



COMMENTARY

On 'disgusting' report about women's soccer, Governor Murphy's silence is troubling

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OCTOBER 7, 2022 7:14 AM



📷 Gov. Phil Murphy declined to answer whether he feels responsibility for the alleged misconduct of the now-former coach of the soccer team Murphy co-owns. (Danielle Heminghaus for New Jersey Monitor)

The findings of [an investigative report released Monday](#) by the U.S. Soccer Federation are, alas, not surprising.

Abuse and misconduct of players ran rampant, people in charge didn't listen to the players' complaints, and men who behaved like monsters were allowed to keep doing so. I wish this weren't a story told again and again, but we've seen similar scandals involving women gymnasts and swimmers, among others.

There's something else about the soccer scandal giving me a case of déjà vu: how Gov. Phil Murphy reacted.

Murphy and his wife, Tammy, own the women's soccer team NJ/NY Gotham FC, formerly known as Sky Blue, which in 2016 hired a man named Christy Holly to be its head coach. In August 2017, the team announced Holly was stepping down – mid-season – in a press release that praised Holly as “committed to Sky Blue” and said he and the team were parting ways on good terms.

After leaving Sky Blue, Holly was hired by the U.S. Soccer Federation and then, in 2020, he became head coach of Racing Louisville. There, the report says, he engaged in a “pattern of misconduct.” One player told investigators he sent her sexually explicit photos and asked her to send him her own – he admits this – and she said he sexually assaulted her in his home and groped her elsewhere. He denied to investigators that any “sexual conduct continued at Racing Louisville,” the report says. In August 2021, Racing Louisville announced it had fired Holly “for cause” and declined to specify further.

What's troubling about the Murphys' involvement is what Sky Blue's owners could have done to prevent what happened after they and Holly parted ways.

A witness who talked to investigators said Sky Blue's general manager said Holly's departure was necessary “after repeated and ongoing complaints by players regarding Holly's verbal and emotional abuse,” the report says. Holly's relationship with the team's captain, also, had become “so toxic and disruptive that he had ‘lost the locker room,’” the witness said, according to the report (he and the former team captain are now married).

The report also says Sky Blue players were “asked to keep the matter of Holly's departure confidential.”

That's a far cry from Sky Blue's public announcement that things between the team and Holly were hunky-dory.

There's more: One of Racing Louisville's owners [told The Equalizer in 2020](#) – this was right after the Kentucky team hired Holly – that Steven Temares, the former Bed Bath & Beyond executive who co-owns the team with the Murphys, gave Holly “a glowing reference,” while another said Temares told him he would “100%” hire Holly again. Temares conceded he gave – in the words of the report – “what could be considered a positive reference” of Holly to Louisville.

Could the Murphys and Temares have stopped some of the alleged misconduct if they had been honest about why Holly left Sky Blue?

That's an unanswerable question: We've seen time and time again that men can do bad things and continue to succeed professionally. But the Murphys and Temares seemed to have helped Louisville roll out the red carpet for Holly to become head coach there.

Murphy talked to reporters about this Wednesday, saying he was "disgusted" by what he's read and that there's a separate investigation "being done by the league."

"So, I'm not going to, at the moment, not going to talk any of the specifics," he said.

Of course. An outside investigation, so his lips are sealed, except for when they're not.

This is a bad look for Governor Murphy, and unfortunately, it's a look we've seen before. When Julie Roginsky went public with accounts of toxic behavior by men working for the Murphy campaign in 2017, Murphy [said he knew nothing](#). When Katie Brennan alleged a Murphy campaign staffer sexually assaulted her, Brennan said her [pleas for help from Murphy went unanswered](#). Then, even after a legislative committee said Murphy's general counsel, Matt Platkin, was "sloppy" in his handling of the matter, Murphy [elevated Platkin to attorney general](#).

What do they say about two times being a coincidence and three a trend?

Murphy's spokeswoman deferred questions to the soccer team's PR folks, who directed me to [a statement issued by the "club"](#) – not the owners – on Twitter Thursday.

"The findings are both distressing and sobering. Abusive behavior and sexual harassment have no place in any environment," the statement reads. "While we have made strides as an organization, we fully accept our responsibility to our players, employees, and fans to do and be better every day."

The investigative report does not indicate the Murphys knew specifics about the allegations against Holly. Maybe their ownership of Sky Blue was so hands-off, they didn't know what went on with the coach and players (there's [some evidence](#) to indicate that). But if Governor Murphy is serious about how disgusted he is by the report's contents, he should be transparent about what he knew about the claims against Holly and why he, his wife, and Temares didn't kill Holly's soccer coaching career when they could have.



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Editor Terrence T. McDonald is a native New Jerseyan who has worked for newspapers in the Garden State for more than 15 years. He has covered everything from Trenton politics to the smallest of municipal squabbles, exposing public corruption and general malfeasance at every level of government. Terrence won 23 New Jersey Press Association awards and two Tim O'Brien Awards for Investigative Journalism using the Open Public Records Act from the New Jersey chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists. One politician forced to resign in disgrace because of Terrence's reporting called him a "political poison pen journalist."

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