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## **"SPORTS GOES TO COURT: NCLR LAUNCHES PROJECT TO ERADICATE HOMOPHOBIA IN WOMEN'S ATHLETICS"**

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In the past two decades NCLR has successfully taken on many important issues affecting the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, issues that had remained invisible in the culture at large. One extremely important domain that, until now, has not been challenged is the rampant injustice endured by lesbian youth, coaches, administrators and sports professionals in the homophobic culture of athletics.

As this country's only lesbian, feminist, public interest law firm, NCLR is uniquely positioned to spearhead the aggressive new Sports Project to tackle this issue in collaboration with other concerned athletic and LGBT organizations. NCLR will confront institutionalized homophobia in professional and college athletics through a nationwide campaign of litigation, free legal assistance, public education, and outreach to individual athletes and coaches who suffer discrimination on a daily basis.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender athletes deserve to be treated equally and fairly. And they deserve the opportunity to participate in sports and athletics without fear that disclosure of their sexual orientation or gender identity will result in the loss of their jobs or expulsion from their college teams. Until now, they have had no place to turn for resources and advocacy.

While lesbians have participated in sports for decades, the fear of being labeled lesbian has forced most of us to remain silent and powerless in the world of college and professional sports. Homophobia is used as a weapon against lesbians--and against all women--in athletics. Many girls admit that they quit playing sports as young teenagers because they don't want to be labeled lesbians. University athletic directors often don't hire women at all for coaching positions because of their strong fear of hiring a lesbian and alienating potential students. Only 47% of women's college teams have women coaches and only 16% have women administrators. Many lesbian coaches feel they have to "act straight" by wearing heels or even getting married. Lesbian and gay athletes live in fear. To maintain their positions as coaches and players, they must remain silent, or even deny their sexuality. Many of those who have been brave enough to "come out" have lost their scholarships or their jobs.

You might remember this blatant example of unchecked homophobia because it hit the front pages in 1991. When Penn State University women's basketball coach Rene Portland's team made the final four in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) finals that year, the media discovered her team training rules: "NO ALCOHOL, NO DRUGS, NO LESBIANS." To make matters worse, she was voted "Coach of the Year." Bad press forced Penn State to quickly change its anti-discrimination clause and hire Professor Pat Griffin, famous author of the book *Strong Women, Deep Closets* and leading expert on the devastating effects of homophobia in sports, to conduct sensitivity training for the athletic staff.

It's ten years later, and the situation for LGBT athletes has not improved much. Although such blatant proclamations of homophobia are less common, the silencing of lesbian athletes continues unabated.

As these personal stories demonstrate, the constant fear of being labeled or identified as a lesbian intimidates and limits all women in sports:

"After 2 years I have never been open with anyone, except a lesbian who happened to be leaving the institution. I only know of one other person on campus who is gay. I am out there with absolutely no

network. I hide just as much as I ever have, maybe more. I never talk about my home life. I never talk about my partner." -- NCAA Division III athletic administrator

"I was told by my coach that I was not allowed to make political statements, which meant I was not allowed to be out. I went by the rules. Someone told me they can't force me to be closeted, like if I wore a school basketball jacket and a gay pride T-shirt. I don't know; they [the coaches] might be able to say that's a political issue maybe." -- NCAA Division I basketball player

"I'm not a lesbian, but when I played for her [Rene Portland] I was afraid she might think I was and take away my scholarship. I started changing the way I dressed, started going out with a guy I didn't like, just to stay on the team. It meant my academic career, that scholarship." -- Former Penn State player who asked not to be named

The good news for all athletes, coaches, administrators and sports personnel is that NCLR has the legal clout to take the contest against homophobia off the playing courts and into the courts of law and win. NCLR will employ its proven methods for achieving long-term change: providing free legal assistance, litigating cases to fight blatant discrimination, and bringing visibility to the issue through community education. We will work in close collaboration with the Women's Sports Foundation's (WSF) Project to Eliminate Homo-phobia in Sports, and make our legal expertise available to the National College Athletic Association and other key policy-making organizations in sports.

The time is right for NCLR to flex its legal muscle to establish the first protections for lesbians in sports. Last year, the NCAA added sexual orientation to its non-discrimination clause. This is a significant step because the NCAA is the governing body for 2,000 colleges and universities around the country. But this new policy will make no difference in the lives of women until NCLR helps lesbians win lawsuits that force the schools to actually end the discrimination and homophobia. Athletes are fed up. In fact, a courageous 21-year-old college basketball player recently requested legal assistance from NCLR. "Anna" (not her real name) was kicked off her team in a Midwestern college after her junior year by the fundamentalist coach. She lost her basketball scholarship and is struggling just to stay in school. NCLR is helping Anna document this discrimination and fight back.

In 1972 feminist lawyers and activists helped win passage of Title IX, groundbreaking federal legislation requiring colleges and universities to provide equal opportunity to women's athletic programs. But it took years of intensive education and litigation by coaches and athletes to expand opportunities for women and girls in sports. Progress is slow, but it is real.

Now it's our turn. The lesbian athletes are ready. NCLR lawyers are ready. We invite you to join our team.

NCLR wishes to specifically thank and acknowledge Dr. Dee Mosbacher whose vision and determination were instrumental in encouraging NCLR to begin this work on homophobia and women's sports. Thank you, Dee.

We also thank author Pat Griffin for permission to reprint athletes' and administrators' stories from her book, *Strong Women, Deep Closets, Lesbians and Homophobia in Sports*.