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Dot's Eagles contemplate flying the Pop Warner nest ; Coach: Adult attacked player to set off Disney brawl

By [Rochelle Ballin](#)

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It has been a hectic week for the Dorchester Pop Warner Eagles organization. What was supposed to be a time of fun and - potentially - glory at the Pop Warner National Championship tournament in Florida turned into a nightmare after members of Dorchester's midget squad were involved in a brawl at a Disney World hotel with a rival team from Rhode Island. The fight resulted in a tough disciplinary crackdown by the national Pop Warner board, which has barred all levels of the Dorchester league from participating in post-season competition for the next three years. The midget team's coach, Tony Hurston, has also been suspended for a year.

The sanctions came down amid loud protests from the Dorchester group's leaders, who say that an adult coach from the Cranston, Rhode Island, team assaulted a Dorchester teenager to spark the incident - an account which is at odds with the national league's findings. Another Dorchester player required stitches to his head after he was hit with a chair during the fracas.

In a later development, the Reporter has been told that a police report from the Dec. 11 altercation - details of which were related to the newspaper this week by a Sheriff's Department spokesperson in Osceola County - leaves unclear any determination about which side was at fault in the fracas. However, the police records do indicate that an adult from Rhode Island was accused of assaulting a 14--year-old from Dorchester.

The case was still under review by the Osceola County Sheriff's Department this week, although the mother of the unidentified Dorchester player decided this week not to press charges, according to the Sheriff's Department.

Jon Butler, the executive director of the national group - officially called Pop Warner Little Scholars - this week stood by the board's sanctions, which he said were informed by the police investigation, along with the testimony of eyewitnesses. However, Butler left the door open for a potential revision to the sanctions.

"We're always willing, if new facts and testimony come up. We will revisit any decision if any of that becomes pertinent," he said.

Terry Cousins, a longtime Dorchester Eagles coach and organizer, lashed out at the national board this week for penalizing the entire Dorchester organization and for discounting his team's version of the events.

"The media have been slaughtering us, but they are getting their information from [the national Pop Warner organization]," said Cousins. "All these people that are sitting behind the computer are writing all these nasty things about Dorchester without the full story."

One thing is not in dispute: Several members of the midget squad - the league's oldest division, which comprises players ages 11-15 - were involved in an altercation with counterparts from the Edgewood Eagles of Cranston last Thursday at the food court of Disney's All-Star Resort Hotel. It is also clear that a three-person disciplinary board of the National Pop Warner organization - which convened the next day under league rules - found that Dorchester played the role of aggressors in the fight. That determination, together with allegations of other bad behavior during the Eagles' stay in Orlando last week, resulted in far stiffer punishment for the Dorchester program. While the coaches for the Cranston team were given a one year-probation - and a warning not to commit a second offense - Dorchester's program has been pushed to the brink of outright expulsion from Pop Warner.

The ruling has outraged Cousins and others involved with the Eagles program.

"I'm all in agreement," Cousins said. "If our midgets were in a fight, then suspend them. But I don't understand how they suspend the whole organization. That's not fair. They are trying to punish Dorchester Pop Warner. We will take nationals to court and let a judge decide our fate. If the three-year suspension stands, we are going to leave Pop Warner."

Cousins claims that the account of the incident accepted by league officials - that one or more of the Dorchester players instigated the assault - is not accurate. According to Cousins, trouble between the two teams started at a Wednesday night party that was thrown for all the teams after the first round of play, in which the favored Dorchester was defeated by a team from North Carolina.

"The teams that won were walking around with their chests out and the teams that lost had their heads down," said Terry. "At one point they had us ranked as the number one team coming out of New England. We felt the vibe as soon as we got off the bus, that everyone was watching us. To get beat in the first round made us feel foolish."

"The team out of Cranston is also the Eagles," Cousins continued. "They taunted our kids, saying [we] can't be the number one team out of New England because they are the number one team out of New England. Those kids won, but they were rubbing it in our kids' faces. The difference is, though, we are in Division One and they are Division Two."

The next morning - Thursday, Dec. 11 - a few of the Dorchester players encountered the Cranston team during breakfast in the hotel cafeteria's food court. That is where the problem escalated, according to Cousins.

"One of our coaches took them to the cafeteria," said Cousins. "While they were eating [the coach] went to put in a load of laundry. The other kids were in sitting down in the cafeteria also. The [Dorchester] coach doesn't know the conversation that happened; all he saw was one of the [Cranston] coaches square up and hit our kid in the face."

"When that happened, our kids jumped in and then his players jumped in," said Cousins. "A grown man hit a kid. That's the part that nationals aren't putting in the paper."

Butler says that Cousins's account is off-base. "Terry was not present and I was not present," he told the Reporter. The initial report was that, yes, indeed an adult had struck a child. We didn't know which side was which. As things played out, the Sheriff's Department was contacted. When they came to the hotel and conducted an investigation, their report back to us was that a child struck an adult."

Butler said he received an oral report on the incident from the Oseoloa County Sheriff's Department about their investigation, but was not certain if there was a written account of their findings.

On Tuesday, a spokeswoman for the Sheriff's Department - Twis Lizasuain - told the Reporter that the written report that exists on the incident does not make a determination about the cause of the fight "because there was conflicting information." No arrests were made.

However, Lizasuain took issue with the claim that the Sheriff's Department probe concluded that the Dorchester players were aggressors.

"According to the report, it appears as if the Dorchester team was the victim and the Rhode Island team would have been the aggressor," Lizasuain said. "It appears from the deputies' report that we were called out there because a player on the Dorchester team was in an altercation with an adult from the other team."

Butler says that, in fact, initial reports that an adult had assaulted a juvenile was the reason that the Sheriff's deputies were summoned to the scene. But he insists that other witnesses in the cafeteria reinforced the Cranston team's claims that they were the victims of a Dorchester assault.

"We have been verbally told that the disinterested witnesses accounts corroborate the stories from Edgewood," said Butler, who said he anticipated getting further details from those witnesses this week.

Cousins says that the Dorchester Eagles plan to retain a lawyer and are "going to press charges to the fullest extent of the law," even if the juvenile's mother has decided not to.

"We will talk to the mother and if she doesn't want to, then we will press the charges as an organization," Cousins said. "We have the right to pursue all legal avenues because it was our responsibility. That kid didn't have stitches when he went down to Florida, but he came back with them. We will do what's right for him and the organization."

"Here it is, we got a kid that got hit in the head with a chair that required stitches and we got a kid that got punched by a coach, but they only give them probation. It's a cover up," Cousins told the Reporter.

Butler says that the fight was the culmination of a pattern of bad behavior by the Dorchester team on their trip last week. "Dorchester arrived at the hotel on Saturday night and we started hearing their name mentioned at our daily meeting on Sunday morning. Complaints about kids and coaches being rude to hotel staff and trash-talking towards other teams were fielded about the Eagles," he said.

A rival team from North Philadelphia (which went on to win the division one championship last weekend) reported being harassed by Dorchester players, who allegedly knocked on their hotel room doors and threatened their players. Butler says that on the night before the fight, there were complaints of Dorchester players wandering the hotel at 2 a.m., in violation of Pop Warner's curfew policy.

Cousins calls Butler's description of Dorchester's behavior "an absolute lie. They are going to say anything to protect themselves. If that is the case, how come nobody approached us all week? How come they never went to our regional director or our commissioner to have them talk to us?" Cousins responded. "If I'm running National Pop Warner if one of your kids is doing something then I'm going to go to your commissioner and your commissioner is going to talk to your president or your coach. So why is all of this coming out now that there has been a fight? Why didn't all of this come out when it allegedly was happening?"

Lizasuaín, the Sheriff's Department spokesperson, said that deputies were repeatedly called to the All-Star Resort hotel during the week of the Pop Warner tournament. She could not say why they were called to there.

Cousins believes that the backlash that the organization is getting is due - in part - to their many years of success. Every year that the Eagles have been eligible for the Pop Warner Super Bowl, (they have made the trip five times since 2003) they have had a problem raising the money. Now, they have made no qualms about - as Terry Cousins calls it - "exposing" the trip.

"They charge us \$24,000 for the rooms and \$300 per kid for a four-day pass to the park," said Cousins. "It's about making money, not the ability of the kids. When coming from the inner city, it's hard to raise that money in a week. We are lucky and blessed to have city support."

Butler disputes Cousins's criticism - one that was echoed in a **[prominent Boston Globe metro column](http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2008/12/07/wide_world_of_greed/)** (http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2008/12/07/wide_world_of_greed/) last week - that the price tag for the Disney tournament is too dear for many teams, including Dorchester's entry. He says that teams - especially repeat contenders like the Eagles - know well that they need to fundraise year round to anticipate an Orlando bid. And Butler claims Disney does discount its packages to accommodate the Pop Warner teams.

Still, Cousins believes the overall treatment that Dorchester has received is unfair. "Dorchester Eagles is a good football program," said Cousins. "We reach out to all kids of all races. If it's a bad kid we try to make it better. If it's a good kid we try to add more to his life. We don't turn our back on any kid. Like I said, I agree with suspending the midget team, but they suspended our six year-olds, the nine- and ten- and 12-year-olds, for what? Now when we put those same kids in the uniform, you are telling me that they can't make it [to the playoffs] even if they deserve it. They aren't saying that we can't play; we just can't play in the playoffs. What kid is going to want play if they can't do that."

Butler says that the national disciplinary board "considered more severe sanctions, including potential expulsion from Pop Warner altogether but after further deliberation decided not to. They did not want other kids in the Dorchester community to be penalized and lose the opportunity to play Pop Warner football or cheer."

There are other football and cheering organizations locally, including the division two Mattapan Patriots and the city's other powerhouse program, the Boston Raiders, based in Roxbury. Butler noted that the Raiders - which also made the trip to Orlando this year - won one of two good sportsmanship awards given out during the Disney tournament.

Cousins insists the Eagles will soldier on - with or without the blessings of the larger Pop Warner movement.

"Orlando is trying to silence us and for three years they don't have to deal with us," said Cousins. "Everyone that tries to critique us can go to hell. All these fake pretending people, we don't need you and we don't want

you. We are going to go on and we are going to be back in the spotlight."

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