

Tongues wag over taped football clash

By **EVE HIGHTOWER**
BEE STAFF WRITER

When a youth football coach stormed the field during a game Saturday and charged a player, the videotaped incident ignited more than a brawl.

Three days after witnesses said Cory Petero, 36, of Riverbank, attacked a 13-year-old Stockton player during a pre-season game between the River Oak Redskins and Stockton Bears, rumors and opinions burned through the sidelines.

"He's got a problem," league vice president Reg Evans said of Petero, who is facing a felony child abuse charge that could put him in jail for a year or in prison for two to six years.

Brian Woods had just earned a penalty for a late hit when Petero, an assistant coach and the father of the boy Woods tackled, rushed Woods from behind. Spectators charged the field, but no one was seriously injured, league officials said.

Evans has asked coaches to keep mum about the incident until officials decide how to address it.

"There's a lot of rumors, like the fight lasting 20 minutes," Evans said. "Maybe the crowd was on the field that long, but (the fight) only lasted five or six minutes."

Neither Petero nor Woods responded to calls. But that hasn't kept the community quiet.

"I couldn't believe what I saw on TV," Stacey Machado, 43, of Winton, said while watching her 12-year-old son practice with an Atwater team in the Central California Youth Football League. "I don't think any of our parents would do that."

Tina Syer, associate director of the nonprofit Positive Coaching Alliance, said she has heard that before.

"Everyone says they have a really positive culture. Then something like this happens," she said.

Coaches and parents have to learn from incidents like this, said Keith Ducey, Thunder football program president.

"You've got to swallow your pride and say, 'I know my kid is getting his butt kicked out there, but that's football,'" he said.

Evans said the incident has garnered national attention, including from NBC's "Today" show. Even Luther Campbell, founder of the National Youth Football League, weighed in by releasing a statement Tuesday:

"This recent outburst adds to the already well defined notion that youth sports are too competitive and need to be curbed. How can the fun usually associated with youth sports be put back into the now toxic games where parents are doubling as angry coaches?"

Syer said sports are supposed to offer children an opportunity to learn positive life lessons.

"Parents want to protect their kids, so they're going to get emotional," she said. "It's really important that parents and coaches who were there talk about it. Don't sweep it under the rug."

As a coach, Syer sometimes resorts to tricks that help relieve the tension, such as visualizing tension being flushed down a toilet.

"If this coach had something to do to keep himself calm, it would have been a better outcome," she said.

Every Pop Warner coach, including Petero, is trained on how to handle situations like this, said Delta Youth Football League Commissioner Jim Hall. The league also conducts criminal background checks.

"It's pretty hard to anticipate something like this," Hall said. "Nothing like this has happened before, not in the 26 years I've been here."

Petero, who was released from jail Sunday, will not coach for the league again, nor be allowed to watch his son play, Hall said.

Bee staff writer Eve Hightower can be reached at 578-2382 or ehightower@modbee.com.

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