

Training Rules - Synopses

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26 Word Summary:

Training Rules examines how women's collegiate sports, caught in a web of homophobic practices, destroys the lives and dreams of many of its most talented athletes.

30 Word Summary:

Training Rules examines how women's collegiate sports, caught in a web of homophobic practices, colludes in the destruction of the lives and dreams of many of its most talented athletes.

Synopsis 1 (102 words): Rene Portland had three training rules during her 26 years coaching basketball at Pennsylvania State University - no drinking, no drugs and no lesbians. *Training Rules*, examines how a wealthy athletic department, enabled by the silence of a complacent university, allowed talented athletes, thought to be gay, to be dismissed from their college team. The film follows the lawsuit filed in 2006 against Portland and Penn State by student athlete Jennifer Harris. This high profile case ignited the world of women's collegiate sports. It inspired the discussions so sorely needed to end discrimination based on sexual orientation that pervades all organized sport.

Synopsis 2 (149 words): Rene Portland had three training rules during her 26 years coaching basketball at Pennsylvania State University - no drinking, no drugs and no lesbians. *Training Rules*, examines how a wealthy athletic department, enabled by the silence of a complacent university, allowed talented athletes, thought to be gay, to be dismissed from their college team.

In 2006, student athlete Jennifer Harris, in conjunction with the National Center for Lesbian Rights, filed charges against Pennsylvania State University and basketball coach Rene Portland for discrimination based on sexual orientation. This lawsuit inspired others whose lives were shattered during Coach Portland's reign to come forward. The film focuses on these individuals and investigates why organizations, established to protect these athletes have done so little to end this common form of victimization.

Training Rules serves as a wake-up call to the many athletic departments nationwide that still discriminate against their student athletes and coaches.

Synopsis 3 - (1035 words)

At age three Jen Harris was running track against eight year olds -and winning. Towards the end of 5th grade she received her first recruitment letter from a college basketball program. By 9th grade she had received well over 250 recruitment letters from universities nation wide. In 2003, Jen graduated from Central Dauphin high school with academic honors. She is still the most decorated basketball player in the high school's history. Out of all the universities she could have chosen, she accepted an athletic scholarship from Pennsylvania State University and began playing basketball for the Lady Lions. A year and a half later, in March 2005, she was summarily dismissed from the team. Had she been allowed to move into her junior year, she would have been the team's leading scorer.

When Jennifer entered Penn State Rene Portland, the Lady Lions basketball coach, had already been coaching for 23 years. During that same 23 years she made no secret of her training rules - no drugs, no drinking and no lesbians. Her intention, as stated to the Chicago Sun Times in 1986 and the Philadelphia Inquirer in 1991, was to take the stigma of lesbianism out of women's sports.

Portland used tactics that were deemed "intimidating, hostile and offensive" against Jennifer when she was a Lady Lion. The indignities and ostracism that followed her dismissal resulted in depression and thoughts of suicide. Jennifer was resolute that this treatment would befall no other student athlete. In 2006 she decided to take legal action. The advocacy organization, The National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR), determined

that this case was emblematic of a pervasive and stifling homophobic climate in women's collegiate sports and proceeded to file charges against Portland, athletic director Tim Curley, and Penn State University. The suit alleged discrimination based on perceived sexual orientation, racism and gender stereotyping. At the time, Jennifer had no idea how many others would break their painful silence of decades to share similar stories of abuse and discrimination.

"Training Rules" takes the disturbing facts of the Harris vs. Portland case and personalizes their impact by telling Jennifer's story as well as those of six other women who were victimized through the years. Together they unveil a litany of betrayal, abuse, humiliation and bigotry. Softball coach Sue Rankin, whose activism contributed to passing the 1992 inclusion of sexual orientation into Penn State's non-discrimination policy, was pressured by the athletic department to disengage from her activities. Her outspokenness precipitated a decline in her coaching evaluations. Each of these young athletes was at the top of her game when she was dismissed. Sue Rankin's coaching evaluations had been excellent.

Known as "The Mommy Coach", Rene Portland made ardent promises to take good care of the young women she enlisted for her team, most of who were leaving home for the first time. During a recruitment visit in 2002, coach Portland visited Jen at her job and at home. Pearl and Lambert, Jen's parents, were delighted to host one of the winningest coaches in women's basketball. They broke bread together. Rene assured them she would be Jen's mom away from home.

It was a very different picture on March 2, 2005 – the end of Jen's sophomore year at Penn State. Pearl and Lambert were on their way back from Jen's out of town playoff game with Liberty College. It was after 1am when Jen called them in tears. Just minutes before, Rene had brusquely and dispassionately dismissed Jen from the Lady Lions.

Student athlete Cindy Davies, whose talents were so extraordinary that she was recruited for the Olympic trials her senior year in high school, was an early casualty of Coach Portland's discrimination. Her story parallels that of the other Lady Lions (also characters in the film) who were dismissed, or forced to leave the team.

While Jen Harris, Cindy Davies and others were recovering from the trauma and

devastation of lost scholarships, self-esteem and promising basketball careers, coach Portland flourished. She was twice voted “Coach of the Year” by the Women’s Basketball Coaches Association (WBCA). Once in 1991, the same year the Philadelphia Inquirer article came out and again in 2004. In addition, she has won that same honor four times in her Big Ten division. She also held the title of President of the Women’s Basketball Coaches Association (WBCA) from 1989-1990.

It is notable that all of the women whose lives were dismantled by Coach Portland decry her discrimination, but without exception testify that she is, technically, an exceptional coach. No one has challenged her strategic knowledge of the game. She was a winning coach who filled the stands and brought elite players to her program. Her reward was an impenetrable encasement in the protective bubble of a powerful athletic department.

Although Jen’s story of harassment and dismissal repeats itself with remarkable consistency among other basketball players at her school, this is a tale told not just at Penn State, but also at universities and colleges across the country. Rene Portland may be a blatant example of homophobia in women’s sports, but she is NOT the only coach who discriminates based on sexual orientation. Penn State is NOT the only university that disregards its own code of ethics in order to preserve its cash flow.

How was this allowed to happen? It is well known that Coach Portland, as well as certain other college coaches, discriminate. It is public information. Where were the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA), the Women’s Basketball Coaches Association (WBCA) and the university, when coach Portland’s unfettered statements of bias were made to the press? If these statements were being made in reference to race, i.e., no drugs, no drinking, no Blacks, Jews, Asians..., how silent would they have been? How has this culture of silence diminished women’s sports? What are the consequences to Coach Portland’s basketball program at Penn State? Although Rene Portland’s career demonstrates an impressive win loss record, she has never won a national title. Can a team living in fear really win it all?

When the last image of *Training Rules* fades from the screen, some of these questions are answered, others are raised and a tangled web of discrimination is exposed.