

Paternity claims trail Patriots star

[City Edition]

Boston Globe - Boston, Mass.

Subjects: Litigation; Fathers; Tests; Professional football; Child support

Author: Armstrong, David

Date: Aug 2, 1998

Start Page: A.1

Section: NATIONAL/FOREIGN

Document Text

SUN

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. -- Scattered among the family pictures hanging on the walls of Sherri Hauser's modest condominium are snapshots of New England Patriots All-Pro Ben Coates.

For 6-year-old Bre'yana Hauser, the pictures are the only link to her father, whom she hasn't seen in two years, according to her mother.

"She asks where Daddy is and I tell her he is at work," Sherri Hauser said of Coates. "It's sad. He has never been around."

Hauser is one of at least four women, only one of whom Coates has married, who have five daughters among them fathered by the football player.

A fifth woman has filed papers in North Carolina seeking child support for her 8-year-old daughter, but has been unable to get Coates to submit to a paternity test -- something he did for two of his other children.

The private life of Coates, the highest paid tight end in the National Football League, became public last week when he was arrested for allegedly assaulting the mother of one of his children outside his home in Franklin, Mass. He pleaded not guilty, and is scheduled to be back in court Aug. 25.

In the wake of the alleged assault, the 28-year-old Coates was portrayed by his representatives as a responsible parent who has provided financial support for his children.

"He has been responsible," his agent, Michael George, said yesterday. "He has done what he is required to do and more." Coates has declined comment, as has his lawyer, citing pending legal action.

But court filings in North Carolina and South Carolina and interviews with some of the women provide a more complicated portrait of the star tight end.

In three of the cases, Coates was reluctant to provide financial support for his children, and did so only after the women filed court action against him. In two of those cases, the courts ordered the Patriots to deduct the child support payments from Coates's paycheck.

In those cases, Coates pays about \$950 a month in child support to each mother -- an amount that is less than 1 percent of his average monthly gross pay from the Patriots. He has filed a motion opposing an increase in support.

Coates is hardly alone among professional athletes who have fathered several children out of wedlock. In May, Sports Illustrated produced a special report on the huge number of professional athletes who have done so, quoting one NBA agent who said he spends more time on paternity claims than contracts.

Clearly, athletes have ample opportunities for sexual encounters, and the increase in out-of-wedlock births is a societal trend -- a 1995 study by the National Center for Health Statistics found that the unmarried birth rate rose 54 percent from 1980 to 1992.

But some say the number of out-of-wedlock children fathered by athletes is staggering.

Coates's former Patriots teammate, David Meggett, released by the club earlier this year after being charged with sexual assault -- a charge later dropped -- had five children with four women, none of whom he married.

In public, Coates has stressed the importance of good parenting. Last year, he urged students at a school in Southport, N.C., to respect their parents.

"My advice is to pretty much obey your parents and do what you can to complete your education," he said.

He also talked of the dangers of life in the NFL and "younger guys who are not used to that kind of money and just blow up."

Less than a mile from the school where he spoke to the impressionable youngsters lives a former college classmate of Coates who says he is the father of her 8-year-old girl.

Justina Evans said she showed the baby to Coates, who joined the NFL in 1991, when they were in college and told him he was the father. "He just said the baby didn't look like him and walked away," she said. It was the last time he saw the child, she said.

A representative of Coates said he has never heard of the woman. North Carolina officials said Evans has had an open child support enforcement case against Coates since 1990, but the case has been stalled because Coates has not been tested for paternity. The official could not explain why Coates had not been tested or if he had been formally notified of the claim.

Evans, who works full-time as a chef at a nearby island resort, said getting financial support from Coates is not as important as his acknowledging paternity.

"Money is not a big issue. We have made it so far," she said. "I want my daughter to know him."

Sherri Hauser, who also met Coates at Livingston College in Salisbury, N.C., said she was forced to go to court to collect child support after Coates told her he would not pay.

With the help of child support enforcement authorities in North Carolina and South Carolina, she filed a complaint against Coates in 1992. Coates insisted on a paternity test, which was conducted in 1994. The test found he was the father.

After the DNA test, the state of South Carolina ordered the Patriots to withhold \$985 a month from Coates' paycheck.

Hauser, who works at a local hospital, is now back in court with Coates. She wants more money for her daughter and sole custody of the child.

"For the past year {Coates} has failed to adequately provide financially for the minor child," her complaint states. He "has not consistently exercised visitation with the minor child nor appears to be concerned about her welfare."

Another woman, Mamie Jacobs, also filed a court motion recently seeking an increase in the \$955 monthly payment she receives to support their daughter, 7-year-old Lauren.

Jacobs, who lives in a small home on a rural road just north of Columbia, S.C., declined to comment.

Court records, however, reveal she also was forced to take Coates to court. In a 1992 memo, a caseworker from the South Carolina Office of Child Support Enforcement typed a note to a superior indicating "this man is not going to pay."

Jacobs, citing the three-year, \$7.5 million contract Coates signed with the Patriots last year, is seeking an increase in child support.

On Dec. 22, 1997, Coates filed a motion opposing Jacobs' request for more money, saying she failed to "allege any increase in the child's needs to justify an increase."

Jennifer Marshall, the Norton woman who was allegedly assaulted by Coates last week, also had to file a lawsuit to prove he was the father of their child and to collect child support. The couple has a 3-year-old daughter, Destiny.

After it was determined Coates was the father, the court ordered support payments. Eventually, the couple reached an agreement that is part of a sealed court record.

A source familiar with the settlement says the amount paid to Marshall is several times what Hauser and Jacobs receive. In addition, friends of Marshall say the pair have continued their relationship since they first met in 1993.

The friends said Marshall and Coates were together as recently as July 25. But the next night, Marshall spotted an unfamiliar car parked in the driveway of Coates's house in Franklin. Suspecting that it belonged to a new girlfriend, she knocked on Coates's door.

When Coates came to the door, a fight started. In an account backed by a neighbor, Coates said Marshall hit him first and that he pushed her away in self-defense.

Marshall, whose account was supported by a friend who was with her, said Coates came out of the house screaming and pushed her to the pavement. And when she pushed Coates back, he slammed her head on to the hood of her car, she said.

Coates also has two children with his wife, Yvette, who remains at the couple's home in North Carolina when he moves to Massachusetts for the football season.

In a brief interview, Yvette Coates said she is aware her husband has children with other women and of the incident with Marshall.

"I believe him. He did nothing wrong," she said. "We are definitely still together. We have already been through everything. We are fine."

Abstract (Document Summary)

A fifth woman has filed papers in North Carolina seeking child support for her 8-year-old daughter, but has been unable to get Coates to submit to a paternity test -- something he did for two of his other children.

In three of the cases, Coates was reluctant to provide financial support for his children, and did so only after the women filed court action against him. In two of those cases, the courts ordered the Patriots to deduct the child support payments from Coates's paycheck.

A representative of Coates said he has never heard of the woman. North Carolina officials said (Justina) Evans has had an open child support enforcement case against Coates since 1990, but the case has been stalled because Coates has not been tested for paternity. The official could not explain why Coates had not been tested or if he had been formally notified of the claim.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.