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Injured player may sue Camden

By CHUCK GORMLEY
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A Michigan attorney representing a paralyzed Woodrow Wilson High School football player has indicated he may file a lawsuit seeking \$10 million in damages, the Courier-Post has learned.

Shykem Lawrence, 18, was paralyzed below the neck after making a tackle in a scrimmage game on Aug. 25 at Eastern Regional High School in Voorhees.

Lawrence's lawyer, Ronald R. Gilbert, set the stage for a possible suit on March 20, when he filed a notice of claim against a public entity. The notice names the superintendents, athletic directors and football coaches at Woodrow Wilson and Eastern high schools, along with the New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association.

The schools' trainers and doctors are not named in the claim.

The claim contends "numerous acts or omissions" contributed to Lawrence's injury, including inadequate and improper coaching, supervision and equipment.

"There is no litigation pending," Gilbert said Monday from his office in Fenton, Mich. He would not predict whether the case would ever reach a courtroom.

"I don't like to speculate," said Gilbert. "Right now he could come out of this with nothing.

Gilbert, who has represented more than 200 people with spinal cord injuries since 1981, said he has received a videotape of the play in which Lawrence's injury occurred. However, he has been unable to speak with the coaches and athletic trainers who attended to Lawrence immediately after the injury.

"I've tried to talk to coaches, but that's not going to happen because they're all represented by umpteen attorneys," said Gilbert, who estimated it could cost him \$10,000 to investigate the case.

"Unless we would get a six-figure sum, it might not be worth going through," he said.

"We have to have an expert to support a legal theory in court. The only thing we can gain, obviously, is economic," said Gilbert. "There's no way I can give him his health back, which would be my first choice.

Harvey Johnson, an attorney for the Camden school district, said he was not surprised by the possibility of a lawsuit.

"The district has tried to work with the Lawrence family and the Lawrence family has to do whatever they have to do in the interests of their child," Johnson said.

Under the New Jersey Municipal Tort Claims Act, a plaintiff may not recover a reward for pain and suffering unless the loss of a bodily function is permanent and substantial.

Phil Smart, the athletic director at Eastern Regional, said he could not comment directly on the notice of claim. However, Smart noted Eastern won an Athlete of the Year fund-raising competition, raising \$4,587 for the Adam Taliaferro Foundation. The foundation donated \$25,000 toward an elevator lift for the Lawrences' home.

"The response from Eastern has been very supportive," Smart said.

Gilbert said Lawrence is more fortunate than most of his clients because of his extensive health coverage.

Camden School District Public Information Officer Bart Leff said each student in the Camden school system may receive up to \$1 million in medical coverage through Bollinger Insurance and an aggregate \$15 million per occurrence with an umbrella insurance through North River Insurance.

"I'm sure he's used over a million already," Gilbert said, "so it starts evaporating very quickly."

Shykem Lawrence's mother, Nita, said she is not actively pursuing the lawsuit and has spoken with Gilbert only once when he visited her son at a rehabilitation facility in November.

"I'm not hoping to get anything (monetarily)," she said. "They're just checking to make sure everything was done properly to help Shykem."

Nita Lawrence, who has five other children and one grandchild, said all of her son's medical expenses -- including a month-long stay at Cooper University Hospital and more than six months at Magee Rehabilitation Hospital -- have been paid.

She said her son's round-the-clock nursing care also is covered under his school's health plan, as is the hospital bed, manual wheelchair, hoist and medication her son has been using since he was released from Magee on April 11. She said it could be another three to six months before the specialized "sip and puff" wheelchair her son requires will be delivered.

Gilbert said he was contacted by Shykem Lawrence's grandmother, Vivian Sims, shortly after his injury. He said he contacted Woodrow Wilson High School and was granted permission to inspect Lawrence's football helmet.

"Right now the project is on hold. I need to talk to (Shykem) and see how things are working out. Any complications he may be having are much more important in his life right now than litigation."

Lawrence was readmitted to Cooper for four days last week with a urinary tract infection, but was released Friday and is at home in Camden with his family.

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