

## **Penn St. coach should be packing**

**By Graham Hays**

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Even Terrell Owens apologized.

Penn State practically let women's basketball coach Rene Portland off the hook, even after an investigation found evidence to support former player Jennifer Harris' claim that Portland harassed her and ultimately drove her away from the institution, simply because the coach thought Harris was gay. (She isn't.)

Her press conference would have been a good time for Rene Portland to issue an apology.

The school hit Portland with a \$10,000 fine and required her to attend some diversity sessions. And instead of expressing appreciation for a remarkably light sentence, or simply shutting up and slinking home, silently grateful that she still had a job at a school funded by the taxpayers of Pennsylvania, Portland issued a defiant statement, saying the conclusions of the investigation were "flawed" and she disagreed with the ruling.

Actually, that's the one point on which I agree with Portland. I don't agree with the ruling, either.

Because for the school to find enough evidence to fine the coach \$10,000, there had to be something more than the word of one disgruntled former player. And even if those extra words were little more than whispers, Portland should have been packing boxes, not holding a press conference.

By wimping out on Portland's punishment, the school has effectively said it's willing to enter next season with a bigot coaching its women's basketball team.

This is hardly the only time Portland has dealt with issues of homosexuality. She gave voice to her views on the subject in an article in the Chicago Sun-Times in 1986. And Jere Longman profiled Portland's views through quotes from former players in a 1991 article for the Philadelphia Inquirer.

The stereotype that women's basketball, whether in college or the WNBA, is entirely composed of lesbians is as inaccurate as it is prevalent among critics who somehow find nothing wrong with using that perception as a means to denigrate the sport. It's an easy laugh at the sports bar, or an implied insult on talk radio. Just one more example of how homophobia is the last stronghold of acceptable hate.

Women's basketball is not synonymous with homosexuality. But there is no denying that the athletic world is one area of life in which some gay women have been able to find a culture that isn't inherently hostile. A place where they can be themselves without the fear of people defining their entire existence by their sexuality.

In fact, there's no reason anyone should want to deny that point.

It's one small aspect of a sport that matters because of what the players do on the court, not who they sleep with off the court. But the diversity and open minds -- at least outside of State College, Pa. -- so frequently found in the women's game represent something that should be trumpeted as a source of pride.

Saturday marked the anniversary of Jackie Robinson's debut with the Brooklyn Dodgers. And all these years later, sport still has been used as an example of equality in an area where the rest of society lags lamentably behind. Robinson didn't step into the batter's box looking to make a social statement; he stepped in looking to be himself, to be a baseball player. We're the ones who made the color of his skin matter.

So when Sheryl Swoopes takes the court for the Houston Comets, or WNBA fans in some cities respond to marketing directed at the gay community, they aren't doing so as social statements for gay equality or examples of "lesbianism" run rampant in basketball. They do so as a basketball player or as basketball fans.

Homosexuality is a part of women's basketball, just as it's a part of men's baseball, law firms, brokerages, churches and every other entity in life.

Do you really think Rene Portland should still be working the sidelines for Penn State?

All of which makes it that much tougher to stomach the idea of Portland patrolling the sideline next season and playing the role of thought police (and thought judge, jury and executioner) with the young women in her program.

It's easy to say Portland has a right to her own views, and that she is up-front in making them perfectly clear to the players she recruits. But she isn't coaching at a private school supported by religious donors who may share her outlook. (Not that privately funded prejudice is any more acceptable.) She's a very visible representative of one of the nation's largest public institutions, charged with guiding kids through a time in their lives that should be about learning and interacting with people of different backgrounds.

And yet the school itself found she created a "hostile, intimidating and offensive environment" for Harris, simply because she thought the player was gay. Replace "gay" with any religion or race and ask yourself whether Portland still deserves her job.

So now, in addition to being taught to hate people for their sexual orientation, players (and students in general) at Penn State can learn that you can put a price on intolerance ... and it's \$10,000.

Portland's defenders will talk about all the work she's done at the school and in the community during her tenure. Good for her -- hopefully she managed to help some people while mentally poisoning others.

Portland has made very little effort to conceal her feelings on the issue of tolerance. And the administration was most likely right, or at least not at fault, in not acting on those reports. Portland shouldn't be punished for her thoughts, no matter how hateful they seem to many.

But those same viewpoints should have been fair game as evidence when Portland was found to have acted on those views to harass Harris. Penn State has more than two decades of Portland's tenure to know this wasn't an isolated incident or misunderstanding.

Portland is a homophobe.

And in this country, she has every right to be.

But that doesn't mean the citizens of Pennsylvania should be obligated to pay her to spread those views among current students or discriminate against prospective students at the state's land-grant university.

It's sad that Portland views the world through such myopic lenses; it's reprehensible that, knowing that, the school still wants her as its coach.

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