

# The Joplin Globe, Joplin, MO

July 24, 2010

## Seneca woman recounts story of son's hazing

By Greg Grisolano  
Globe Staff Writer

SENECA, Mo. — The mother of a Seneca High School football player allegedly beaten by teammates during a hazing incident said she wants more answers from school officials and coaches.

The woman alleges her son was one of 17 players beaten as part of a hazing of younger players. It occurred over the course of a three-day football camp in early June at Pittsburg (Kan.) State University.

"Where were the coaches for this? What were they doing?" said the Seneca mother. The Globe is withholding the name of the woman in order to protect the identity of her minor son. She said her son was beaten with rods used to open and close window blinds, and had bruises covering his legs and buttocks. She has pictures allegedly showing her son with welts on his thighs and his knees.

At least 50 members of the Seneca football team went to a summer football camp at Pittsburg (Kan.) State University last month. The students stayed in a dormitory with an unknown number of the Seneca football coaching staff serving as chaperones.

According to a police report, upperclassmen used the rods to strike 17 underclassmen. Some team members also allegedly placed their genitals on the faces of younger players.

"These boys are going to have to carry this with them for the rest of their lives," the mother said. "I want to see the school offer more than just school counseling. They may need outside services to help."

She also wants parents who sent children to the camp to get a refund.

"The camp was \$150 per student," she said. "We didn't pay to have our kids abused."

The Crawford County prosecuting attorney's office has charged eight players with multiple felony counts of aggravated battery and misdemeanor battery. Three other players face one count each of misdemeanor battery. At least one player is 18 and faces charges as an adult. The other players will have legal proceedings start in juvenile court, where a decision will be made whether to charge them as adults, per Kansas law.

No charges were filed against members of Seneca's coaching staff.

Globe efforts to obtain comment from Seneca School Board President Joe Caputo, Seneca High School Principal Tosha Fox and Seneca head football coach Robert Townsend were unsuccessful. The Globe sent e-mail queries, made telephone calls and went to the administration building and high school in an effort to reach officials. Superintendent Rick Cook also was unavailable last week on vacation.

'Get the kids home'

The mother said her son and about 50 players left Seneca High School by bus the morning of Wednesday, June 9.

The woman said she first found out about the incident when her son texted another family member early Thursday

afternoon. PSU police, who conducted an investigation into the incident, reported that the alleged beatings took place around noon Thursday.

Her son told her after the incident that he was forced to run through a line of players holding plastic rods and pizza boxes that allegedly were used to assault the other players. Several victims also were allegedly told to drop their pants before they ran through the line, she claims.

"They were told, 'If you fall down, we're going to beat you until you get up,'" she said.

The mother claims she notified Cook of the incident Thursday afternoon. She said she also received a phone call from Fox, the principal.

"They told me they were on to it and they had already called the coaches," she said. "I was surprised one of them didn't go up there. Somebody needed to go up there and get the kids home."

She said she and her husband made the decision to bring their son home Thursday, but other students stayed through Friday.

She also alleges that parents of other victims have told her some abuse happened after she had already notified school officials Thursday afternoon, but pointed out that she got that information secondhand because her son had already been taken home. PSU officials who investigated the matter said the most serious hazing occurred that Thursday during the lunch break.

PSU Police Chief Mike McCracken said he couldn't say for certain that no hazing occurred after the Thursday lunch break.

#### Board action

According to a statement released July 16 by Caputo, the school board president, the hazing investigation continues.

Already, the board has stated that 12 players have been suspended or expelled. Student punishments were handed out by the district July 1. At least nine parents requested hearings before the board to appeal the decisions.

District officials also are investigating whether members of the coaching staff "failed in their supervisory duties."

The board's statement was issued on the heels of a closed session July 15, in which board members discussed legal issues, including personnel and student disciplinary matters.

"Employees who may have violated board policy and/or their responsibilities to district students will be disciplined accordingly," the statement reads.

The Globe filed an open records request for a copy of an investigation by Sarah Spence, an independent investigator from Columbia. Spence's report reportedly included interviews with the coaching staff, and a review of the district's policies and procedures in light of the hazing incident.

Caputo said via e-mail Wednesday that the document would not be released, as it fell under the attorney-client privilege exemption of state law.

The board statement said district personnel became aware of the incident June 10, and launched an investigation in which they interviewed "the victims, perpetrators and district staff."

Along with the suspensions, five of the players were removed from participating in any athletics for 365 days. Four more were removed from the 2010-2011 football team.

Reached by phone early last week, Caputo declined to comment in a phone interview but suggested the Globe e-mail him a list of questions. He did not respond to questions about whether the district has a policy for teachers and coaches who take students on overnight trips, and if the investigation had determined where the coaches were during the hazing.

#### Review

A spokesman for PSU said a policy review is under way, but no timetable has been set to announce any changes.

“Every event we have on campus we review afterward to see if we need to do anything different, and that’s what we’re doing right now,” said Chris Kelly, associate vice president for marketing and communication at PSU. “We’re trying to find out, are there things we could or should be doing? We want to make sure we do it right, just as we would with any camp or event.”

Kelly said coaches who act as chaperones at the football camp are given a list of rules, both for themselves and their players.

The rules state that coaches are in charge of their own players in the dorms; rules for the students state they are to remain in the dorms at night.

“We’ve had these camps for over a decade,” Kelly said. “Thousands of kids have come through. This is the first incident that I’m aware of that was reported to campus police.”

#### Board meeting

The Seneca R-7 Board of Education will hold a special session at 5:45 p.m. Tuesday at 914 Frisco St. The only business listed on the agenda is a closed meeting, citing legal matters, personnel and student disciplinary meetings.