

LIONS WOMEN'S BASKETBALL COACH IS USED TO FIGHTING AND WINNING RENE PORTLAND HAS STRONG VIEWS ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS, LESBIAN PLAYERS AND LARGE MARGINS OF VICTORY.

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Want a fight? Rene Portland will give you one. Try anything that even vaguely suggests her team is being treated like a second-class citizen and she will be in your face like a blocked shot. Give her players a little less respect than they deserve and she will give you an attitude adjustment.

A lot of male ego has made the mistake of going toe-to-toe with Portland, only to discover too late that the head coach of the Penn State women's basketball team is used to fighting and used to winning.

Her early battles were small ones. Her St. Joseph's team didn't have practice jerseys. Portland got the players practice jerseys. Since then her battles have gotten progressively larger. As a coach in Colorado, she got her players a workable budget, scholarships, books and a chance to eat at a training table.

When she came to Penn State, the women played in White Hall, in a little room that looked like a junior high gym. If they wanted to use the men's gym, they had to schedule their practices early in the morning or late at night.

Her resolve to bring the women's program out of "the Dark Ages" brought her into conflict with men's coach Dick Harter, and even occasionally with the athletic equivalent of a saint, Joe Paterno.

On the basketball court, she is one of the nation's very best coaches. At Colorado, she took an intramural team and turned it into a national power. Her No. 1-ranked Lions are strong contenders to win the NCAA title this season. She urges her team to play as if "destroying buildings" and prefers total victory to mere wins, often telling her players how much the margin of victory should be.

Yet, this ferocious campaigner for women's rights and basketball victories is also a fascinating contradiction who sometimes irritates other women's rights leaders. While she works tirelessly to open opportunities for some women, she is willing to shut others out.

Her most controversial stance is the least widely known - her refusal to grant scholarships to women who are gay.

It is one of the few issues she will not speak publicly about, but her stance is well known to her players and others in women's basketball.

But Portland sees controversy as a problem for others to worry about. Her view of her mission is simple: "I had enough confidence to stand up and be tall, now and forever," she said.

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Rene Muth Portland, 37, who grew up in an athletic family of seven children in Broomall, was a member of the Immaculata College team of the early '70s - the first great team in women's basketball - that won three national titles.

Players on that team went on to have a national impact on women's basketball. Two teammates, Theresa Greutz and Marianne Stanley, have coached teams that won national championships. Portland, with 338 career victories, is poised to do so, too.

The Lions (29-1), who won the Atlantic Ten Conference tournament last night, defeating St. Joseph's, 78-63, will now go on to the NCAA tournament.

Portland began coaching in 1976 at St. Joseph's. She made \$2,300 per season there, while her teams were winning 47 games in two years.

Her big coaching break came in 1978 when Colorado offered her \$20,000 and the chance to turn an intramural team into a legitimate Division I power.

She did not let that chance go by. While making dramatic improvements in the budget and basic athletic amenities, she made great demands on her players, at one point taking them on a 22-game road trip to the East.

A TASKMASTER

Sandy Bean played for one of Portland's Colorado teams and vividly remembers an uncompromising taskmaster.

"Rene actually made us box out," said Bean. "We had never done that before. She said, 'You girls have big butts, so stick them into somebody's stomach.' "

After one loss, recalled Bob Foley, a former assistant, she demanded: "Get on a plane and don't come back until you get me some players."

After two seasons, Portland suddenly found the women's athletic budget being drained by the football program. Chuck Fairbanks, then the football coach, remodeled his office at a cost of more than \$50,000. "We used to take our recruits in there," Portland said. "It was bigger than a restaurant."

This was in 1980. Penn State needed a coach that year.

Paterno, then the athletic director as well as the football coach, offered Portland the job. "I knew I wasn't going to find anything better," he said. "She knew exactly what she wanted."

Except that she wasn't sure she wanted Penn State.

The program was solid. But Rec Hall was off-limits to the women's team. The women players had no locker rooms or office space. They played their games in White Hall.

"I know you're going to take the job," associate sports information director Mary Jo Haverbeck told Portland after her campus visit.

"I'm not going to take the job," Portland replied. "That place is in the Dark Ages." But she did.

Harter, the men's coach, hoarded his prerogatives like rare coins. He closed off the jogging track above the court. He taped the gym doors so no one could look in on practices. And he definitely didn't appreciate sharing anything with the women's team.

Portland refers to him as "the ultimate woman-hater."

"They were two tough competitors," Paterno said. "The fact that they butted heads - nothing wrong with that. Dick was fighting to get his program better. She was fighting for equal facilities."

Portland, married to John Portland, a home builder, refused to practice at night; she had two kids, would soon have three, and was determined to be home for supper.

Paterno refurbished a practice gym in Rec Hall, replaced the floor, provided new rims. He moved the women's games into the main gym. He provided a locker room, a full-time secretary and a full-time assistant coach. When he moved, he gave Portland his office.

She won 19 games that first year, then 24, then 26, all without a blue-chip recruit. In 1985, Portland finally landed her first blue-chipper, Suzie McConnell of Pittsburgh, who would make the Olympic team in 1988. Since then, Portland has won at least 20 games in all but one season.

This year's team is impressive offensively, with crisp passing, inside- outside balance and a willingness to take the three-point shot.

"She's just the type you want to play for," McConnell said. "She cares about you as a person and a student. She tells you exactly what she expects, on the court and in class. If you don't do it, there's consequences."

No drinking is allowed from the first day of school until the day after the season ends. No jeans are allowed on road trips. Miss a class and you aren't allowed to practice.

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Portland also has an unwritten rule of keeping lesbians off her team.

All Portland will say about that is, "I have training rules. And I will never have to say what my training rules are."

But it is clear from interviews with former Penn State players and recruits, other coaches, campus organizations and the Women's Basketball Coaches Association that her stance is no secret.

"She does make it known when she's recruiting that she doesn't put up with homosexuality," McConnell said.

"She tells you, flat out, 'I don't have any appreciation for the homosexual lifestyle. I won't have that on my team,' " said Patti Longenecker,

who played at Penn State from 1983 to 1986.

Wendy Benner, of the Gay-Lesbian Switchboard in State College, said it was common knowledge in the lesbian community "that there is no place on the team for lesbians. And if you are one, you'd better keep your mouth shut and hide it."

Betty Jaynes, executive director of the Women's Basketball Coaches Association, said she was aware of Portland's stance. "I think it would be received with mixed reaction around the country," Jaynes said. "Many coaches would not agree with it, many would."

Jaynes said the WBCA had conducted seminars on homophobia but had no real policy on sexual orientation. The NCAA leaves to individual schools the decision of awarding scholarships to homosexual players, according to spokesman Jim Marchiony.

When Portland arrived at Penn State, three players left the team because of "principle differences," Portland said.

Several years ago, she said, an affirmative-action complaint was filed against her after another player was dismissed. The complaint contended that the player had been released because she was a lesbian.

"I cut the kid because she couldn't play," Portland said, adding that no action was taken against her by the school as a result of the complaint.

"Obviously, I heard about it," said Jim Tarman, the Penn State AD. "It was a matter between the individual and the office of affirmative action; it was not between her and the athletic department."

Tarman said, "I usually don't ask people (coaches) what they do in certain areas, such as the sexual preference of their recruits. I never had a specific discussion with her about that."

Tarman also said that "if any action was going to be taken" as a result of Portland's stance, "it would not be by the athletic department."

Portland's stance is not against the law in Pennsylvania. Penn State, however, has a nondiscrimination policy that prohibits intolerance of sexual orientation. Penalties for violating the policy include dismissal from the school.

Penn State President Joab Thomas could not be reached for comment.

CHANGING A PERCEPTION

Several Penn State players said in interviews that they appreciated Portland's stance, which they said was aimed at avoiding social disruption on the team and at changing the perception that many women athletes are lesbians.

"I like that she took that stance," said Meggan Yedsena, of Mahanoy City, Pa., the state's player of the year last season.

When Portland recruited her, Yedsena said, the coach said she would revoke the scholarship of a player if she found that the player was a lesbian.

Yedsena said she narrowed her choices to Penn State and Nebraska precisely because both coaches made their feelings clear.

"It's pretty much a big issue," said Yedsena, who ultimately chose to go to Nebraska. "Rene and (Nebraska coach Angela) Beck are trying to create an image for women's basketball. They are trying to get the stereotype erased."

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One of Portland's most celebrated struggles came last year when the Penn State athletic department surrendered the Lady Lions' home-court advantage in a first-round NCAA tournament game, banishing them to Florida so the men's team could play a lesser NIT game at home on ESPN. Portland went on the offensive.

"Every female athlete at Penn State has to be insulted by this decision," she said to anyone who would listen. "I've always valued the four-letter tournament (NCAA) more than the three-letter (NIT)."

Women's groups on campus protested the men's game at Rec Hall. A 20-foot sign outside said, "The women should be here tonight." Apparently, many Penn State fans felt the same way. The men's game drew only 3,800 spectators, half the crowd that showed up for the men's second-round NIT game.

Although she is quick to praise Paterno's support for the women's program, Portland did not feel he was supportive on this issue and she said so.

"The 'old guard' in Joe came out in that," she said. " 'Send the women away. We don't need the women.' "

Paterno had a different side of the story.

"I thought she was all wet on that baby," he said. "She knew what was going to happen. There was no need to make that big a deal. But it's tough to get angry with her. As a coach, I can understand her fighting for her kids."

Most people come to understand that.

- Caption: PHOTO PHOTO (1) 1. Portland has taken Penn State to a No. 1 ranking. (The Philadelphia Inquirer / JOHN COSTELLO)
- Memo: COLLEGE BASKETBALL

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