

Grand Island seeks author of 'hateful,' anti-Jewish posts targeting Lew-Port athletes

[Stephen T. Watson](#)

The Grand Island High School boys basketball team is having its best season ever on the court, advancing all the way to Saturday's Class A regional final at SUNY Buffalo State University. But this playoff run comes as district administrators investigate whether anyone on the team is connected to antisemitic online posts that targeted Lew-Port High School and its boys basketball team.

Two offensive Instagram posts circulated widely through the school communities before the long-standing rivals met last week. One post had the name and photo of a Lew-Port player and twists the name of his hometown and school into an anti-Jewish slur. The second, posted on [a fan account for the Grand Island boys basketball team](#), used the same slur as part of an appeal to Vikings supporters to attend the game against Lew-Port.

Grand Island Superintendent Brian Graham swiftly put out a statement denouncing the "hateful" online posts and vowing to find whoever was responsible. "The language that appeared in these posts is offensive, harmful and completely inconsistent with the values we expect from members of the Grand Island community," he wrote. Graham told The News on Thursday the district had not yet identified who created the posts and still doesn't know whether it was a current student or basketball player.

Lew-Port Superintendent Paul Casseri said Grand Island officials have kept in contact with leaders in his district. "I was appalled. I was very upset," Casseri said in an interview, adding, "I was assured that the matter was going to be looked at very carefully." Members of the area's Jewish community say the disturbing posts demand a meaningful response, including significant discipline for any students involved. "It's all very traditional antisemitic posts, pictures, changing phrases to reflect a hatred of the Jewish people or Zionism – whatever they're taking aim at," said Lisa Benson, president of the Buffalo Coalition Against Antisemitism. "It took a little effort on the part of this student to create this. But, clearly, there's a lot of hatred underneath this."

Rival schools meet

The posts began spreading in the hours before Grand Island's playoff game against Lew-Port on March 5 at Buffalo State's arena. The two teams were meeting for the Section VI Class A1 boys basketball championship. Casseri wrote in a public message that the "deeply troubling" posts targeted members of the Lew-Port community. He said district officials and their counterparts were coordinating to make sure that afternoon's game would be contested in a safe environment and that more security would be assigned as a precaution.

Casseri noted the schools share a long-standing sports rivalry that can bring high energy to their games. "However, when that rivalry crosses the line into antisemitic or hateful speech, it must be condemned and addressed immediately," Casseri wrote.

Graham's own message from March 5 used similar language in decrying the posts and noted the hard work the Grand Island team had put into the season. "Let us support our student-athletes with pride while showing respect for our opponents, their community and everyone in attendance," Graham stated. "Hate has no place in Grand Island."

Grand Island handily defeated Lew-Port, 63-39. The game went on without incident except the Lew-Port student section at times chanted that a member of the Grand Island team "is racist."

'Lew-Port' name twisted

The superintendents' statements didn't include specifics about the offending posts, which The Buffalo News later obtained. The two posts were published on different Instagram accounts. The first went up on "gi_barstool," a reference to the boundary-pushing Barstool Sports online empire. It superimposed the photo of a Lew-Port player's face, and his name, on top of an apparent online profile of a college student active in his local Chabad House, a hub for the Jewish community. The post referred to this player, whose first name was misspelled, as "Jew of the Week."

The News is not repeating the slur and is not naming the student. It's not known whether this student is Jewish. His father didn't respond to an email seeking comment. This post no longer remains online and the "gi_barstool" account is no longer active.

The second Instagram post originated on "grandislandmbb." This account, which has 339 followers, describes itself as the "Grand Island Men's Basketball Official Page" but notes it is "not affiliated with" the district. This March 4 post initially used the same offensive twist on Lew-Port as the other post while encouraging Viking fans to wear Hawaiian shirts while attending the following day's game against Lew-Port. An updated post, with the slur term replaced with "Lewport," remains on the account page. The News sent a message to the "grandislandmbb" administrator but didn't receive a response.

The account operator is likely someone with a close connection to the boys basketball team, since the 43 posts on the page include photos of players taken inside school buildings. Benson, the antisemitism coalition's president, said the Jewish community has seen a rise in "Jew hatred" like this online with the growth of social media platforms. And it's no coincidence the antisemitic posts came before a big sporting event, when the images were sure to get higher engagement, Benson said. "It's a great outlet for the haters to spread their message," she said.

Authors remain unknown

On the court, the Grand Island Vikings keep rolling.

They won again Wednesday, beating Section V's Monroe in the Class A sub-regional, 77-51, and will play Maine-Endwell from Section IV in Saturday's regional final, essentially the state quarterfinals, a level they're reaching **for the first time in program history**.

Off the court, the district's investigation continues, with Graham, the superintendent, saying officials have conducted numerous interviews with students. He said they don't know whether the posts were produced by a student, a graduate or someone else connected to the school.

"We're hopeful that we'll come to some type of conclusion, whether it takes a few more days or a few more weeks. But, right now, they have not identified anybody that has done this," Graham told The News.

If a boys basketball player was responsible, Graham said, the district would impose appropriate punishment, even if the team's historic season was still underway. Students could face discipline under the district's student and athlete codes of conduct, he said.

The Buffalo Jewish Federation said Friday that Graham told organization leaders he wants to meet with them soon and arrange for future presentations to students from federation representatives, including a Holocaust speaker. Benson, for her part, said she's been in close contact with the Lew-Port superintendent but wants to hear from Grand Island what, exactly, they're doing to identify and punish the responsible parties. Benson said this investigation appears "half-hearted, in my opinion."

Graham said district officials are doing everything they can to find out who's behind the posts. He said he's kept his Lew-Port counterpart updated on Grand Island's efforts, which Casseri confirmed. If something similar had happened involving a Lew-Port student as the culprit, the district would pursue a twofold response if and when the culprit were found, Casseri said. "There would be disciplinary consequences, obviously, but then we would also try to create some restorative process," he said. Casseri said the Lewiston-Porter School District has a small number of Jewish families and he spoke to the parents of two students after the posts emerged. "Whether we have a small or large population, it's just not appropriate," he said. "It's not right, and it was a very heinous and ugly post."

News sports reporter Clevis Murray contributed to this report.