

## **Hazing, sexual assault scandal shocks Youngstown area Catholic high school**

There's nothing quite like high school football in American culture. The shaking of cowbells, the shouting of angry parents and coaches and the smells and chills of the autumn breeze- these are nostalgic memories for most.

But what happens when it goes too far? What happens when our young athletes are put on such a pedestal that they feel as if they are above the law?

In Youngstown, OH, football reigns supreme at Ursuline High School, which operates as a part of the Catholic Diocese of Youngstown. The program has won four state championships at the Division Five and Six levels since the turn of the century, and under head coach Dan Reardon, the team went 72-29 between 2004 and 2011.

The annals of history were set to tell a favorable story of Reardon, the school, its administrators and the community as a whole. That is until now, where shocking allegations of sexual assault, child pornography and a cover up of the stories of accusers and misconduct have been levied at Ursuline High School and the Catholic Diocese of Youngstown.

This story spans over 250 pages of legal documents filed by Subodh Chandra, the legal counsel for the plaintiffs in two federal Civil Rights lawsuits that allege Ursuline High School violated its obligation as legal reporters by not notifying the proper law enforcement about Title IX violations within the suit.

**Warning: The following subject matter is sensitive. Reader discretion is advised.**

### **“Son King”**

On a nine day trip in June of this year, the Ursuline High School football team went across multiple states including Alabama, Florida and Tennessee. It’s during this trip that multiple criminal acts occurred, such as hazing, physical and sexual abuse, kidnapping and the production and dissemination of child pornography.

In total, the lawsuit accuses 12 football players of crimes and mentions over 25 teammates and multiple witnesses.

The offenses the lawsuit alleges include:

- Violating student’s Title IX protections
- Failing to protect students from foreseeable harm
- Criminal hazing
- Assault
- Sexual assault
- Aggravated assault
- Battery
- Kidnapping
- False imprisonment
- Stalking

- Child pornography
- Sexual cyberharrasment
- Distributing lewd and obscene materials
- Telecommunications harassment and
- Witness/victim intimidation

“The federal civil rights lawsuit that we filed on behalf of our clients alleges that there was a longstanding hazing culture in the football program at Ursuline,” Chandra said. “It also alleges that the diocese and the school were both negligent and reckless in hiring the head coach and an assistant head coach because those defendants were aware of problematic issues with those coaches' backgrounds.”

The lawsuit also alleges that both coach Reardon and two of his assistant coaches, Timothy McGlynn and Christian Syrianoudis, were aware of the incidents “before, during and after the trip.”

The male plaintiff in the first of two filings presented by Chandra’s office, a minor who is addressed in the files by the pseudonym “Son King,” was allegedly sexually assaulted by a football player while other players recorded the incident and put it in the team’s Snapchat chain message.

The lawsuit depicts an incident where two players came to Son King's room for "initiation." King hid in a closet, only to be forced out and grabbed by the throat before being thrown on the bed "face up."

A player, with a "visibly erect penis through his clothes," began humping Son's buttocks. The lawsuit states this incident was recorded and put on social media where other Ursuline students saw it.

Another event filed in the complaint spoke of multiple players chasing Son into a bathroom, where he suffered an injury to his foot. Later, Son was lured into another room and stripped of his clothing, restrained and humiliated while the act was recorded.

Furthermore, Son King's sister, referred to as "Daughter King," was allegedly intimidated at her workplace and other locations by an Ursuline athlete. Daughter King, a senior at the time, was so traumatized by the incident that she transferred schools.

"The suit alleges that Daughter was stalked at work by a player and his friends, and at some point the friends offered a threatening message in the form of pointing at their eyes and pointing

at her as if to say we are watching you,” Chandra said. “And that there was no good reason that this player should’ve been at her place of work.”

On June 16, Son King’s mother, who is referred to by the pseudonym “Mother King,” reported the attacks on her son to McGlynn. Coach McGlynn allegedly showed no concern and was not surprised, responding to Mother King by saying “Just boys being boys.”

Mother King then took her son’s story to Ursuline Principal Matthew Sammartino and assistant principal Margaret Damore. According to the lawsuit, Sammartino was allegedly uninterested, while Damore said “this is bad,” and recorded the evidence on her own phone.

“It further alleged that the coaches were aware of the hazing going on and did nothing to protect our client or other children from it,” Chandra said. “And that the administrators when they became aware of it failed to act appropriately, failed to conduct a thorough investigation and failed to fulfill their obligations as mandatory reporters under Ohio law.”

The lawsuit alleges Ursuline senior staff members and athletic staff members attempted to cover up Son King’s allegations and were nonchalant upon hearing that multiple student athletes were purportedly committing crimes- crimes that, as mandated reporters, Sammartino, Reardon, Damore and others should have immediately reported to the proper authorities upon hearing.

In addition to being unreactive towards Mother King's allegations, the lawsuit also alleges that Sammartino and Damore instructed players to "not say anything to anyone about what occurred." Sammartino is also accused of making false statements to the media, saying the alleged attack on Son King was an "isolated incident," and "only a few players were involved," which is contradictory to what the lawsuit alleges.

"What the suit alleges is that the mother met with the administrators, clearly laid out what she was alleging occurred, [and] presented them video and photographic evidence that assistant principal Damore recorded on her own phone and nevertheless failed to act in an appropriate manner in terms of doing an independent thorough investigation," Chandra said.

Ursuline High School and the Catholic Diocese of Youngstown did not take any disciplinary action against players and coaches until after Chandra filed the complaint on behalf of his clients.

Reardon, who resigned from his position at Ursuline in 2011, left the school in a "cloud of negativity," according to the lawsuit. Furthermore, a Diocesan official even recommended against re-hiring Reardon in 2019 due to allegations of dishonesty- he was eventually brought back regardless..

"What the complaint alleges is that a senior diocese official was aware that Reardon had allegedly had very serious problems in his behavior at the high school," Chandra said. "At least one diocesan official, whose duty included overseeing the athletic programs and the hiring of

coaches, recommended that Reardon not be hired because of an alleged history of dishonesty, turning a blind eye to his players' misconduct and a generally negative atmosphere that followed.”

The term “false idol” is repeated several times during Chandra’s fillings. He is referring to the fact that Ursuline allegedly covered up Son King’s story for the purpose of keeping athletes out of trouble, and keeping the season alive.

### **“Daughter Chef”**

Son King is one of two minors who allege they suffered abuse during their time at Ursuline represented by Chandra. A female plaintiff, referred to as “Daughter Chef,” alleges similar things.

According to the complaint, in June 2023, the then freshman student Daughter Chef, had been asked for sexual favors by a freshman Ursuline football player. Daughter Chef refused the athlete’s advances and blocked him on Snapchat, but the harassment allegedly continued.

During gym class, the athlete chased Daughter Chef before hoisting her in the air and throwing her to the ground twice before dragging her on her back across 30 feet of turf.

Daughter Chef's mother, referred to as "Mother Chef," reported her daughter's incident to school authorities. Damore and Athletic Director John DeSantis-both of whom are mandated reporters-allegedly did not report the incident to law enforcement upon hearing this, as required by law.

Damore is also being accused of "strongly advising" Mother Chef not to file a police report and even promising her that Ursuline would address the incident and prevent the two students from having class together. However, Daughter Chef and the player eventually shared a class together in the fall of 2023, where it's alleged that he continued his harassment of Daughter Chef by stalking and staring at her.

Daughter Chef's older brother, an Ursuline graduate, confronted DeSantis over text messages about his sibling's situation. The complaint provides the text message conversation between the two, where DeSantis says "The situation you mentioned happened 4 months ago. If there is something going on she needs to report it to me Monday morning."

Daughter Chef's complaint also mentions an incident where an unnamed Ursuline coach told a former student that coaches "have to make tough choices to protect the better players to win games."

The complaint also alleges a conversation between Daughter Chef and Damore:

Daughter: “So you’re just not gonna help me [with the player or anything else]?”

Damore: “No.”

Both complaints allege nearly identical circumstances. Ursuline officials and coaches, when told by students and the parents of students that members of the football team are harassing and hazing members of the student, do not comply with their roles as mandate reporters and instead work cohesively to cover up any allegations that may tarnish the image of the school and prevent the football team from continuing its success on the field.

### **Rape culture and the nature of sexual violence in America**

Ursuline High School is not the only organization that has been accused of sexual harassment and hazing, specifically committed by athletes such as football players and coaches.

Most college football fans will recall the case of former Penn State assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky, who was found guilty on 45 charges of sexual abuse. Sandusky, who worked for the Nittany Lions and the university for nearly 40 years, had been accused of assaulting young boys from 1994 to 2009, and wasn’t put on trial until 2011.

Most recently, former Houston Texans and current Cleveland Browns quarterback Deshaun Watson was accused of sexual misconduct by over two dozen women who worked in massage

parlors that Watson frequented. Watson was never found criminally liable, and served an eleven game suspension without pay after settling with 20 of 24 accusers.

With that being said, one question sticks out: Is there a “Rape Culture” in our country? And furthermore, does society support athletes even after they’ve been accused of sexual crimes, and do younger athletes see this and think they too can get away with it?

“It would be difficult for me to say there is no such thing as rape culture,” said Stephanie Smith, a Professional in Residence and Associate Professor at Kent State University. “We tend to think of schools like the University of Virginia, that was the target of a very famous rape investigation as a place where there’s rape culture, but we’re looking at this phenomna even in the ninth grade.”

Over the years, the headlines have been filled with numerous stories of sexual violence scandals in industries such as film making and music production, where the stories of victims are covered up and silenced [Harvey Weinstien, P. Diddy]. It is no different in amateur and professional sports.

“If you look at Kobe Bryant now, what you remember about Kobe Bryant is a heroic story of a supernova talent who died too young and died with his daughter,” Smith said. “Gone is the memory, and in fact many people would be incensed, if you said ‘let’s look at the whole person.’”

Smith is referring to when Bryant was accused of raping a 19 year-old woman in a Colorado hotel room in 2003. Bryant was arrested and criminally charged, before the accuser decided she was not willing to testify, and the two would eventually settle out of court in 2005.

“I think sports is complex, because we tend to and even more so sometimes than entertainers, we tend to put them on a sort of superhuman pedestal,” Smith said. “With sports, especially with male participation in sports, part of the conditioning, there’s an emotional and mental conditioning that goes on to which is, dominate the field, dominate the play, dominance, dominance, dominance.”

With American culture so hyperfixated on the success of professional athletes, and the needs of fans for their favorite team to win and leave no doubt, has the country itself created this environment we find ourselves in? For the sake of athletes and athletic achievement, is there an environment in this country that breeds the need for the covering up of allegations towards athletes?

“The NFL and NBA, they’ve done their own cover-ups, if you’ve looked at some of the cover-ups and some of the punishments, they’re on the light side,” Smith said. “But that kind of conditioning begins, unless you begin playing football at a very young age, Deshaun Watson doesn’t get an NFL contract and decides to engage in those behaviors, those behaviors become ingrained reflexes.

Another factor that plays into the cases of Son King and Daughter Chef is that Ursuline High School operates as a part of the Catholic Diocese of Youngstown. Not unlike athletes, the Catholic Church is no stranger to child sexual violence scandals.

“The Catholic Church is not the only church that has this problem, but you would think that because the problem has been so prominent for so many years and so costly to them in terms of real money and reputation capital, that they would have a crisis play book on this that would be, one, two, three, four,” Smith said. “The only thing that works in crisis management is transparency, and transparency begins before you know the whole story.”

The opposite occurred at Ursuline High School. Regardless if the allegations levied against Sammartino, Damore, Reardon and others are found to be true in a court of law, their titles of mandated reporters force them to contact the proper authorities on the subject matter at hand.

### **Aftermath**

On September 5, Farrell High School canceled its game against Ursuline, which jumpstarted a chain reaction. In the following days, St. Vincent-St. Mary, Warren G. Harding and Austintown-Fitch all announced that their football teams would not play against Ursuline.

Reardon, McGlynn and Syrianoudis were all placed on administrative leave, with Reardon receiving a suspension on September 8.

On September 12, it was announced that Ursuline's entire football season would be canceled. Additionally, the Ohio High School Athletic Association announced five days later that Ursuline football athletes will not be permitted to transfer to any other school in the state for the remainder of the 2025 football season.

If you or someone you know has been sexually assaulted, you can call RAINN's National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-4673.

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