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POLITICS

Hastert Case Is Said to Be Linked to Decades-Old Sexual Abuse

By **MICHAEL D. SHEAR** and **MICHAEL S. SCHMIDT** MAY 29, 2015

WASHINGTON — J. Dennis Hastert, who served for eight years as speaker of the House of Representatives, was paying a former student hundreds of thousands of dollars to not say publicly that Mr. Hastert had sexually abused him decades ago, according to two people briefed on the evidence uncovered in an F.B.I. investigation.

Federal prosecutors on Thursday announced the indictment of Mr. Hastert, 73, on allegations that he made cash withdrawals, totaling \$1.7 million, to evade detection by banks. Federal authorities also charged him with lying to them about the purpose of the withdrawals.

The man — who was not identified in court papers — told the F.B.I. that he had been inappropriately touched by Mr. Hastert when the former speaker was a high school teacher and wrestling coach, the two people said Friday. The people briefed on the investigation spoke on the condition of anonymity because they did not want to be identified discussing a federal investigation.

It was not clear when the suspected behavior, which was first reported by *The Los Angeles Times*, occurred. Mr. Hastert was a high school teacher and coach in Yorkville, Ill., from 1965 to 1981, and the indictment said the recipient of the payments was from Yorkville and had known Mr. Hastert for decades.

It was also unclear whether the authorities considered pursuing charges

against the man on suspicion of extorting payments from Mr. Hastert in exchange for keeping silent. Such a prosecution would likely have required Mr. Hastert to allege that he was the victim of an extortion. But the indictment said Mr. Hastert denied to the F.B.I. that he was making payments to the individual, saying he withdrew the cash because he no longer trusted the banking system.

Mr. Hastert, a Republican who had a highly lucrative career as a lobbyist since leaving Congress in 2007, could not be reached for comment at his office in Washington. A spokeswoman for the United States attorney for the Northern District of Illinois said Friday that there was no lawyer of record on file for Mr. Hastert.

The allegations against a man who was once one of the most powerful people in Washington has stunned lobbyists, lawmakers and veteran Capitol Hill staff members who worked alongside him as he rose to become second in line to the presidency in 1999.

“The Denny I served with worked hard on behalf of his constituents and the country,” House Speaker John A. Boehner said in a statement late Friday evening. “I’m shocked and saddened to learn of these reports.”

The indictment also surprised Mr. Hastert’s former students and high school teachers back home in Illinois. Several of them said Friday that they were struggling to make sense of the federal charges against him.

“They are all stunned at the news,” said George Dyché of Aurora, Ill., a coach who competed against Mr. Hastert’s team for years, and worked closely with him to develop the Illinois state wrestling association. “They all say, ‘Are they talking about *our* Denny?’ ”

In Yorkville, about 50 miles southwest of Chicago, Mr. Hastert is a larger-than-life figure, not just because he rose to be speaker of the House, but because the wrestling team he coached at tiny Yorkville High School won the state championship in 1976 — a triumph still listed as a historical event on the town’s official website.

A statement released Friday by the Yorkville Community Unit School District said it had “no knowledge of Mr. Hastert’s alleged misconduct, nor has

any individual contacted the district to report any such misconduct. If requested to do so, the district plans to cooperate fully with the U.S. attorney's investigation into this matter."

In the lobby of Yorkville High School, where final exams were underway on Friday, Ron Kiesewetter, the principal, referred all questions to office of the school district superintendent.

In his years at Yorkville High School, Mr. Hastert taught a range of topics — history, economics, sociology and speech — but he seemed best known at the school for his efforts to build the wrestling team, the Yorkville Foxes, over more than 15 years.

In Mr. Hastert's 2004 memoir, "Speaker: Lessons from Forty Years in Coaching and Politics," Mr. Hastert acknowledged the wrestling squad of 1976, a championship team, on a dedications page.

"While many of our teams did well, you were the very best," he wrote, addressing the Yorkville Foxes of 1976. "For me, winning the state championship was among the finest moments of my life. So many of the fine athletes I had the good fortune to coach are today raising and coaching boys and girls of their own. They're mentoring the next generation. For me, it doesn't get any better than that."

Mr. Hastert also worked with the Boy Scouts for 16 years, according to an address he gave in 2008 to a Boy Scout group at Pikes Peak in Colorado.

"We did a lot of neat things," he said to the group, including taking high-school-aged boys on trips to the Bahamas, the Grand Canyon and float trips on the Green River in Utah. "I saw those kids develop and meet challenges and change," he said.

Yearbooks from Mr. Hastert's tenure at the high school said he also was an adviser to the Yorkville Explorer Post 540, and had traveled in the late 1960s with the Explorers to the Bahamas for a week, as well as on a canoe trip to Canada.

"He is now planning a trip for the future around the world," the Mi-Y-Hi of 1970, the school's yearbook, said.

In 1979, the yearbook noted the wrestling team's successful season — a

record of 16-6 — and Mr. Hastert's having finished his 14th year as coach, ending up “one meet short of 200 varsity wins.”

Mr. Dyche said Mr. Hastert helped build the sport in his home state, was president of the wrestling association and started a state wrestling newspaper called *The Word* in the 1970s. Mr. Hastert still regularly attends Big 10 Conference collegiate wrestling championships, said Mr. Dyche, who said he saw him there this year.

“He was a quiet guy in the corner, not a yelling, screaming coach, very pragmatic, cool under fire,” Mr. Dyche said. “I would go up after losing to him and say: ‘Damn it, you did it again. I know what your kids are going to do, but my kids still couldn't stop them.’ ”

Mr. Dyche said Mr. Hastert “ruled his program with a calm but firm hand. He was extremely successful and respected.” And he said he was stunned by the allegations.

“Of all the people in the world, it's not the Denny Hastert I know,” Mr. Dyche said. “He was a man of character, a pillar in the community.”

Mr. Hastert was already an affluent man during his service in the House, largely from land holding, according to financial disclosure forms.

He owned land in Kendall County, Ill., a farm in Wisconsin, and a home and property in Plano, Ill., worth between \$3 million and \$15 million, along with savings and investment accounts worth as much as \$310,000. His cash income while in office consisted of a congressional salary of \$212,100 and an Illinois pension of \$34,000.

His pay soared after he left Congress and opened his own lobbying firm. He also worked for Dickstein Shapiro, where he lobbied for Lorillard Tobacco, Peabody Energy, Bridgepoint Education and an Illinois real estate developer.

The indictment said that in 2010, after several meetings, Mr. Hastert agreed to pay the unidentified man \$3.5 million “in order to compensate for and conceal his prior misconduct against” him. The authorities alleged that Mr. Hastert structured the cash withdrawals, totaling \$1.7 million so far, in increments designed to avoid bank reporting requirements.

Kim Nerheim, a spokeswoman for the United States attorney's office, said

Friday that Mr. Hastert's case had been assigned to Judge Thomas M. Durkin of Federal District Court, who will schedule an arraignment for the former speaker, perhaps as early as next week.

Preliminary bail in Mr. Hastert's case was set at \$4,500, according to court documents.

Reporting was contributed by Monica Davey from Yorkville, Ill., Dave Philipps from New York, and Carl Hulse and Jonathan Weisman from Washington.

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