

Staten Island Advance

GRYMES HILL

Verbal abuse or sports culture?

Wagner College confirms investigation of complaints against head football coach

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Wagner College is conducting an internal investigation into its head football coach, according to the institution's chief human resources officer.

The investigation began after the college's human resources department received a complaint against Jason Houghtaling, Chief Human Resources Officer Jazzmine Clarke-Glover said in an email to the Advance.

The nature of the complaint was not divulged, and Clarke-Glover declined further comment on an ongoing investigation. However, a parent of a current player retained attorney Mark J. Fonte to "investigate potential issues within the Wagner College football program."

In an email sent to the Advance, Fonte said, "Allegations of physical and verbal abuse by the head coach have been brought to my attention."

"These incidents go well beyond what is customary in the rough and tumble world of college athletics," Fonte said.

Fonte also said that his investigation will look into an alleged "lack of an oversight review by the school itself despite assurances that the school would conduct its own investigation."

While the substance of the initial complaint and subsequent Wagner College investigation was not relayed to the Advance, interviews with a current player, a parent of the current player and a source with close knowledge of the college's football program indicate that verbal abuse allegations are at the center of the inquiry.

The sources, who spoke on the condition of anonymity out of fear of potential retaliation, expressed deep concern that Houghtaling allegedly exhibited behavior that was unprofessional toward players and other members of the program's football staff, including one instance where two sources say the coach had an extremely heated and vulgar confrontation with an equipment manager on the team.

Two sources allege that Houghtaling fosters an environment of humiliation at the program, using the platform of a team environment to embarrass players.

"He tries to break you in front of the other kids," one source said.

SEE FOOTBALL COACH, A8



Wagner College head football coach Jason Houghtaling directs plays from the sidelines during a game in 2015. *Staten Island Advance*

Football coach

FROM A1

WHAT'S ACCEPTABLE?

The parameters of verbal abuse in sports are often skewed, and a source who is a high school football coach with over two decades of coaching experience — including experience in college football — said that a "culture change across the board" is underway within football and how coaching is conducted within the sport.

"The way your father and grandfather coached you, or the way that was acceptable, is really no longer acceptable by parents," the source said.

Additionally, the source explained that college coaches "have a much tougher job" because their employment is entirely predicated on their performance as a coach, whereas high school coaches are often volunteers.

However, in regard to the allegations concerning an environment of embarrassment, the coaching source said that "the theater of public humiliation" is where coaches could cross the line in terms of verbal abuse.

A source with close knowledge of the Wagner College football program — who played football for well over a decade — admitted that it is "hard to know [where] that line is."

However, the source said that "there was probably a few times where he had crossed it," speaking of Houghtaling.

A player currently on the team said that Houghtaling has "been disrespectful to many kids" on the team, adding that he "has no respect for the coaches" on his staff.

When asked if Houghtaling crosses the line with his verbal conduct, the player said, "he has no line."

WHERE DOES NCAA STAND?

In response to a question concerning the specific parameters of what is considered verbal abuse by a football coach, an NCAA spokesman said that those parameters would have to be determined by school administrators.

According to the NCAA Division I 2017-2018 manual, "Individuals employed by (or associated with) a member institution to administer, conduct or coach intercollegiate athletics and all participating student-athletes shall act with honesty and sportsmanship at all times so that intercollegiate athletics as a whole, their institutions and they, as individuals, shall represent the honor and dignity of fair play and the generally recognized high standards associated with wholesome competitive sports."

Bylaws regarding verbal abuse are not mentioned in the manual.

COLLEGE DECLINES TO COMMENT

Lee Manchester, a Wagner College spokesman, declined to confirm the college's investigation or issue a statement on behalf of the institution, citing that the college does not provide comment on personnel matters.

In a separate incident in September, however, the school did confirm that a professor was suspended and banned from campus.

An email sent to the college's athletic department seeking comment was not returned at the time of publication.

Houghtaling became the Wagner College head football coach in 2014, according to the school's website.

This season, Wagner is 1-8 as of Nov. 7.

Houghtaling has developed 22 All-Northeast Conference (NEC) selections, including 11 First-Team choices in his first four years at the program, Wagner's site says.

Houghtaling did not respond to an email concerning questions regarding the allegations made against him.

Following an investigative review by Fonte, a decision will be made whether civil litigation is warranted, or if a possible criminal referral will be made to the Richmond County district attorney's office, he told the Advance.