The Story – Contradictory Claims

The night in question was Jan. 15, 2010, a Friday night when Thompson and five or six friends gathered at Dublin Square, a popular pub just north of Grand River Avenue, the street that divides the campus from the city nightlife. They had gathered, Thompson said, to memorialize a mutual friend who had died in an automobile accident six months earlier.

Around 1 a.m., Thompson said, she and a friend were conversing at a small, round, high-top table in a back corner of the pub when Walton, in a black cap and hoodie, approached. This was the second time he approached the table, Thompson said. The first time, he apparently recognized Thompson’s friend and they struck up a brief conversation. The second time Walton approached, according to the police report, Thompson said Walton “was hitting on her.”

“He just walked up to our table and interrupted me in the middle of a sensitive conversation,” Thompson said. “And I wasn’t in the mood to deal with it.” So Thompson told Walton — whom she says she didn’t know or recognize — to “F-off.” “I barely got the words out of mouth,” she said, “and he hit me.” Thompson said Walton hit her with a closed fist, first on her right temple, then on her left jaw. The second blow, she said, knocked her back and off her chair, and the table came crashing down on her, as did several drinks.

According to witness statements in the police report, Walton was quickly escorted out by a bar employee, and didn’t give the employee any problems as he was being led out. Walton told the employee he didn’t hit anyone, and that a woman had hit him.

Thompson said she lunged at Walton after his first punch, but didn’t make contact. She said Walton then hit her again, causing her to fall to the floor, hit her head and briefly lose consciousness. Thompson said the woman who hit Walton was her friend, and she hit him with her purse, after Thompson already was on the ground.

In a written statement issued Jan. 30, Walton said he never physically assaulted Thompson. “While conversing with her, and without notice or provocation, she threw a drink at me, and I subsequently left the establishment.”

“Throwing a drink at him, that did not happen,” Thompson told The News. “Absolutely ridiculous.”

Thompson said she lost consciousness for several seconds after the second punch. When she came to, friends told her it was Walton. A junior at Michigan State at the time and a self-described casual sports fan, she said she didn’t know who that was.

Thompson said a bar employee then escorted her to a basement office and pulled up pictures of Walton on Google. Thompson confirmed that was the man who physically assaulted her; the employee confirmed this account in the police report.

Two witnesses interviewed by East Lansing police offered similar accounts in the in the report provided to The News by Thompson, though one said Thompson was struck once, and the other said Thompson did make contact with Walton between his two punches. The News was unable to reach either of the witnesses. Thompson said she’s not in regular contact these days with the friends with whom she was at the bar.

Both witnesses in the police report said they were certain the man was Walton.

One witness “observed a facial expression on Walton which he described as shock inferring that Walton could not believe what Thompson just said to him.” The witness said Walton then swung at Thompson. That same witness said he was a big Michigan State sports fan, and recognized Walton — as well as T.J. Duckett, a former Michigan State football star who he said was with Walton that night. Duckett wasn’t interviewed by East Lansing police. Duckett told The News last week he was surprised to recently learn his name was in the report, and he doesn’t remember the specifics of that night.

“I don’t, that’s the thing,” said Duckett, now 36. “I have other nights where I can remember the break in the action, if you will. There’s nothing from that night that I can remember. We’re talking a specific moment eight years ago. “I mean, I was going through my own stuff at the time. ... I was doing a lot of partying, I was drinking.”

As for Thompson, she “had a few drinks, but I was in a sound state of mind during the event,” she told The News. She said her memory was a bit fuzzy in the immediate aftermath of the incident, but that “stuff came back to me a little bit later.”

**The investigation**

According to the police report, the East Lansing police officer on the case talked to multiple witnesses and bar staff — 10 people in all — and requested video surveillance from Dublin Square. According to the police report, video surveillance “does not clearly show the event described by the complainant.”

Thompson woke up around 10 that morning and went to Lansing’s Sparrow Hospital, where she was diagnosed with multiple scalp contusions and a concussion, according to medical records provided by Thompson and reviewed by The News. The medical report said Thompson told doctors she didn’t lose consciousness. She told The News that was a mistake on the part of the doctors; she told them she did lose consciousness, she said.

Thompson, now 31 and studying at Eastern Virginia Medical School in Norfolk, Va., said she experienced headaches and dizziness for several days and was forced to miss more than a week of work at Full Throttle Motorsports in Lansing, where she was a sales assistant. That and bartending put her through Michigan State, she said.

The police investigation began Jan. 16, 2010, the day Thompson said she delivered five photographs to East Lansing police, showing the extent of her injuries. The police report logs the photographs as evidence, but The News has not seen them, since East Lansing police denied access to the report. Thompson said she doesn’t have copies of them.

The police investigation concluded Jan. 25, 2010, with the responding officer requesting a warrant for Walton on assault and battery charges. The warrant was issued by Judge Richard Ball on Feb. 23. Walton appeared in court that day, and a $500 bond was ordered. Walton was ordered to have no contact with Thompson, but Ball did clear him to continue traveling with the Michigan State basketball team.

Izzo has been tight-lipped lately about what he knew regarding any allegations or charges against Walton, who lived in Izzo’s basement that season, according to a recent report from Walton’s hometown newspaper in Lima, Ohio. Izzo hasn’t addressed whether Walton lived with him. Asked if Walton lived with Izzo at that time, Walton’s spokesman, Justin Near, referred to Walton’s original written statement, which doesn’t address that question. The statement denies he punched Thompson.

Izzo has been asked about the allegations against Walton after each of the four games since the publication of ESPN’s “Outside the Lines” report, which also details allegations of sexual assault against Walton from April 2010 — the month Michigan State played in its second consecutive Final Four. Walton never was charged with sexual assault, and has said the relationship was “consensual.”

Following last Wednesday’s victory over Penn State, Izzo said, “I think that there will be a time when I get to speak, but it isn’t right now.”

There were two pretrials on the assault and battery charges, and on April 21, 2010, the charges against Walton were dismissed. He then pleaded guilty to the littering charge and the following day, the case was considered closed, according to court records.

Later in 2010, after he graduated, Walton signed a contract with Ratiopharm Ulm, a professional basketball team in Germany. Walton said he was never “hired or fired” by Michigan State.

In a FOIA response from Michigan State on Tuesday, the university said no personnel file exists for Walton.

Thompson said she found it “both angering and comical” when she learned he had pleaded to a lesser charge, especially “littering.” She said she was not kept in the loop by Meyers regarding Walton’s court proceedings, and was given no notice when Walton’s final hearing would take place. She said she would’ve appreciated the opportunity to speak at that hearing.

Meyers, an assistant city attorney for East Lansing from 2006-17 before going into private practice, said in his statement that Walton’s defense lawyer produced “two independent witnesses that directly contradicted the allegations made by the accuser.”

The News has not seen those witness statements. Walton’s defense lawyer, Andrew Abood, did not respond to request for comment.

“I can affirm that I did review the initial report, took the allegations of the accusing witness seriously and recommended criminal assault charges be issued,” Meyers said in his statement. “The case was fully reviewed and a determination was made that while the case wouldn’t be fully dismissed, a plea offer would be made. Unlike a county prosecutor, city attorneys can only charge 90-day misdemeanors which are the lowest level charge that are still criminal, and due to that, most plea offers result in some type of civil infraction, typically a litter.

“I can affirm that the plea offer was approved by my supervising attorney and was within our normal guidelines,” Meyers said in a statement. “Despite that, these were difficult decisions and I was fully aware that the decisions made by the city attorney’s office affected both sides.”

Littering, it turns out, has been a common plea-down in East Lansing’s 54B District Court. For example, in numbers provided to The News by Meyers on Tuesday, he said he worked 52 assault cases between 2014 and 2017. Of those, 34 were pleaded down to the litter charge, or 65 percent; only one ever went to trial, and got a guilty verdict from a jury.

Peter Henning, a law professor at Wayne State, said he was surprised to hear an assault-and-battery could be pleaded down to littering. “I suspect they chose the most innocuous charge they could that could get a guilty plea,” Henning said. “I wouldn’t say that’s typical. “Prosecutors will plead down a case if they are concerned the evidence won’t support the higher charge, but usually it’s going to be something that’s actually related to the (alleged) conduct. You wouldn’t suspect littering.”

Cases are pleaded down frequently. In early 2009, Thompson was arrested and charged with driving under the influence and possession of marijuana — of which she was “found not guilty and pled down to a traffic offense,” she said. Thompson confirmed the arrest to The News “in an effort to be completely transparent,” but added, “I believe that my past has no relevance in this matter.” Meyers was the assistant city attorney on that case, as well.

Thompson said after the case was pleaded down, she considered filing a civil lawsuit against Walton, but couldn’t find a lawyer to take the case. So, she said, she moved on with her life — first moving to Pittsburgh in 2011 after graduating from Michigan State, then recently Norfolk to continue her education. She said she hadn’t thought about the case since 2010, until she was contacted by ESPN this fall. Thompson said she got a call out of the blue from an ESPN reporter, and when she called her back, the reporter asked her, “Do you know what this is regarding?” “I’m guessing it’s about Travis Walton punching me in the face,” Thompson told the reporter. An ESPN team eventually flew down to meet with Thompson, interviewing her for six hours.

On Friday, Jan. 26, hours after Michigan State athletic director Mark Hollis resigned, ESPN published its investigative report on its website, and two days later aired an hour-long “Outside the Lines” investigative piece on TV. ESPN has been criticized by some in the media — most notably, 97.1’s popular drive-time host, Mike Valenti — for loosely tying the Larry Nassar sexual-abuse scandal to allegations that Izzo and football coach Mark Dantonio have improperly handed multiple allegations of assault and sexual assault by players over the years. A graphic shown during the “Outside the Lines” piece, titled “Crisis at Michigan State,” includes big pictures of Izzo and Dantonio, with a smaller picture in the background of Nassar, a former Michigan State and USA Gymnastics doctor who’s been convicted of sexually abusing more than 200 girls and women and who has been sentenced to life in prison.

The night of Jan. 26, Dantonio issued a stern rebuttal of ESPN’s claims, calling them “absolutely false.” Later, following Michigan State’s win over Wisconsin, Izzo was questioned about the report for the first time and said he’ll “hold judgment” on talking about the report, but added, “I’m not going anywhere, in my mind.” In press conferences since, Izzo has said even less.

ESPN also interviewed Meyers, who said the ESPN article has “misleading insinuations,” including that the Michigan State athletic department received preferential treatment. He strongly denied this in his statement, saying, “At no point in my life have I spoken to Tom Izzo or Mark Dantonio.

“At no point in my role as assistant city attorney did Travis Walton or any other person receive preferential treatment from me as to their criminal proceedings,” Meyers said.

Meyers cited a 2015 ESPN investigative piece — authored by Paula Lavigne, who co-authored the most recent ESPN report — that “showed no substantial overall difference in how, or whether, the cases were prosecuted,” in comparing cases involving Michigan State athletes and those involving typical college-age males.

Meyers said he left East Lansing “on good terms” because of a family health matter, and had hoped to possibly return one day. “I love the community, the students and the people I worked with in East Lansing,” he said. “I believe I had a reputation of integrity in my position there and thought I may one day return. This one article, without actual evidence of any wrongdoing on my part, has severely and unfairly tarnished my nearly 12 years of service to East Lansing and my reputation as a whole.”

Lavigne defended ESPN’s reporting in a multi-part Twitter post, stating “our story states facts.”

The fallout hasn’t been easy on Thompson, either, as she said she’s endured harassment online and on social media since her story went public. “I knew kind of how this would play out, negatively in my favor,” she told The News. “People would attack me. But I thought it was more important to not stay silent, to help women in the future avoid situations like this.”