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NEWS

## Canton McKinley High School football coaches to face further discipline, possible criminal charges

**Kelli Weir** The Repository

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The McKinley High School football team takes the field in this file photo from 2019. *CantonRep.com* / Ray Stewart

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CANTON – Eight of McKinley High School’s football coaches will face further discipline following the Canton City School District’s nearly [weeklong investigation](#) into allegations the coaches forced a player to eat pork against his religious beliefs as punishment.

The coaches also could face criminal hazing charges.

**More on the McKinley coaches:** [Canton McKinley High School football player says he was forced to eat pork against religious beliefs](#)

Superintendent Jeff Talbert issued a statement Wednesday that said the district’s completed internal investigation found that the coaches on May 24 "engaged in actions that constituted inappropriate, demeaning and divisive behavior in a misguided attempt to instill discipline in the student-athletes."

The statement does not include details of what occurred on May 24.

"The football program, which has a long and proud history, is an important part of our school culture and our community," wrote Talbert, a former head football coach. "This incident does not reflect the Canton City School District culture of protecting the physical and emotional wellbeing of our students. Let us be clear, the Canton City School District holds our coaching and general staff to the highest professional and ethical standards. Anything short of these standards is unacceptable and will not be tolerated."

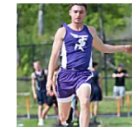
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Talbert wrote that further disciplinary measures will follow, but said those measures have not yet been determined. That could include firing the coaches.

Head football coach [Marcus Wattley](#) and assistant coaches Badre El Bardawil, Cade Brodie, Joshua Grimsley, Romero Harris, Frank McLeod, Zachary Sweat and Tyler Thatcher have been suspended with pay since May 26. The coaches have not returned messages seeking comment or have declined comment.

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The Canton City school board has scheduled a special meeting for 5:30 p.m.



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The Canton City school board has scheduled a special meeting for 5:30 p.m. Thursday at McKinley High School’s downtown campus to discuss an investigation of personnel and other personnel issues in a closed-door executive session. The board is expected to take a public vote following the executive session. The meeting will be streamed live at <http://boelive.ccstv11.com/>.

## First Amendment lawsuit on hold

The coaches are accused of forcing a 17-year-old football player to consume an entire pepperoni pizza against his religious beliefs as punishment for missing a voluntary May 20 strengthening and conditioning workout. The Canton Repository has agreed to not name the player, who has received interest from Division I colleges.

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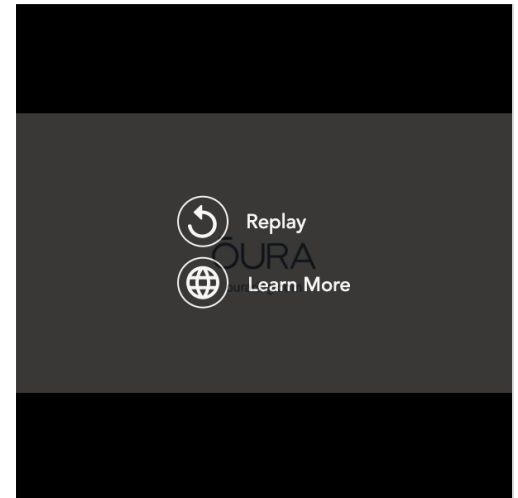
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Attorney Edward Gilbert, who is representing the player’s family, on Tuesday threatened to file a lawsuit against the Canton City School District for violating the student’s First Amendment constitutional rights.

He said the player told head coach Wattlely at least 10 times that he did not eat

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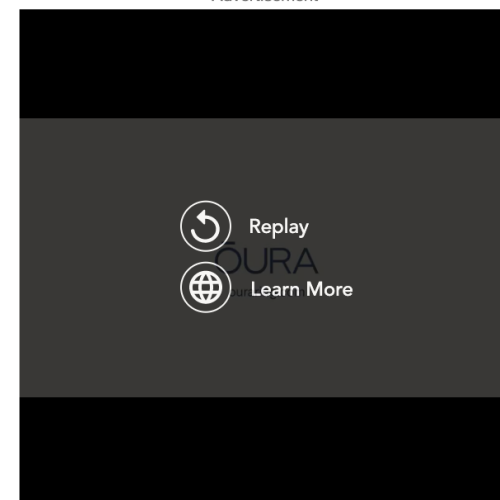
Attorney Edward Gilbert, who is representing the player's family, on Tuesday threatened to file a lawsuit against the Canton City School District for violating the student's First Amendment constitutional rights.

He said the player told head coach Wattley at least 10 times that he did not eat pork because he and his family are members of the Hebrew Israeli religious faith, which strictly forbids the consumption of pork or pork residue. Gilbert said all the coaches should have known the player didn't eat pork because he has been present during previous player meals.

Gilbert said Wattley did allow the player to remove the pepperoni and some of the cheese from the pizza, but residue from the pork clearly remained.



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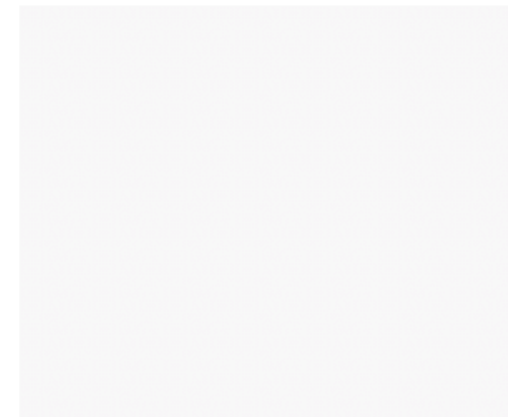


Kenny Walker, center, listens as his attorney Ed Gilbert, front, speaks on behalf of the family during a press conference in Akron on Tuesday. The family plans to file a lawsuit against Canton City School District because they say the football coaches forced their son to eat pork, which is against his religion, as punishment for missing a voluntary practice. *Jeff Lange, Akron Beacon Journal*

If the player refused to eat the pizza, he was told that his teammates would be forced to perform additional drills and "there was a question of whether he would be able to stay on the team," Gilbert said. The attorney said the player missed the

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May 20 voluntary workout to nurse a slight shoulder injury he received during a previous practice.


The player's father, Kenny Walker, said his son, who is undergoing psychological counseling, expressed anger, frustration, hurt and felt ostracized after the incident, which included his son's teammates and coaches yelling at his son while he ate. Walker said his family hasn't eaten pork since 2013.

On Wednesday, Gilbert said the filing of the lawsuit has been delayed because the district has asked to mediate the dispute and the family has agreed.

"We prefer not having the child, based on his depressive state, go through a trial if we can avoid it," Gilbert said.


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Canton Police Chief Jack Angelo confirmed Wednesday that Talbert filed a complaint with the department. He said based on the Ohio Revised Code, a hazing violation likely would be the charge but added that the decision on what type of charges to file would be up to the Canton city prosecutor.

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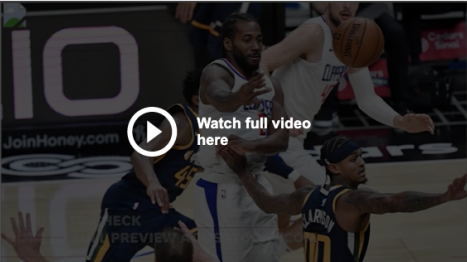
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Talbert, in his statement, said the police report was filed "in an effort to be comprehensive, and with our student's health and wellbeing in mind."

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