

SPORTING CHANCE

Lewis & Clark professor fights homophobia in college athletics
by Melissa Saylor

A football player beats up a tennis player because he is gay. A coach outs a student to his teammates and family. A coach is outed and his students become the victims of vandalism and verbal and physical assaults. A known lesbian grows out her hair, begins wearing skirts and puts away pictures of her girlfriend when she gets a job as an assistant coach at a large university.

For most, college is a time of great self-discovery, idealism and freedom. But not for many gay athletes and coaches. Every day they have to struggle with the pressure of staying closeted—or going back in the closet—for fear of being harassed, not being played or not being promoted.

But Nora Beck, faculty athletic representative and professor of musicology at Lewis & Clark College, and a handful of like-minded peers are hoping to change that.

Two years ago she attended her first NCAA Annual Conference in San Diego. After sitting through a panel on diversity and hearing no mention of sexual orientation, she made one simple action that hopefully will send waves through the sports world for a long time.

During the question-and-answer period, she stood up and said: "This was a wonderfully informative panel, but I'm a lesbian and I played basketball at Barnard College in New York for four years, and it was really hard being in the closet and our coach was in the closet and it was just a tough time. Could someone address homophobia on the diversity panel?"

The convention hall, packed with hundreds of people, answered her with dead silence. But officials eventually came forward from the NCAA and assured her they were working on the issue.

After two years and a few well-placed letters urging them to address the matter, they held their first panel on homophobia in sports during the 2002 conference Jan. 12 in Indianapolis. Speakers included Laurie Priest and Michael Muska, openly gay athletic directors at private colleges; Dwight Slater, a student and former football player at Stanford; Jenny Allard, head softball coach at Harvard; and Beck.

About 200 people listened as the panelists shared their experiences with homophobia and outlined the issues facing campuses nationwide. The common threads connecting everyone's stories were performance and well-being—as a student, an athlete, a coach, a teammate, a teacher or a mentor.

According to *NCAA News*, Slater explained that keeping his sexuality secret in a team environment rife with anti-gay and offensive comments and jokes was eating him alive. "My academics were affected, my football was affected. I couldn't sleep or eat."

Allard said coming out to her team brought about a stronger sense of trust, which improved the level of play and classroom achievement. Muska said he could've been a better coach had he been honest about his sexuality earlier in his career.

"I just couldn't concentrate," Beck explains of her experience as a closeted athlete. "My grades went down.... I was nervous someone was going to find out. I just didn't perform well."

Beck is also a musician and writer; she just finished publishing *Fiammetta*, a novel about lesbian love and adventure. "I come from a world where the more honest you are, the better your art is," and she hopes to relate that understanding to gay athletes and coaches.

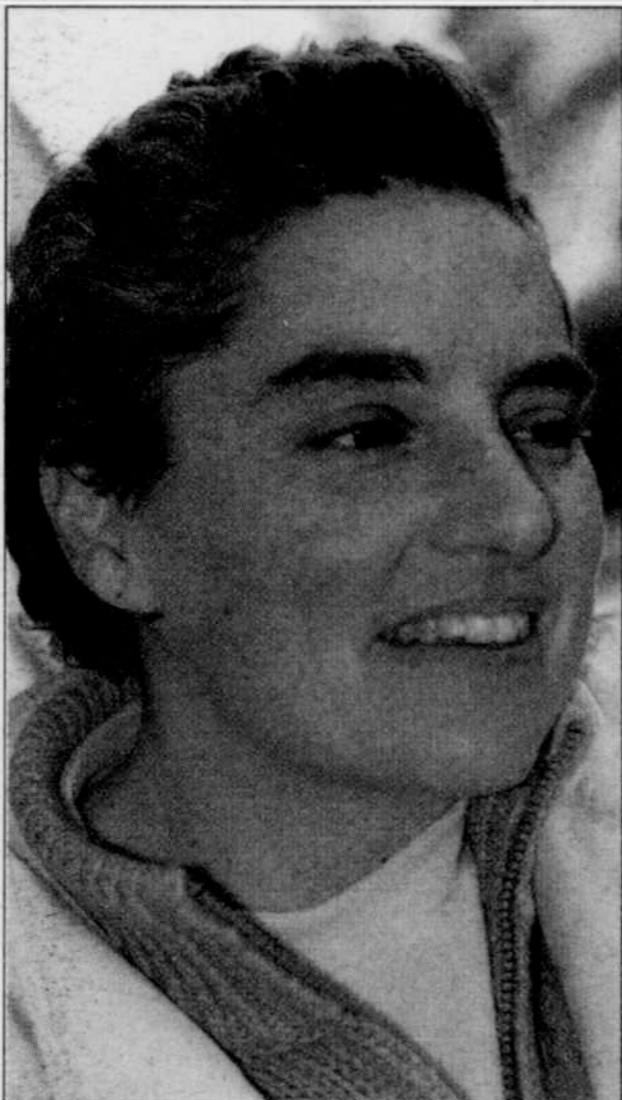


PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

Nora Beck spearheaded the NCAA's first panel on homophobia in sports

But is the country ready for its beloved star quarterbacks and record-breaking home-run hitters to be openly gay? Considering athletes often represent the penultimate image of masculinity—not to mention the shaky ground of gaining acceptance female athletes still stand on—change will come slowly.

Beck points out an added obstacle for colleges is their focus on having a good image to attract new students. Out gay athletes might damage the school's reputation and bring them unwanted attention.

But "education is where it has to start," Beck says. Although administrators have been slow to address the matter, "the students won't let the issue be dropped."

This summer Beck is planning to meet with the NCAA's Management Councils and Student Athlete Advisory Committees, which then will start building an information base on what kind of support systems are in place and get ideas about rules that can be enacted for dealing with homophobia. She says the association has the right language regarding discrimination in its bylaws but doesn't have any policy to deal with it when it does happen.

In the meantime, she and Andy Holder have co-founded a nonprofit called Sexual Minorities in Athletics. Its goal is to develop financially sustainable programs to combat homophobia within the world of athletics and its connection to societal acceptance of gays. ■

SEXUAL MINORITIES IN ATHLETICS can be found on the Internet at www.smiaonline.org. Other sites to check out are www.outsports.com and www.coachganby.com, which has information about former track coach Eric Anderson's coming-out experience in Southern California.

MELISSA SAYLER is a former University of Colorado at Boulder rugby player. Go Buffs!

Eric Brown
District Manager
in Portland
500 NE Multnomah
Portland, OR 97232
503.238.6036

**Want to be on
top of the world
with your investments?**

Mutual Funds Investing
IRAs and Roth IRAs
IRA Rollovers
Estate Planning
Retirement Planning
Investments for Retirement Income
Savings Plans for College
Tax Advantaged Investments
Working with the Gay and Lesbian Community for over Ten Years

Sure, you can get a lot of information on the Internet. Too much information, in fact. Where do you begin? How do you know it's reliable? And, most important, how does that information apply to your specific situation?

Those are some of the reasons to meet with Eric Brown, a personal financial advisor from Waddell & Reed. Eric takes the time to get to know you and your family and help you create a workable, personalized, financial plan specifically tailored to help you reach your goals.

For information without the confusion, call Eric Brown, financial advisor from Waddell & Reed.

Investing. With a plan.®
waddell.com

Member SIPC

Our Family Realtor Since 1990

ACLU

Sierra Club

Full Circle Temple

Portland Lesbian Choir

Nature Conservancy

1000 Friends of Oregon

Lesbian Community Project

Basic Rights Oregon

When you buy or sell a home with me, you'll know your dollars are helping support a greater cause. I contribute at least 10% of my earnings to community and environmental organizations.

Millynn James

Associate Broker, GRI
ABR, Accredited Buyer's Representative

503.330.HOME (4663)
1.800.825.9948

www.millynn.com
Email: millynn@james.com