

4 Damascus JV football players accused in locker room broomstick rapes released on bond

MONTGOMERY COUNTY, Md. (ABC7) —

After spending Thanksgiving weekend in jail, four Damascus High School junior varsity football players will be released to their families as they await their respective trials.

The judge's ruling followed a nearly hour-long bond review in Montgomery County District Court Monday. During that hearing, prosecutors painted a vivid picture of the incident, which they described as "astonishingly cruel."

Around 2:45 p.m. on Oct. 31, the four victims, all 14-year-old freshmen, were preparing for their final JV football practice of the season, which was

scheduled to start at 3:30 p.m. They were in the freshmen locker room.

Meanwhile in the neighboring sophomore locker room, fellow teammates Jean Claude "JC" Abedi, Kristian Jamal "KJ" Lee, Will Smith and Caleb Thorpe allegedly devised a plan to attack the smallest and least athletic players. "Let's go broom some freshman," one of the teens said.

"These crimes were intended to inflict pain, degrade and humiliate the weaker members of the football team," Montgomery County Deputy State's Attorney Peter Feeney stated in court.

The victims recalled the locker room lights suddenly going dark. The sophomores entered banging the four-foot wooden broomstick against the wall, while chanting and pumping their fists in the air.

One by one, the victims were pinned down to either the floor or a bench, and stripped of their clothing. Some reported being sodomized with the broom while others fought back limiting the extent of penetration. The group huddled around one of the victims and berated him with names like "soft" and "fatty."

"We're not as good as most of the other kids on the team. I think that might be a reason," one of the victims would later theorize to investigators.

"I went to the ground and squeezed my legs to avoid the broom," a different victim told detectives.

The victims were pushed, punched, kicked and stomped on as they struggled to keep their boxers and pants on their bodies. One exclaimed, "stop, stop, stop!" Laughter could also be heard in the locker room. Feeney explained that one victim attempted to escape from the locker room, but Thorpe blocked him from doing so.

"Each defendant played a significant role in carrying out their plan to sexually assault the victims in this case... The crimes could only have been committed with the active participation of each defendant."

The alleged plan was to sodomize more teammates, but when someone yelled, "coach is coming," everyone scattered and reported to practice. Word started to spread after one victim had a "breakdown" following practice, which included crying and hyperventilating.

Later that same day, the father of one victim came from work to find his son sobbing in his bedroom. That boy told his dad what had happened. The father called the head JV football coach. The JV coach then contacted the head varsity coach, who in turn, called Damascus' principal, Casey Crouse.

Crouse reported the incident to Montgomery County Police the following day, Nov. 1. Around 2:30 p.m. that afternoon, Thorpe, Abedi, Lee and Smith were loaded into different patrol cars, and taken to the Special Victims Investigation Division for interviews.

Meanwhile investigators obtained a search warrant and collected evidence in the freshman locker room, including the wooden broomstick with tan bristles. Authorities also became aware of a Damascus JV football team Snapchat group where players discussed the alleged rapes.

Damascus High School JV Football Players Charged In Locked Room Rape Case:

Jean Claude "JC" Abedi — 6'1" / 242 pounds — 23100 block of Arora Hills Drive in Clarksburg

Kristian Jamal "KJ" Lee — 5'4" / 143 pounds — 11800 block of Little Seneca Parkway in Clarksburg

Will Smith — 5'4" / 143 pounds — 23400 block of Arora Hills Drive in Clarksburg

Caleb Thorpe — 5'11" / 170 pounds — 24100 block of Newbury Road in Gaithersburg

Each of the embattled football players appeared via closed circuit television from the county jail as private defense attorneys spoke on their behalf.

David Felsen, Smith's lawyer, had the 15-year-old's mother and two sisters raise their hands in court. He stated his client is an honor roll student, and tried to poke holes in the prosecution's narrative.

"Different people say that different people did different things to different people," Felsen remarked.

Thorpe's parents, godmother and three grandparents attended court. His attorney, Shelly Brown, noted that the teen had been taking six honors courses, and is active in his church where he volunteers helping young kids.

Attorney Jason Downs rattled off Lee's, grades: 84 percent in honors Spanish, 82 percent in honors biology and 81 percent in honors U.S. history. Downs made clear that Lee has no prior juvenile record, and based on what's outlined in criminal charging documents, appears to have been less involved when compared to Abedi, Smith and Thorpe.

Defense attorney Daniel Wright revealed that Abedi has already been expelled from Damascus High School. He proceeded to point the finger at a combo platter of pack mentality and poor supervision.

"Peer pressure and group psychology can take over making young people do things they wouldn't normally do," Wright stated. "It was out of control because of the group nature of the offense, and the utter lack of adult

presence in the locker room."

Judge John Moffett opted to release each of the four teens on a \$20,000 unsecured personal bond, explaining he does not believe they are a flight risk or pose harm to the community. An unsecured personal bond does not require an upfront financial contribution, but should one of the teens flee, their parent/s could be ordered to pay the court the full \$20,000.

Moffett's ruling serves as only a temporary victory for the teens. After all, they each face one count of first-degree rape, three counts of attempted first-degree rape and one count of conspiracy to commit first-degree rape. All told, the charges could result in decades of prison for each athlete.

Following court, Montgomery County State's Attorney John McCarthy held a press conference where he scoffed at anyone who continues to refer to this case as "hazing," something Montgomery County Public School leaders have done repeatedly over the last month.

"I'm offended by the term 'hazing.' It's not hazing, these are crimes and I would caution anyone to refer to this as hazing."

McCarthy also acknowledged the fact that at least two of the suspects, and many others in the Damascus community, have made claims that "brooming" is a longstanding tradition within the town's robust football program. Smith, for instance, reportedly told police, "'the broom' started generations ago."

"Will we be looking at the potential this has happened in prior years? The answer is absolutely yes, but we had to set priorities of what to do first, and what to do second," McCarthy stated, explaining that filing charges in the current case took absolute precedence.

Four weeks of police work has resulted in more than 600 pages of documents, plus roughly 14 hours of video taped interviews. The state revealed that in one clip, Lee is recorded laughing while telling detectives his side of the story.

McCarthy went on to share he has been in frequent communication with MCPS Superintendent Jack Smith, providing Smith with updates along the way. McCarthy made clear that his office does not believe school employees — nor the coaching staff — did anything criminal.

"The lack of supervision was something that was spoken to a couple of times at the bond review today by the defense attorneys. I don't think any of that rises to level of criminal culpability. Obviously the victims in this case may have some civil causes of action against the school system, but not a criminal matter."

All four suspects charged as adults are black. Some of the victims are white. That has prompted certain people to ask if race played a role as freshman were selected, beaten and sexually assaulted. McCarthy stated that is an important question his office is looking into further.

All four players are not allowed to return to Damascus High School or communicate with one another while out on bond. The court system will likely set a daily curfew and may require the teens undergo mental health evaluations.

Felsen indicated he plans to file a formal waiver requesting Smith be returned to the juvenile court system. A judge would have to approve such a measure, for which there is no guarantee.