

## **Lawyer: Teacher Wrongly Accused**

Columbia High's Bernard Watt placed on leave by district, faces charges

The lawyer for a teacher charged with inappropriately touching a student said Tuesday any contact was accidental. Bernard "Bernie" Watt, 47, was placed on administrative leave Tuesday by the East Greenbush school district. Watt, a gym teacher at Columbia High School and well-known soccer coach, was charged Monday with endangering the welfare of a child and forcible touching, police said.

Watt was released on his own recognizance and will return to Town Court March 5.

Watt is accused of inappropriately touching a 16-year-old girl in his class, town police said. But Watt's lawyer, Thomas Carr, said the contact was accidental and the charges against his client are unfounded.

According to Carr, Watt was running basketball drills during a gym class with about 25 students and another administrator when he and the girl collided by accident when they were running from different ends of the gym.

"The next thing he knows is these charges were filed," Carr said. "These sorts of allegations are easily made and can tarnish a celebrated career."

It is not the first time Watt has been in trouble with the district.

A teacher with the district for 24 years, Watt was fined \$500 and placed on probation for two years in February 2005 for making inappropriate comments to a female gymnastics student. In the previous case, school officials charged Watt with conduct unbecoming of a teacher, neglect of duty and insubordination.

An arbitrator determined at the time that Watt should be fired if he again made similar remarks. In addition to teaching at Columbia, Watt works with the Adirondack Lynx, a professional women's soccer team. Watt, who played professionally and has coached at area schools, is noted nationally as a specialist in coaching goalies, according to the team's Web site.

He also runs a soccer training facility at his Schodack home.