

NEWS

Fired Canton McKinley football head coach Marcus Wattley, five assistants sue for defamation

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CANTON – Former McKinley High School head football coach Marcus Wattley and five of his former assistant coaches are suing the nine people they say have damaged their reputations by spreading the false accusation that they punished a football player by forcing him to eat a pepperoni pizza against his religious beliefs.

Peter Pattakos, the lead attorney representing the coaches, filed a 67-page complaint Monday in Stark County Common Pleas Court accusing Canton City school officials, the player's father and attorney and a former McKinley football assistant coach of defamation and false light.

The case has been assigned to Judge Natalie Haupt.

Read a copy of the lawsuit here: [Defamation lawsuit](#)

The lawsuit seeks compensation for the damage done to the coaches' reputations, their lost wages, their diminished earning capacity and for the mental distress, pain and anguish they have suffered.

More: [Akron prosecutor to decide if Canton football coaches should face criminal charges](#)

Pattakos is representing Wattley and assistant coaches Frank McLeod, Zachary Sweat, Romero Harris, Cade Brodie and Tyler Thatcher.

The coaches are suing Canton City Schools Superintendent Jeff Talbert, all five Canton City school board members – John “J.R.” Rinaldi, Scott Russ, Kim Brown, David Kaminski and Eric Resnick – as well as the player's father Kenny Walker, the family's attorney Edward Gilbert and former McKinley assistant coach Josh Grimsley.

The lawsuit revolves around statements that have been made since May 24 when the coaches disciplined a 17-year-old football player by having him sit in the middle of McKinley's auxiliary gymnasium and eat a pizza while his teammates circled the gym holding 45-pound weights for roughly 20 minutes.

Walker and Gilbert have accused the coaches of forcing the player to eat the pepperoni pizza against his Hebrew Israelite religious beliefs as punishment for missing a voluntary workout on May 20. They said the player missed the workout due to a slight shoulder injury he sustained at a previous practice.

Talbert suspended the coaches with pay on May 26 while the district investigated the complaint. The school board, at the recommendation of Talbert, then removed the coaches from their coaching positions on June 3. The board on June 24 fired McLeod, Sweat and Grimsley from their noncoaching jobs and suspended Wattley without pay, pending a formal termination process. Wattley has asked for a court-appointed referee to hear his appeal, but a hearing date has not yet been set.

More: Canton City Schools defends investigation of McKinley coach Marcus Wattley, assistants

The coaches have maintained that they did not force the player to eat anything, that they did not know about the player's religious faith, they had offered him chicken nuggets as an alternative and it was the player's decision to pick off the pepperoni and cheese and eat the pizza.

The coaches said the discipline – giving the player the “royal treatment” in a room of hungry working men – was meant to give him a lesson about teamwork, responsibility and accountability. They said the discipline wasn't for a single missed workout, but they were trying to rescue a troubled player whose off-the-field behavior was negatively influencing his teammates and jeopardizing his future as a Division I college athlete.

Attorney: Lawsuit to remedy the damage that has been done

Pattakos on Monday said the defamation lawsuit was filed to remedy the damage that has been done to the coaches' reputations, but to also help ensure that other educators who “go above and beyond to help their students do not have their careers destroyed as a result of misrepresentations of their extraordinary efforts by corrupt opportunists.”

In the lawsuit, Pattakos asserts that the nine people named as defendants made statements or took actions that implied the coaches were engaging in criminal behavior, such as hazing, and putting a player at risk even though they knew the statements were false. He accuses them of concealing evidence that benefited the coaches and said they have failed to demonstrate that the coaches did anything to exceed their commonly understood discretion to discipline their football players.

Pattakos also accuses each of them of having an ulterior motive that fueled their desire to smear the coaches' reputations.

The Canton Repository contacted each of the defendants Monday and they either did not return a message seeking comment or declined to comment. None of the defendants reached had seen the court complaint as of Monday night.

Gilbert, who also had not yet seen the complaint, called the defamation lawsuit a "publicity stunt" and said he looked forward to defending himself and the player's father in court.

Accusations against Josh Grimsley

In the lawsuit, Pattakos blames Grimsley for initiating the "avalanche of defamatory misrepresentations" when he called Kenny Walker and told Walker that the other coaches forced his son to eat the pizza and the pepperoni even though his son had said he did not eat pork. He also accuses Grimsley of suggesting to Walker that he could "make some quick cash" by threatening a lawsuit against the school district and claims that Grimsley agreed to testify in the player's favor during the legal proceedings.

Pattakos said Grimsley knew he was lying, but he was motivated by jealousy over Wattle's success and the strong bonds that Wattle and other staff members had forged with one another and their players. He notes that Grimsley, who has worked for the district since 2006, sought the head coaching position in 2019 when it was awarded to Wattle and he was the only member of the staff who would not be asked to return for the upcoming football season.

Grimsley's attorney Richard Blake previously told the Repository that Grimsley didn't know Wattle had planned to discipline the player on May 24 and had entered the gym with his 9-year-old son after coaching baseball when he saw what he described as an "excessively harsh reprimand of the student." Blake, who declined to comment on the lawsuit, has previously said Grimsley was so bothered by the punishment that he reported his concerns to his immediate supervisor.

Accusations against Walker and Gilbert

Pattakos blames Walker and Gilbert for inflaming the situation begun by Grimsley by falsely claiming the coaches knowingly violated the player's religious beliefs and by causing the widespread publication of the defamatory accusations.

He claims in the lawsuit that the player told his father that he wasn't forced to eat the pizza, but Walker and Gilbert proceeded with the false accusations to force a monetary settlement out of the school district.

The family, which is in negotiations with the school district, has asked the U.S. attorney and the FBI to open a federal investigation to determine whether a hate crime occurred based on the student's religion.

Accusations against school officials

Pattakos blames Talbert and the school board members, in their personal capacities, for not conducting a thorough investigation that he says would have disputed the false accusations and cleared the coaches.

Instead, Pattakos said the school officials defamed the coaches by representing their investigation as comprehensive and its conclusions based on fact, even though he claims they ignored evidence that would have benefited the coaches, including players' testimony that the coaches didn't force the disciplined player to eat anything.

He also accuses school leaders of treating the football coaches more severely than other varsity coaches who recently have been accused of misconduct.

Pattakos claims the school officials endorsed the "salacious and defamatory" accusations "to further their own selfish purposes."

He believes the school officials used the accusations as an opportunity to replace Wattlely with their personal friend and Canton native Antonio Hall. Hall, who had applied for the head coaching job in 2019, was hired as the district's athletic director in June 2020, a day before the school board hired Talbert as superintendent. The school board has named Hall as McKinley's interim head football coach.

Pattakos, in a statement Monday, wrote that the school officials have had multiple opportunities to fix their mistakes.

“Rinaldi and Co. might believe they can hide from accountability to the voters who elected them, but they can't hide the truth from Ohio's court system ...,” Pattakos said.

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