

## NEWS

# Attorney: New photos show Canton McKinley football player at 2019 barbecue fundraiser

**Malcolm Hall** The Repository

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CANTON – An attorney representing former McKinley High School head football coach Marcus Wattley has released photos that show the 17-year-old at the center of the firing controversy attending a barbecue fundraiser in 2019.

Attorney Peter Pattakos of Fairlawn contends the photos show the player has willingly consumed pork in recent years – despite the family's contention that eating the meat violates his Hebrew Israelite faith.

**More:** See the video of the events that led to Canton McKinley football coaches being fired

**More:** Attorney of fired Canton McKinley assistant coach calls discipline 'excessively harsh'

Wattley and six of his assistant coaches were fired June 3 after the player's family accused the coaches of disciplining the teenager on May 24 for not attending a May 20 voluntary strengthening and conditioning session.

The family, which has threatened a lawsuit against the district, says Wattley and his staff forced the player to sit in a chair in a gym and eat an entire pepperoni pizza while his teammates did drills around him. The coaches say the player could have left, had the option to consume a different food and the lesson was to address the player's ongoing negative behavior that was affecting the team.

Canton City school officials have called the coaches' actions "inappropriate, demeaning and divisive." The district has not addressed the religious aspect of the family's complaint.

The Canton City Police Department, at the request of the school district, is investigating the incident to determine whether hazing charges should be filed against the coaches.

## **Photos of McKinley football player emerge**

The newly released photos show a team fundraiser called the McKinley Rib Challenge. The event, according to Pattakos, took place in 2019. A plate of food can be seen sitting in front of the boy in two of the photos. The boy is not actively eating the food in either photo.

"The contest was a timed contest," Pattakos said. "They gave them a certain amount of time. The contest was how much ribs can they eat in a certain amount of time."

Pattakos said the photos call into question claims by the boy's father, Kenny Walker, that the family has not eaten pork since 2013 due to its adherence to the Hebrew Israelite faith, which prohibits the consumption of pork or pork residue. The Canton Repository has agreed not to name the player because of his age.

Pattakos said a parent notified his office about the boy's participation in the McKinley Rib Challenge event. Subsequently, Pattakos, with help from the former coaches, was able to track down photographs of the boy at the event where the food was served.

"You can tell by looking at these photographs these are pork ribs," Pattakos said. "We are almost 100% sure these are pork ribs. There is no evidence this kid had any such dietary restrictions."

## **Family attorney of McKinley football player responds**

The boy's family is represented by Akron-area attorney, Edward Gilbert.

"I am familiar with that," Gilbert said of the photographs. "If you look at those photos, my client has his hand under the table. The question is, 'Is he eating them?' And, 'Are they beef ribs?' We all know on the day of the incident, that he said, 'I don't eat pork.' This is nothing but a desperate attempt to divert attention from the real issue."

Currently, there has been no lawsuit filed against the school system on behalf of the family.

"The district has talked with us about not filing a lawsuit," Gilbert said. "We are in deliberation now. I have to give credit to Talbert. He came out and said it (punishment) was indefensible. He took immediate steps."

With the dismissal of Wattley, the school system appointed athletic director Antonio Hall as interim head football coach. Pattakos believes the allegations against Wattley presented the

Canton City School District administration with an opportunity to fulfill a desire to implement a coaching change.

"This was convenient for them," Pattakos said.

*Reach Malcolm at 330-580-8305 or [malcolm.hall@cantonrep.com](mailto:malcolm.hall@cantonrep.com)*

***On Twitter: @mhallREP***