

News

Victim of a different coach and era speaks

01/01/2012 6:40 AM



Ken Stockton (second row, second from left) says his Little League coach Fred Wombwell (back row) abused him. Confronted, Wombwell paid a settlement and agreed to therapy.

View

By John P. Martin
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ANN ARBOR, Mich. - When Ken Stockton, a 63-year-old communications specialist here, read that Jerry Sandusky, accused of abusing children, allegedly lavished victims with attention and trips, his memory drifted back decades to his youth in Trenton.

There, Stockton had a similarly generous Little League coach, a man who took him bowling and mini-golfing, to the Penn Relays and the 1962 Little League World Series.

According to Stockton, the coach, Fred Wombwell, secretly molested and raped him hundreds of times between the ages of 11 and 14.

Decades passed before Stockton sought counseling. He also took an unusual step. Despite knowing his 40-year-old accusations were too old for criminal or civil courts, he enlisted a lawyer and sent Wombwell a list of demands: Stockton wanted an apology, signs of remorse, and money.

The coach's response was equally unexpected. He agreed to pay Stockton \$100,000 and enter therapy. He had one condition: that Stockton keep the agreement secret. That was in 2004.

Then came Sandusky.

Two grand juries have painted the former Pennsylvania State University coach as a caring mentor who befriended boys then abused them. Stockton recognized the playbook.

Stockton resolved that he should not live with his secret anymore and neither should his abuser. The \$100,000 was hush money, he decided, and no amount was worth silence. He contacted Wombwell's lawyer, Little League Baseball Inc., and The Inquirer.

"When you see a Sandusky or anybody else, that's just the tip of the iceberg," Stockton said. "Ninety percent of these guys I don't think have ever been exposed."

Now 76, Wombwell disputes the details but does not deny he abused Stockton.

"Look, I did something terrible," he said last week at his Ewing Township home.

Wombwell blamed his conduct on immaturity during what he called "a different time." He also said he saw Stockton as a friend.

Wombwell, a retired state employee, has never before been publicly accused. When asked if he had molested anyone else, he replied: "Not really. No, not at all."

Wombwell said he endured moments of panic over the years, afraid his past would become public. The allegations against Sandusky and former Daily News columnist Bill Conlin rekindled the fears.

It was fair to view him the same way, he said, or to label him a sex abuser of children.

"Everything that's in there," he said, citing his written agreement with Stockton, "says that is what I was."

A flood of accusations

Sandusky's November arrest unleashed a flood of new accusations, according to advocates, therapists, and lawyers.

Stockton and Wombwell signal how far those tremors rippled, unearthing cases once settled. A wave of similar announcements occurred a decade ago, when clergy sex-abuse victims broke their silence about payouts from the Roman Catholic Church.

"You can't overstate the emotional impact, the sense of entrapment that confidentiality agreements have on victims," said Mark Serrano, a former altar boy paid \$241,000 in 1987 to settle a lawsuit against a North Jersey priest who molested him.

"What I discovered was I really sort of signed away my liberty when I signed that confidentiality agreement," said Serrano. "In my view, it was probably as harmful as the abuse itself."

When the New York Times published his account in 2002, a dozen others brought allegations against the priest, the Rev. James Hanley. He was defrocked. And the church never tried to recoup its payout to Serrano.

"There was absolutely utter relief that the truth was finally out," he said.

Jennifer Freyd, a University of Oregon professor who studies abuse, said many victims choose silence because they are unsure how others will respond to their allegations.

The reaction to cases like the one against Sandusky can be empowering, she said, because it helps

victims think they'll be believed.

"Because the fear of not being believed," said Freyd, "can really paralyze people."

Crazy about baseball

Gray streaks line Stockton's brown hair, and his beard and eyebrows are white. But as a child, he had fair skin and soft features, and was smaller than his peers - "a cute little boy," he said. He was also crazy about baseball.

In 1960, Stockton tried out for the West End Little League and was picked for a team sponsored by a local insurance company. Wombwell, then 24, was coach. The players, 9 through 12, called him Fred.

Wombwell was committed. He often stayed for hours after practice to help a few boys, including Stockton, an infielder, hone their skills.

"He knew baseball," Stockton said last month, sitting at his dining-room table with the weathered Don Hoak glove he used as a child. "He knew the fundamentals, and he knew how to teach it. So as a kid who was hoping to be a major-league baseball player, having a coach that's willing to do this, and teach me stuff, and make me better - man, that was amazing."

Months after Stockton joined the team, he said, Wombwell offered him a ride home and asked if he wanted to steer the car. Stockton jumped at the chance.

As he navigated the Bel Air, Stockton said, Wombwell slipped his hands down and began fondling him. Then the coach pulled the car to a secluded spot and continued, he said. Stockton was 11.

According to Stockton, Wombwell dropped him off that night and said: "Next time, it's my turn."

Stockton was confused and upset but said nothing to his parents or older brother, he said.

In time, he said, the abuse escalated to oral and anal sex. Over the next two years, it continued, often several times a week, in the coach's home, car, or other places.

Sometimes, Stockton said, Wombwell would take him to parks or a favorite miniature golf course in Bucks County, then abuse him. Stockton said Wombwell also took him to the Penn Relays and to a professional boxing match in New York City.

Stockton described anxiety that experts say is common among child sex-abuse victims. He said he wondered if such activity was normal, or if he might be gay. He wondered why Wombwell chose him or if he shared responsibility for what was happening. He fretted about disease.

Stockton came from a working-class family and was conflicted because the coach was giving him so much attention, taking him places he otherwise would never go. More than once, Stockton said, he asked Wombwell if they could be friends without any physical contact, but he said the coach ignored him.

"I was probably compliant," Stockton said. "I probably had a passion for [baseball] that exceeded other kids' passions. I had parents that trusted, and maybe weren't sophisticated enough to understand, to ask questions about what was going on."

In August 1962, Wombwell proposed taking Stockton to Williamsport for the Little League World Series. Stockton said his mother asked the coach to promise he was a decent man. He did, according to Stockton.

They spent several days in Williamsport, and Stockton celebrated his 14th birthday. Wombwell molested

him twice a day during the trip, he said.

No one else, it seems, saw the signs. Scott Gordon, a friend and teammate of Stockton's, credited Wombwell with molding him into a star baseball player and giving him life skills. He was envious when the coach took Stockton to Williamsport and did not know about the abuse for decades.

"When you're 9 through 12, you're not too worldly," said Gordon, a Yardley resident.

In the interview at his home, Wombwell denied sodomizing Stockton or participating in oral sex. He said their relationship was limited to fondling, but he would not say Stockton was lying. "As far as I'm concerned, that's all I think that went on," Wombwell said.

The men agreed that the abuse ended when Stockton was 14. They occasionally saw each other around Trenton, and they remained cordial.

Stockton said Wombwell stopped abusing him when Wombwell started to show interest in a younger boy on the team. Asked last week if he had assaulted that boy, whose name is being withheld by The Inquirer, Wombwell said: "I'm not sure about him, to be honest. There may have been something. I don't think so, but there may have been something with him."

By the time Stockton was 16 or 17, Stockton said, he began to see the sex abuse as wrong. He got angry, he said, but not enough to act.

Anger did not subside

Stockton graduated from Boston University, got married, and started a family. Over the years, he said, he felt freer to discuss the abuse with close friends and family members, but the anger did not subside.

Regularly, he said, he would erupt in outbursts that seemed wildly out of proportion. He recalled the day 20 years ago he took his youngest son, then around 10, to return a winter jacket to a sporting-goods store.

Before he knew it, Stockton said, he was screaming at the store clerk, ranting over a broken zipper. Then Stockton turned toward his little boy. "My son was crying," he said.

Stockton says his deep-seated anger and resentment cost him jobs and career advancement. Still he hesitated to do anything about it. He did not want to be perceived as "damaged goods," especially as a father with young children, he said.

"In this society, we blame victims," Stockton said.

In 2003, he finally agreed to seek counseling. Weeks into his therapy, he resolved to confront or sue Wombwell. Stockton said he solicited lawyers in New Jersey, but none would consider his case, because it was outside the statute of limitations.

Then he enlisted Kurt Berggren, a friend and lawyer in Michigan. "It was eating away at him," Berggren said.

A writer by trade, Stockton spent six hours drafting a detailed narrative describing the abuse and what he wanted. That became the blueprint for a letter Berggren sent to Wombwell later.

Among other things, it demanded that Wombwell report his conduct to New Jersey authorities, contact other victims, read four books about child sex abuse, and pay Stockton \$250,000. When Wombwell was

slow to respond, Stockton mailed the ex-coach a flier he threatened to circulate.

"Attention, Ewing Township resident," it read. "There is a known pedophile in your neighborhood."

Within days, Wombwell agreed to a mediation. Months later, both men signed settlement papers. Stockton did not get all his demands, but he did get an apology and a letter from a psychologist who treated Wombwell. Stockton pocketed two-thirds of the \$100,000 payout and gave his lawyer the rest. He also agreed to remain silent.

Wombwell said the abuse haunted him, too. He said that it happened a half-century ago, when he was a different person, and that Stockton put him and his wife through "agony" with his threats of exposure. "We spent a year working it out," he said. "I thought we had settled it."

Still, he said he worried that it was not over, especially when child sex-abuse cases hit the news. Sandusky was the tipping point.

About a week after the former Penn State coach's arrest, Stockton called Wombwell's lawyer. He also wrote letters to Little League Baseball Inc. about the abuse by his coach. (The organization forwarded his complaint to state law enforcement and youth services agencies.)

Stockton will not rule out writing his own story about abuse, and he says he will sue if Pennsylvania or New Jersey lifts the statute of limitations. He said he hopes telling his story helps other victims cope with their own abuse and keeps a spotlight on the issue.

Wombwell said Friday that he did not expect to recoup the settlement payout. Stockton said he would return it if ordered, but "I don't think that there's anybody who's going to compel me to."

He also concedes he wants to impose new consequences on his old baseball coach. Their settlement "was not punishment enough," he said. "I will bear the burden of this through my entire life. I am much better now than I was in 2003, but I will never heal."

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