

# Center fielder fills void by becoming political

Editor's Note: This column is being reprinted with permission of the New York Times Company.  
By ROBERT LIPSYTE  
New York Times

Theresa Sumner imagines herself in center field again, running into the gap after a fly ball, her thudding footsteps echoing in her head. It is, she says, the "most peaceful, wonderful feeling in the world." But right now, it's only a dream. Last summer, in a pickup basketball game, she ruptured her right Achilles' tendon.

"I've been through heartbreak, divorce in my family, you name it, but this was the worst," said Sumner, a 22-year-old Penn State senior. "Softball is my life."

Last fall, for the first time since she was a Little Leaguer in Albion, Sumner wasn't

## COMMENTARY

on a team. She was in a cast. To fill the void and drain her energy, she "became political," eventually becoming a co-director of the Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Student Alliance, a group leading the campaign to end homosexual bashing on the conservative, isolated campus.

A focus of the campaign was Rene Portland, the highly successful women's basketball coach, who continues to refuse even to comment on what amounts to a policy barring lesbians from her team. It has been reported for years that Portland used the policy as a recruiting tool. Such an anti-gay stance could be construed as a tacit approval of the harassment of gays and lesbians, especially since the powerful athletic department, including its former director, the

celebrated football coach, Joe Paterno, never disavowed Portland's policy.

Earlier this month, after a flurry of news media coverage, Penn State's Board of Trustees included sexual orientation in its anti-discrimination rules.

It was a great victory for the alliance, but the battle has been an uncomfortable one for Sumner.

"Rene Portland is a great coach and a terrific fighter for women's equal rights in sports," said Sumner. "Here I am, thinking of myself as a center fielder, and she forces me to choose between being a woman and a lesbian."

Like many lesbians at Penn State, Sumner has been an avid supporter of Portland's team. The Lady Lions, the team's nickname in Happy Valley, as the campus is called, are a top-ranked symbol

of the rise of the women's game since Title IX mandated funds.

Once money made women's basketball glamorous and a potential source of income, male-dominated athletic departments tended to take it over from female-dominated women's physical education departments. Show companies walked in. Television called. An attempt was made to purge women's sports lesbian image, perceived as a barrier to mainstream support.

On recruiting trips, female coaches showed pictures of their husbands and children. Portland was merely less subtle than most.

Joseph Smith, a New Yorker who runs a national scouting service for women's college basketball, says that "the dirty recruit—

Please see COMMENTARY page 4C

## Commentary

Continued from page 1C

ing isn't so much under-the-table money but in telling a kid, "You don't want to go there; they're all dykes."

"It plays on fears and old stereotypes. Also, most girls would rather play for male coaches in college. Most of them played for men in high school, seen men on television, think men are more professional and know the game better. It's a perception. As far as I'm concerned, Rene Portland can coach with any man in the game."

Coach Vincent Cannizzaro of Christ the King High School in Queens, in recent years one of the top two or three schoolgirl teams in the country, shares Smith's regard for Portland's coaching ability. He senses that parents see their daughters as sexually vulnerable, especially to "something as alien as lesbianism" once they leave home.

Yet, Cannizzaro says he has "never had a situation where I told a kid not to go to a school because the coach was a lesbian, even when I knew she was."

"If a coach is a professional," he said, "sex doesn't enter into it."

Theresa Sumner agrees with that, and wishes she could talk to Portland, jock to jock. She has never gotten close. Portland has been protected by the athletic department, a rich and successful fiefdom, traditionally the vehicle for the university's national reputation. After the board's decision, the athletic department released a minimalist statement, declaring itself part of the university and "committed to fully adhering to state and federal laws and the policies of the institution."

In recent interviews on the subject, Penn State staff and faculty members are guarded, seemingly fearful of incurring the athletic department's wrath.

No wonder that students like Sumner led the battle for fair play, virtually alone for many years, with meetings, memos, demonstrations and eventually



RENE PORTLAND  
...under fire

"We got a lot of support from outside groups who wanted to go after Rene's job. But I never felt like that."

—Theresa Sumner

the alliance's 450-page documentation of gay bashing on campus.

"We got a lot of support from outside groups who wanted to go after Rene's job," Sumner said. "But I never felt like that. I don't think she fully understands what she's doing. And I can appreciate that basketball's her life, like softball is mine."

In the year of therapy for her right leg, Sumner began to think beyond softball for the first time, to graduate school, perhaps to government as a lobbyist. But now her leg is feeling better, it's summer and her mind is drifting out to center field.

"I guess I'm not really as much of a team player as people think," she said. "I love to be in center field, all by myself, everybody depending on me. It's do or die in center field. If the ball gets past me, it's all over."

Copyright © 1991 by the New York Times Company. Reprinted by permission.