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Dallas Cowboys staffer is left paralyzed after facility collapse 21

Two others remain hospitalized; OSHA to investigate collapse

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By JASON TRAHAN / The Dallas Morning News
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IRVING – A 33-year-old Dallas Cowboys staff member was left paralyzed and two other team staffers remain hospitalized after Saturday's practice facility collapse, which is now the subject of a federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration investigation, authorities said.

Scouting assistant Rich Behm suffered a spine fracture that caused permanent paralysis from the waist down, the team confirmed Sunday. He underwent surgery to stabilize the fracture Saturday night and remains in stable condition at Parkland Memorial Hospital.

Team owner Jerry Jones grimly surveyed the debris on Sunday morning. He lauded Irving police and emergency services for their actions the previous day.

"We are also grateful to those Cowboys players and staff members who acted so quickly and heroically in the face of personal danger to help those around them who were in need of immediate assistance," he said in a statement.

Cowboys special teams coach Joe DeCamillis will undergo surgery at Parkland Hospital today to stabilize a broken vertebra. He was not paralyzed. Assistant athletic trainer Greg Gaither is expected to remain at Baylor University Medical Center for the next few days while his broken right leg heals.

The other nine people who received medical treatment were released by Sunday.

About 3:30 p.m. Saturday, a burst of up to 70-mph wind carried by passing thunderstorms battered the 85-foot-tall practice facility. The high-tension fabric shell and metal structure folded onto itself and collapsed during the Cowboys rookie camp. About 70 players, coaches, team support personnel and members of the media were inside. Ambulances transported 10 people; two others sought help on their own, officials said.

Richard L. Weiner, a neurosurgeon at Texas Health Presbyterian Hospital Dallas who is not involved in Behm's treatment, said such spinal injuries are "true disasters."

"You lose all sensation and all strength and motor function of the legs," he said. "There's really not any medication we've come up with to reverse that."

Irving police spokesman David Tull said Sunday that OSHA was investigating the collapse. Representatives could not be reached Sunday. The agency generally looks for violations of federal workplace safety rules.

On Sunday, a steady stream of curious fans and neighbors tromped in the mud behind Gold's Gym, separated by a fence from the ruined Cowboys facility.

Chip Drown, a lifelong Cowboys fan, drove in from Fort Worth to photograph the tangle of fabric and metal.

"Now they can complain about the debris," he said, referring to neighbors who opposed the Cowboys building the huge structure in 2003.

"It's amazing that only 12 people got injured," he said, shaking his head. "Someone is going to get sued over this."

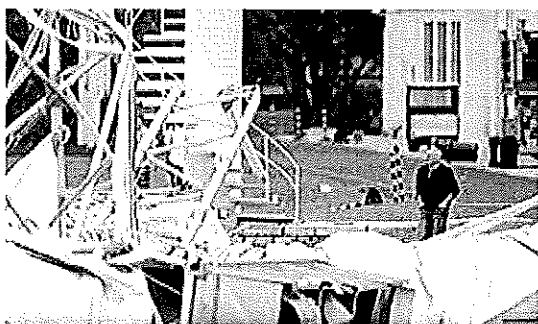
It appears that lawyers for the Cowboys were already at work less than 24 hours after the collapse.

On Sunday, The Dallas Morning News phoned Charles Timbie, a structural engineer in Pennsylvania who specializes in forensic analysis of building failures. When asked about his investigation of the collapse of a similar facility in 2003, he referred all questions to Levi McCathern, an attorney for the Cowboys.

When asked if he had already been hired by the team's legal counsel as an expert, he again referred questions to McCathern, who did not return phone calls Sunday.

According to McCathern Mooty LLP's Web site, McCathern specializes in catastrophic damage litigation and is "primary trial counsel" for the Cowboys and Jones' family.

Representatives of Summit Structure of Allentown, Pa., and Cover-All Building Systems, of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, which built the facility, could not be reached Sunday.



TOM FOX / DMN

Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones surveyed the debris Sunday and thanked officials, players and staff for aiding others.

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Cowboys spokesman Rich Dalrymple declined to comment on any legal preparation.

In 2007, a Pennsylvania judge, relying on Timbie's expert assessment, found that a structure Summit built for the Philadelphia Regional Port Authority on the Delaware River collapsed because of "failure

of the design" to account for snow buildup on the roof, court documents show. That structure had a double roof construction, which is different from the Dallas Cowboys' structure.

Judge Allan Tereshko wrote that the Philadelphia structure collapsed "under the weight of the first significant snowfall" of the year, conditions that "would have been easily tolerated by the building had it been properly designed and constructed."

Texas A&M University, which has a similar practice facility, is re-evaluating its "bad weather policies," athletic director Bill Byrne said Sunday.

He said its facility, which was built using a Houston contractor, "was put to the test this past fall when Hurricane Ike hit the Texas Gulf coast. Our buildings withstood the high winds."

When bad weather is in the area or is expected, "we have personnel monitoring the radar and weather conditions," he said. "The football indoor facility was built to serve as protection from lightning and thunderstorms that can pop up. The severity of these spring storms is very hard to predict."

In an interview with NBC's Bob Costas after learning of the collapse Saturday, Jones complained that his staff "did not get good warning."

The Cowboys had held practice in the structure in heavy rain before, but reporters who regularly attend practices there say that they had never seen the overhead lights sway violently, which occurred prior to Saturday's collapse.

The New England Patriots also have a similar facility, the Dana Farber Field House, which opened in 2003. Team spokesman Stacey James said Sunday that he was not sure whether the team would have anyone look at the structure to make sure it is sound. The Patriots had been in an air-supported bubble before the tension structure was built.

Staff writers Brad Townsend, Chuck Carlton and Todd Archer contributed to this report.