

Son of Bo Schembechler Says He Was Abused by Team Doctor at Michigan

Matt Schembechler said his account of abuse when he was a child in 1969 was ignored by his father, Bo, who was the new head football coach at Michigan.



By Alan Blinder

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A son of Bo Schembechler, the coach who did more than any other to build the University of Michigan program into the one with the most wins in college football history, said his father angrily ignored his account of sexual abuse by a university doctor in 1969.

Matt Schembechler, one of the coach's three adopted sons, made the accusation in interviews with The New York Times and other news organizations almost one month after a university-commissioned investigation concluded that Robert E. Anderson, the team doctor, had "engaged in sexual misconduct with patients on countless occasions."

"I felt betrayed," Schembechler, 62, said Wednesday of his father's dismissal of his complaints that Anderson had molested him during an examination in 1969 when he was 10 years old. "I felt unprotected by someone I thought had taken on the job of protecting me in situations like this."

Schembechler's account could not be independently corroborated, and there are no known records to support his claims. His mother died in 1992, and Bo Schembechler died in 2006. Matt Schembechler had a tense relationship with his father, and once sued him and the university in connection with a business dispute. (The case was dismissed.)

Matt Schembechler said he had no current relationship with a brother or a half brother, who could not be reached for comment on Thursday. Don Canham, who was Michigan's athletic director for two decades and, according to Schembechler, knew about his encounter with Anderson, died in 2005.

But Schembechler's description of his encounter with Anderson is similar to accusations that others have made against the doctor, who died in 2008 and was not charged with any crimes.

The report of the investigation Michigan commissioned noted instances of Bo Schembechler, who won 194 games at Michigan and led the Wolverines to 13 Big Ten Conference championships, being told about Anderson's behavior. In a footnote, though, investigators also wrote that multiple people who had worked alongside Bo Schembechler believed that "had he been aware of Dr. Anderson's misconduct with patients, he would not have tolerated it."

But according to Matt Schembechler, the coach did not stand up for him when he said he was attacked.

The family, he recalled, had just moved to Michigan after Bo Schembechler's six-season stint atop the football program at Miami University in Ohio. Matt Schembechler, then in fourth grade and navigating the world of his mother's recent marriage to Bo Schembechler, joined the Junior Wolverines — a youth football program. The players, he recalled, got to wear uniforms that mimicked the ones Michigan's players wore.

He needed a routine physical exam to participate, and the family arranged one with Anderson. As the doctor for the team that Bo Schembechler was leading, Anderson was convenient and free, Matt Schembechler said.

A report commissioned by Michigan found that Robert Anderson, who died in 2005, “engaged in sexual misconduct with patients on countless occasions.” Robert Kalmbach/Bentley Historical Library University of Michigan, via Associated Press

According to Schembechler, his interaction with Anderson included “extended cupping” of his genitals and an ungloved rectal exam. His intuition, he said, led him to believe that Anderson’s behavior had been improper, and he reported the episode to his mother, a nurse. She convened a meeting in the kitchen with her son and her new husband.

“It was maybe the first — but certainly one of countless occasions — where he just went berserk,” Schembechler recalled, adding that the coach struck him with a closed fist after he described the episode. “He was angry with me: Why was I taking up his time and bothering him with something that didn’t matter to him, that would involve his team, his staff and cause problems for him?”

The coach, he said, recited mantras that would become familiar across the years: “I’m not hearing this” and “Don’t tell me this.” The two never discussed the matter again.

Matt Schembechler said that he stopped Anderson from groping him during a later examination and that Anderson did not attempt to attack him on a third visit.

Decades of public silence about Anderson followed. Schembechler said he had chosen to come forward now, though, because it would be “irresponsible” not to disclose what had happened.

“I thought I could make an impact and make a change and help this stop from happening to anyone ever again,” Schembechler said. “I’ve always been proactive and willing to put myself out there to help other people.”

In a statement on Thursday, Michigan’s president, Mark Schlissel, and board of regents said: “Our sympathy for all of Anderson’s victims is deep and unwavering, and we thank them for their bravery in coming forward.” The officials added that they were “committed to resolving their claims and to continuing the court-guided confidential mediation process.”

The recent and substantive inquiries into Anderson’s behavior began in 2018, when a member of the wrestling team from the 1970s wrote to Michigan’s athletic director and accused Anderson of wrongdoing. The letter led to a police investigation, and in February 2020, the university announced that “several individuals” had made claims against Anderson.

The announcement, and the university’s plea for additional information, led to scores of new complaints about the doctor and, eventually, to the report that became public last month. In it, a law firm hired by the university said that Anderson had engaged in a “broad range” of misconduct and that Michigan officials had not taken action against him despite “credible reports.”

“He continued to provide medical services to student-athletes and other patients — and to engage in sexual misconduct with large numbers of them — for the rest of his career,” the report said. Investigators believe that Anderson victimized hundreds of people during his tenure, when he often worked in a building named for Bo Schembechler.

The report described some instances in which student-athletes reported concerns about Anderson, who retired in 2003, to Bo Schembechler, with one recalling that the coach had responded with a simple admonition: “Toughen up.”

“You do not mess with Bo, and the matter was dropped,” the man, who played football at Michigan in the 1970s, told the university police decades later, according to the report.

Michigan’s current coach, Jim Harbaugh, who played quarterback under Schembechler, said last week that he believed the coach always “addressed everything in a timely fashion.”

Matt Schembechler said, though, that the renowned coach had been “the biggest bully I ever met” and also “one of the most practical people in my life.”

“He was all about no distractions, win football games and look good doing it,” he said.

The coach’s attitude toward Anderson was a part of that, Matt Schembechler said. He believed his father thought the situation could have disrupted his team’s success on the field.

More than a half-century later, he said he had chosen to forgive Anderson and his father.

“But,” he said, “it doesn’t make what they did OK, and it never will.”