

Tempe Union High School District Governing Board members reject coach's resignation

By Megan Lupo

TEMPE, Ariz. — The five-member Tempe Union High School District Governing Board voted unanimously to reject Mountain Pointe High School coach Justin Hager's resignation, instead seeking the process for his termination at its Sept. 18 meeting.

According to the board, Hager, who served as the head coach for girls' basketball, assistant football coach and physical education and health teacher, resigned from the district on Sept. 13 after a personnel investigation concluded he disclosed game plans, strategies and other confidential information to opposing coaches for the past three years.

In the board's latest September 2019 meeting, the members approved Superintendent Kevin Mendivil and the district's human resources department to proceed with a formal statement of charges, which is the next step needed toward dismissing Hager.

Calling Hager's actions "a betrayal for our students," board member Sandy Lowe said she could not support his resignation due to the devastation he caused the Mountain Pointe High School community.

"When you think about the impact on not only the boys that were playing, but the whole school and how dishonest and unethical this was, I mean, they passionately played their hardest, and now they come to find out that perhaps the other team knew exactly what they were doing," Lowe said. "It was such a strong, unethical thing that [Hager] did, and I think that's why we decided that we would like to move forward and look to termination."

Board member Andres Barraza, who attended Marcos de Niza High School, part of the district, said that students were troubled with this breach of traditional values that are instilled in

the Mountain Pointe High School culture but refused to comment further on his voting, incorrectly citing how Arizona's open meeting laws forbade him to discuss his views on this matter with the public.

For Mountain Pointe mother, Elizabeth Honne, however, she immediately expressed content with the board's voting in a phone interview, calling it "the best decision they could make."

Honne's son, Mason, a 2018 Mountain Pointe High School graduate, played offensive line on the varsity football team for most of his high school career, Honne said. He could not recall any direct interaction with Hager, but remembered Hager wishing his team good luck prior to games—a remark nonsensical to Honne, as she believed Hager's indiscretion cost them a possible title.

Although Honne said her son would never have imagined his former coach to cause such distress, there were times he and his teammates experienced an odd feeling after a few games.

It was a ritual for the Honne family to go out to dinner after the Friday night football games with some of Mason Honne's teammates and their families, Honne said. Sometimes, she would overhear the boys insist the other team knew their plays and formations.

Honne, at the time, said she shrugged those concerns off to the competitiveness of Arizona high school football, especially at Mountain Pointe High School, but now she knows differently.

"It broke my heart just to know that the boys could have been cheated out of everything," Honne said. "I want to know what his motive was."

Other parents, such as Maricopa resident Tena Dugan, are not just focused on why Hager sent classified details via anonymous email account walterpayton12@yahoo.com, but why it took three years for Hager to be caught and why those who stayed quiet are not held accountable.

“I think the most important thing to me though is that the school administrators and coaches from the schools that got those emails need to have super, super harsh punishment, or it will continue down the same path it’s been going all along,” Dugan said in a phone interview, adding those coaches’ teams should be stripped of their wins and championships.

The 10 coaches listed on the receiving end of Hager’s emails either declined to comment or could not be reached for comment.

Dugan said she intentionally did not send her four sports-playing children to Mountain Pointe High School due to the intense pressure and obsession of its aggressive football team, instead they went to Maricopa High School.

Volunteering throughout the schools in her area for 16 years with her husband, as well as both serving as booster club presidents for sports, Dugan said she witnessed school administrations and the Arizona Interscholastic Association, an organization that regulates Arizona high school athletics, overlook controversies, surrounding football powerhouse high schools, such as Mountain Pointe High School and nearby Hamilton High School in Chandler, for the sake of reputation and finances.

Referencing the lawsuit where alleged victims of a 2017 hazing case at Hamilton High School blamed staff members for failing to report or take preventative action, Dugan said she hopes this is not another incident where school employees can get away with silence.

“High school sports to me were more about character integrity, responsibility. That's what I had hoped. My oldest son, the one that played college ball, is getting married in November; he's 24. Do you know he invited his high school football coach to his wedding?” Dugan said. “That tells me he had an effect on his life far more than the football field.”

TUHSD Board Member Michelle Helm called Hager's actions, as a coach, an “abuse of students.”

“If you think of the number of students who may have lost scholarships, those who may have been teased or bullied because a kick or play didn't occur correctly, those who went home, despondent or depressed, those things we'll never know,” Helm said during the board meeting. “We know about physical abuse, but we don't always see the emotional abuse.”

The next TUHSD Governing Board meeting will be held at 500 W. Guadalupe Rd. in Tempe on Oct. 2 at 3 p.m..