

## NEWS

# Attorney: Fired McKinley High School coach Marcus Wattley never forced player to eat pizza

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CANTON – Marcus Wattley broke his silence Monday about the discipline of a player that led to the end of his career as McKinley High School’s head football coach.

Wattley, through his attorney Peter Pattakos, said the accusations that the coaches forced a 17-year-old player to eat an entire pepperoni pizza against his Hebrew Israelite religious beliefs for missing a voluntary May 20 strengthening and conditioning workout are false and exaggerated.

**More about Hebrew Israelites:** Canton family's faith at the center of McKinley High football coach abuse allegations

“I miss my boys. I love them, they know that,” Wattley said. “I learned from a great man how to coach football. (Former St. Vincent-St. Mary head coach Dan) Boarman showed me a lot, how to take care of kids and everything that comes with the kid – not just the football player but the student, the person and the athlete. I try to incorporate that with my coaches every day.”

## “They needed to get through to him some other way”

Pattakos, on behalf of Wattley and assistant coach Frank McLeod, on Monday described a situation where the coaches 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.

“They’ve run plenty of sprints. The sprints weren’t working,” Pattakos said. “They needed to get through to him some other way. They needed to show him what it was like to be the only

man eating in a room full of hungry, working men. That's the lesson that needed to get through to him."

## **Coach said it's worked in another locker room**

Pattakos said Wattley previously had witnessed the eating-alone lesson work effectively in a different Division I locker room.

"This is not something that he made up," Pattakos said. "This is an extraordinary tactic that is used to teach an extraordinary lesson to an extraordinary young man under extraordinary circumstances."

**Poll:** Head football coach Marcus Wattley, six others dismissed for misconduct. Do you support the move?

He emphasized that the player had the ability to leave at any time and had the option of selecting an alternative food that did not contain pork.

"This young man wasn't forced to eat anything," Pattakos said. "He was asked to accept this form of a lesson. He wasn't forced to eat pork. He was offered chicken (nuggets) and (told), 'You can sit here and eat. If not, then you can leave.' That's the lesson."

## **Attorney says player's punishment was more than just missing a voluntary workout**

Pattakos said the punishment was not merely for missing a single voluntary workout. He said the student had stopped regularly communicating with his coaches, had left workouts early, and had been acting disrespectfully to coaches.

"Four young men in this program have been shot in this last calendar year alone," Pattakos said. "That's why it raises concerns when this young man doesn't text his coaches and explains where he is when they are expecting them to be at a voluntary workout, even though it is voluntary. This wasn't about that (a single missed workout). This was about something much bigger."

Pattakos, who said the player apologized to the coaches and showed up for the voluntary workout the next day after his punishment, blames an assistant coach for inflaming the situation by reporting an exaggerated version to administrators and the player's family. Pattakos said he believes the assistant coach, whom he did not name, wanted Wattley's job.

## **Explanation called “desperate attempt to try to hurt (the player’s) family”**

Attorney Ed Gilbert, who is representing the player and his family, called the coaches’ explanation for their punishment “bizarre” and a “desperate attempt to try to hurt (the player’s) family.” He said no matter what the coaches say, it doesn’t excuse them for coercing a player to eat pork against his religious beliefs.

“It’s absolutely, totally ridiculous,” Gilbert said. “I’m not going to respond to every allegation that comes up because it’s like a moving target. His defense is all over the place. It doesn’t make any sense.”

Gilbert has said the player was told that if he didn't eat the pizza, that his teammates would be forced to perform additional drills and that the player's status with the team was in question. Gilbert has said the family has agreed to meet with district officials before pursuing a lawsuit.

## **Ongoing disciplinary hearings**

Wattley spoke Monday following a roughly two-hour disciplinary hearing with Canton City school officials about whether Wattley should retain his job as a district academic and athletic liaison. McLeod’s disciplinary hearing with school officials over his job as a safety and security liaison was held earlier Monday.

Disciplinary hearings for assistant coaches Joshua Grimsley and Zachary Sweat, both of whom are school resource assistants, are scheduled over the next week. Following the hearings, the superintendent is expected to make a recommendation to the Canton City school board regarding their employment outside of their coaching positions, according to Canton City Schools spokeswoman Lisa Reicosky.

The school board on Thursday voted to fire Wattley and six of his assistant coaches after the district’s completed investigation found that the coaches on May 24 acted in a “demeaning and divisive” manner in what school officials have called a “misguided attempt to instill discipline in the student athletes.”

The district has declined to provide details of what happened on May 24. Superintendent Jeff Talbert said surveillance video gave administrators the information they needed to warrant their recommendation to dismiss the coaches to the school board.

## Wattley wants to return as McKinley coach

Pattakos, who said he, Wattley and McLeod saw the surveillance video for the first time Monday, said he isn't giving up on reinstating Wattley and McLeod as McKinley coaches. Wattley was hired at McKinley in 2019 and McLeod has been coaching since 2004.

“This was an extraordinary situation we all can learn from,” Pattakos said. “Nobody is perfect, not even Coach Wattley is perfect and he knows that. We hope that the district can acknowledge that, too, and bring everyone together.”

McLeod on Tuesday said he believes the surveillance video clears the coaches. While the roughly 12-minute video doesn't have audio, McLeod said you can tell by the body language of the coaches and players that the player wasn't being threatened.

“I'm in disbelief that I'm basically accused of harming a kid when I've done nothing but take care of kids in this community,” said McLeod, a 1996 McKinley graduate who was an all-Ohio linebacker for McKinley.

McKinley football player Mani Powell said he wants his coaches back. He was one of several football players who attended the disciplinary hearing Monday to show their support for Wattley and McLeod.

“It won't be the same without them,” said Powell, a rising senior who is considered McKinley's top returning player. “We won't stop fighting until we get them back.”

**More about McKinley's new head coach:** Interim McKinley Bulldogs football coach Antonio Hall will look to 'put our kids first'

Powell said Wattley and all of the assistant coaches have become father figures to him and his teammates.

“They are more than coaches,” said Powell, who lost his father when he was young. “They lose sleep over me and the boys.”

Other football players who were at the May 24 workout have said the coaches never forced the player to eat the pizza and they gave the player the choice of eating chicken nuggets instead. They have said the player chose to pick the pepperoni off the pizza and eat it.

Beyond the disciplinary hearings, two other investigations remain open: The Canton City police department is investigating whether the coaches' conduct rises to the level of a

criminal hazing charge. The Ohio Department of Education's professional conduct division also is reviewing whether the coaches should retain their educational and coaching licenses.

As of Monday, both investigations were ongoing.

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