

Mater Dei head coach Bruce Rollinson talks to his team before the 2021 CIF Open Division high school football state championship game Dec. 11, 2021, in Mission Viejo, Calif. The team won the state championship game 44-7. A lawsuit against Mater Dei alleges Rollinson not only knew about a dangerous hazing ritual but condoned it. (AP/Ashley Landis)



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Pride. Poise. Courage. Red block letters in the varsity locker room spell out the motto of Mater Dei High School football. A California powerhouse, the program boasts three Heisman Trophy winners among its graduates and in 2021 was ranked No. 1 in the country by USA Today.

But a recent spate of allegations linked to the Catholic school in Santa Ana appear to highlight behaviors antithetical to the motto. Late last summer, several football players sexually assaulted a teammate, according to claims in a Santa Ana Police Department document obtained by the Los Angeles Times. Seven months prior, a football player allegedly suffered a broken nose and a traumatic brain injury during a team ritual, leading the injured player's parents to file a lawsuit against Mater Dei and the Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange.

Other claims suggest the violence extends beyond football and the walls of the locker room. In 2019, two football players reportedly punched a basketball player in the head and face, breaking his jaw. This spring, Santa Ana police investigated allegations of assault and hazing in the Mater Dei boys water polo program.

Critics of the high school say these incidents are not isolated but are part of a toxic culture stretching back decades — to past allegations of sexual abuse that involved administrators, teachers, coaches and priests. And they say it reflects an ongoing lack of accountability from the school and diocese.



Joelle Casteix was sexually abused by a Mater Dei choir director in the late 1980s and now advocates for survivors of child sexual assault and institutional cover-up. "Mater Dei has continually escaped accountability when it comes to abuse and violence," she said. (Courtesy Joelle Casteix)

"Mater Dei has continually escaped accountability when it comes to abuse and violence; it has a cultlike mystique that makes it untouchable," said Joelle Casteix, who was sexually abused by a Mater Dei choir director in the late 1980s. She's now an author and advocate for survivors of child sexual assault and institutional cover-up.

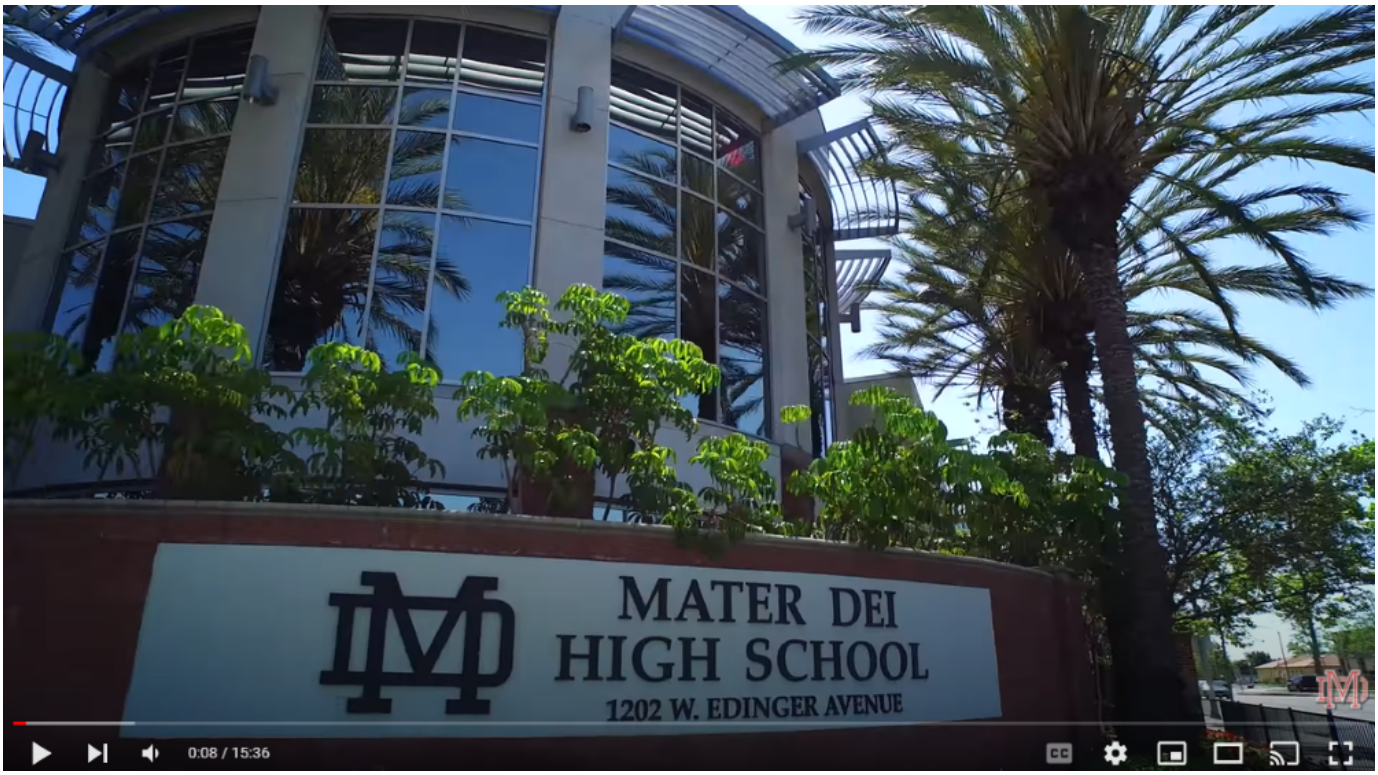
NCR reached out to administrators at the school and diocese with questions about the recent alleged incidents but received no response. Bradley Zint, a diocese spokesperson, said no employees of either entity can comment on pending litigation or affairs regarding minors.

"As a general principle, however, our entire clergy, teachers and staff take the safety of students very seriously," Zint said in an emailed statement. "Toward that end, Mater Dei and the diocese remain committed [to] finalizing our previously announced campuswide assessment, which is ongoing and being conducted by an independent agency."

On Aug. 31, 2021, Mater Dei football players forced a teammate to the ground, exposed their genitals and "began humping him" through their pants, according to the Santa Ana police document cited in the Los Angeles Times. The document said the student was not physically injured but suffered anxiety following the incident. It did not indicate if the assault claim would be investigated.

Brian Williams is a lawyer with Greenberg Gross, one of the firms representing the football player who received a head injury in February 2021. "I would have hoped that months after my client's injuries the school would have implemented some steps to avoid this kind of thing from happening again," he told NCR.

The football player's lawsuit, filed in November, alleges negligence, negligent failure to warn, train or educate, negligence per se hazing in violation of the California penal code, and intentional infliction of emotional distress.



The front of Mater Dei High School in Santa Ana, California, is seen in a virtual tour of the school. Multiple allegations and lawsuits against the school and the Diocese of Orange highlight a toxic culture and lack of accountability that goes back decades, say critics of the school. (NCR screengrab/YouTube/Mater Dei High School)

In May the diocese's attorneys filed a motion to have three of the four causes of action dismissed. Maria Roberts, a lawyer representing the Diocese of Orange, told NCR in response to questions that she was "not at liberty to comment about pending litigation or related matters."

The case currently is in the discovery phase; a trial date has not been set.

Signed by Williams, the suit recounts a game on the football team known as "Bodies." It involves two players punching each other between the shoulders and hips.

"The persistence of this hazing ritual is longstanding, well known by Mater Dei leaders and apparently condoned by its head coach," reads the lawsuit.

A newer member of the squad, the plaintiff was "trying to fit in and gain acceptance" and was "coerced" into playing the game, says the complaint. The newer player and one much larger exchanged blows, with the larger teammate eventually punching the smaller one in the face multiple times, it says.

Amanda Waters is a former athletic director at Mater Dei who resigned about two months after the locker room fight and nine months after she was hired. In a sworn deposition filed in Orange County Superior Court in April, Waters said she left the school in part because of how it handled safety issues and the hazing case.

"Everything from … when [the injured player] walked out of the locker room to the silence after was handled wrong, in my opinion," said Waters in the deposition.

She said later in the deposition that when she confronted head football coach Bruce Rollinson about the locker room incident, he told her: "If I had a dollar for every time these kids played Bodies, I'd be a millionaire."

The lawsuit, first reported by the Orange County Register, alleges the school tried to cover up the student's injuries by not calling the paramedics and not contacting his

parents for 90 minutes. Initially Mater Dei officials also declined to cooperate with Santa Ana Police Department investigators, according to police reports.

In the deposition, Waters said Rollinson previously had dismissed her repeated requests to have someone monitor the school's locker room. She said his response "over and over" was "I don't have time to do that s---."

In court documents filed in May, Roberts, the diocesan lawyer, said the former athletic director "testified untruthfully" and that incidents Waters relayed in her sworn testimony contradict other evidence, including security footage and texts and email messages Waters sent the night of the incident.

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>
> —Amanda Waters
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Roberts also said that because the student injured last year already was a member of the football team, his attorneys could not claim the incident was hazing based on the California penal code.

"By definition hazing only applies to a method of initiation or preinitiation, when a student is seeking membership in an organization," Roberts said, quoting part of the code.

Orange County District Attorney Todd Spitzer declined to file criminal charges against the larger player, saying the incident did not meet the legal standards for felony assault or criminal hazing. There is not "a single shred of evidence" to indicate it was anything other than "a mutual combat situation," Spitzer said in a statement last fall. He said he would consider additional evidence if it emerged.

The parents of the injured student told the Los Angeles Times that players who chose not to participate in Bodies were bullied and their lockers were sometimes soaked in urine.

"We feel extremely let down by Mater Dei," the student's parents told NCR in an email. They asked to keep their names private to protect their son's privacy. "When parents drop their child off at school, there is an expectation that their child will be kept safe," they said. "Mater Dei failed our family on the most basic of expectations — safety, care and compassion."

In the wake of the lawsuit, Mater Dei hired a Sacramento-based law firm to investigate student safety at the school, according to Zint, the diocese spokesperson. He said the investigation still is in progress but would not indicate if the results of the investigation would be shared publicly.

Holy Cross Fr. Walter Jenkins was appointed president of Mater Dei last year and said he would also establish a task force of professionals within high school athletics to review the school's athletic programs, and the school would hold forums where students and parents could offer feedback about player safety.

Jenkins was president just six months before he left in January. The diocese said there was no connection between his departure and the litigation, though the Orange County Register has reported tensions between Rollinson and Jenkins.

Bishop Kevin Vann of Orange, Calif., has issued one public statement about the alleged 2021

Bishop Kevin Vann of Orange, Calif., has issued one public statement about the alleged 2021 hazing, calling the accusations "concerning and saddening, to say the least." The statement also says that church officials "are very sorry that this or any incident led to a student being injured."
In this 2019 file photo, he gestures during the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. (CNS/Bob Roller)

When NCR asked if the task force and forums announced by Jenkins were still underway, the Orange diocesan office of communications responded with the following statement: "Mater Dei High School continues to evaluate and explore meaningful ways to improve and support student safety."

Past abuse, calls for accountability

Casteix, the abuse survivor, and other critics say the school and diocese have long sought to guard Mater Dei's image at all costs.

In 2005, the Diocese of Orange reached a $100 million settlement with 90 people who said they were sexually abused by diocesan employees and priests, including those at Mater Dei. At the time it was the largest settlement in the United States between sexual abuse victims and the Catholic Church.

Dozens of former students say they were abused at Mater Dei decades ago. Among the most notorious perpetrators was Msgr. Michael Harris. Known as "Fr. Hollywood" for his charisma and good looks, Harris was accused of molesting several male students at Mater Dei and Santa Margarita High School, also in the Diocese of Orange, in the late 1970s through the early '90s. He was laicized in 2001.

Hours after agreeing to the historic settlement, Bishop Tod Brown, then head of the Diocese of Orange, apologized to all victims. But neither Mater Dei nor Santa Margarita have apologized, according to survivors.

Casteix, who was part of the settlement, said an apology directly from Mater Dei would be a simple but important step. She said all she's received is "the feeling that we survivors are a bunch of bitter bad apples."

NCR asked Mater Dei if officials had ever apologized to victims. In response, Zint, in a statement on behalf of the school and diocese, underscored Brown's apology. The bishop "took the crucial step of publicly apologizing to all victims of abuse, including those from within the school system, including Mater Dei, with the hope and intent that such action would help pave a new path forward."



Joelle Casteix and other Mater Dei sex abuse survivors founded MDGrads for Change in an effort to hold Mater Dei and the Diocese of Orange accountable and "protect kids still at risk," according to the group's website. (Courtesy of Joelle Casteix)

Zint listed numerous initiatives the diocese has implemented to protect young people, such as establishing an independent oversight review board, providing pamphlets for churches and diocesan schools outlining policies, and requiring background checks for all seminarians, priests and religious. Many are standard practice under the U.S. bishops' Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People. Zint also reiterated that the diocese has settled various claims involving clergy abuse.

The 2005 settlement gave Casteix access to more than 200 pages of documents, which included her abuser's signed confession and correspondence between the school and diocese that she said proves school and church leaders "knew about the abuse and did nothing to stop it," even after she asked school officials for help.

To call for accountability from the Diocese of Orange and Mater Dei and protect current students, Casteix founded a group called MDGrads for Change. Mater Dei has "refused to make changes to the school, hold wrongdoers accountable, acknowledge the abuse, or even apologize to the victims," says the group's website.

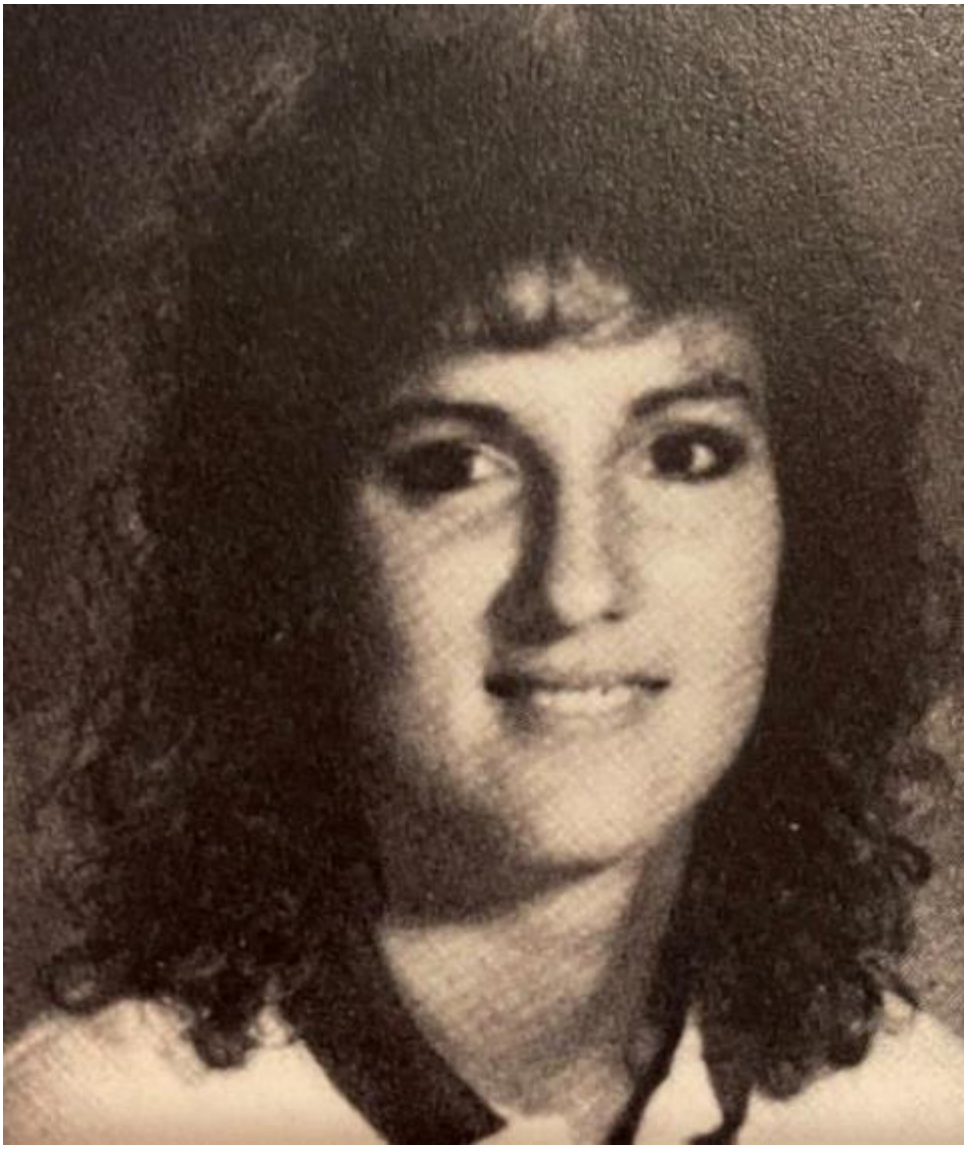
The current head of the Diocese of Orange, Bishop Kevin Vann, has issued one public statement regarding the alleged 2021 hazing. In a letter to Mater Dei students, parents and alumni he laments the "media frenzy" around the lawsuit, calling it "concerning and saddening, to say the least." The statement goes on to say that church officials "are very sorry that this or any incident led to a student being injured."

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Barbara Casserly, a longtime Catholic in the diocese who's worked in child abuse prevention, has closely followed allegations of violence at Mater Dei. "I cannot believe the bishop hasn't responded proactively," she said. "For all of us watching from the sidelines, it's an example of why people say the Catholic Church is terrible, because they don't respond to things like this."

John Manly is a Mater Dei graduate and attorney who's repeatedly sued the school over alleged sexual abuse. "As a student, I loved Mater Dei," he said, recalling how a speech coach encouraged him to go into debate, putting him on a trajectory toward law school.

His views of the school changed in the '90s after he met a Mater Dei student who said he was molested by Harris.



Former athletic trainer Lynn Ingram, pictured in a 1988 yearbook, charged football coach Bruce Rollinson with assault for pushing her against a wall and choking her. The trial ended in a hung jury, and Rollinson pleaded no contest to disturbing the peace. (Courtesy of Joelle Casteix)

"I was convinced that if the bishop at the time found out what had happened, he would do the right thing," recalled Manly. "Instead, the diocese's lawyer essentially told my partner and me to go F--- ourselves."

During his three decades at the school, Rollinson has been loved by many players and revered by coaches. In 2019, he was nominated for an NFL award bestowed on high school coaches who embody "integrity, commitment and character," and Sports Illustrated ran a profile on him in 2012. Rollinson told Sports Illustrated that no

matter how famous his players become, he was "more concerned that they're still good men."

In court documents related to the football player's lawsuit, Roberts, the diocesan attorney, admonished the plaintiff's lawyers for pushing "ruthless and unfounded attacks" against Rollinson, who she said has devoted his life "to encouraging, caring for, developing the character of and promoting the well-being of tens of thousands of students."

Rollinson was charged in 1989 with assault for allegedly pushing the school's athletic trainer against the wall and choking her. The trial ended in a hung jury, the Los Angeles Times reported, and Rollinson pleaded no contest to disturbing the peace.

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The impact of hazing on victims can be significant, said Susan Lipkins, a New York-based psychologist and author who specializes in high school and college hazing. It may cause anxiety and depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. It affects young people's ability to eat, sleep, focus, plan for the future and socialize.

The psychologist defines the behavior more broadly than California law does, calling hazing a process used by groups to maintain a hierarchy and to discipline members. "It's not necessarily only used as initiation," she said.

The parents of the injured football player said they have not given up on their son's former school.

"We remain hopeful," they told NCR, "that Mater Dei will ultimately embrace transparency and accountability, in line with our shared Catholic values."

A version of this story appeared in the **June 24-July 7, 2022** print issue under the headline: California's Mater Dei High School faces hazing, assault allegations.