



COURT RESULT

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Former Southampton Football Coach Convicted of Non-recent Child Sex Abuse

A former Southampton youth football coach who abused young boys for a quarter of a century between 1971 and 1996 has today (Thursday 23 May) been convicted.

Robert 'Bob' Higgins, 66, was branded a 'predatory paedophile' in court as he faced 51 counts of indecent assault relating to 24 boys, most of whom were youth football players at the time of the offences.

Today, Higgins was convicted of 45 offences following a trial by jury.

Higgins had already been convicted of indecently assaulting another boy at a previous trial which began in May 2018.

During the trial, Adam Feest QC, prosecuting the case, told Bournemouth Crown Court that the investigation began after former Crewe Alexandra football players appeared on the Victoria Derbyshire show alleging they had been abused as children. The NSPCC subsequently set up a helpline for those who had been affected by this type of abuse in sport.

“The telephones started ringing and one name was mentioned over and over again. That is the name of this defendant, Bob Higgins”, Mr Feest said.

“There’s no doubt he was a talented coach. He spotted and nurtured many young players, many of whom went on to achieve significant success both nationally and internationally.

“His reputation as a coach was high, and many young teenagers often turned down more prestigious clubs so they could train with him because they hoped that they would enhance their chances of becoming a professional footballer. The prospect of that type of career was one which many teenage boys would give a huge amount for.”

Mr Feest continued: “For some of these boys he developed a perverse sexual attachment, telling them he loved them and getting them to show signs of affection towards him.

“Behind all this abuse lay a systematic and all pervasive pattern of grooming behaviour.”

Detectives from Hampshire Constabulary’s Operation Marmion team, who specialise in investigating non-recent child sex abuse, first started making enquiries in November 2016.

What followed was a lengthy and complex investigation spanning two trials which has now concluded with today’s verdicts.

Detective Chief Inspector Dave Brown, senior investigating officer, said:

“Today’s guilty verdicts are testament to the bravery and patience of all those victims and witnesses involved.

“Bob Higgins was a predatory paedophile. He thrived on controlling and manipulating his victims and knowing that he held the career prospects of many young men in his hands. He exploited that position in the most disgraceful way.

“Many of his victims haven’t felt able to speak about these horrendous experiences for most of their lives. After taking the extremely brave step of coming forward and reporting this abuse to police, they have then had to go through the stress and strain of a very public crown court trial, as Higgins maintained his innocence throughout.

“I would like to thank those men who came forward and who have worked with us over the past couple of years – often having to disclose some of the most personal information. We appreciate how difficult and distressing this has been for them and their families, friends and loved ones.

“I would also like to acknowledge that not everyone will be happy with all the verdicts returned in this trial. The jury listened to a comprehensive package of evidence put forward by the Crown Prosecution Service and also heard from many victims and witnesses during the course of the proceedings.

“The burden of proof in cases involving sexual offences is extremely high and we must respect the verdicts returned by the jury. The not guilty verdicts show that they felt there was not enough evidence for them to say that Mr Higgins was guilty beyond all reasonable doubt of all 50 counts on the indictment.

“The team of officers that worked on this case are experts in their field and are specially trained in dealing with victims of non-recent child sex abuse. I would encourage anyone who has been a victim of abuse, no matter how long ago it happened, to come forward. We will treat you with the utmost dignity and respect and have a team of specialists within our Operation Marmion team available for you to talk to. We don’t always need forensics or evidence you would typically think of in these sorts of cases, to secure charges and take cases to court, as has been proven in this case.

“If you would like to speak to one of our specialist officers, please call 101, and ask for the Operation Marmion team.”

In a joint statement, the victims in this case said:

“When Bob Higgins returned to court eight weeks ago, he gave a clear message to us all with his continued refusal to accept responsibility for what he did to us as children. However, that message made us all stronger and more determined. The verdicts from the Jury after hearing all of the evidence mean that Mr Higgins’ arrogance and lies have finally caught up with him. At last, after all these years, we can finally get a sense of closure and try to move on from this nightmare.

“On behalf of everybody who’s taken part in the trials, we would like to thank everyone involved in the case for having faith and belief in us.

“We would particularly like to thank the prosecution and investigation team who must have spent hundreds, if not thousands, of hours putting this jigsaw puzzle together.

“But, most of all, we must thank our loved ones, wives, girlfriends, sons, daughters, mums, dads, brothers, sisters and close friends who have supported us right through to the end. It must have been difficult for them also.

“We now ask the members of the media, who have been very courteous so far, to give us all some time and space to reflect on today’s verdicts. Please be respectful of our wishes and we will make no further comment until after sentencing.

“We did it Billy, love you our good friend and brother xxx”

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