

# Ex-Patriot Jon Vaughn recounts sexual abuse by doctor at University of Michigan

By **Steve Marantz** Globe correspondent, Updated July 26, 2020, 5:14 a.m.



Jon Vaughn was drafted by the Patriots in 1991 and played two seasons for them. THE SPORTING NEWS/SPORTING NEWS VIA GETTY IMAGES

When running back and return specialist Jon Vaughn came to the Patriots in 1991 as a fifth-round pick out of Michigan, one of the first things he noticed was the team's medical care. The Patriots doctors and trainers were knowledgeable and professional. Most conspicuous to Vaughn, their treatments were appropriate.

Not so during Vaughn's three years at Michigan, where he said the team physician used every exam to humiliate Vaughn in ways he dared not talk about. Ways that defied polite description. Ways that Vaughn tried to forget when he got to Foxborough.

"I didn't tell anybody," Vaughn said. "I was 21, one of the youngest guys in the league, and I just wanted to make the team. Sometimes you go through things you bury, you don't want to think about. You suppress things and just move on."

Vaughn was moderately successful in two seasons with the Patriots and went on to play for Seattle and Kansas City for another two seasons. He played a season in Europe and then found a post-football career in consulting and project management in the hospitality industry.

But it wasn't until this February, nearly 29 years after Vaughn left Michigan, that the unspeakable found a voice. That's when the Detroit News first reported that the University of Michigan was investigating claims of sexual abuse and molestation against the late Dr. Robert E. Anderson, the physician for the athletic department during Vaughn's time with the Wolverines.

The university said it began its investigation in July 2018 after a former student-athlete lodged a complaint. But it wasn't until another former student, wary of university inaction, took his complaint to the newspaper that the university publicly acknowledged an investigation into Anderson.

The allegations have been denied by two of Anderson's three children, Jill and Kurt Anderson.

"My dad was a beloved doctor at UM for so many years," Jill Anderson told the Detroit News. "He was very well-respected. Everyone said he treated them with the utmost integrity and care."

The story pushes several hot buttons of social discord. The first female victim of Anderson recently came forward, bringing echoes of the “Me Too” movement. The disproportionate impact on African-Americans, among them Vaughn and many of his teammates, raises the specter of institutional racism. The serial victimization of student-athletes who could not afford to attend Michigan if not for their athletic scholarships points to income inequality and its punitive effects.

But none of those issues and thoughts immediately occurred to Vaughn when he first heard of the investigation. His reaction was purely personal as his mind raced back in time.

“I hadn’t thought about my day-to-day life at Michigan for 30 years,” said Vaughn, who lives in Dallas. “Then I began remembering what happened and looking at it through the eyes of a 50-year-old. It’s pretty devastating, on a number of levels.”

## **Invasive exams**

Vaughn had gone to Michigan in 1988 as a highly recruited player from McCluer North High School near St. Louis. The son of what he called a “loving” schoolteacher mother and an “abusive” janitor father, Vaughn saw Michigan football as a ladder to a better life.

He wanted to be a Michigan Man, the term popularized by legendary football coach Bo Schembechler to symbolize pride and commitment to the Maize and Blue. The Ann Arbor campus inspired him and filled him with hope.

Then he underwent his freshman physical.

“We did all the usual stuff — vitals, touch toes, cough,” Vaughn recalled. “Then he said, ‘Drop your pants,’ and he proceeded to fondle my penis and testicles. Then he told me to lay back and pull my knees to my chest and he gave me a rectal exam with his fingers. He wasn’t shy about getting up close while he did those.”



Vaughn in his days as a Michigan running back. RICK STEWART/GETTY IMAGES

At the time, Vaughn recalled, he thought Anderson's actions were normal. His experience with doctors was limited, and he had little basis for comparison. But during his three years at Michigan, while undergoing another 10 or 11 examinations by Anderson, he began to doubt the doctor's methods.

"Those parts of the exams would become longer and more invasive," Vaughn recalled. "He was very vocal from a moaning standpoint."

"Looking back now, there was no need for an 18-year-old to have a prostate exam. Or to be penetrated when you went to the doctor for a strep throat or a twisted ankle. Whatever you went in for, he would rush through the normal exam and spend extra time on your penis, testicles, and anus. The rectal exam always involved digital insertion. He didn't use

penis, testicles, and anus. The rectal exam always involved digital insertion. He didn't use gloves."

Vaughn has since come to learn, in conversations with former teammates, that they were subjected to similar exams.

"Everyone went through this — it's kind of mind-boggling how the story is the same over and over," Vaughn said. "But back then we didn't talk about it. The intimate details were never discussed.

"You would hear things in the training room; people would say, 'Gotta take your medicine,' and kind of chuckle, but we never had any specific conversations.

"Some guys just stopped going; kind of like how you feel about the dentist. They just didn't want to see Doc Anderson."

## **Reassigned, not fired**

Anderson worked for the university from 1966 to 2003, initially in both the University Health Service and athletic department, then solely in the athletic department after 1979. He died in 2008.

Since the first public revelation in February, more than 400 former Michigan athletes have come forward with allegations and put their names to lawsuits against the university, Vaughn among them. The lawsuits assert that Anderson's conduct was criminal, and perhaps more disquieting, that the university was culpable in covering up his misdeeds for decades.

Vaughn's lawsuit states that Anderson's "sexual assault, abuse, and molestation" caused him to suffer wide-ranging emotional damage. It alleges that the university was complicit because it ignored several complaints about Anderson dating to 1968 and chose not to fire him, instead assigning him full time to the athletic department in 1979. There, Anderson had access to hundreds of male athletes, such as Vaughn, who did not complain for fear of jeopardizing their scholarships and/or progress on the field.

Vaughn's lawyer, former Michigan state attorney general Michael Cox, who represents 79 plaintiffs, said Anderson took particular advantage of those dependent on athletic scholarships.

"At first he's at University Health Service where he treats ordinary students who are classic suburbanites who pay their own tuition and can afford to file complaints against him," said Cox. "So where do they send him? Over to the athletic department where he'll only treat those who can't complain because they need their scholarship to stay in school."

He added, "My clients are white, Hispanic, and African-American. This really should be viewed through a prism of class."

Michigan's transfer of Anderson to the athletic department had echoes in the Catholic Church's handling of pedophile priests, Cox said.

"Priests were transferred from parish to parish, while this was from one department to another," Cox said.

## **The racial element**

Vaughn sees institutional racism in Michigan's actions. He points out that Blacks made up 70 percent of the football team when he was at the school.

"So how could you not bring in race into the bottom-line judgment of liability?" Vaughn said. "Their thought process was, 'It's OK to put him with these guys.' Because they weren't looking at our civil and human rights."

Anderson's abuse was uniquely traumatic to Black athletes, Vaughn suggests, because of ingrained cultural attitudes around masculinity.

"There was a taboo — Black men didn't discuss their pain, their fears, they internalized it

THERE WAS A TABOO — BLACK MEN WOULD NOT DISCUSS THEIR PAIN, THEIR TEARS, THEY INTERNALIZED IT — that was especially prevalent in the '70s, '80s, and '90s,” he said.

Men raised within strict codes of masculinity may be particularly damaged by sexual abuse, said Heather Drevna, a spokeswoman for RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network), the nation’s largest anti-sexual violence organization.

“Football players are portrayed as the embodiment of strength — the biggest, strongest, most macho guys on campus,” said Drevna. “They may deal with feelings of shame and self-doubt because they believe they should have been strong enough to stop the perpetrator.”

University spokesman Rick Fitzgerald declined to comment on Vaughn’s complaint specifically. He said that Michigan hired an outside law firm, WilmerHale, to investigate allegations against Anderson, and has made extensive outreach efforts to complainants — now totaling 400. The university has announced an “alternative resolution process,” which it said will provide “certain and faster relief” than the courts.

“We have great admiration for all of the former UM students and athletes who are bravely stepping forward to share their stories,” said Fitzgerald. “WilmerHale’s mission with its independent investigation is to follow the facts wherever they may lead in order to help the university understand how the abuse that has been reported could have occurred. That knowledge will allow the university to better prevent abuse from happening in the future.”

But in late June, a federal judge in Michigan, Victoria Roberts, barred the university from further outreach to potential victims. Her order addressed concerns that the university contacted potential victims without alerting them that independent lawyers were available to represent their interests. It came a week after the university announced its investigation had widened and reached out to 300,000 alumni who attended during Anderson’s tenure.

## **A culture of enablers**

Anderson is at least the fourth university physician to be accused of sexual misconduct in recent years. Most prominent was Michigan State sports doctor Larry Nassar, who [went to prison for sexually assaulting hundreds of women](#) under the guise of medical treatment, and for whom Michigan State has paid more than \$500 million in settlements.

Cox represented two of Nassar’s victims in court.

“The victims in that case were four or five years younger,” said Cox. “But this case might be more egregious because UM determined in 1979 that Anderson should be gone, and he stayed another 24 years. Michigan State didn’t have that kind of notice with Nassar.

“Also, most of the young ladies in the Nassar case [at Michigan State] went to him voluntarily. At Michigan, the athletes were forced to see Anderson, many over their objections.”





Other high-profile campus sex abuse scandals involve [University of Southern California gynecologist George Tyndall](#) and former [Ohio State University sports doctor Richard Strauss](#). Current and recent cases followed the 2012 conviction of former [Penn State assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky](#) for child sexual abuse.

The root causes of recurring sexual abuse are the academic pursuit of University of Utah law professor Amos Guiora. He has written extensively about cultures of “enablers” who look away from immoral or criminal behavior instead of confronting it.

The University of Michigan was an obvious enabler in the Anderson case, Guiora said, and the Big Ten Conference and the NCAA could be considered enablers of the university, deferring to its sheer size and financial might.

“It’s fair to ask where the Big Ten and NCAA are in all of this,” said Guiora, whose next book, “Armies of Enablers,” explores the sexual assault scandals at Michigan State, Ohio State, Penn State, and the Catholic Church.

Vaughn, who is familiar with Guiora’s writing, said he struggles with what he views as Michigan’s complicity and coverup. He questions why the university did not take public action until the newspaper report surfaced in February. And he is wary that the university’s “alternative resolution process” is an attempt to circumvent the courts.

“I love Michigan, some of the oldest relationships I have were made at Michigan, and some principles I adhere to as a man I learned at Michigan,” Vaughn said. “But to know that so many times this could have been stopped, and wasn’t ...

“Throughout this, one thought runs through my mind: At what point does my love for Michigan overshadow my love for myself?”

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