

# Harris stands tall in painful battle with Penn State coach

Updated 5/11/2006 2:19 AM ET



NCLR photo

Jennifer Harris' parents, Lambert and Pearl, say their daughter was taunted at high school basketball games, with opposing fans chanting "Mister Harris."

## PENN STATE CONTROVERSY

By Jill Lieber, USA TODAY

When she was kicked off the Penn State women's basketball team in March 2005, after her sophomore season, Jennifer Harris felt as if her heart were breaking.

She barely ate. She seldom slept. She hardly spoke. She skipped classes, and she lay on the couch and wondered: "Will I ever love basketball, or anything else, in the same way again?"

"It broke my spirit," says the 6-foot guard. "It's hard, when you put all your trust in someone, and they just hurt you."

Lady Lions coach Rene Portland, Harris alleges, repeatedly asked Harris if she was a lesbian; pressured Harris to change her appearance to be more "feminine" and singled her out in practice, berating and demeaning her in front of teammates and in individual meetings, telling Harris: "That's why they don't let coaches carry guns." And, "Break a leg so you can't play and put me out of my misery."

Instead, Harris sought help from the National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR) and filed a federal lawsuit against Penn State, Portland and athletics director Tim Curley in December 2005, claiming racial and sexual discrimination.

The university's six-month internal investigation found Portland created a "hostile, intimidating and offensive environment" because of Harris' perceived sexual orientation.

On April 18, university president Graham Spanier announced he had fined Portland \$10,000, required she undergo diversity and inclusiveness training and said she would be fired if she violates the school's anti-discrimination policy.

Portland, in a telephone interview Wednesday, said the university's investigation was "flawed" and continues to deny discriminating against Harris.

"I can only repeat what I've said before, and really the sole basis of my decision was on her performance on the basketball court and her ability to give a positive contribution to my team, and there was nothing more," Portland said.

Harris, who played in every game her two years on the team, averaged 10.4 points a game her sophomore season, starting 22 of 30 games, and averaged 25.8 minutes.

On Monday, the parties will meet face-to-face for the first time in Harrisburg, Pa., at a court-ordered mediation, where they will try to resolve the case before its scheduled May 2007 trial.

"I couldn't have lived with myself if I didn't speak up," says Harris, now 21 and a junior at James Madison University, where she is majoring in pre-medicine with a minor in psychology.

"It's a horrible, humiliating situation to go through. I didn't want anyone else to have to go through this again. Anywhere."

### **Harassed in high school**

It's no coincidence Harris, a former Pennsylvania High School Player of the Year and three-time All-USA TODAY selection, is willing to go to court. Her parents, Lambert and Pearl, say they told her every day, as she walked out of their Harrisburg home, to treat others the way she would want to be treated — and to always stand up for herself and what she believed in.

They both coached Jennifer, the youngest of their four children, to national AAU track and basketball championships. They spent countless hours working with her and driving her to practices all over town. In high school, they drove the 114 miles to Philadelphia, at least three times a week, where she played for the powerhouse AAU girls basketball team, the Philadelphia Belles.

"When she was 12 years old, I told her, 'Jennifer, you're going to be somebody one day,' " said Darnell Williams, her AAU track coach when she was 10 until she was 15. "She replied, 'Mr. Williams, I've always been somebody.' She had a belief in herself. She knew what direction she wanted to go. She wanted to be the best in the world."

While becoming the most decorated player in Central Dauphin High School history — she is the school district's all-time leading scorer in basketball, male and female, with 2,191 points — Harris faced questions about her sexual orientation, her mother says.

"That's because of how athletic she was, and because she was able to do a lot of things athletically that the rest of the girls could not do," Pearl says of her daughter, who stood 5-7 at 10. "We chalked it up to the whole jealousy thing. Adults were out to break her spirit. We told Jennifer all the time: 'You cannot allow that to happen. You have to dictate what is best for you.' "

Pearl says her husband, Lambert, had to go out to a rival school and ask that their fans stop taunting their daughter with chants of "Mister Harris."

"Every time she got the ball, they'd say, 'Mister Harris,' instead of 'Miss a Shot,' " Pearl says. "They did that for three years. We made up our mind this was going to stop. It was all about distracting her. All it did was make her stronger."

The lawsuit is testing that strength.

"I'm on sleeping pills and anti-depressants now because I've gone through such a long period of depression that it was starting to worry people," says Harris.

Like her father, who fears the lawsuit has damaged their family. "None of us will ever be the same," he says. "I haven't heard Jennifer laugh in a year."

### **Deciding to sue was difficult**

Harris has always welcomed a fight.

That includes going against her father, who, like Portland, complained about the extremely baggy clothing his daughter wore, especially in her high school days.

"As I told (Portland), 'This is who I am,' " Harris says. "My dad doesn't like the way I dress. I haven't changed for him; I'm not going to change for her."

Although Harris says her parents taught her never to allow herself to be labeled, it wasn't easy to decide to take on Penn State and Portland, who has led the Lady Lions to 21 NCAA tournaments.

"I just couldn't decide if I wanted to just let it go, forget about it and go someplace else and start new," Harris says. "Or if I wanted to stay at Penn State and not play basketball at all. Or if I wanted to actually do something about it."

She was jolted into action by niece Ashlea Thompson, now 14, and cousin Brandy Harris, now 15, basketball players who are beginning to investigate college programs.

"They're really interested in Penn State, and I couldn't see them going through what I went through," Harris says.

Portland, however, said Wednesday the federal lawsuit has not hurt recruiting. "I know I can be tough and a demanding coach at times," she said. "I know I'm not perfect."

### **Game plan for mediation**

NCLR attorney Karen Doering says she plans to sit down at the mediation table Monday and negotiate in good faith.

Harris' 71-page complaint asks for an undisclosed amount in damages. In addition, Harris asks the court to order Penn State to conduct mandatory non-discrimination training for all athletic department employees, as well as to create policies to help student-athletes report discrimination without fear of retaliation.

Penn State announced April 18 it would inform students of their rights and all available avenues for filing discrimination complaints, plus require the athletics director to review the school's non-discrimination policies at the athletics staff's annual fall meeting.

"We'd like to hammer out a win-win scenario," Doering says. "We want to make sure it never happens again, and at the same time, to leave Penn State's athletic department stronger."

The San Francisco-based advocacy group NCLR estimates Harris' attorney's fees are already about \$400,000, on their tab.

### **Joining a new team**

Harris is trying to restore some semblance of normalcy to her life. She sat out last season because of NCAA transfer rules but is working out with the James Madison women's basketball team, preparing to play.

A few weeks ago, she and her parents flew to San Francisco to attend NCLR's 29th Anniversary Gala, where she was given the organization's Justice Award.

Harris says she never thought of herself as a civil- or gay-rights activist, but that she's happy to carry on this fight, for herself, for the former Lady Lions, for her niece and cousin and for those she does not know.

"I hear people say I'm doing a great thing, that I'm a hero," Harris says. "I don't feel like that. It's a horrible situation that I don't want anyone to go through. It's humiliating. It's painful. I want as many people to avoid that as possible."