Emotional Abuse Allegations Beset Three College Basketball Programs

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Already in 2019, three Division I women's basketball programs are reeling from allegations that coaches engaged in emotionally abusive and manipulative behavior towards student-athletes.

The Georgia Institute of Technology ("Georgia Tech") fired Head Coach MaChelle Joseph on March 26, following allegations that Joseph fostered a toxic environment. Current and former players maintain that Joseph – the team's longest tenured and most successful coach – cursed, yelled, and threw basketballs and clipboards at players. One former player accused Joseph of sexual harassment. Joseph insists that she did yell and curse, but categorically denies engaging in emotional or mental abuse, or sexual harassment. To the contrary, several players reported that Joseph would – daily – curse at players and call them demeaning names. Some staff members confirmed the players' accusations and said Joseph also "regularly disrespected" staff members. Additionally, when players voiced concerns about Joseph to the team psychologist, players suspected that the psychologist relayed those exact concerns to Joseph. The players visited the psychologist in a private setting and under the expectation of confidentiality, but Joseph would, during team practices or meetings, call out the exact concerns the players mentioned to the psychologist.

The University of North Carolina ("UNC") placed Head Coach Sylvia Hatchell and three assistant coaches on administrative leave due to issues raised by student-athletes. Hatchell brought a national title to UNC in 1994 and has twice been named National Coach of the Year but is now under scrutiny after players claimed that she made racially insensitive comments. On one occasion, Hatchell allegedly told players that she would hang nooses in the locker room if the team played poorly against the University of Louisville. The players also said Hatchell referred to players as old mules, which they understood as a reference to female slaves. Hatchell's attorney said the players misconstrued Hatchell's statements, which were not intended to be racially insensitive. Several of Hatchell's former players have described the coach as fierce, but not as racist.

At Northern Kentucky University ("NKU"), student-athlete Taryn Taugher alleged that Head Coach Camryn Whitaker emotionally abused current and former players over the past three years. In a blog post, Taugher argued that Whitaker went far beyond the constructive criticism student-athletes expect. Of all the accusations, two were sensational. First, Whitaker had a "crying couch" in her office, on which student-athletes would sit as Whitaker insulted players' intelligence and threatened to take their scholarships away. Second, Whitaker once humiliated a player with Crohn's Disease by making the rest of the team run sprints while the player used the restroom. Taugher claims that NKU's Title IX office and school officials were aware of these incidents, but never acted on that awareness. Taugher's claims caused immediate reactions – from teammates, NKU, and local media. While some players backed Taugher, eight current teammates issued a strong rebuttal in a blog post of their own, noting that the demands and hardships they have experienced never "exceed the expected amount." In response to Taugher's claims, NKU opened an "independent, external review and assessment" of its women's basketball program but did not provide additional details. Whitaker has not responded.

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All three universities opened external reviews of their women's basketball programs. As of this writing, it is unclear whether Hatchell and Whitaker will face the same fate as Joseph. It is clear, though, that at least three bodies of rules can apply when a student-athlete alleges abuse by a coach.

First, virtually all universities have codes of conduct that apply to students and school personnel, alike. These codes sometimes outline consequences for violations thereof. But, universities do not routinely apply such rules in the athletic context, and universities rarely apply such rules after a student-athlete alleges abuse. The relationship between coaches and players is often more informal than a professor-student relationship but can be more intense and confrontational. University codes of conduct and employee manuals should specifically address potential concerns in the relationship between coaches and players. Moreover, institutions should vocalize their expectations of all involved parties if the player-coach relationship ever sours.

Second, student-athlete wellbeing is an anchor of the National Collegiate Athletic Association ("NCAA") Division I Manual. Coaches and staff members are implored to "do more than avoid improper conduct or questionable acts." Instead, they must demonstrate exemplary conduct. Article 10.1 notes that staff members can be disciplined for unethical conduct. Thus, if allegations of emotional abuse and verbal mistreatment are borne out, the NCAA could take disciplinary action against a coach or university.

Third, legal commentators, school officials, and student-athletes often speak about Title IX as if it provides all rules relevant to women's college sports, but the Title IX statute does not tell universities how to handle allegations of emotional abuse. This is worth mentioning because NKU's players claimed they reported Whitaker's behavior to the Title IX office, yet the issue was never resolved. Title IX's focus is to prohibit discrimination based on sex. Unless NKU deliberately allowed a coach of women's sports to engage in acts the university would not allow a coach of men's sports to engage in, Title IX plays no role in a university's response to allegations of emotional abuse.

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