

Discrimination charges shadow Penn State coach, former players

Coach Rene Portland, accused in a lawsuit of bias against lesbians, will be the target of protests when the Lady Lions come to Minnesota.

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Jerry Zgoda, Star Tribune*

Cindy Davies scrutinized airline timetables and juggled her work schedule so she and her partner could travel 900 miles for today's Gophers-Penn State women's basketball game at Williams Arena.

The last time she attended a Penn State game -- her state university for which she had once briefly played -- Davies remembers leaving early and in tears. That was more than 20 years ago.

This time, accompanied by supporters who will cheer the Gophers and wear human-rights buttons and lavender clothing in protest of Penn State coach Rene Portland, she plans on staying until the end.

Portland is the Big Ten basketball conference's dichotomous grande dame, twice named the nation's best in her profession, veteran of more games coached at her school (801) than eight other conference peers combined.

She also is the subject of a federal lawsuit alleging that for more than 25 years she systemically has harassed and discriminated against Penn State players, particularly black student-athletes, who she believed to be lesbians.

If proven true, that violates the university's non-discrimination policies as well as state and federal laws.

Former player Jennifer Harris -- dismissed immediately after playing all 30 games, 22 as a starter, last season -- filed the lawsuit in December against Portland, the university and its athletic director. Backed by the National Center for Lesbian Rights, Harris claims Portland repeatedly told her to feminize her appearance and demeanor, told teammates to spy on her dating habits and invoked an "escalating campaign of harassment and humiliation" so she'd quit the team. The suit alleges that Portland believed Harris, who is black and says she is a heterosexual, was a lesbian. She has transferred to James Madison University.

Davies stepped forward to support Harris 23 years after Davies quit the Lady Lions because, she claims, Portland suspected she dated a female team manager and threatened to tell Davies' parents, the media and the university that she was a lesbian.

Davies calls that 1982 meeting "frozen forever" in her memory, a life-changing event that left her feeling alone and floundering -- she admits she drank too much, worked a series of minimum-wage jobs, contemplated suicide -- for many years before she again found her footing.

"I dealt with it as best as I could," said Davies, a record-setting recruit who back then said she quit to focus on academics. "All these years later, it still hurts. It's like it happened yesterday."

She said she vowed she'd tell her story if a Penn State player ever surrounded herself with the proper support to successfully challenge Portland.

"Part of me felt almost guilty for not stepping up to keep this from happening to other girls," Davies said from her Texas country home before she flew to the Twin Cities.

Portland has "categorically and emphatically" denied the allegations. She released two statements last fall and has since declined to discuss the issue. Portland responded initially by saying Harris behaved badly and didn't meet the commitment level expected from her players. When Harris added racial-discrimination charges, Portland said, "My career has been built on treating all Lady Lion players with respect. I will continue to do so."

The university is conducting an investigation. On Thursday, its lawyers asked a federal judge to throw out the suit, a move Harris' lawyer called standard legal procedure.

"No lesbians"

NCLR lawyer Karen Doering calls Portland's discriminatory policy -- "No drinking, no drugs, no lesbians," the lawsuit terms it -- the "worst-kept secret" in NCAA athletics. She said about 20 former Penn State players or athletic department employees from three different decades have told the lesbian-rights advocacy group about experiences similar to those of Harris and Davies.

In a 1986 Chicago Sun-Times article asserting that rampant lesbianism endangered women's athletics' progress and future, Portland was quoted saying, "I will not have it in my program" and said her stance relieved recruits and their parents. Gay-rights activists protested on the Penn State campus in 1991 after a Philadelphia Inquirer story quoted two former players stating matter-of-factly that Portland made it clear she didn't tolerate lesbians.

Soon thereafter, Penn State added a sexual-orientation clause to its non-discrimination policy. Portland has seldom discussed the issue since then, except to say she abides by the policy.

The lawsuit seeks punitive financial damages, an end to the alleged discriminatory behavior, annual sensitivity training for Portland and Penn State staff and a meaningful grievance process for athletes and staff members.

"The problem is much larger than Penn State," Doering said, "but Rene Portland is the poster child for homophobia."

Mary Jo Kane, the University of Minnesota's Tucker Center for Research on Girls and Women in Sport director, calls homophobia "in the bone marrow" of women's athletics because of the relationship between traditional gender roles and sports. Women who aspired to be strong, tough, athletic left their femininity and womanhood "always suspect."

Media images, she said, lopsidedly portray women athletes dressed up, made up, as mothers and wives to mark themselves as heterosexual -- "Not gay," Kane said -- while the WNBA pro basketball league and women's athletics step a "false dance," feeling it necessary to promote themselves as a wholesome, family-oriented product because a significant portion of their audience is lesbian.

"The fear is you will lose your job or your scholarship or not get hired or that negative recruiting will be done against you" if you're known to be or thought to be lesbian, she said.

Kane calls WNBA star Sheryl Swoopes' October announcement that she is gay an "amazing, significant milestone in women's athletics" because she is a woman who is attractive, supremely talented, formerly married and has a young son.

"It illustrates being pro-family and gay are not a contradiction in terms," Kane said. "Lesbians come from families and have families."

Protest planned

OutFront Minnesota -- a Minneapolis gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender advocacy organization -- supports a loosely organized group of some Gophers fans and activists who will wear lavender and rainbow-colored clothing and carry signs expressing "fair-minded messages of equality" today. A Gophers women's basketball Internet bulletin board has featured a spirited discussion on the subject.

"It's more important than basketball," said Sue Short, the board's owner who will wear human-rights equality stickers on her Gophers sweatshirt. "It's human rights."

Gophers coach Pam Borton, her team aimed toward the Big Ten title, said she hopes fans do not protest.

"To use our event to voice people's opinions, to stand on their soapboxes, I hope it's not a distraction to our kids," said Borton, who said she has no opinion on the controversy.

Davies, a physical therapist, said she does not plan to actively protest or confront Portland, whom she said she approached and exchanged in stilted small talk at the Final Four a decade ago.

She attended her last Penn State game -- "I thought I'd be fine, until I got there," she said -- while visiting friends a year or two after she transferred during her sophomore season to a Division II college in Indiana, Pa., her hometown. She decided to attend today's game after meeting supporters through that Internet bulletin board.

"I'm going to have a good time," she said. "Who knows, being there maybe even I'll feel better. Maybe it will help me heal a little more."