that would seem to indicate that Mr. Carey is leaning towards treating these kids as juveniles and not adults. While Mr. Carey has a couple more weeks to decide this issue, this may be the time where some of the seven charged would at least consider, with their parents and attorneys, making a deal with the prosecutor.

## FRESHMEN VICTIMIZED AGAIN AND AGAIN

One disturbing factor in this case is that there were far more (to a lesser degree) than four victims on the freshman football team. For example, there are a number of published reports that state that many freshmen were afraid of the upperclassmen, that they would dress outside of the locker room, that they would not take showers or take them very quickly to get out of the locker room.

While the four victims, if true, were the most victimized, it says here that all of these young kids were victims in varying degrees.

But it would seem that all of these freshmen were further victimized by having their season cancelled by the superintendent and the school board. A number of parents of varsity players vehemently stated at school board meetings that their kids, who did nothing wrong, should not be punished. But there seems to have been no outcry on behalf of the freshmen; no discussion, at least publicly, about whether the freshman season should have continued. While there seems to be a general view among objective people that the varsity program had to be totally shut down, one cannot find any discussion, article, blog post, anything, on the freshman football team.

Would the community have rallied around a freshman team that was allowed to play after at least four of its kids were victimized by upperclassmen?

Well, that's something we will never know. But, at a minimum, that should have been considered separate and apart from any decision with respect to the varsity team.

Some freshmen have been victimized for a third time. According to published reports, the names of a couple of the accusing freshmen have been bandied about on social media. One can only imagine the grief they are getting – one kid told the New York Times that the backlash “made me want to shoot myself.”

So, while people can hope and say that the community should all get behind these freshmen and support them, the reality is that’s a pipe dream. While all should be done to protect them, mentally and physically, the truth is, when someone has the courage to come forward, they are going to be vilified by certain members of the community. Like it or not, that’s just the way it is – in Mepham, Long Island, in Steubenville, Ohio and, yes, in Sayreville, New Jersey.

#### WHAT ABOUT THE COACHES?

Well, what about the coaches? At best, they were totally ignorant of what was going on. Apparently, Coach George Najjar, a Hall of Fame coach in New Jersey, simply had no idea that any of this was happening. While it’s hard to believe that no coach (apparently the head coach had 12 assistants in his football program) knew anything about any of this, if they didn’t, then, at a minimum, they are guilty of some kind of non-feasance, of some kind of lack of supervision.

While five of these coaches, who are also tenured teachers (Coach Najjar is a physical education teacher), have been suspended (with pay), it’s hard to believe that they will be allowed to return to coaching football at Sayreville if the allegations are true. Whether they keep their teaching jobs is a separate and more difficult issue.

According to one published report at [nj.com](http://nj.com), Coach Najjar told his team, the day before the first cancellation of a varsity football game, “I don’t trust you guys anymore.” It seems that the coach believed that the players should police their own locker room and that he was rarely, if ever, in it (apparently the coaches’ room is separate and apart from where the players dress for practice and games).

Many other coaches have opined that, in 2014, it's hard, if not impossible, to leave kids alone as they dress and undress before and after practices. Coach Najjar, who has been coaching for at least 30 years, maybe didn't realize the changing dynamics of youth sports in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

But it seems clear that somebody should have been there in a supervisory capacity. "Where were the coaches?" is the common refrain one has heard from many people.

Coach Najjar has made no substantive comment on these allegations. Presumably, he has either consulted with or hired an attorney who has advised him not to say anything.

WAS STATE-MANDATED ANTI-BULLYING TRAINING GIVEN TO THESE COACHES?

Part of the coaches' defense (and none of them have been charged with anything), at least as articulated by an assistant coach at this past Tuesday's Board of Education meeting, is that the coaches were never given required anti-bullying training. New Jersey has one of the toughest (some would say the toughest) anti-bullying laws in the country, revised as recently as 2011 to spell out what has to be done.

A review of the law and a review of the Sayreville School District's website shows that, at least on paper, these changes have been implemented. Indeed, with respect to training, Sayreville War Memorial High School gave itself nine out of a possible nine rating in its 2014-15 "Anti-Bullying Self-Assessment Ratings" for "Training on the BOE-approved HIB Policy" (that would be the Board of Education-approved Hazing, Intimidation and Bullying Policy).

Of course, we are probably all skeptical of "self-assessments." But this should not be hard to prove one way or the other. If these coaches were not trained, that's a big problem for the school district.

ARE YOU A CONSPIRACY THEORIST?

Arguably the most shocking claim at Tuesday's Board of Ed meeting was set forth by assistant coach Robert Berardi, who accused Superintendent Richard Labbe of "celebrating" the demise of the football team and its coaches, saying Labbe said things like "we finally got them" and "they're done."

While that charge seems far-fetched and was totally rejected by the superintendent and the board, it turns out that the superintendent started as a teacher at Sayreville in 1990 and was an assistant football coach there in the early '90s. The conspiracy theory goes that the superintendent was apparently relieved of his coaching duties in 1994 – when present coach George Najjar came to Sayreville and took over the football program.

The superintendent does seem like somebody who really cares about the kids and the school district. While it's a stretch to this writer that such a thing would happen, there will be conspiracy theorists out there, as well as people who hold the cancellation of the season against this superintendent, who will believe that this was a vindictive guy settling an old score.

Again, hard to believe.

**PENN STATE: INNOCENT UNTIL PROVEN GUILTY OR GUILTY UNTIL PROVEN INNOCENT?**

One of the unjust (at this time) outcomes of the scandal in Sayreville is what has happened to the football team's star running back. He had accepted, at least verbally, a scholarship to Penn State to play football next year. While it's not clear that he is one of the seven charged (reports are that there was police activity at his house the day six of the seven were arrested), Penn State went ahead and stated that he no longer has a scholarship offer from the school. Apparently, that's the case whether he was involved or not.

But this is really disgusting. Whether charged or not, this kid has been found guilty by Penn State. Unfortunately for him, Penn State, in the wake of the horrific Jerry Sandusky scandal, is probably the worst school in the country to have a scholarship from when these kinds of Sayreville accusations exist. Not surprisingly, Penn State ran the other way when they got even a sniff of the allegations.

So this kid is guilty until proven innocent. And even if he's proven innocent (or not even charged), he apparently has lost his chance to play at Penn State. A sad state of affairs.

## HERE COME THE LAWSUITS?

The pink elephant in the room, of course, is the specter of lawsuits coming down the pike. At least one victim was scheduled to meet with a top New Jersey lawyer, according to a published report. That lawyer has already categorized the attacks as "rape."

So you have the possibility of victims suing the school district (deep pockets there), maybe the coaches, maybe the perpetrators. The three victims in the Mephram, Long Island case sued that school district and settled, according to one of the attorneys in that case, for "lots of money."

If the coaches get fired, or even if they believe they have been wrongly suspended, they may very well wind up suing the school district and/or others.

If the lawyers want to make it really sticky, they may wind up suing board of education members and/or the superintendent individually (whether they can recover in that capacity is a different issue), in addition to the school district.

## CONCLUSION

Well, obviously, the whole thing is a mess. But it would seem, that with proper supervision, all of this could have very likely been avoided.

This is (another) wake-up call for school districts in general and coaches in particular. While nobody believes that coaches are responsible for watching their players 24/7, it seems clear that,



at a minimum, what goes on in the locker rooms of America has to be supervised and monitored by those in charge.

Whether that's a coach or some kind of security guard or an "anti-bullying specialist" (who had to be hired under the New Jersey law) remains to be seen.

But something has to be done.

And the time is now.

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