

D.C. Sports Bog

'Like a rerun': Jordan McNair isn't the first Maryland football player to die of heatstroke

By [Jacob Bogage](#)

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Lister Harper had been through football workouts, but none like this. The drills were more physical than what he was used to when he played on Blair High School's varsity squad in Silver Spring. Players were faster. Coaches were, well, more gruff.

Harper, days away from enlisting in the Navy, drove with a friend from Silver Spring to College Park to watch the University of Maryland's football team practice, and boy, the two said to one another, were they glad high school ball was easier than this.

Harper saw coaches pull an offensive lineman out of a scrimmage and send him to run through rope nets and then do laps around the field. When the Terrapins' junior varsity squad headed for the locker room, the lineman jogged after them, but coaches pulled him back and told him to keep running.

"I'm not going to do it," the lineman, Charles "Sonny" Lohr, hollered back to the coach. "I can't do it."

"You got to do it," Harper remembers the coach shouting back.

Minutes later, still trying to complete those sprints, Lohr collapsed. He died four days later, Sept. 6, 1959.

And when Harper, now 77 and living in Edgewater, saw on television that another Maryland football player, [Jordan McNair, had collapsed at a workout in late May and died several days later](#), he felt a twinge of déjà vu.

"This is like a rerun," he told The Washington Post this week.

Harper called the similarities between Lohr's death and McNair's eerie.

A decade after Lohr's death, Maryland ousted another football coach, Bob Ward, over allegations that he verbally and physically abused players. Now, university officials have parted ways with the football program's strength and conditioning coach, [Rick Court](#), and placed football coach DJ Durkin on administrative leave pending an investigation into McNair's death and more allegations of abuse within the coaching ranks.

Harper was among four eyewitnesses in 1959 that contradicted Terrapins coaches' accounts of Lohr's collapse. Maryland Coach Tom Nugent insisted Lohr wasn't singled out for extra running, that his practice routine was just like any other day. Assistant coaches repeated the same thing.

But Harper, as well as three other recent high school graduates who watched the practice, told The Post and university officials that coaches picked on Lohr and pushed him to keep running until he was delirious.

McNair had a seizure after struggling to complete several 110-yard sprints, according to a medical report filed by emergency responders. After the episode, McNair struggled to keep his footing, according to an [ESPN investigation](#), and head athletic trainer Wes Robinson yelled to trainers assisting him to "drag his ass off the field." School officials have disputed some of the reports: "At no point before or during the external review has a student-athlete, athletic trainer or coach reported a seizure occurring at 5 p.m."

Nearly 60 years ago, Lohr arrived at Prince George's General Hospital with a body temperature of 108 degrees. McNair was airlifted to R. Adams Cowley Shock Trauma Center in Baltimore with a 106-degree temperature.

In neither instance, 59 years apart, did university athletics personnel [take either players' temperature](#). Both of their bodies were so hot, their internal organs began to shut down. Doctors transferred Lohr to University Hospital where a new kidney was ready, just in case. McNair received a liver transplant.

Maryland called Lohr's death an "unfortunate accident," in a university report, which sought to discredit Harper and the other eyewitnesses. Lohr's mother, Lucille, told the committee that wrote the report her son's death was "an act of God and that she had no basis for believing that anyone could be held responsible for his death."

Nugent, in his first year as head coach, retained his position with the backing of the school's administration.

"I believe my coaches to be honest," University President Wilson H. Elkins told The Post. "I cannot find anything unusual concerning the circumstances of Lohr's collapse. I attended the practice and have been connected with football for many years and know it is customary for players to take sprints as a windup. That is all part of the game."

McNair spent two weeks in the hospital and died June 13. University President Wallace D. Loh told the player's parents [the college accepted "legal and moral responsibility"](#) for McNair's death, though several formal investigations are ongoing. McNair's parents have called for Durkin, entering his third season, to be fired.

“We have looked at the preliminary observations that were given to me and others,” Loh said at a news conference this week, “and some of our policies and protocols do not conform to best practices. Some of the actions of our athletic training staff — not the coaching staff, our athletic training staff — they basically misdiagnosed the situation.”

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