

Penn State didn't learn from Duke

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By Christine Brennan

Cautionary tales are delivered to us through the sports pages incessantly, often through the antics of those in the ranks of professional sports. But for all the time we've spent gnashing our teeth over the pros who populate the headlines, who would have thought that the best lessons of the year would come to us from the pristine, pseudo-Ivy world of Duke University? Or, for that matter, all-American Penn State, the ones who always wore the white hats.

Duke, we know about. But 465 miles to the north, we find a story that is far less publicized, but just as revealing. This week at Penn State, the university president reprimanded women's basketball coach Rene Portland for discriminating against a black player by creating a "hostile, intimidating, and offensive environment" because of that player's perceived sexual orientation, according to the university's website.

Jennifer Harris, the player in question, says Portland dismissed her from the team in 2005 because Portland thought she was gay, even though Harris says she is not.

By the standards set by Duke's administration, which admirably got rid of its men's lacrosse coach and canceled the season as details of despicable behavior began to emerge (not even counting the charge of rape), one would expect that Portland would have been forced out of her job for what she did.

She was not. Shocking as that is in 2006, one might presume, then, that she apologized profusely. She didn't do that either.

With a feisty scowl, Portland denied discriminating against Harris, who filed a federal lawsuit against her. She also called the university's investigative process "flawed." Now that's chutzpah. The university president gives her another chance, and she runs right up and kicks him in the teeth.

Portland's reprimand was slight — a \$10,000 fine against the backdrop of a six-figure salary. She also was ordered to participate in diversity and inclusiveness training and was told if she ever does anything like this again, the university definitely will fire her then.

Portland and homosexuals have an ignominious history together. In the 1990s, she refused to deny in a *Philadelphia Inquirer* story that she discriminated against lesbians in her program. When she was saying this back then, she found some takers, especially in the living rooms of Middle America.

One wonders, however, what she is finding today in a world that is more open-minded and, presumably, far more surprised to hear such stark words of discrimination, words that, if one lives by them, also happen to be against the law.

But Portland is a smart woman. She clearly knows how to pick whom to despise on the Penn State campus. Replace the word "gay" with black, Asian, Jew or even overweight, and she would be cleaning out her desk today.

What we are finding out about the affairs of Duke and Penn State is that they are all about what you learn, and how quickly you do so. There was a time not so many years ago when a school like Duke would have pulled a Penn State and gone soft on an offending coach or program. You know, "boys will be boys." But not anymore. Whether a rape was committed or not, Duke's men's lacrosse team had degenerated into a morass unworthy of any institution of higher learning, much less one as reputable as Duke. If it can happen at Duke, it can happen everywhere. We should thank Duke for the wake-up call.

It's not a right to be a college athlete, it's a privilege. Sports teams are significant representatives of a school. (Just ask any Duke alum about that today.) And just as university presidents disband fraternities and the occasional sorority for behavior worthy of *Animal House*, so too should presidents jettison athletic programs that exhibit the same boorish ways. Duke's leadership set an example that more than likely will have to be followed in years to come when other sports teams at other schools come unglued at the seams.

A valuable lesson is learned when one is made an example for others. Unfortunately, Penn State didn't seize the opportunity as Duke did. Perhaps its controversy wasn't publicized enough. Perhaps its news story lacked too many of the incendiary ingredients the Duke case has.

Nonetheless, in places where our children are supposed to be learning, there are lessons to be learned by us all, if only we choose to go looking for them.