

Back on the field, a Sayreville varsity football player races down the sidelines on a punt return during an October game.



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COMEBACK SEASON

Story and Photos by Glenn Cook

A New Jersey school district and community recover from a hazing scandal

More than two decades after playing his last football game, Richard Labbe still has dreams about being on the field.

“If you took Father Time away, I would never stop playing football. That’s how much I love football,” says Labbe, who vividly remembers his final high school and college games as an under-sized lineman.

For more than a year, however, football has been the subject of nightmares for Labbe, who was named superintendent of New Jersey’s Sayreville Public Schools in July 2014. Just three months later, the district’s acclaimed football program, which had won six state championships and made 20 consecutive playoff appearances, became embroiled in a locker room hazing scandal that drew national attention.

comeback season

Like any scandal or catastrophic event, Sayreville's story has multiple layers and details that have not—and in some cases still cannot—be made public. But what happened then and what's happened since offer valuable lessons for other school districts.

After allegations surfaced, Labbe and the school board cancelled that week's game due to the criminal investigation. After seven players were charged, the rest of the 2014 season was cancelled. In the ensuing months, Sayreville's athletic director resigned and the high school's Hall of Fame football coach was transferred to an elementary school to teach physical education. Other assistant coaches, many of whom are Sayreville alumni, did not return.

"I knew how much it was going to hurt by cancelling that season, but a lot went into that decision," Labbe says. "We wanted to make sure the community, particularly the people involved in that program, understood that the safety and well-being of our children is by far our highest priority and much more important than football."

The story provides a stark reminder that, without proper care and supervision, high school athletes can lose sight of what's more important than playing games under the Friday night lights. It illustrates the need to better understand the attitudes and knowledge that all students—and their families—have about hazing and bullying.

And, just as important: It also points to the courage that administrators and school boards must have in making—and sticking with—tough decisions in the face of intense scrutiny and criticism.



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SPORTS AND PATRIOTISM

American flags and community ball fields are the first things you notice when driving through Sayreville, located in Middlesex County about 35 miles southwest of New York City. Sports and patriotism are intertwined throughout this borough of 45,000, a blue-collar town that offered work and security for returning World War II veterans who built homes along the Raritan River.

Street signs with the names of soldiers killed in action dot the landscape, and a “Welcome Home Veterans” sign is in front of the town hall. “Bombers” is the name of the Sayreville War Memorial High School mascot.

“When new residents ask me about the long street names, I always tell them, ‘If they can put your name on a dog tag, we can put it on a street sign,’” says Mayor Kennedy O’Brien.

Kevin Ciak, a Sayreville graduate and school board member for more than 20 years, says the football program has long been a source of pride for the community, which has seen major employers like DuPont downsize dramatically, and flooding from Superstorm Sandy leave hundreds of residents homeless. The program's high profile only strengthened an already deep connection.

“My second year as a coach here was our first winning season in 20 years, but it wasn't about the program being successful,” says Labbe, who started his career in Sayreville, working as an assistant coach for three years in the early 1990s. “It was about a community's love of football. It was a community-based activity, what you did on Friday night or Saturday afternoon. It was the crown jewel of Sayreville.”

So what happened last fall? Sifting through available documents and rafts of single-source media reports leaves an outsider with skeletal facts and few specifics. What's known is that several members of the varsity football team harassed and bullied four younger players in an unsupervised locker room on different occasions in the fall of 2014.

The bigger question is: Why did it happen, and more importantly, why didn't someone come forward sooner? To a person, those connected with the district and the program can only speculate.

“There wasn't even a suspicion of something,” says Ciak, who was board chairman at the time and is a member of NSBA's board of directors. “There were no rumors about hazing. There had never been a complaint. We never had been given anything that would give us a clue that this was going on.”

James Brown, the high school's principal, says the



incident has tortured him because he had no indication that hazing was occurring.

"I've been at every football game, on the sidelines, for 15 years and I regularly go out to practice, so I've asked everyone, 'How did I miss this? How did we miss this?'" Brown says. "It has made me question everything about my ability as an administrator."

The legal cases against the athletes, all of whom were minors when the incidents took place, have been sealed in family court. Six of the seven have received probation; one case was still pending at press time. Counseling has been provided to both the perpetrators and their targets. Understandably, the district won't discuss specifics about personnel decisions that resulted in the hiring of a new athletic director and football coach, or any disciplinary action taken against the students who were charged.

What district officials will discuss, somewhat hesitantly and warily, are the steps taken since the incident was reported. Without fail, the phrase "moving forward" peppers every conversation.

'UNDER SIEGE'

Sayreville's efforts to deal with the allegations and take the steps necessary to rebuild the football program were complicated from the beginning. The case's criminal nature meant district officials could not talk to coaches or students without approval from the Middlesex County prosecutor. With games scheduled just days

after the allegations surfaced, decisions had to be made without full knowledge of what had transpired.

The media, first local and then national, had a field day. Labbe and Ciak were handling 40 to 60 calls each. Add an angry, confused, and vocal minority of parents, players, and community members and it's easy to see why Labbe describes the experience as being "under siege."

"In the parent meeting that we had [after the first game was cancelled], I basically got hit left and right by an angry and hostile group of parents," Labbe says. "As I'm trying to explain that the allegations were far more serious than they imagined, one parent said, 'Why are you so angry?' It took every bit of willpower I had not to look at that person and say, 'Why aren't you angry? Four kids lost their innocence and you're upset that you lost a football game?'"

Emotions continued to run high at the board meeting the next day, when Labbe sought to cancel the season. He had been on the job just three months and a week, but the board, with members who have served for decades, supported his recommendation with a roll call vote.

"I thought that was incredible," Ciak says. "The board came out right behind the superintendent and said, 'What has transpired is serious. We don't tolerate it. And we're putting the health, welfare, and safety of our students ahead of football.'"

Ciak says he understands why parents were confused, at least to a point. "You had a very successful program,

Back on the sidelines, Sayreville's cheerleaders rouse the crowd during a recent home game. Cancelling the 2014 football season also cut short opportunities for the cheerleaders and marching band to perform.

comeback season

and obviously our students' futures were relying on it," he says. "We had very limited information that we could share to support our justification, and at that particular point, parents and kids were in a sense of denial that anything had occurred.

"It wasn't about picking up the pieces. It was: How do we hold this thing together?"

Three days after the board meeting, seven players were arrested, and the majority of the community finally understood what caused the season to be cancelled.

Back in the stands, Sayreville's active student section was all decked out in Bomber blue and reacting with emotion to almost every play.

START THE HEALING

Brown, the high school principal, takes pride in knowing the names of almost all of his 1,700 students. He stands in the same place every morning and welcomes them for another day.

"I want them to know this is their home and that I'm going to protect them," he says.

Brown's self-described "old school" approach has worked well as a principal, which only compounds his confusion and frustration over the scandal. But he disagrees with the decision to cancel the season, saying it could have been handled internally.

"I know those kids. I know their families and the multiple layers of brothers and sisters who came through here," he says. "I've thought about this a lot, and I don't want to be misunderstood. I think the kids who did this should be punished, but I don't think we had to cancel the season to do it."

After the allegations surfaced, Labbe and Tamika Price, the assistant superintendent he had hired just a month earlier, conducted an internal investigation that affirmed their decision and resulted in a series of policy changes for all students and staff participating in extracurricular activities.



“We learned two very important things: a) Parents don’t understand what hazing is and they don’t know how to respond if they are hearing about it, and b) The kids don’t know what hazing is and they don’t know how to respond if they’re hearing about it,” Labbe says.

As a result, all students and their parents now must sign a contract saying they won’t engage in hazing, intimidation, or bullying (HIB). If they do, they will be cut from the team. If another widespread situation erupts, the season will be cancelled. Parents and students also must participate in HIB training before each season.

Coaches in all sports must now meet all state requirements and take additional hours of HIB training as well. Labbe and Price also meet with coaches prior to the start of each season to ensure locker rooms are properly supervised at all times, and any incidents are reported promptly.

“We have a supervision policy that clearly states a standard of care must be met at all times, and it was not being followed or enforced by those who supposed to be enforcing it,” Labbe says. “We had coaches who did not understand what action is supposed to be taken if they heard of an instance of HIB, and that demonstrated to us that we have not been as child centered as we would like to be.”

Brown organized a series of activities, including a “Week of Hope” last December that “started the healing.” He also has brought in nationally renowned speakers to talk to students about bullying and harassment, and has made “The Power of One: One Community, One People” an ongoing theme. Community members held events at Kennedy Park and in other places to discuss the emotional well-being of students and ways to recognize signs of hazing.

“I don’t think anyone could look at what happened and say we didn’t get lulled into some kind of complacency because the team was so successful,” Brown says. “With that said, anytime you can look at and reflect upon what happened, then you can be better. If you are fortunate enough to do it in the absence of a traumatic event, you are ahead of the curve. That’s where we plan to stay.”

‘EDUCATE THESE KIDS’

Reinstating football this fall came as a relief to Sayreville’s loyal fan base, which has turned out in force again on Friday nights. They are cheering for new coach Chris Beagan, who won a state championship at Monroe Township, as well as for their beloved Bombers.

A Sayreville alum and former assistant coach, Beagan was hired after several rounds of interviews by administrators, board members, and community representatives, all of whom cited his student-centered approach.



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“Obviously it’s easy to focus on wins and losses and the thing that take place when everyone gathers to see us on Friday nights, but it’s a journey,” Beagan says during a brief interview in his office. “Wins and losses are a short-term goal, a quick-glance way of looking at things. My goal is to make sure our athletes are being prepared to be successful at the next level, so they can return and be part of the greater community.”

Labbe attended the first home game, but is not sure when he’ll go back. He says it’s difficult to sit in the stands and watch games now that he’s no longer playing or coaching. His only direct involvement with sports now is coaching recreational soccer.

“I was a very intense and competitive coach, but at some point when I had my children, I changed,” he says. “I recognized there and then what’s most important. Interestingly enough, I’m so much more proud of what I’ve done as a recreational soccer coach than anything I did as a football coach.”

At that point, nearing the end of a two-hour interview, he repeats that he would do the same all over again.

“It was the only decision I could make,” Labbe says. “The first thing I tell our coaches when I meet with them is, ‘I don’t care about your records. I don’t care if you win a single game. What I care about is how you take care of our students. I want you to take care of them as human beings first, students second, and athletes third.’”

“I don’t want anyone in this school district to think we have to win games to be successful. We are educators first. And that’s what we’re going to do: Educate these kids.”

Glenn Cook (glenncook117@gmail.com) is a freelance writer and photographer, and former executive editor of American School Board Journal.

For more Sayreville photos, go to www.nsba.org/asbj.