

HISTORY OF ABUSE. WITH SEXUAL PREDATORS PROWLING THE SIDELINES, PARENTS CAN'T TRUST ANYONE

BY MICHAEL O'KEEFFE
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Jimmy Carlino exploded with raw emotion last week in a Boston courtroom as he described how his godfather, former Christ the King basketball coach Bob Oliva, sexually abused him during the 1970s.

All the pain, fury and hurt that had been bottled up for 35 years came rushing out, bringing Suffolk Superior Court Judge Carol S. Ball and just about everybody else in the courtroom to tears.

Even Oliva, who acknowledged that he molested Carlino during a 1976 trip to Massachusetts and pleaded guilty to sex abuse charges that day, seemed shaken as Carlino fought back loud sobs as he struggled to read his victim impact statement.

When the hearing was over, a tall, middle-aged man with thinning sandy hair and an athlete's gait, one of the half-dozen friends who had traveled to Boston to support Carlino, stepped into the hall and talked about how Oliva had victimized him, too.

"He took me to prostitutes at 14, 15, 16 years old and watched me," says former Christ the King baseball star and major league pitcher Allen Watson. "He showed me pornography and he masturbated."

Watson, who testified before the Massachusetts grand jury that indicted Oliva last year, told reporters that he decided to speak out to raise awareness of sexual abuse.

"Sports are great for kids and I had a lot of great coaches. Only one was a pedophile," says Watson, whose eight-year major league career includes seasons with the Mets and Yankees. "But parents need to be aware that there are predators out there. They need to do their homework.

"That's why I'm telling my story."

Sexual abuse experts say there is no evidence that high school sports and youth athletic leagues are rife with sexual abusers. Coaches are no more likely to sexually abuse children than anyone else - teachers, Scout leaders, music instructors - who work closely with kids. But the experts do agree with Watson: Parents need to take steps to make sure their kids don't become victims.

"Sexual abuse is vastly underreported across the board, but especially in the highly macho world of sports," says David Clohessy, the national director of the Survivors

Network of those Abused by Priests. "For boys and girls to acknowledge that they were abused, that is hard to do in a world that encourages toughness."

University of New Hampshire sociology professor David Finkelhor, the director of the school's Crimes Against Children Research Center, says researchers do not keep statistics on coaches accused of sexually abusing children, but there is no reason to believe that pedophiles flock to Little League games looking for prey.

"The majority of people who abuse kids, they don't go looking for them," Finkelhor says. "They get into a relationship with kids who are vulnerable and take advantage of the situation. They don't go shopping for opportunities."

"The most important thing parents can do is have a good relationship with their kids, so kids feel comfortable coming to them if something is wrong," Finkelhor adds.

But sports do provide predators with several advantages, says Chris Gavagan, a Brooklyn filmmaker who is working on a documentary called "Coached into Silence," about the abuse he says he suffered at the hands of his roller hockey coach.

"Kids look at coaches to teach them how to do the things their sports heroes do," Gavagan says. "Sports are all about hero worship, and kids will do whatever their coaches tell them. They are craving role models, and there is more of an imbalance of power in sports than in other relationships."

The imbalance becomes even more pronounced for coaches who are especially successful, says Kevin Mulhearn, an attorney who represents nine former Poly Prep students who claim in a federal lawsuit filed against the Brooklyn school last year that they were abused by now-deceased football coach and gym teacher Philip Foglietta.

The lawsuit says that Poly Prep officials looked the other way because Foglietta turned the small private school into a city football powerhouse. Poly Prep officials, the suit says, "condoned and facilitated Foglietta's criminal behavior because he was a highly successful football coach instrumental in raising substantial revenue for the school."

"Poly Prep, indeed, derived substantial revenue, from alumni donations, tuition payments and otherwise from the unparalleled success of its football program," the suit adds.

"Institutions will preserve and protect pedophiles over the kids," Mulhearn says. "Schools, like churches, find it is easier to ignore it."

Robert Hoatson, a Catholic priest who founded an organization called Road to Recovery that serves clergy abuse survivors, says Oliva and Ernest Lorch, the founder of the once-powerful Riverside Church basketball program who also was indicted on sex abuse charges in Massachusetts last year, were two of the most powerful men in New York City basketball.

"They created their own kingdoms," Hoatson says.

Oliva knows scores of college coaches and could land a scholarship for a kid with a phone call. His links to Nike gave him access to sneakers and athletic gear that many students could not afford.

And, of course, he decided who played basketball for the Royals.

"Oliva was a god at Christ the King," Watson says.

Lorch, a wealthy investment lawyer, had a fat Rolodex full of phone numbers of college coaches, and he also had deep pockets. Lorch bought the loyalty of scores of Riverside kids by providing them with money for sneakers, coats or their families' Con Ed bills. Two men have told the Daily News that Lorch paid them millions of dollars to remain silent about the alleged abuse by Lorch in the 1980s.

Mulhearn says Foglietta was just as powerful at Poly Prep - and just as unaccountable - as Lorch was at Riverside and Oliva was at Christ the King.

"Foglietta was the alpha male at Poly Prep," says Mulhearn, who attended the school and played football for Foglietta, who died in 1998. "That kind of power corrupts, and if you have a predilection to that kind of behavior, you can do whatever you want. We always wondered why he didn't take a job as a college coach. Now we know why. It was because he had access to a new class of boys every year."

Many youth leagues now conduct background checks on potential volunteers before they are allowed to coach kids or officiate games. Little League, for example, picks up the tab for local leagues to conduct 125 background checks a year, says spokesman Steve Barr, and charges \$1 for each additional background check.

"Cost should not be an issue," Barr says.

But filmmaker Gavagan points out that background checks will flag only men or women who have already been arrested for sexual abuse or other crimes.

Parents should intervene, SNAP's Clohessy says, if a coach seems more interested in spending more time with their son or daughter than with adults. Sudden shifts in mood or behavior - an Eagle Scout who gets caught drinking, a girl who starts cutting herself - may be a cry for help.

"It's sickening, because you can't trust anybody these days, and it's a shame because there are a lot of great people working in sports," Watson says. "Just a small percentage of people out there are pedophiles. I was a young and innocent kid, and Bob Oliva made me think every kid went out to dinner with his coach and then went to a prostitute. I have kids and I don't want to see anyone go through what Jimmy went through.

"Parents, do your homework."