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## Middletown football videos shine harsh light on sexualized hazing, 'quickest way to completely humiliate': experts

***“OPEN HIM UP NOW.”***

A group of Middletown football players yelled that phrase as they surrounded a fully clothed teammate being held down, his legs spread.

The graphic scene at the school's fieldhouse was captured on two videos shared earlier this month on social media.

It was a “clear” incident of “sexualized hazing”, according to a psychologist interviewed by PennLive who specializes in high school violence. She said the incident indicated planning, and possibly reflected a team tradition.

“They made it incredibly clear what their intention was,” said Susan Lipkins, author of the book “Preventing Hazing: How Parents, Teachers, and Coaches Can Stop the Violence, Harassment, and Humiliation.” “This was not spontaneous.”

The videos are among the evidence county detectives are examining as they investigate reports of hazing on the football team just before the start of the regular season.

No charges have been filed and detectives are working with at least two potential victims, Dauphin County District Attorney Fran Charo told PennLive.

Middletown School District officials said last week that they are investigating the reported hazing and expect to provide more information Monday. They have not responded to repeated inquiries about the incident or actions they are taking in response, such as providing counseling for students.

A scrimmage went on as planned Saturday but without head coach Scott Acri, who resigned last week. Rob Brodish was named acting head coach.

Middletown vs Northern in high school football scrimmage

Rob Brodish is acting head coach of the Middletown High School football team after Scott Acri resigned from the position following reports of a hazing incident involving the team. Brodish is shown directing the team in a scrimmage on Saturday, Aug. 20, 2022. Sean Simmers | [ssimmers@pennlive.com](mailto:ssimmers@pennlive.com)

The videos have roiled the community and reverberated across the region, shining a harsh light on sexualized hazing. They also have raised questions about whether school officials are doing enough.

One video shows a boy being restrained on the lap of another, who is sitting on the floor. Two other students holding objects approach.

One held what looked like a round white stick. A second student had a black device that looked like a muscle massage gun with a narrow tip. Others stood or sat along a wall in the background.

The captor tipped the restrained boy back, and the player with the massage gun pressed it into the boy's butt over his clothes as he screamed.

In another video, players surrounded another boy who was sitting on the floor, back against a wall, knees against chest and arms wrapped around his legs. Several students pulled his arms and legs to stretch him out and pressed the massage gun against his shorts. Others hooted and hollered, some with their phones out to record it. One person clapped.

If the videos hadn't been shared, the actions may never have come to light, Lipkins said, as young people typically adhere to a strict code of silence.

The videos also indicate a few things, she added. First, it appears older students are hazing younger, smaller, ones, who have "zero power."

"It's about power and maintaining the pecking order," Lipkins said.

It also, she noted, appears to be a ritual.

"This is a continuation of it," Lipkins said. "You see how helpless the victim is and how blasé the perpetrators are."

Middletown defeats Camp Hill 38-0 in high school football

Middletown head coach Scott Acri, shown here following an Oct. 9, 2021 game against Camp Hill, resigned last week after the district received a report of a hazing incident involving the team. Vicki Vellios Briner | Special to PennLive  
Vicki Vellios Briner | Special to PennLive

Hazing has been a problem across the country for decades, but sexualized hazing has gained favor more recently, said Hank Nuwer, an instructor and author who began tracking hazing deaths in 1975 and is considered a national expert.

He first heard of sexualized hazing in 1982 on a baseball team in Arizona and noticed a flood of similar reports, starting about 2007.

Hazing can happen anywhere, but most often occurs in locker rooms, at sports camps, team parties or on a bus, Nuwer said.

There's a reason that hazing has increasingly turned to sexualized humiliation, experts say.

"It is the quickest way to completely humiliate a victim and brand them as the lowest in the hierarchy," Lipkins said. "There is no escape, and the victims' own sexual identity is often questioned."

Lipkens said she was shocked that the videos were uploaded to social media, adding those who are being hazed are often threatened to keep them silent. In this case, she said, the perpetrators may have been the ones to break the code of silence.

Other experts say sharing the videos on social media is a sign of the times, when young people live much of their lives online. And it furthers their goal of humiliating those being hazed.

Officials at the Middletown Area School District said they learned of the incident Friday Aug. 12, the same day the videos were posted on social media, and started their own investigation. They confirmed on Monday, Aug. 15, that they were investigating "improper conduct of a select few members of the football team."

Middletown Athletic Director Scott Govern talked during Saturday's scrimmage, saying that his next steps include "meeting with our kids on Tuesday, and all the fall student athletes just so we can talk about our culture and the steps we're looking to move forward with."

The lack of public communication has upset some parents. The situation has divided the community between those who think it was so egregious that the football season should be canceled and those who think it's being overblown or just the work of a few "bad apples."

Blaming hazing on just a few players is a mistake, experts say. It diminishes the importance of what happened and ignores that hazing is typically a ritual passed down among players and among different sports teams.

"The perpetrators are passing on what they think they are supposed to do," Lipkins said. "There are these types of 'traditions' going on and probably have been for a while and probably on other teams. This is not one person who started this. It's a pattern of hazing."

The rituals typically get more harsh and violent as each new class of perpetrators adds their own touch.

The apparent lack of adults in the room in the Middletown videos also raises questions, said Doug Fierberg, who has a Washington, D.C. law practice focused solely on representing victims and survivors of school violence.

"Coaches have the expectation to supervise for just this reason," he said. "Hazing like this can really only take place when it's outside the purview of caring adults."

Supervision should be heightened early in the season, when younger members are joining the team, he said. Coaches need to be aware that students will be vulnerable and isolated in locker rooms and practice and training areas.

“You’re dealing with young people and should reasonably supervise where the kids are,” Fierberg said. “End of discussion.”

Players would not attempt sexualized hazing in particular, Feinberg said, if they thought they might be interrupted. Given the yelling and screaming captured in the videos, the students must have believed there would be no intervention, he said.

“Not only was there no responsible adult there, they were far enough away, they didn’t hear or respond to the melee,” he said. “A young person is screaming and hurt. People expect coaches to be in the vicinity to stop it.”

Middletown school board meeting on the high school football hazing incident.

Superintendent Chelton L. Hunter speaks during a Middletown school board meeting about a report of a hazing incident involving the football team. August 16, 2022. Sean Simmers | [ssimmers@pennlive.com](mailto:ssimmers@pennlive.com)

Dauphin County detectives took over the investigation into the incident at the request of Lower Swatara Township police.

The detectives are likely interviewing everyone they can find who was in the room, and anyone they may have spoken to about it, said David Freed, a former Cumberland County district attorney and U.S. Attorney.

They also would want to interview graduates of the program to see if this has happened in prior years and find out whether coaches or school officials had any knowledge of what was happening.

Some challenges to criminal prosecution of such cases fall into three categories, Freed said: evidentiary, legal and cultural.

“Your case is only as good as your evidence,” he said, which often can involve conflicting accounts from witnesses.

The second hurdle is whether police can prove the actions fit the language and required threshold of the criminal statutes. Some sexual crimes in Pennsylvania, for example, require the act be done for the sexual gratification of the offender. But other crimes, such as deviate sexual intercourse, do not and, in fact, prohibit penetration of any kind, by body or object, “however slight.”

A hazing law passed in 2018 following the death of Timothy J. Piazza at Penn State, created penalties that can be assessed against an organization or institutions that “intentionally, knowingly or recklessly promotes or facilitates” a hazing violation.

From what is publicly known in the Middletown case, the district attorney appears to have various paths, including simple harassment, assault, sexual offenses and hazing, depending on the specific evidence gathered, Freed said.

The third and final obstacle to prosecutors can be cultural. Some victims, their families or witnesses may not want to testify, especially if there is pressure to protect a valued program, such as high school football.

It doesn't affect the decision of a district attorney, but can affect their ability to present evidence, Freed said.

If a victim chooses not to prosecute, a district attorney with sufficient evidence could still go forward, Freed said. While the state's victim bill of rights says that victims must be allowed to provide their input, a prosecutor can file charges even with unwilling victims.

Hazing is particularly harmful to those targeted because it comes in waves, the experts said. First is the actual hazing, then a second "hazing," said Lipkins, when some or much of the community may minimize what happened or "blame" the victims.

"The group was holding them down," she said of the Middletown videos. "You can see the others there, they aren't doing anything to stop it. If they had, maybe they would have been hazed worse."

The harm can keep coming if the coach is sacked or the season is canceled, because victims may feel pressure or blame. Victims in other incidents have had to change schools or move to escape the stigma.

But school districts have a duty, codified in the federal law known as Title 9, to protect the educational interests of their students.

"The school must protect the two known victims from any kind of harassment by anybody," Fierberg said. That, he said, may require kicking perpetrators off the team, and out of the school so the survivors don't have to face them.

"These two must not be further harmed or retaliated against," he said. School officials should talk with all students and make clear that hazing, harassment and retaliation will not be tolerated, he said.

The survivors "can't have their whole high school career destroyed before they even set foot in their first high school classroom," he said.

School officials "have to really respect the issue and decide it's not going to happen here," Lipkins said. Education against bullying, hazing and harassment should be integrated throughout the curriculum.

"The district needs to educate everybody, from staff to bus drivers to the cleaning crew," she said, "and there should be many ways to report suspected hazing, even anonymously."

An athletic coach has enormous power, Lipkins said, as the person who doles out coveted recognition and playing time.

“If there is a tight ship and the coach treats situations appropriately, it’s likely hazing will not occur,” she said.

Middletown is scheduled to open the regular season Friday at Lower Dauphin High School.