

## Controversy surrounded resignation of longtime Kenowa Hills baseball coach, documents show

Published: Saturday, July 09, 2011, 8:00 AM



By **Garret Ellison | The Grand Rapids Press**

ALPINE TOWNSHIP — Had Bruce Oosterhouse resigned from the varsity baseball program at Kenowa Hills any other year, his send-off would have befitted a state Hall of Fame coach who spent 36 years teaching kids to play a game he loved.

But this was not a normal year for Kenowa Hills baseball.

When the most successful coach in school history left under what some said was a cloud of controversy last month, the Knights lost their entire baseball staff along with him.

“The whole thing is just unfortunate,” said Christine Annese, outgoing assistant superintendent at Kenowa Hills and the district’s head of human resources.

What prompted Oosterhouse’s departure in early June isn’t clear. Athletic Director Eric Haik has declined to discuss it. Oosterhouse would say only that he had been eyeing retirement and wants to focus on his family.

So, what happened?

According to correspondence between administrators and the parents of a team member obtained by The Press through the Freedom of Information Act, the longtime coach resigned following a reprimand and investigation into an alleged violation of student privacy laws.

Lawrence and Sandra Keeney lobbied school leaders for Oosterhouse’s resignation, alleging discrimination and harassment of their 16-year-old son, a diabetic, during the 2011 baseball season, according to documents.

Although a lawsuit may have been hinted at, nothing was ever filed or formally threatened, according to Haik and Annese.

In a June 5 letter to district officials, the Keeneys alleged Oosterhouse told their son in a private meeting May 5 that he would not play anymore “because of his diabetes,” following an 8-0 loss to Forest Hills Central when the coaches took issue with his attitude after sitting the game out.

That alleged incident took place two months after a March practice in which Oosterhouse allegedly told assembled teammates the boy’s diabetes was bad to the point where “I do not know how long he will be with us.”

Players, mistakenly thinking that meant their teammate was dying, told their parents. Haik and the Keeneys declared it a violation of the Federal Educational Right and Privacy Act, according to documents.

But those remarks are disputed. Assistant Coach Dave Pullen says he doesn't remember it. Neither does Greg Chulski, the team's senior catcher.

"I've heard him tell a kid he did a play wrong, but I've never heard him denigrate a player," said Chulski, 18, who played several years for "Coach O" and will be attending Muskegon Community College on a baseball scholarship.

The Keeneys requested Haik interview individual players, and he told the family in a memo that all players present at the time confirmed the comment was made while their son was absent from practice.

Haik declined to talk about his investigation or Oosterhouse's resignation. Lawrence Keeney refused to elaborate, saying only that the school "did a very good job and they should not be criticized."

When contacted by The Press, Oosterhouse said he looks back fondly on his time at Kenowa Hills, but was considering retirement going into the season.

He coached the Knights between 1970 and 1995, and since 2000. He racked up 637 wins and 383 losses in those years. His teams won six conference titles, five districts, two regionals and had 11 seasons of at least 20 wins. This year, the team won 18 and lost nine games.

"I don't have anything bad to say about anybody," he said. "It's just time to move on and focus on my family."

His son, Kyle, is battling cancer.

In his resignation letter obtained by The Press, Oosterhouse called the decision to resign "not an easy one."

"I have seen the game change, the players change and even the rules change over the years," he wrote, saying he would miss the people connected to the game but would cherish the memories.

Still, his supporters aren't happy with the send-off. Pullen said he, varsity assistant Greg Smith and junior varsity and freshman coaches Ted Iciek and Jim Sobota all resigned "in disgust at the way things were handled."

Recently resigned school board member Jeff Miller cited Oosterhouse's resignation and the way hockey coach Dave Adams left the district last year among his reasons for abruptly stepping down last month.

The coach's supporters said any player who missed practice got benched and Keeney missed a lot of practice. Between March 14 and April 28, the boy missed 10 of the 28 practices and left early five times, according to Haik's notes from a meeting on the issue.

The Keeneys sought assurances from the school that their son would be allowed to play baseball his senior year in hopes of getting a college scholarship.

Because of construction work on the ball fields and the lack of a coaching staff, there are no baseball camps this summer at Kenowa Hills, a long-time tradition.

Haik did address rumors that the school's baseball diamond, Oosterhouse-Pullen Field, would be renamed.

It won't be.

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