Will Portland finally feel heat after latest accusations?

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When Penn State made the 2000 Women's Final Four in Philadelphia, a few of us longtime women's hoops reporters wondered if a "Rene and the L-Word" controversy might come up. It didn't. Why? We didn't ask the question.

A player who was dismissed after last season has accused Penn State coach Rene Portland of anti-lesbian bias. Instead, the biggest buzz around that Final Four was the Geno Auriemma-Pat Summitt rivalry as UConn and Tennessee met in the final, including the story about the competing cheesesteak places in Philly called Pat's and Geno's. Ha-ha. It was a yuck-fest.

But it was also Penn State's first visit to the Final Four, the only time the program had been to that level of a national stage. It was the only such appearance since Portland made public remarks in the 1980s and early 1990s -- the most noted being in a 1991 New York Times article -- that she would not have lesbians in her program.

Did we reporters fail in an aspect of our jobs at the 2000 Final Four? I'm still not sure. Portland, however, is involved in another controversy at Penn State concerning her alleged attitude and actions toward players who either are gay or whom she perceives to be gay.

To be honest, I've been debating for some time about what to write in regard to Portland. Then I found out that WNBA MVP Sheryl Swoopes is acknowledging she is gay in a first-person piece as told to ESPN The Magazine's LZ Granderson. And it seemed essential to address the Portland issue now.

Portland always has been a puzzling case to me. She has been a trailblazer is so many ways, as both a player and coach. She has said so many smart, snappy, quotable and on-the-money things about the respect women's athletics deserves. Her program has produced some excellent players and had a lot of success.

And yet, a significant segment of women's basketball observers believes she has undermined all of her accomplishments and her reputation because of her attitude toward homosexuality.

This is a long story with a lot of twists and turns, but I'll try to explain it as briefly as possible. The latest issue concerns what appeared to be three very bizarre dismissals of Penn State players Jen Harris, Amber Bland and Lisa Etienne after an NCAA Tournament loss to Liberty in March.

The players didn't seem to know what they had done to be asked to leave. There was conflict over their releases. If Portland was concerned at the time that the dismissals might require a public explanation, she didn't show it.

So … the rumor mill began. Portland's long history of saying she did not want lesbians in her program caused some to speculate that this was the issue at the heart of the dismissals. But it was all murky. Fast-forward to October, when Harris -- who has since transferred to James Madison -- alleged anti-gay discrimination by Portland.

The National Center for Lesbian Rights sent a letter on behalf of Harris to Penn State president Graham Spanier, "demanding that action be taken against … Portland for her decades-long policy of harassing players whom Coach Portland believed to be lesbians."

Since that press release, Harris has come forward to say she's not actually gay, but that she suffered discrimination and was forced out at Penn State because Portland believed she was.

Portland countered with a press release that Harris -- who would have been Penn State's leading returning scorer this season -- had been dismissed from the team because, "She did not meet the level of commitment I expect all players to have to this great program … For example, she engaged in disrespectful, profane and belligerent behavior toward coaches and teammates, and she exhibited a work ethic and attitude that were unsatisfactory and detrimental to the success of our team."

This prompted the NCLR to raise the stakes in the rhetoric, saying if Portland didn't retract those comments, it would file a defamation lawsuit against her.

So we're into the land of she said/she said, with Penn State officials saying they're investigating … and Portland not saying much of anything.

Whatever your view of this particular conflict between a coach and an ex-player, it's hard to deny that as a university, Penn State has looked clueless at times in handling the entire issue.

When Penn State spokesman Bill Mahon claimed he knew of "no similar accusations being made against Portland in her 25 years at Penn State," I'm surprised some women's basketball followers didn't need to be hospitalized so they wouldn't die laughing.

Many observers would say the description of Portland as having a problem with gays is accepted fact. She created the perception herself with her statements to the media and has really done nothing to change it.

For the last several years, some of Portland's defenders have said she made those anti-gay remarks "a long time ago," as though that means she no longer has to account for them and anyone who was offended should forget about them. Other defenders come at this from a very different perspective: They don't think it's "homophobia." They think Portland is justified in creating a comfortable atmosphere for herself and her presumably straight players.

But … the university added sexual orientation to its anti-discrimination policy not long after the 1991 New York Times story. Portland has said at different junctures since that she abides by it. Most recently, "I wish to make it perfectly clear that I fully support the policy [and] have abided by it at all times."

However, addressing the anti-discrimination policy issue at other times, she has left open an ocean of interpretation as to how she defines "abide."

Where are Portland's colleagues on this issue? Well … you don't hear much that's supporting or criticizing. That's kind of the way it is when controversies come up in coaching, men's or women's, in any sport.

But you can be sure in women's hoops, most coaches just want this issue to go away.

There are many reasons they don't want to talk about it. The gay coaches for the most part are fearful of discussion of any gay issues in the sport. Many straight coaches absolutely wouldn't want to take a lie-detector test about whether they've used the lesbian issue against another program during recruiting wars.

Heck, even some gay coaches use that against each other. Sometimes they do it because they think they're good at disguising themselves. Or they hire a straight, married male or female assistant to do the dirty work for them.

Recruiting is like gambling: You put a lot of time and money into something that could be extremely valuable to you but has absolutely no guarantee of any payoff at all. It's a very high-stakes competition, and some coaches let that get the best of them.

Plus, they rationalize, "Hey, I never *say* the L-word. I just sell the fact that we have a better 'family environment' here. OK, I maybe mentioned that Team X's head coach doesn't have any children but, you know, I was just making conversation."

Certainly, some of her colleagues would love to see Portland packing up her office. But others would just like the whole issue to go away. As would Penn State, where next to Joe Paterno, Portland is about the longest-standing "institution" at the institution. She was the WBCA's national coach of the year in 2004, and a few months later, was given a four-year contract extension by Penn State.

So how will this all play out? We'll see. Portland has danced around this issue for a long, long time. Now, is she actually going to feel the heat?

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