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When the fouls get very personal
Player's suit claims Penn State coach was biased against lesbians

"I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy, the horrible, humiliating, painful things she put me through. I don't want anybody else to ever experience it again," said Jennifer Harris, above.

By Bob Hohler, Globe Staff | March 26, 2006

HARRISBURG, Pa. -- They echo through the years, voices from a generation of female basketball players who say their lives were marred by a powerful college coach's campaign against homosexuality.

Their legacy of pain began in 1982, when, Cindy Davies says, Penn State coach Maureen T. "Rene" Portland threatened to expose her as a lesbian. The legacy endured as Portland in 1986 publicly espoused her opposition to coaching homosexuals and reaffirmed her stance in 1991, all the while allegedly engaging in a pattern of bias based on sexual orientation. And the legacy grows as Jennifer Harris pursues a federal discrimination claim that Portland cut her from the Penn State team last year in part because the coach considered her a lesbian.

As the women's basketball community converges on Boston this week for the Final Four of the NCAA Tournament, the Portland case looms as a watershed chapter in a decades-long struggle to eradicate prejudice that has long festered in the sport against homosexual players and coaches. Numerous athletes and coaches said in interviews that nearly every facet of women's college basketball, from recruiting to hiring practices, has been affected by discrimination based on sexual orientation.

"This lawsuit is the most significant thing that has happened in trying to address homophobia in the sport to date," said Pat Griffin, a professor emerita at the University of Massachusetts whose educational program aimed at curbing bias against homosexuals has been distributed by the NCAA to every member school. "It's a cautionary tale for coaches and athletic directors that they cannot discriminate with impunity anymore."

While the NCAA prepares a survey on the impact of homophobia in the sport and the Women's Basketball Coaches Association plans at its national convention in Boston this week to adopt a code of ethics that bans discrimination based on sexual orientation, Harris, 21, is seeking unspecified monetary damages and a number of institutional reforms in her 20-count civil rights suit against Portland, Penn State athletic director Timothy Curley, and the school. The list of proposed reforms includes annual mandatory anti-discrimination training for Penn State's athletic staff.

"I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy, the horrible, humiliating, painful things she put me through," Harris said of Portland in an interview at her family's home in Harrisburg. "I don't want anybody else to ever experience it again."

Harris, who is African-American, also charges Portland with a racial bias as part of the complaint.

Portland, 53, who did not respond to interview requests, issued a statement last October calling Harris's allegations "completely and utterly untrue." The coach said she has honored Penn State's anti-discrimination policy, whose clause on sexual orientation the school adopted in 1991 amid protests over Portland's public stance against lesbians.

"First and foremost, let me make absolutely clear that the only reason Jennifer Harris is no longer with the Lady Lions is because of her performance and attitude in relation to basketball," Portland said.

The coach recently inspired a new round of protests when she asked the court to dismiss much of Harris's suit, arguing in part that Penn State's anti-discrimination policy represented an "aspirational sentiment," rendering it unenforceable.

Penn State spokesman Tysen Kendig said the university has not endorsed Portland's view of its anti-bias policy or her unilateral rejection of Harris's claim. He said the university, which has asked the court to dismiss 12 counts of Harris's lawsuit, believes "the allegations that Penn State as an institution fosters discrimination are unfounded."

Climate of fear

Penn State has nearly completed an internal investigation of Harris's allegations. And the women's basketball world is watching.

"The big question is, will the Penn State president take action and enforce the anti-discrimination policy if the investigation shows Rene Portland discriminated? Or are some people in athletics so powerful that no matter what they do, nothing will happen to them?" said Helen Carroll, who coached the University of North Carolina-Asheville to an NAIA national championship in 1984, served as athletic director at Mills College in California for 12 years, and now coordinates the sports project for the National Center for Lesbian Rights, which is helping to represent Harris.

Beth Bass, CEO of the Women's Basketball Coaches Association, which named Portland its National Coach of the Year in 1991 and 2004, declined to comment on Portland's case. But Bass said homophobia "unfortunately is an issue in hiring and firing in women's basketball and is used in negative recruiting."

"Is it used as a scare tactic and a fear factor? Absolutely," Bass said. "Do we have issues? Absolutely. But we're trying to address them and change the culture."

The climate of fear was documented in a study of 13 lesbian college coaches published last year by Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport. Researchers from the University of New Hampshire and Bowling Green University reported they needed two years to persuade all the coaches to participate in the survey even though the coaches and their schools would not be identified (only one coach was openly gay).

The researchers said the coaches reported coping with daily tensions involving their sexual orientation and job performance. Coaches who are perceived as lesbians battle the stigma in recruiting, most often when rival coaches cite their sexual orientation in trying to turn prospective players against them.

"This negative and sometimes hostile climate reinforces the perception that it is not safe to reveal a lesbian identity and to do so may result in negative consequences, such as loss of one's job," the study found.

Lesbian players endured similar fears, according to the study.

"They believed something terrible would happen, such as being cut from their team or being treated poorly by their teammates, if their lesbian identity was revealed," the researchers reported.

Confrontational coach

In Portland's case, the timeline of her campaign against homosexuality dates to 1982, her second full year at Penn State (she was hired by the school's legendary football coach, Joe Paterno, who then doubled as athletic director). Suspicious that Davies, one of her prized players, was romantically involved with the team's female student manager, Portland dismissed the manager and confronted Davies, the former player said in a telephone interview.

"It's seared in my mind to this day," Davies, 43, said of the confrontation. "[Portland] said, 'I don't know if it's true, but if I find out it's true, there's nothing that will stop me from going to your parents, the university, and the media.' "

Davies said she "felt like I was being blackmailed" but lacked the support she would have needed as a 19-year-old to challenge Portland.

"I was scared to death," she said. "I felt like I was cornered. I ended up saying I would leave the program to concentrate on my academics."

After leaving Penn State, Davies said, she entered a lengthy period of depression in which she contemplated suicide.

"I always wondered if my silence was hurting other kids, but I didn't know what to do to help them," she said tearfully. "I always made a pact with myself that if anybody ever came forward, I would back them any way I could."

Portland made a point after Davies departed to lecture her next group of incoming freshmen about homosexuality, according to one freshman in the fall of '84 who asked not to be identified for fear her current lesbian partner could suffer in the workplace.

"She threatened to take away our scholarships if she found out we were gay or ever associated with a lesbian," the ex-player said.

The woman said she concealed her homosexuality from Portland for four years, partly by dating men.

"I went through a lot of anxiety and fear about being found out," she said. "It was intense."

Portland's opposition to lesbians first became public in 1986, when she was quoted by the Chicago Sun-Times as saying she cautioned all recruits and their parents about homosexual activity.

"I will not have it in my program," the paper quoted her as saying.

Five more years passed before Penn State added a sexual orientation clause to its anti-discrimination policy. The change came amid protests in March 1991 after the Philadelphia Inquirer further detailed Portland's opposition to lesbians in her program.

Since then, Portland generally has remained publicly silent on the issue. But several former players said she has said plenty behind the scenes.

Courtney Wicks, who played for Penn State in 1996 and '97, said Portland told her family while recruiting her that she would not tolerate lesbians on her team. Wicks said Portland "instigated a full-fledged gay-bashing session" after the team attended a professional women's game in Seattle in 1996. And, finally, Wicks said, Portland drove her off the team by accusing her of associating with a lesbian.

"She uses her power to ruin your life if you don't live by her code," Wicks said in a phone interview. "It can be very debilitating emotionally. I feel like she singlehandedly tried to ruin my career."

Mixed message

Portland's supporters cited her ardent advocacy for equal rights under the 1972 Title IX law that banned discrimination against women at educational institutions. They said she helped pioneer progress in women's athletics after she won three straight national titles from 1972-74 as a player with tiny Immaculata College in Pennsylvania and began her coaching career at Saint Joseph's in Philadelphia in 1976. She spent two

years at Saint Joseph's and two more at Colorado before she began building Penn State's program from an afterthought to a perennial national power.

With a career record of 678-249, Portland is one of the winningest coaches in NCAA history and is considered one of the reasons women's college basketball has gained such popularity that the sport topped 10 million in attendance this season. Penn State last year named her its Renaissance Person of the Year, after she created another legacy at the university in 2001 by endowing two scholarships for Penn State student-athletes.

"This commitment is evidence of Rene's incredible leadership and vision, which she proves time and again," Penn State president Graham Spanier said at the time.

To Wicks, however, Portland has demonstrated a different trait.

"I saw her as a woman who stood up for Title IX and for women, but then in the same breath she turned around and discriminated against another group," Wicks said. "I thought it was the height of hypocrisy."

Virginia coach Debbie Ryan, a longtime friend of Portland's who played against her in college and served with her as a camp counselor, was puzzled by the allegations against her.

"I think she's an excellent person," Ryan said. "In all the years I've known her, I've never heard her say anything disparaging toward anybody's race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation."

Considering the bond between the coaches, Harris and her parents, Lambert and Pearl, said they were surprised when Portland engaged in negative recruiting against Ryan while both schools pursued Harris in 2001. As one of the best high school players of her time from Pennsylvania, Harris was named an All-American by McDonald's, Parade, Nike, and USA Today, among several other organizations, after setting nearly every record at Central Dauphin High School in Harrisburg. The 5-foot-11-inch guard, a four-year member of the National Honor Society, had narrowed her college choices to Penn State and Virginia before she paid an unofficial recruiting visit to Portland.

"She told me if I liked Virginia, then I couldn't like Penn State because at Penn State the girls dated guys and at Virginia they dated girls," Harris said.

Ryan initially expressed doubt about Harris's contention.

"I can't imagine Rene Portland doing that to me," Ryan said. "I just can't. I'm just going on how I feel about our friendship."

Ryan, however, left open the possibility that Harris spoke truthfully.

"If she did it, then she did it," Ryan said of Portland, "and we will have to address it on a personal level."

Harris and her parents said Portland also told them three players on Penn State's 1996-97 team wore out their welcome because "they were dating each other and it was a distraction." But the Harrises said Portland's remarks raised no red flag for them. Harris said she is not a lesbian and was more interested in basketball than sexual politics. And her father said he was most concerned at the time about reports of racial strife at Penn State.

He said Portland eased his concern.

"She said, 'I promise you, nothing will happen to Jennifer. I will be like a mother to her,' " Lambert Harris said. "We accepted that."

Now, the Harrises said, they regret it. By December of Harris's freshman season, Jennifer said, Portland began a pattern of asking her whether she was dating women. Pearl Harris said Portland cautioned her to keep Jennifer away from a Penn State teammate who would not be invited back the next year because she was a lesbian. And Jennifer said Portland castigated her for visiting the player the next summer, after the player had left the team.

By her sophomore season, Harris was starting regularly for Penn State. But she said she remained a target of Portland's suspicions and was called into the coach's hotel room with a teammate during a trip to Texas and asked if she was dating the other player.

"I said, 'I don't understand where this is coming from,' " Harris recalled.

She said Portland focused on her appearance, criticizing her in particular for wearing sweat clothes and her hair in cornrows.

"She said, 'You could dress more feminine,' " Harris said. "She wanted me to change my appearance to appear that I'm not gay."

Dismissal, then transfer

By the end of the season, Harris had lost her starting job, despite starting 22 of 30 games and averaging more than 10 points a game. She said Portland routinely asked Harris's teammates if Harris was sleeping with women. She said the coach then told her teammates to no longer associate with Harris. Ultimately, Harris said, Portland told her after the final loss of the year that she no longer was welcome on the team.

"I told her I thought she was kicking me out of school because she thought I was gay," Harris said. "She said, 'You know how I feel about that. I'm not going to change. I'm still going to be the coach at Penn State and you're still going to be gone.' That's how it ended."

Harris's parents said they tried repeatedly to discuss the matter with Portland to no avail.

"It's a nightmare that won't end," Lambert Harris said.

While a number of other women's college coaches cited the prevalence of homophobia in the sport, several cautioned against demonizing Portland until she fully addresses the allegations.

"We can't judge what's going on with Rene and why that program has become such a lightning rod for this because we're not there," said Yale coach Chris Gobrecht, who has gained a reputation for fostering a climate of diversity during her 25 years coaching Division 1 teams, including Southern California, Florida State, and Washington.

Gobrecht expressed doubt about Harris's account.

"This particular case, to me, is fishy," she said. "I don't put a lot of stock in somebody who says I'm heterosexual but I got kicked off the team because I was perceived to be homosexual. It sounds to me like she is the one with a problem."

Harris's lawyer, Karen Doering, said she has a lengthy list of Portland's former players and assistant coaches who will support the lawsuit.

"Rene is not the only coach who is an ultra-control freak, but she crossed way too many lines, including the sexual orientation line," Doering said. "I'm very confident in our case."

Harris, a pre-med student who hopes to become a pediatrician and carries a 3.2 grade point average, transferred to James Madison University, where she plans to use her two remaining years of eligibility after sitting out this season under NCAA rules. She said she has overcome the suicidal impulses she felt after the ordeal at Penn State but continues to cope with depression and several stress-related health problems, including kidney stones.

Portland, meanwhile, received a contract extension in 2004 that runs until 2009. She just endured the most trying season of her career, posting her first losing record (13-16) and the Penn State team's first sub-.500 mark in 33 years. She encountered protesters at Penn State and at a number of road games, including Big 10 contests against Michigan State, Minnesota, and Indiana. And while she tries to recruit a new class of Lady Lions, she awaits results of the school's investigation and the lawsuit against her.

Ryan may have aptly characterized Portland's status.

"She's in a really tough situation," she said.