

Former players say coach is anti-lesbian

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SUMMARY: Two ex-Penn State women's hoops players tell ESPN they were shocked by coach Rene Portland's homophobia as the state mulls a discrimination complaint.

Two former Penn State women's basketball players went public about their old coach's anti-gay attitude during the Sunday edition of ESPN's program "Outside the Lines." The show took a closer look at a story involving recent team superstar Jennifer Harris, who says she's not a lesbian but was forced off the team in part because her notoriously anti-gay coach thought she was.

Cindy Davies, who played for the Lady Lions in 1980 and is gay, said on the program that she was so upset by coach Rene Portland's homophobia she had thought about suicide. Davies quit the team after Portland confronted her about a lesbian relationship she had with the team manager and threatened to make it public.

The second player to confirm Portland's problems with lesbians, Courtney Wicks, played on the team in 1996 and 1997. She told ESPN that she isn't gay, but that her older sister is, so she is sensitive to the issue. She said she often heard the coach make derogatory comments about lesbian couples.

Portland has not made a public statement about the ESPN program. She has, however, been outspoken about her anti-gay feelings in the past. In 1986, she told the Chicago Sun Times she doesn't allow lesbians to play on her team. In 1991, when Penn State added sexual orientation to the school nondiscrimination policy, she reaffirmed her no-lesbian-player philosophy.

The National Center for Lesbian Rights has filed a complaint on Harris' behalf with the Pennsylvania Human Rights Commission several weeks ago. The complaint suggests Portland wanted Harris to change her appearance because she was not "feminine enough." Harris said Portland "threatened and humiliated" her enough to get her to quit the team.

In a statement made after the formal discrimination complaint, Portland said the accusations are "completely and utterly untrue." She said Harris wasn't on the team any more because of her "performance and attitude in relation to basketball."

Harris' record, however, may lead people to believe otherwise. During her tenure on the team, she started 22 games; during her last season with the Lady Lions, the 6-foot-tall guard was among team leaders in steals, assists, and scoring. Throughout her career at Penn State she maintained roughly a 3.0 GPA, meaning she was academically eligible to play.

Harris is now sitting out the basketball season. The NCLR says Penn State delayed giving Harris the authorization she needed to ask the NCAA if she could play this year. Harris had transferred to James Madison University so she could still play basketball. She hopes to play in the 2006-2007 season.