

Racial slurs alleged at football game

11-02-2021, Barre Times Argus, by Jim Sabataso

The Vermont Principals' Association is investigating allegations of racial slurs being used by athletes at a high school football game between two Rutland County teams.

The slurs were alleged to have been used on Oct. 30 during a quarterfinal Division III football game between Mill River Union High School and Otter Valley Union High School.

"Athletes reported escalating 'trash talk' during the game, and the allegations of racial slurs were brought to school leaders' attention after the game was completed," read a joint statement from both schools' superintendents, principals and athletic directors posted to MRU's Facebook page.

The statement continued that the VPA will be conducting a third-party investigation to determine whether there were any violations of school district hazing, harassment and bullying policies.

It added, "Both schools intend to cooperate with and fully support the investigative process in order to protect all students and student athletes. Ultimately, leaders from Otter Valley and Mill River will be working together to process and address the incident through restorative practices in an effort to bring the matter to a satisfactory resolution."

School officials declined to comment further on Tuesday.

Jeanne Collins, superintendent of Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union, in which OVU resides, stated in an email, "I would add that we appreciate that student athletes are willing to step up and speak up and both districts are committed to supporting the students."

Jay Nichols, VPA executive director, said he did not know the nature of the slurs used, however, he stated they were of "racial nature" and had allegedly been used more than once by one student toward a student of color on the opposing team.

He said, at this point, he couldn't disclose at which team the slurs were directed.

A third-party investigator already has been appointed, Nichols said.

He said the investigator, whose name he declined to disclose because they were not yet under contract with the VPA, is a former school superintendent with "a lot of experience doing investigations."

He added that the individual does not have ties to either school community.

Nichols said the investigator will meet with superintendents, principals and athletic directors from both schools this week and will begin the process of identifying and interviewing witnesses.

The investigator will then deliver their findings in a report to the VPA. From there, the VPA can take whatever actions it deems necessary.

Nichols noted that the VPA's jurisdiction only covers athletics, so a potential consequence might be suspending a player from participating in a certain number of games or even an entire season. Any additional disciplinary actions, he said, would be determined by the individual school districts.

He said he did not know how long the investigation would take, but hoped it could be resolved within a couple weeks.

The allegations come on the heels of a string of similar incidents around the state.

During a boys' soccer game between Winooski High School and Enosburg Falls High Schools on Sept. 18, Winooski players reported racist comments made by Enosburg Falls players and fans.

Then, on Sept. 29, during a boys soccer game between Rutland Middle School and Woodstock Middle School, a parent alleged that some RMS players used offensive language, including the N-word, against Woodstock players, according to the Mountain Times.

Earlier this month, Burlington High School girls' volleyball players were the target of racial and transphobic slurs during a game against South Burlington High School, according to a joint statement released by both school districts.

Also this month, the Herald reported the Hartford High School girls soccer team walked off the field with six minutes remaining during a game at Fair Haven Union High School after alleged sexual harassment from fans.

In response, the VPA, which oversees high school sports across the state, released a list of new procedures aimed at curbing bad behavior exhibited by spectators and players.

The new procedures include asking schools to read a statement at school-sponsored events outlining expectations and potential consequences if those expectations are not met; launching a portal on its website where people can report incidents; requiring all sports officials to complete implicit bias training prior to the

start of the upcoming winter sports season; and creating a “third-party party investigation option” to investigate allegations.

In light of these incidents, the VPA announced Monday that it planned to bar fans and members of the media from a rematch between the Winooski and Enosburg Falls boys soccer teams scheduled for Tuesday afternoon.

The decision drew criticism from the Vermont Press Association and Vermont Sports Media Association.

On Tuesday morning, Nichols said the Winooski School District, which is the host of the game, had decided to allow media after discussing the matter with the VPA and Enosburg Falls school officials.

Spectators still are prohibited from attending.

“We don’t have a problem with media being there. We think that’s fine as long as it’s really media and not just people trying to get into the game to stir up things,” Nichols said.