

## Teens allege a polo icon used cash, threats and power to prey on them

Six women interviewed by The Washington Post claim John Gobin engaged in a pattern of harassment and misconduct, including sexual encounters with underage teens



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The teenage polo player was excited when John Gobin, a champion in the sport, approached her one night at a 2021 polo event in Middleburg, Va. Gobin had reached the pinnacle of U.S. polo in the 1990s and 2000s, captaining national teams and winning international cups.

He took part in exclusive matches even by the rarefied standards of the “sport of kings,” riding with a scion of the Ferragamo fashion house and playing before Prince Charles. After stepping back from major competition, he started a polo school in Virginia’s horse country that is one of the largest in the nation.

“Your body looks really good,” the then 16-year-old recalled Gobin, a married man in his 50s, telling her, before offering her a job on the Middleburg farm where he has run the Twilight Polo Club school for 15 years and has had dozens of young employees.

She said she initially brushed off the comment. The chance to work with someone of Gobin’s stature seemed like a great opportunity for an up-and-coming player.

Instead, the woman, now 19, alleges in a lawsuit filed in Virginia state court Monday that Gobin pressured her and another underage girl into sex before trying to silence them. She is among half a dozen women who described to The Washington Post a pattern of sexual harassment and misconduct by Gobin over five years, alleging he demeaned teens and young women, inappropriately touched them, or offered them cash for sex. Gobin denies all their claims.

On Wednesday, the U.S. Polo Association announced it had begun an investigation against Gobin for allegations related to having sex with women under 18 on multiple occasions. Gobin is disputing the claims and the action has yet to be adjudicated. The association did not immediately respond to questions about what prompted the probe or when it started.

According to the women, much of the alleged misconduct was directed at the school's largely teenage staff, many of whom — like the plaintiff — hoped their work on the bucolic farm would open doors in the exclusive sport. Their accounts were bolstered by people who witnessed some of Gobin's interactions with the women, as well as text messages and contemporaneous accounts to friends and family.

The plaintiff, identified in the lawsuit by the alias Jane Doe, claims Gobin manipulated her into sex with cash and alcohol and by invoking his stature in polo, offering access to tournaments and horses and threatening to destroy her reputation if she revealed his actions.

In her lawsuit and a separate interview with The Post, the woman said Gobin had sex with her and another 16-year-old on two occasions in July 2021. In the two years that followed, she said she and Gobin had dozens of sexual encounters. Another woman, who was underage at the time, told The Post that Gobin forcibly kissed her and touched her crotch over her clothes. Four others told The Post that Gobin made lewd comments and unwanted advances toward them. Several of the women spoke on the condition of anonymity because they fear repercussions in the polo world for speaking out.

“We didn't really think deeply on how disgusting it was because he was such a big dude in the polo world,” said one of the women, who worked for Gobin as an underage teen and claims she was groped and forcibly kissed by him. “We didn't want to do anything because it was like ... girls who were young going against this man who has a ton of clients, is wealthy and has a wife. ... We didn't know what to do.”

Gobin referred questions to his attorney, August McCarthy, who said in a statement the claims by the women are false. McCarthy said the allegations were part of a campaign to damage Gobin's reputation that grew out of a business dispute.

“The allegations are categorically false, every one of them. Mr. Gobin has never had any inappropriate contact with anyone, minor or adult. He certainly has never engaged in sexual conduct with a minor. These are malicious allegations,” McCarthy said. “These false allegations are an affront to anyone who has truly experienced sexual abuse. They undermine efforts to hold abusers accountable.”

The allegations have drawn the scrutiny of law enforcement officials. The plaintiff said she was interviewed in 2022 by the FBI and an investigator from the Fauquier County Sheriff's Office about allegations Gobin had sexual contact with underage girls. She told The Post that she initially told authorities nothing happened between her and Gobin at his request.

She said she was reinterviewed by investigators from the Loudoun and Fauquier County Sheriff's Offices in November and then again in recent weeks. In those interviews, she said she told investigators that she and Gobin had had sexual contact when she was underage.

Gobin has not been charged with any crime. The Loudoun and Fauquier County Sheriff's Offices told The Post in statements they were aware of allegations of sexual misconduct against Gobin, but the agencies and the FBI declined to confirm or deny the existence of any investigations.

The allegations come as the equestrian world has been rocked by claims of sexual misconduct by other high-profile coaches in recent years and as women flock to polo, a game long dominated by men who are often wealthy and powerful. The first Women's Polo World Cup was staged in 2022.

Experts say awareness about sexual misconduct, resources and safety guidelines have lagged in equestrian sports.

## 'Secret pets'

The woman who filed the lawsuit against Gobin said she started riding at age 6 or 7, quickly falling in love with horses and polo. She liked the energy of the game — describing it as “hockey on horses.” By 15, she was a member of an interscholastic squad and played four or five times a week.

“I never saw myself going pro, but I definitely enjoyed it and wanted it in my life for a long time,” the woman said.

She looked up to Gobin, a major figure in the polo world, but by his own account an unlikely one.

He told his workers and media outlets he had a hardscrabble upbringing in Rehoboth, Mass., far from the moneyed set commonly associated with the sport. At 14, he was hired to muck out a barn near where he lived and discovered polo, he told *Sidelines Magazine* in 2014.

“I caught on pretty quick,” Gobin said in the interview. “Within six months to a year, I was in the arena. I'd be in deep trouble if I didn't find polo and the horses.”

By 17, Gobin was training in Argentina. When he returned to the United States, he won a World Cup with the Budweiser team and scored the winning goal against England in the prestigious Westchester Cup in 1992. He was awarded a medal by Queen Elizabeth II. The victory helped catapult his career.

In an [interview with a newspaper](#) in 2007, Gobin said polo “completely changed my life,” allowing him to hang out with doctors and lawyers, “instead of thugs.” It also brought him wealth — he owns farms in Virginia, South Carolina and Florida — and cache. He rode with the man who was the face of Ralph Lauren's Polo brand and other celebrities.

Gobin was hired by Great Meadow Foundation, an equestrian events center in Middleburg, to run polo exhibitions called Twilight Polo in 2007. He founded his polo school soon after, [reportedly training](#) one client who flew in on a private jet from Toronto and dozens of others.

The plaintiff started working on Gobin's roughly 20-acre estate in Loudoun County in July 2021, when she was 16. It features a polo arena, a barn and horse paddocks set amid green fields. The plaintiff said she loved rounding up the horses from pasture each morning. The majestic animals gave her a sense of peace. She would saddle and groom them, and help with Gobin's clients.

Some of the women said Gobin could be gregarious, charming and generous. But they said his alleged sexual misconduct was also an open secret on the farm and some traded warnings and avoided being alone with him.

The plaintiff said in an interview that Gobin began aggressively pursuing her on her first day of work. When she and Gobin went to a secluded paddock to feed horses, she told The Post that Gobin told her she had a beautiful body and touched her legs and sides. By the third day, she said, Gobin had floated the idea of a “threesome” with her and another 16-year-old farmworker. The plaintiff said she was taken aback.

A couple days later, she said, Gobin brought her and other farmworkers alcohol while they were working at the Twilight Polo exhibitions, where Gobin was the impresario. During the weekly events, which are geared toward families, attendees sprawl on blankets sipping wine and others rent VIP boxes while watching matches.

The woman said she had little experience with drinking before that night and by the time Twilight Polo ended she was “more than buzzed.” After dropping off some horses, the plaintiff, Gobin and the other 16-year-old farmworker returned to the venue.

The plaintiff claims in her lawsuit Gobin laid a towel out on the grass near a pavilion and had sex with each of the teens in succession.

The plaintiff said she wasn’t thinking clearly because of the alcohol she consumed. The other teen, who is now an adult, declined an interview with The Post. It is illegal in Virginia for someone over 18 to have sex with a 16-year-old.

The next day, the plaintiff recalled, Gobin gave her cash, somewhere between \$300 and \$400.

Over the next two years, the plaintiff said, Gobin had dozens of sexual encounters with her, most fueled by alcohol. She said he told her he was going to leave his wife for her and gave her a 17th birthday present of a riding top. He sometimes called her his “second wife.”

The Post reviewed text messages from Gobin to the plaintiff after she turned 18 that said “I love you” and “I miss you.” A relative of the plaintiff and two acquaintances said in interviews with The Post that the plaintiff told them that Gobin had sex with her around the time of the incidents. The plaintiff said an acquaintance told her parents about what happened last year and they confronted the plaintiff.

The plaintiff said Gobin often gave her cash after their sexual encounters. He treated her to dinner. He also gave her access to tournaments, allowed her to board her horses on his farm for free and play complimentary chukkers, or segments of a polo match. It gave her valuable entrée to an expensive sport that professionals said some spend \$30,000 on each month.

She said Gobin regularly pressed her to delete text messages from him and to shower after encounters. She said she felt beholden to him because of the gifts — but she said she and others also felt afraid if they crossed him.

“He threatened our reputations and told us how he would ruin us in the horse and polo world,” if they disclosed his activities, the plaintiff said. “He would say we were whores and no one would want to hire us or play with us.”

She added later, “We were like his secret pets.”

In July 2022, the plaintiff said Gobin came to her in a panic saying his attorney had told him he was under investigation by the FBI for relationships with underage girls. The plaintiff said Gobin told her to deny any sexual contact between them if authorities spoke to her.

A few days later, the plaintiff said, the Fauquier County Sheriff’s Office reached out to her mother to arrange an interview. The plaintiff said she spoke to an FBI agent and an investigator from the sheriff’s office. She said she falsely told them nothing happened between her and Gobin. The plaintiff’s mother declined to comment.

“I felt like I had a lot to lose,” the plaintiff said.

By the fall of 2022, the plaintiff said, she had begun to question Gobin’s hold on her. She quit working for him in the spring of 2023, after hearing him make comments about other younger girls. She was 18. She said she did not report his alleged misconduct to any officials in the polo world.

Gobin has continued to run his polo school, but colleagues said he was no longer running Twilight Polo as of several months ago. The Great Meadow Foundation did not respond to questions about Gobin or his status.

The plaintiff said she felt obliged to go public with her story because she fears Gobin’s alleged abuse will continue otherwise. She is suing him for \$5 million in compensatory damages, alleging rape and sexual abuse. Ari Wilkenfeld, an attorney at Alan Lescht and Associates, said in a statement that his client wanted to “shine a light on what goes on behind the scenes” in polo.

“The polo world seems to be a place where a number of wealthy and powerful men routinely take advantage of vulnerable teenage girls who simply want to work a job, play the sport, or be part of the community,” Wilkenfeld said. “This exploitation needs to stop, and these men need to be held accountable for their action.”

## ‘It didn’t stop’

Other women who alleged misconduct by Gobin described persistent harassment, groping and comments that left them feeling violated. Some of them were underage at the time of the incidents.

“Once it started it didn’t stop,” said one woman, who worked on the farm as a teenager. She said Gobin would tell her at times that he wanted her to have his baby and asked her on occasion, “How much money for you to be with me?”

She described a party at Gobin’s farm in late spring or early summer 2022 that began with a bonfire and Gobin supplying his workers with alcohol. At some point, Gobin pulled up a chair next to the woman, who was 17 at the time, she said. The plaintiff in the lawsuit also said she was among the employees in attendance that night.

The 17-year-old woman said Gobin praised her appearance and made other comments she considered inappropriate.

Gobin then grabbed her crotch over her shorts and the plaintiff, who was nearby, slapped it away, the woman and the plaintiff said. Gobin accused her of “cock blocking,” according to both women.

Around May 2022, the woman said, Gobin offered her, the plaintiff and another underage teen shots of whisky after work and invited them back to a cabin he rented in The Plains, Va. “At one point, he forcibly grabbed my head and made me kiss him,” said the woman, whose account was confirmed by the plaintiff who was there. The third teen did not see the forcible kiss but confirmed details of the gathering.

Another woman, McKenzi Golden, then 18, said she met Gobin through friends, and he invited her and two underage teens out to dinner at the King Street Oyster Bar in Middleburg in May 2023. Golden agreed to be identified by name and her account was confirmed by a second woman at the dinner.

Golden said Gobin bought them drinks. As they ate, Golden said, Gobin began rubbing her leg underneath the table and asked her to join him in a hot tub at his friend’s house. Golden recalled Gobin saying they had alcohol and “could drink without worries.”

Golden said she slapped his hand away. She was unsettled, so one of the other girls pretended she was sick so they could leave, she said. After leaving the restaurant, Gobin tried to get them to come to a bonfire, Golden said. Gobin offered her \$400, she said, but she declined. She said he ultimately gave it to one of the other girls to give to her.

Golden asked what it was for. She said he replied: “You earned it.”

“It felt like hush money,” Golden said.

A fifth woman, who worked in a VIP box at Twilight Polo exhibitions briefly in August 2020 when she was 22, said she quit after Gobin began making sexual comments to her one night at an event and grabbed her waist and buttocks after they had gone to turn out some lights.

“I had to push him away,” the woman said.

Melissa Basye, who also worked a Twilight Polo VIP booth when she was 23 and agreed to be named, said Gobin repeatedly made sexual comments to her, telling her she looked great in “tight polo pants” and invited her over to his house.

“It really does take an aggressive girl ... to get this man to stop,” Basye said.



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Remembering Queen Elizabeth and all she contributed to the equestrian world and especially her love for the game of polo. ❤️

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The allegations against Gobin come at a time when an increasing number of women are taking up polo. The U.S. Polo Association's female membership increased more than 35 percent between 2012 and 2022 from about 1,600 to nearly 2,200, according to its figures. Women now account for about 40 percent of members.

There are no statistics on the prevalence of sexual assault and harassment in polo, but a 2020 survey of about 4,000 adult athletes by the U.S. Center for SafeSport that included equestrians found 48 percent were aware of coaches developing sexual relationships with players.

SafeSport lists 73 equestrian coaches and other figures in the sport who have been disciplined for sexual misconduct and other offenses since 2015, according to [its database](#). They include George Morris, a former Olympic team coach, and a major figure in the show jumping world who was accused of sexually assaulting minors and banned for life from the sport. He denies wrongdoing and has not been charged with a crime.

It is one of a [series of allegations](#) involving prominent trainers that have convulsed the equestrian world.

Kathryn McClain, the program and partnership director for a group called #WeRideTogether that combats sexual misconduct in equestrian sports and others, said there's a lack of education, awareness and resources in equestrian sports to address sexual assault and harassment.

McClain said equestrian sports also have features that can foster abuse, including coaches and athletes traveling together and spending time in secluded places like barns. She said the expense of horse-related sports can give coaches leverage over athletes.

"Polo and equestrian sports are highly aspirational, tightknit environments, where there's a lot of competition and coaches are respected, feared and often put on pedestals," McClain said. "There's a power imbalance at play."