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For soccer pioneer, a past he can't shake - Former coach faces deportation years after indecency conviction

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For decades, Ron Griffith, a crusty, disheveled Englishman, has been revered as a youth soccer pioneer.

He launched the Texas Longhorns, the oldest soccer club in the Southwest; led scores of young players on overseas soccer tours; and is widely known as the founder of the Dallas Cup, one of the world's premier youth soccer tournaments.

Less well-known is a dark part of his past: In 1981, he was convicted of fondling a 14-year-old boy he met through the sport.

That incident, for which Mr. Griffith served five years' probation, is surfacing again, threatening to sever him from the community in which he has invested much of his life. Since 1999, government officials have been working to deport Mr. Griffith, a legal permanent resident. A hearing is scheduled before an immigration judge in Dallas next month.

Several Longhorns and Dallas Cup officials, past and present, have been subpoenaed by prosecutors to testify at the hearing. After his conviction, Mr. Griffith continued to be part of both organizations for years, despite objections from some parents and board members.

By the late 1980s, Mr. Griffith had left both organizations. But before he did, he was in contact with thousands of young people as he promoted the organizations he founded, recruited teams and organized tours.

Mr. Griffith has no record of any other crimes and still maintains a loyal following among people he coached.

Officials with the Longhorns and the Dallas Cup declined to discuss most details about Mr. Griffith's ties to the groups, saying that most current board members were not around when he was arrested and convicted. And, they stress that times and attitudes have changed since 1981. The groups now have strict policies and procedures to prevent and to deal with accusations of abuse.

The case raises questions about why a man who admitted fondling a child was able to continue working with youth organizations and why the government is only now attempting to deport him for that crime. Some of the answers may lie in the way attitudes toward such crimes have shifted over the decades, as well as changes in immigration law.

Mr. Griffith, 64, who lives in Richardson, declined several requests for comment about his past, as did his immigration lawyer, Garry Davis. Those who know Mr. Griffith well say he does not talk about the case.

Friends and supporters say he has paid for his mistake and is exceptionally distraught that the case has resurfaced.

"He had a certain foible, which is now past. He's paid very dearly for that foible," said Mike Renshaw, a former pro player with the Dallas Tornados and a longtime friend of Mr. Griffith's. "It's a shame that it's coming out 25 years after the fact."

A former friend disagrees.

"It's very bad, but whatever happens, he brought it on himself," said Mary Kaipus, who first met Mr. Griffith when she volunteered for the Dallas Cup in 1986.

His background

Friends, news clips and school records state that Mr. Griffith, a native of Blackpool, England, arrived in Texas in 1966, enrolling at the University of Texas at Austin. Not long after that, he moved to the Dallas area, where he worked at a private school in Denton and later coached a recreational soccer club at Southern Methodist University.

In 1968, Mr. Griffith founded a soccer club called the Longhorns, serving as a coach and referee and then as a board member. The team was one of the first in North Texas to travel internationally to play games.

The Longhorns team also was the launching pad, and continues to be the host team, for what is perhaps Mr. Griffith's most prominent achievement, the Dallas Cup. The youth soccer tournament began in 1980, with 24 teams from four countries. It now attracts hundreds of teams from every corner of the world and recruiters from professional leagues.

"He was a groundbreaker; he blazed the trail," said Bobby Moffat, former pro player with the Dallas Tornados. "Ron was innovative and very fanatical about soccer. He did a lot of good things for the sport."

Many parents who had children who played on Mr. Griffith's teams agree.

"If we hadn't had him, we wouldn't have what we have now," said Denise D. Brooks, whose son played in the Dallas Cup and for the Longhorns in the 1980s. "We would not have soccer as we know it here, without Ron."

For a time, until the early 1980s, Mr. Griffith also operated a soccer equipment store called Mr. Soccer. It was one of the first such retail places in North Texas, and a popular hangout for soccer aficionados.

Mr. Griffith organized tours for soccer teams to travel to Europe, not only for sightseeing but also to play in games and tournaments.

Brian Brooks, who played for the Longhorns for five years in the 1980s, said those trips to Europe meant a lot to his development.

"I probably wouldn't have ever gone to places like England and France if it had not been for an organization he was running," Mr. Brooks said. "It showed me what the rest of the world was like."

Some people recalled that Mr. Griffith was not a particularly affable man.

Parent Gayle Nelson described Mr. Griffith as "an odd duck, no doubt about it."

"He came to visit our house all the time," she said. "Sometimes he would just sit there and read the paper and not ever talk to us. But he was always good with the kids."

However, Mr. Renshaw, the former pro player and Mr. Griffith's friend, described him as a person "generous of his things and of his time," who was "always helpful to everyone." He said he would have no problem with any of his five children spending time with Ron.

The incident

But all of Mr. Griffith's accomplishments would be marred by what happened in the pre-dawn hours of May 9, 1981.

According to a Richardson police report, Dallas officers found a 14-year-old boy "in an excited and highly emotional state," running through a parking lot in the 8600 block of Spring Valley Road. The boy told police he had gone to Mr. Griffith's Richardson condo around midnight. He had intended to spend the night there.

The boy told police that Mr. Griffith, who was 40 at the time, said he could sleep in his room. Around 4 a.m., he woke up to find Mr. Griffith fondling him. He said that he tried to brush him away and pretended to be asleep, but that Mr. Griffith once again groped him and masturbated next to him.

The boy said he got up, grabbed his pants and ran out the door, afraid that Mr. Griffith might chase him. He said he

was trying to get to a telephone to call his father when police found him.

According to the police report, as officers were speaking to the boy, a light-colored van passed by, and the boy said it belonged to Mr. Griffith. Police stopped the van, and Mr. Griffith was arrested.

The victim did not return phone calls and e-mails from reporters. His father said the night of the offense was the first time his son had spent the night at Mr. Griffith's home. He said he believed that other boys had spent the night there: "That was what I understood or was led to believe, that it was not uncommon."

Mr. Griffith "was very charismatic, influential, and kids seemed to gravitate to him," the father said. (To protect the victim's identity, his name is not being published. The Dallas Morning News normally does not print names of victims of sex offenses.)

Mr. Griffith was indicted in June 1981. Later that summer, he pleaded guilty to a charge of indecency with a child and was sentenced to 10 years probation and ordered to undergo psychiatric treatment. According to court records, after he served five years of probation, the remainder of his sentence was set aside.

The victim's father said his family cut contact with the team after the incident. He does not believe his son has suffered long-term effects from the crime.

The father said that at the time he believed the crime "was inappropriate for probation. I would rather have had something else happen to him, at the very least for him not to have the continued ability to have contact with youth," he said.

"He was trusted, and I thought then that he took advantage of the situation," he said.

As word got out about the incident, parents were divided.

Linda Irion, whose then teenage son, Monte, played for the Longhorns when Mr. Griffith was arrested, is still angry. Neither mother nor son knew about the accusation - until the son was already in Europe with Mr. Griffith, more than a month after the arrest.

"I was very surprised that the parents in charge of the soccer team kept it all under the rug and told the kids to go to Europe. It was very irresponsible," Ms. Irion said. "Even today, I keep thinking about everything, and I can't let it go."

After numerous phone calls, Ms. Irion found her son in Sweden and warned him about what had happened. Monte Irion, now 40 years old, said players did not discuss the allegations on the tour.

Once news of the accusations reached all parents whose sons were on the trip, a team meeting was called, Ms. Irion said. The parents argued.

"I was very angry and upset that my son went off with a man who was charged with a crime," she said. "I felt like mine was not one of the popular opinions."

Other parents did not think the charges were serious, because they had never seen anything inappropriate between Mr. Griffith and any player.

Mr. Griffith "was a big part of our lives from the time my son was 11 years old until he went to college," said Gayle Nelson, one of the parents. "If anything inappropriate had happened, I feel certain the kids would have told us. ... Nothing, to my knowledge, ever went on."

Mr. Brooks, who toured Europe with the Longhorns that summer, said Mr. Griffith never did anything inappropriate with him, and he never saw anything involving other players and Mr. Griffith.

"It's not that I stuck my head in the sand, but I just never saw it," said his mother, Denise Brooks.

Court records show that after Mr. Griffith was indicted, several parents sent a Mailgram to him in Europe, declaring

their support. Among the supporters listed on the note was Carl Generes, Mr. Griffith's lawyer at the time. In 1981, Mr. Generes was also an official with the Dallas Cup. He declined to comment about his former client's case and said he didn't recall if his son had been on the trip.

People affiliated with the team and the Dallas Cup recall that both organizations struggled for years with what to do about Mr. Griffith.

"It was an emotional issue, as I recall," said Judy Murphey, a Dallas Cup board member since the mid-'80s and the current president of the Texas Longhorns board of directors. The Dallas Cup board "was very divided on what to do."

"Some people were upset, some parents in the club didn't even know, and others didn't care or didn't think that he should go," said Ms. Kaipus, the Dallas Cup volunteer.

Eventually, Ms. Murphey and Ms. Kaipus said, both the Longhorns and the Cup agreed to sever ties with Mr. Griffith.

Elmer Murphey, a lawyer who represents the team and the tournament, said via e-mail that Mr. Griffith did not officially leave the Longhorns until 1987. He stayed with the Dallas Cup until 1989, eight years after his guilty plea, as a board member until 1984 and later as a consultant. He continued to appear in photographs of Dallas Cup board of directors and officers until 1989.

Acquaintances and computer records show that after living in Austin for a few years in the early 1990s, Mr. Griffith returned to North Texas. Through a company called SoccerTex, he organizes European tours for soccer groups, including prominent college teams. He has not been traveling with the teams because his passport has been seized, friends say.

He continues to attend youth soccer games, said several people who know him. Mr. Griffith's conviction occurred before sex offenders were required to register with law enforcement.

Distancing

Team and cup officials are now trying to distance themselves from their founder.

"We're way beyond Ron," said Mr. Murphey, whose wife, Ms. Murphey, is president of the Longhorns board of directors.

Today, all volunteers, board members, and Dallas Cup staffers are required to undergo criminal background checks, said Gordon Jago, executive director of the Dallas Cup. Tournament manager Randy Jones said the background checks have been mandatory since the 1994-95 soccer season.

The Longhorns reacted swiftly in 1995, when coach Michael McKay Custer was accused of fondling three players. He was immediately removed from the team, news articles indicate. State records show he pleaded guilty in 1996 and was sentenced to 18 years in prison and is now on parole.

Changing times

Eric Reed, a Dallas criminal defense lawyer who is not involved in the Griffith case, said defendants charged with sex offenses today have a much more difficult time fighting the accusations.

"The laws have gotten more draconian," Mr. Reed said. "Now people can never put such cases behind them. If the case were to happen today, he would have been faced with much more serious consequences."

Some experts say nonviolent sex offenders have a good chance of being rehabilitated if they attend treatment, as Mr. Griffith was ordered to do. At the same time, fears that people convicted of such crimes will reoffend have led more states to enact laws to track them in light of high-profile cases.

Federal immigration law also has gotten tougher.

In 1996, Congress overhauled the immigration act. Under its new provisions, noncitizens with even minor criminal convictions face harsh repercussions. The law also became retroactive; past crimes, often decades old, could now make a person deportable.

Paul Hunker, chief counsel for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement in Dallas, said he could not comment on Mr. Griffith's case specifically. But he did indicate that noncitizens who committed crimes more than five years after obtaining their green card would not have been deportable before 1996.

The deportation facing Mr. Griffith did not begin until January 1999, immigration officials said, when he was detained after landing at Dulles International Airport near Washington, D.C., after a trip to Europe. While officials did not want to comment on how Mr. Griffith avoided being detected before then, that same year U.S. Customs and Border Protection introduced a system that checks criminal records on all passengers and crew members at airports, Mr. Hunker said.

Mr. Griffith was allowed to enter the country while the case was pending.

It was not until 2002 that the government began to schedule hearings and court proceedings in an effort to remove him from the country. Officials with Immigration and Customs Enforcement have declined to say why Mr. Griffith's case still has not been heard by a judge. Mr. Hunker, the chief counsel, said that as a result of changes in the law, many legal issues are still being ironed out, and that could account for some of the delay. He also said cases involving legal permanent residents often take a long time.

The case is now scheduled for Jan. 11.

Mr. Hunker said immigration officials pursue cases involving sexual crimes aggressively, despite delays, as part of an increased effort to find and deport sex offenders who are foreign citizens. Such measures include Operation Predator, which since July 2003 has resulted in the arrest of more than 6,500 convicted sex offenders (most of them foreign citizens) and the deportation of about half of those arrested.

Local immigration lawyers say that at his hearing, Mr. Griffith could argue that his decades-old conviction does not make him a threat to public safety. He could also cite his contributions to soccer.

But even if Mr. Griffith were successful in persuading the local immigration judge to let him stay, Immigration and Customs Enforcement lawyers probably would appeal to the Board of Immigration Appeals, which has consistently ruled against noncitizens convicted of serious crimes.

Mr. Griffith's close friends said he fears that he may have to start his life over in England, where he has no family. He has no relatives in the United States, either.

"He's in a really bad shape right now," said friend and former Longhorns player and coach Neil Cohen. "He's very embarrassed about it, I guess. He gets very nervous and won't even talk. Clams up, you know."

His friends say soccer organizations should acknowledge Mr. Griffith's legacy, despite his offense.

"If it were not for him, there would be no Dallas Cup," said Mr. Renshaw, the former pro soccer player. "But because of his problem, he is a persona non grata among the Dallas Cup people. And that's a wrong that should be righted. He selflessly did the groundwork for the Dallas Cup for over 10 years."

"Look at all the money that it has generated for the city of Dallas, and Ron never took a salary," said Mr. Cohen. "For Ron, it was all about the game, about the people, about the kids."

Officials with both groups contend that Mr. Griffith no longer has anything to do with the tournament.

In an e-mail, Mr. Murphey, the Cup attorney, emphasized the positive influences of the Dallas Cup and the Longhorns.

"Therefore," he wrote, "I think it is fair to conclude that the Mr. Griffith chapter with both organizations ended years

ago and therefore should only be treated as a footnote in the history of both organizations."

Staff writer Brooks Egerton contributed to this article.

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PROTECTING KIDS

Lynn Davis, president and chief executive officer of the Dallas Children's Advocacy Center, says parents can take several steps to protect children who play on sports teams:

-Check to see if the league or organization does criminal background checks, not just of coaches but also people who volunteer as assistants.

-If no background checks are done, get online and look up local, state and national sex offender registries.

-Have honest discussions with your children, not just about stranger danger, but also about what to do if someone they know does something to them that is wrong or makes them uncomfortable. "Over 90 percent of cases across the country are committed by people the young person knew," Mr. Davis said.

-Be involved. "So many parents use sports teams as baby sitters," Mr. Davis said.

-Be observant. "Attend activities and observe how an adult interacts with your child and with other children," Mr. Davis said.

Caption: PHOTO(S): (FILE 1988) Ron Griffith, for years a fixture in youth soccer in the Dallas area, faces deportation. He pleaded guilty in 1981 to a charge of indecency with a child. CHART(S): 1. FROM THE FILES 2. PROTECTING KIDS

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