

# 'Astonishingly cruel.' Prosecutor describes locker room sex assault case at Damascus High School

[Donna St. George](#)



When the sophomore football players entered the freshman locker room, authorities say, one held up a four-foot broom. He pumped his fist and chanted.

Lights went off. The handle of the broom could be heard banging against a wall.

"It's time," another sophomore said.

One of the freshmen tried to leave. A sophomore blocked him from doing so.

This prelude — as described by prosecutors in court on Monday — came before what authorities said was a terrifying series of sexual assaults against four teammates on Oct. 31 inside a locker room at Damascus High School in Maryland.

Four 15-year-old suspects, making their first appearance in Montgomery County District Court on Monday, have each been charged with one count of first-degree rape, three counts of attempted first-degree rape and one count of conspiracy to commit first-degree rape. They were all members of Damascus's junior varsity team, as were four alleged victims.

"The defendants' conduct was astonishingly cruel," Montgomery Deputy State's Attorney Peter Feeney said in court. "These crimes were intended to inflict pain, degrade and humiliate the weaker members of the football team."

Feeney said the attackers went from one victim to the next. At least two of the attackers could be heard laughing, and two of the victims could be heard yelling and screaming, Feeney said.

"Each defendant played a significant role in carrying out their plan to sexually assault the victims in this case," Feeney said, "whether it was pushing, punching, stomping, holding down, tackling or wielding the broom. The crimes could only have been committed with the active participation of each defendant."

Feeney was asking Judge John C. Moffett to continue holding the four in jail

on no bond status. But Moffett ruled they were not a flight risk and said that, on their own, they did not pose a substantial risk to the public. He assigned them each bonds of \$20,000, which would allow their release.

Defense attorneys spoke of their clients' academic performance and family ties. One called the alleged incidents hazing "that went to extremes."

The four teens who appeared in court — via closed-circuit monitor from the county jail — are charged as adults. A fifth team member is charged as a juvenile. His current status couldn't be learned.

At least two of the suspects and two of the alleged victims told authorities the purported incidents are part of a known hazing practice among junior varsity football players at Damascus High, according to charging documents.

When one victim asked three attackers to stop, police said in the charging papers, the assailants replied that it was a "tradition." It remains unclear whether that is true or if the students were mistaken or repeating rumors.

Police have identified the suspects charged as adults as Jean Claude Abedi, 15, of Clarksburg; Kristian Jamal Lee, 15, of Germantown; Will Daniel Smith, 15, of Clarksburg; and Caleb Thorpe, 15, of Gaithersburg. By 9 p.m. Monday, Lee and Smith had been released from jail on the \$20,000 bonds, according to online court records.

[\[Four teens charged as adults in alleged high school locker room assaults, police say\]](#)

At least three of them, when initially charged in juvenile court in early November, faced less serious offenses — counts of second-degree rape and attempted second-degree rape. When charges were upgraded last

week, each faced at least two counts of first-degree rape.

Authorities then amended the charges a second time. Feeney said each of the four now are charged with one count of first-degree rape, three counts of attempted first-degree rape, and the conspiracy count.

In Maryland, the charge of first-degree rape generally requires an aggravating factor, such as multiple assailants or the use of a weapon. The law covers a range of nonconsensual acts that can involve the body or use of an object.

David Felsen, an attorney for Smith, said in court Monday that the shifting charges reflected how difficult it is to know precisely what happened.

"It is clear that this is a developing case," Felsen said. "Different people say different people did different things. I think this is an ever-changing circumstance."

But Moffett said he had heard enough from prosecutors, and from seeing police charging documents, to get the gist of the allegations.

"I don't think I'm turning my decision on any particular one fact," Moffett said. "There's a bigger picture here."

Felsen said that Smith is an honor roll student and didn't represent a threat to the community.

Defense attorneys for the other three suspects also spoke at the hearing.

Jason Downs said his client, Lee, had a "stellar background" and ticked off some of his academic performance — an 82 in honors biology and 81 in honors U.S. history, for example. "He has absolutely no propensity for violence whatsoever," Downs said.

He said the police allegations paint his client as having a "lesser culpability" than the others charged.

Shelly Brown, who represents Thorpe, noted that his parents and three of his grandparents were all in court to support him. Thorpe is taking six honors course, she said, and "is very active in his church."

Daniel Wright, an attorney for Abedi, spoke about how 15-year-olds — more so than adults — will follow others. "Peer pressure and group psychology will take over," he said, "to have young people do things they wouldn't otherwise do."

"This is a hazing incident that went to extremes," Wright added. "It was out of control because of the group nature of the offenses and the utter lack of adult presence in the locker room."

In an earlier interview, Wright called Abedi "a warm, kind young man who loved playing football and was excited to be in school."

Derek Turner, spokesman for the school system, said students must be supervised through the school day and during school-sponsored activities and that locker rooms are not an exception. He said that as soon as the police complete their work, the school system will be looking into supervision issues. There are no established rules about who must oversee students at a given time, whether a coach, an athletic director or a teacher, he said.