

High School Football Coaches Suspended After Teen Is Forced to Eat Pork, Lawyer Says

A 17-year-old in Canton, Ohio, was forced to eat a pepperoni pizza even though the coaches were aware he does not eat pork because he is a Hebrew Israelite, a lawyer for the boy's family said. The Police Department is investigating.

By Claire Fahy

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A high school football coach in Canton, Ohio, and seven assistant coaches have been suspended after punishing a 17-year-old for missing a voluntary practice by forcing him to eat pork against his religious beliefs, according to a lawyer representing the boy's family.

The Canton City School District took action against the coaches at McKinley Senior High School after conducting an initial investigation, according to a statement on Wednesday by Jeff Talbert, the district's superintendent. It also filed a report about the matter with the Canton Police Department, which is investigating it as a potential hazing episode.

On the last day of classes, May 24, four days after he had missed an optional practice session, the 17-year-old, a rising senior, was forced to eat an entire pepperoni pizza, even though the head coach, Marcus Wattley, and the other coaches knew that he did not eat pork because he was a Hebrew Israelite, according to his family's lawyer, Ed Gilbert. He said that the boy's family intended to sue the school district.

School district officials were not available for comment on Wednesday, but in a statement released in the afternoon, Mr. Talbert said, "The investigation found that the identified coaches engaged in actions that constituted inappropriate, demeaning, and divisive behavior in a misguided attempt to instill discipline in the student-athletes."

The statement, which did not provide the specifics of the episode or name the coaches, also did not specify the length of the suspensions. Mr. Talbert added that further disciplinary measures would follow.

"Let us be clear, the Canton City School District holds our coaching and general staff to the highest professional and ethical standards," Mr. Talbert said. "Anything short of these standards is unacceptable and will not be tolerated."

Efforts to reach Mr. Wattley by phone on Wednesday night were unsuccessful.

According to Mr. Gilbert, the 17-year-old, who he said had already attracted college football scholarship offers, is in therapy because of the episode, which was reported last week by The Canton Repository, a local newspaper.

"He is of the belief — and that's what hurts him so bad is — that the coach knew of his beliefs and wanted to punish him, and it's our view that it was done intentionally and that it was a punitive act," Mr. Gilbert said.

According to Mr. Gilbert, the 17-year-old was told that his teammates would be forced to do extra drills if he didn't eat the pizza, and that his own standing with the team could be compromised.

"The coach told him, in order to have respect and stay on this team, you have to eat the pizza," he said.

The coaches knew about the student's religious beliefs because they had all been at team meals together where the student had made sure to order meals that did not include pork, Mr. Gilbert said.

"I don't know what was in this coach's mind — I mean, in today's society, you respect people's religious beliefs," Mr. Gilbert said. "You do not make fun of them or make an issue of that, and I just don't know where this coach's head is."

Although the coaches allowed the player to remove the pepperoni after he reiterated his beliefs, Mr. Gilbert said, pork residue remained on the pizza. He ate it anyway. Once he had finished, coaches instructed him to do weighted exercises on the football field.

When a coach who had not been present heard about what happened, he reported it to the school immediately, according to Mr. Gilbert.

A special meeting of the school district's board of education is set for Thursday to discuss the matter further.