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Volunteer coach dismissed

Melissa Bowerman asked to step down by district after escorting student athlete to Condon prom

By AJ MAZZOLINI
East Oregonian

Volunteer coach Melissa Bowerman drew more than strange looks when she escorted a boy from the Condon/Wheeler track and field team to the Condon High School prom last month.

Two weeks later the 41-year-old was dismissed from her duties, just before the team swept the district meet and qualified 17 athletes for this weekend's state meet in Monmouth.

The district investigated Bowerman after learning the coach accompanied a 17-year-old to the school dance April 20, said

Condon School District Superintendent Jan Zarate. She and Brad Sperry, the superintendent of Fossil School District, with which Condon co-ops for athletics, called Bowerman on May 1 to dismiss her from the team.

The decision came from a two-school athletic advisory committee, which is composed of the superintendents, athletic directors and school board members from each community.

"There was an investigation done and through that investigation, there were some potential details that arose," Zarate said. "We started an investigation that led to us asking her to un-volunteer."

Zarate would not disclose details of the in-

vestigation. Sperry, who also acts as Fossil's athletic director, declined to comment.

According to Melissa Bowerman, who is part of a Condon/Wheeler coaching duo with her husband, Jon Bowerman, 73, no inappropriate relationship existed between her and any of the student athletes.

Melissa said attending the Condon prom with a boy from her team was an error in judgment. But, she said, her intentions were genuine.

Gilliam County law enforcement maintains that Bowerman has not committed a crime and will face no legal ramifications. Though supporters have lobbied the school boards, Bowerman continues to face opponents of her return, which in turn has caused Jon Bowerman, son of Nike co-founder Bill Bowerman, to question his future with the



Photo contributed by Jordan B. Maley

Coaches Jon and Melissa Bowerman pose for a photo with the Condon/Wheeler Knight at the unveiling ceremony for the new track on April 28.

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CONDON: Bowerman may resign at the end of the year

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school. The Bowermans are the program's largest booster, responsible for thousands of dollars raised each year and the team's state-of-the-art facilities.

Prior to the prom, Bowerman said the student in question was struggling with his academics and feeling down because he had no prom date. Bowerman said one of her goals is to know each team member as an individual and help them academically as well as athletically. She said she agreed to go with the boy if he raised his grade in English class.

"If they go on (academic) probation and suspension, then they can't go to the track meets," Bowerman said. "I said, 'OK, I will go with you, but we've got to talk about English first. You're going to do better in English ... That's as far as I thought. In my stupidity, I didn't call the (athletic director), I didn't call the superintendent, I didn't call anybody.'"

Except the boy's father. Bob Thomas said at first he laughed when Bowerman asked his permission to escort his son to the dance.

"The first thing I thought, 'Maybe this isn't a good idea.' But Melissa has been like a surrogate mom to these kids for years," Thomas said. "She kind of took him under her wing. I wasn't worried about his safety in the least because I knew what kind of relationship they had, the same she has with all the kids, boys and girls."

Thomas said no one from either school district contacted him or his son to discuss the details of the evening. Bowerman said no one from either district contacted her until Sperry and Zarate called to dismiss her from the team.

Bowerman said too much was made of public posts on a Condon/Wheeler track and field team page on the social networking site Facebook.

Members of the athletic committee printed off posts, which Bowerman said were of song lyrics and part of a song-guessing game played among the team, and discussed them at the committee meeting the week after the prom. Some lyrics would look like a profession of romantic feelings if taken out of context, Bowerman said.

Zarate declined to comment on the role the Facebook page played in the investigation. The page has since been removed by Bowerman.

Gilliam County Sheriff Gary Bettencourt is conducting his own investigation, based on a complaint by a chaperone that someone over 21 years old attended the prom. He said Wednesday he has found no evidence that Bowerman broke any law. Bettencourt said he interviewed the Bowermans, the boy that the coach took to the prom, as well as other track athletes, parents and chaperones.

"Everybody's opinion is that what she did was inappropriate and she had poor judgment," Bettencourt said. "However, she hasn't done anything criminal ... There isn't anybody here that thought there was anything going on more than a coach wanting to help one of her athletes do better in school. This is a deal about getting a better English grade so he can participate in track."

At the dance, Bowerman played ping pong and Foosball with students and avoided the dance floor for the majority of the evening. Bowerman did dance a few slow, two-steps with the boy, she said.

Bettencourt said other chaperones were uncomfortable with the situation, one called it "creepy," but none acted on that feeling.

"Once they got to the prom, the big question from the community is why didn't somebody intercept them?" Bettencourt said. "She was on the list as a chaperone, but once they realized she wasn't acting in the capacity of a chaperone, why didn't anyone explain the role to her? The school could have helped avoid this all."

Since Melissa's dis-

missal, Jon Bowerman has struggled to coach the team alone. The program has ballooned from six athletes to more than 30 in just four years under the Bowermans' watch.

Jon Bowerman, whose father, Bill, invented the waffle-soled running shoe and co-founded Nike with Phil Knight, was influential in helping obtain for Condon High School the recently completed track made of recycled athletic shoes. The school held a dedication ceremony for the track only April 28. Bowerman has also partnered with the endurance race Wild Canyon Games to outfit each of his athletes with new uniforms and cleats each year.

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— Bob Thomas

Student's father

Jon Bowerman and other parents have encouraged the Condon and Fossil school boards to reverse the decision to dismiss Melissa as coach. As many as 28 Bowerman supporters met with Condon board members at the district meeting May 9. The next night at Fossil's board meeting, a dozen more showed up.

Parents, student athletes and community members spoke to the boards about the Bowermans' character and value to the two communities. In Fossil tension arose. When Melissa addressed the group, she said, her words were ignored.

"I profusely apologized and admitted my lack of foresight," she said. "I could have talked about pink elephants and jellybeans and got the same reaction, though. They just stared at the wall ahead of them."

Two Fossil school board members — who also sit on the six-member athletic advisor committee — continue to oppose Bowerman's return to coaching. Bryce Logan and Carol MacInnes have not wavered from their original stance on the issue while others have softened.

Neither Logan nor MacInnes, whom both have children on the Condon/Wheeler track team, could be reached for comment.

As the Condon/Wheeler team prepared to depart for the state track meet in Monmouth on Thursday morning, Condon athletic director Ron Kopp informed the Bowermans that Melissa would not be allowed to ride on the team's charter bus with the athletes. With the bus only half full, parents of student athletes have historically accompanied their sons and daughters for the ride.

Melissa Bowerman is also a mother of a team member.

The situation may yield a search for more than just a new assistant coach next season, Jon Bowerman said. He has considered resigning following the state meet, possibly even selling his family's ranch near Fossil and leaving the area.

"The only thing we've done wrong is build them a new track and get uniforms and build them a powerhouse program," he said. "If she doesn't come back, I'm not coming back."

The Condon/Wheeler girls team won its first state title at the Class 1A championship meet on Saturday.

Contact AJ Mazzolini at amazzolini@eastoregonian.com or 541-966-0839.

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