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Pop Warner Probes 'Bounties'

Football League Suspends Coaches Over Allegations They Paid Players to Hurt Foes

By **STU WOO** and **MIRIAM JORDAN**



John Zanelli

Tustin Cobras head coach Darren Crawford. He denies allegations that he and other coaches ran a bounty system among players.

Pop Warner Little Scholars Inc., the nation's largest youth-football organization, has suspended coaches of an elite California team amid an investigation into allegations that they paid 10- and 11-year-old players to intentionally injure opponents.

A former assistant coach alleged in a letter this spring to national and local Pop Warner officials that other team coaches ran the bounty program as their team, based in the Orange County city of Tustin, made a playoff run in late 2011. That was months before the National Football League disciplined some New Orleans Saints coaches for orchestrating a similar scheme.

Pop Warner said it would suspend Darren Crawford, the Tustin Cobras head coach, and Pat Galentine, the team president and offensive coordinator, as it investigated the accusations.

Mr. Crawford, the chief executive of a Huntington Beach, Calif.-based warehouse company called Ramp Logistics, denied the allegations in an email, writing: "I have never paid a player to go out and hurt another player period, end of story."

Pop Warner History

1929 Founded in Philadelphia as Junior Football Conference by Joe Tomlin

1934 Renamed Pop Warner Conference, in honor of legendary college football coach Glenn Scobey "Pop" Warner

1938 The organization, still local, included 157 teams

1954 Pop Warner dies

1959 Pop Warner Little Scholars Inc. incorporates as nonprofit, expands nationally

1960 ABC airs a Pop Warner-themed episode of "Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color"

1988 Joe Tomlin dies

2012 Pop Warner claims 425,000 participants, including both football players and cheerleaders, on 5,000 teams

Source: Pop Warner Little Scholars Inc.

Mr. Galentine, a real-estate-company executive, declined to comment. Rich Bowman, the team's defensive coordinator whom the former assistant coach alleged helped run the bounty system, couldn't be reached for comment. Pop Warner said Mr. Bowman was suspended earlier this year for unrelated reasons.

The bounty allegations, first reported by the Orange County Register, came from John Zanelli, who is also the parent of a former player. Before leveling his accusations, he had been banned from the team after heated arguments with other Cobra officials, according to both Mr. Zanelli and Pop Warner officials.

Mr. Zanelli said in an interview that the program started with coaches paying players \$20 to \$50 for hard-hitting tackles. It then evolved into a system in which players got similar rewards for hitting star players on the other team hard enough that they couldn't play for the rest of a game, he said.



John Zanelli

Team president and offensive coordinator Pat Galentine.

Mr. Zanelli alleged that after a playoff game, he saw Mr. Crawford give money to a linebacker who knocked an opposing running back out of a playoff game. Mr. Zanelli said he wasn't certain if it was because of the bounty program.

The allegations in Tustin surface amid concerns over the physical toll of football. Besides the New Orleans Saints scandal, the NFL faces lawsuits filed by thousands of former players who fear they suffered brain damage from their playing careers. Several stars, including Kurt Warner and Tom Brady, have said they would be hesitant to let their own sons play the sport.

The NFL has asked a federal judge to dismiss the lawsuits, saying the cases should be resolved through the league's collective bargaining agreement.

If the allegations in the Tustin case are substantiated, there could be legal ramifications for the coaches and perhaps even Pop Warner conferences, one legal scholar said.

"If you can establish that there was a financial incentive for injury, which would otherwise be incidental to the game, then...the potential for both civil and criminal prosecutions starts to rise," said Paul Haagen, director of the Center for Sports Law and Policy at Duke University's law school. He added that Pop Warner conferences could be penalized for lack of supervision.

A representative for Pop Warner didn't respond to a request for comment on the possibility of legal ramifications.

Pop Warner spokesman Josh Pruce said its Orange County-area conference, and the Tustin Cobras, banned Mr. Zanelli from football for "verbally abusing" other Cobras officials. Mr. Zanelli said he was kicked out because of disagreements—including more than the bounty

complaints—with Mr. Galentine, which culminated in a heated argument in a parking lot.

After being banned, Mr. Zanelli wrote to both the local and national Pop Warner organizations detailing the alleged bounty program. Mr. Pruce, the spokesman, said the Orange County conference investigated the accusations but couldn't find any wrongdoing.

The national Pop Warner organization decided to further investigate "in light of new information and players coming forward," Pop Warner President Jon Butler said in a statement. It said it asked Messrs. Crawford and Galentine to step down until the investigation was finished. "We take this matter very seriously," Mr. Butler said.

The Tustin Cobras in 2011 went undefeated before losing in the Pop Warner Super Bowl in Florida. Before then, they defeated the Santa Margarita Stallions in the playoff game in which a Cobras linebacker inflicted a game-ending injury on the running back that Mr. Zanelli said was targeted under the alleged bounty program.

"That team was bigger, faster and more physical than us last season," said the parent of a running back on the Stallions who didn't want to be named. "But we never contemplated this. ...If these allegations are true, we hope there will be reform."

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