

Lesbians in world of athletics

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After Connie Erickson led Niles West to the girls' state basketball championship in 1979, her recruitment consisted of a drive with her parents to the university she wanted to attend.

There was very little contact with players and coaches. If there had been more, she might have perceived something going on behind the ivy walls.

A year later, a year wiser, and a bit paranoid, Erickson transferred to continue her basketball career. Connie had been exposed to homosexual life for the first time.

"It was a mess," said Connie Erickson Brown, married and an assistant basketball coach at the University of Utah. "I went there really naive.

"I guess coming out of high school I didn't quite understand those things. (Female) coaches were living together and I didn't know what was going on."

Brown began to see a division among the players, one she later thought split "the straight ones and the (lesbians)." She discovered one of her teammates was experimenting in homosexual relationships. She accepted invitations to parties only to find out "I shouldn't have walked through the door."

"These girls were telling me by the time I'm a senior, I'd be (lesbian), too," Brown said. "These girls are telling me this and sure enough I look around at the seniors and most of them (appear to be) lesbians. That's the reason I left."

Stories of alleged sexual misconduct and the public perception it created have tainted and overshadowed the advancement of girls sports since the introduction of Title IX in 1972 and the subsequent proliferation of girls' sports.

But that's a minor concern. Some female coaches have abused their influence and have taken advantage of teen-age girls.

"When somebody with power over somebody else either forces them into sex or seduces them into sex, that's sexual harassment," said Anne Petersen, a psychologist who deals with adolescents. "And this case fits that definition perfectly.

Power play

"There's a power relationship there, so the girls might fear not cooperating. But there are probably a lot of cases where they just want to because everyone respects the coach, and they think if this respected person is doing it, that it's OK."

Notre Dame women's basketball coach Mary DiStanislao agrees with Petersen.

"Girls are socialized to a much greater extent than boys, just to please," DiStanislao said. "You hope some girls would rise above it and be a little stronger. But for a lot of girls, it just doesn't happen. They just want to make the coach happy."

Petersen agrees: "Girls are more vulnerable in (coaching) situations. Because of the way those girls are socialized, interpersonal relationships are more important and they tend to blame themselves or feel that there is more that they ought to do."

For coaches, the lesbian issue hasn't been under wraps, but at the same time, they are reluctant to incriminate college programs and college coaches.

Disenchantment

Oak Forest coach Lynn LoBianco had a player come back from a prestigious Midwest school disenchanting with a lesbian coach and players.

"It's well known by people in women's sports," LoBianco said. "And it's very unfortunate, especially for this girl. She is deprived of being able to play the sport in college she was so good at in high school."

Mary Carroll began to hear stories of such activity a few months ago, and she began to worry for her daughter, Mary, a standout basketball and softball player at Maine South.

Carroll asked around and found others had heard the lesbian stories, too.

"The thing that is most shocking to me is that (lesbian activity) has been under wraps all these years. I certainly wouldn't want my kids involved in anything like that. Why people keep these things quiet is beyond me."

One of the first things Penn State coach Rene Portland brings up during a recruiting visit with a prospective player and her parents is lesbian activity.

"I will not have it in my program," Portland said. "I bring it up and the kids are so relieved and the parents are so relieved. But they would probably go without asking the question otherwise, which is really dumb."

In Portland's six years as coach, her hard-line, no-compromise approach has lost her only one recruit, who called Portland "too judgmental."

Portland's extremism is to battle the stigma all of women's sports seemingly has been forced to face: "Guilt by association."

"I don't want to say it (lesbian activity) is very prevalent, because there are some great (lesbian) people out there coaching," Portland said. "That doesn't mean they are bad coaches, as long as they stay good people. The ones that don't stay good people are the ones we should get rid of."

A stigma

Portland is concerned that the guilt by association stigma won't be overcome and the sport won't nurture its own role models, especially when administrators are fearful of hiring women for fear of lesbian activity.

"Let's just get to the stage where we hire the best person, male or female," Portland said. "I think we are killing ourselves and a lot of it is hearsay.

"I have a fear for women's athletics," said Portland, "because people are waiting for us to do something stupid and kiss this all goodbye."

"If the fear is keeping just one girl from participating in athletics, it's one girl too many," said Mundelein College basketball coach Liz Galloway.

"Women's athletics has done too much to help too many people to let it be hurt by a few."

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