Centre Daily Times

Former Lady Lions back claims of discrimination

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Posted on Tue, Dec. 13, 2005

Two former players on the Penn State women's basketball team, speaking on an ESPN program that aired Sunday, backed another ex-Lady Lion's claims that coach Rene Portland is anti-lesbian.

The show, "Outside the Lines," looked at the allegations made by former player Jennifer Harris, who said that she is not a lesbian but that Portland thought she was one and discriminated against her because of it. The National Center for Lesbian Rights filed a complaint on Harris' behalf with the Pennsylvania Human Rights Commission alleging discrimination on the basis of race and sex.

Courtney Wicks, one of the players who appeared on the ESPN show, said in an interview with the Centre Daily Times that Portland's stance on homosexuality was clear. On ESPN, she recalled hearing Portland make derogatory comment about lesbian couples.

"It was a firm stance," Wicks said. "It was a public stance."

Wicks, whose older sister is gay, said that while she was on the team in 1996 and 1997, she asked Portland why she felt so strongly about the issue.

"She made it seem like if you have lesbians on your team at some point it will get into your locker room," said Wicks, who transferred from Penn State after a year and a half.

The ESPN show also included an interview with Cindy Davies, who played for Penn State in 1980. According to the report, Davies is a lesbian and was romantically involved with the team manager.

Davies said she quit the team and the university after Portland confronted her with suspicions about the relationship and told her she could make the information public if she confirmed it.

Davies told the reporter that she ended up "low enough that I contemplated suicide."

"I wanted to end it because I thought I had no future," Davies said.

"And I think now that I look back I can't allow it to (happen) to anybody else," she said. "If I can help them, I'm going to do whatever it takes to help them. Because nobody should have to feel that way."

Harris also appeared on the show and reiterated her claims.

Penn State spokesman Tysen Kendig said the university has a policy to protect students from discrimination based on sexual orientation and that the university is investigating Harris' claims.

"The investigation that's ongoing will be looking into some of the allegations that have been made through media reports and press releases," Kendig said. "But the policy is very clear, and we can't do anything about students who choose not to come forward with complaints.

"If they don't come forward to file a formal complaint, I'm not sure what specific action the university could initiate. As we've said all along, we're taking the allegations that have been made here in a very public form very seriously."

A call to the Penn State athletics office Monday afternoon was not returned.

Several other former players contacted recently by the Centre Daily Times said they never heard Portland make anti-lesbian remarks.

"When I played there from 1990 to 1995 I never heard those comments," said former Lady Lion Carla Coleman. "It was never directed to me. It was never said in my presence."

Coleman, now a guidance counselor and high school basketball coach in Montgomery County, said Portland had high expectations and it was a tough program, but those expectations helped her achieve her goals later on.

Jess Strom, who graduated this year, defended Portland.

"A lot of stuff is being said about her, but she really did anything for us and she still would," Strom said.

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