

# UMBC swimmers say coach's abuse was an open, painful secret

When students, athletes and children speak up, the adults who silence them make everything worse



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It's not just the abuse, it's the lies — lies in the Catholic Church, the Boy Scouts, school sports and countless other programs that enable young people to be victimized.

In the latest scandal, they manifested in the stunning and dangerous inaction of the administration at the University of Maryland at Baltimore County, which a federal investigation shows had warnings of abuse from student-athletes almost a decade ago.

They heard that charismatic swim and dive coach Chad Cradock — a gregarious man with a winning record known around campus as “Mr. UMBC” — was an abuser.

“I genuinely don't understand why it took them so long to do anything,” said one of the former swimmers at the university who reported the abuse by the team coach in 2018, according to a [lawsuit](#) she filed.

It was a “petrifying” thing to do, the woman said, speaking to The Washington Post on the condition of anonymity to describe sensitive conversations.

And nothing happened.

On Monday, the Justice Department dropped the result of an exhaustive three-year [investigation](#) into the coach and the way he touched and talked to the swimmers, how he took them into hotel rooms and guided their athletic careers according to their willingness to play along.

“The sexually hostile environment was accepted and joked about,” said a male swimmer who said he was abused by Cradock. The Post does not identify victims of sexual assault.

The report described manipulation and mental abuse of women and physical abuse of men. That detail, the targeting of men on the team, often plays into the longevity of abusers' streaks. Though 1 in 10 rape victims are male — and college men are five times more likely to be sexually assaulted than other men — it remains stigmatized.

“The Head Coach kissed male student-athletes' necks, hugged them from behind, traced his fingers down their bare stomachs from their belly buttons toward their genitals, and massaged their bare skin,” the Justice Department's report said.

“The Head Coach asked male students about their sex lives, including relationships with other team members, and told them about his own sex life. He asked male student-athletes if they loved him. He touched male students' genitals while taking their temperature as part of coronavirus testing protocols.”

The woman, a former team captain, said seeing the graphic contents of the report made her realize “how horrible it really was.” The male swimmer said he didn't find anything surprising.

The damning conclusion by the Justice Department addresses the lies that the university leaders told themselves.

“From approximately 2015 to 2020, the University was on notice of allegations that these student-athletes had been subjected to a hostile environment based on sex but failed to address it adequately,” the report said.

“As a result, many student-athletes were subjected to sex discrimination, including unwanted sexual touching and other sexual harassment, which they understood to be a condition for participating in University athletics.”

The university leaders knew.

“If they had actually pursued [the reports], I wouldn't have a single client because none of this would've happened,” said Rignal W. Baldwin V, the attorney for most of the swimmers who reported the abuse.

There was division within the swimming community when Cradock was put on leave in 2020 after more athletes came forward to report his behavior and the team captain I spoke with opened a formal Title IX investigation. She was comforting fellow teammates who were angry that Cradock was removed, while keeping it to herself that she helped prompt the action.

The year after he was removed, Cradock killed himself.

Some of the people on the team called the swimmers who reported him — most of them kept their identities secret, and still do — “killers,” the woman said.

The federal report was validating for her, proof that she did the right thing and evidence to the rest of the team that what the swimmers experienced was real — and wrong.

“The report deeply saddened me because my situation was completely avoidable,” the male swimmer said.

It was clear that UMBC officials knew something was wrong in 2015, when they received an anonymous letter from students tipping off a camera in a locker that pointed directly to the men's showers, according to the Justice Department report. "He is a real creep and makes us students uncomfortable. Help!" the letter said.

Staff members cleaned out the locker — which was registered to Cradock — before university police arrived to check it out, according to the report. The police closed the case.

"I don't feel vindicated until I know and see what the changes are and people are held accountable," the male swimmer said. "I think that I might feel validated but I don't feel vindicated."

Once an Olympic hopeful, the former team captain said she hasn't been able to get into a pool since 2022.

Cradock was a husband and father of three, a valued swim coach at the community team. The donation page set up for the family after his death speaks to the hundreds of swimmers and families who were positively influenced by him.

Yes, it is possible for a person to be harmful and helpful. That's how people in positions of power often justify inaction.

The Post reported that Valerie Sheares Ashby, the president of UMBC, a public university in Baltimore with about 14,000 students, wrote to the campus community: "The findings are deeply troubling. ... We take full responsibility for what happened, and we commit ourselves not only to addressing the failures, but also to rebuilding our community's trust."

When I wrote about the Sandusky scandal in 2011, there was a silver lining to the horrific story: Calls to a national sexual abuse hotline jumped by more than 50 percent by survivors empowered to speak up.

"Every time sexual violence is in the news, it prompts more survivors to reach out for help," said Scott Berkowitz, president and founder of the Rape Abuse & Incest National Network. "Nearly half of those who reach out tell us that they've never before told anyone about what they experienced."

And when they speak up, inaction by those in charge is nothing less than another crime.