

Ray McNulty: Jensen Beach lacrosse coach wins showdown over ... shoes?

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That's what they came up with? Shoes?

Really?

That's what they wanted everyone to believe, anyway.

That was the trumped-up reason Jensen Beach High School principal Ginger Featherstone and athletic director R.J. Costello concocted to fire girls lacrosse coach Michele Ruth in June.

That's what came out of the recently signed settlement of the gender-discrimination case Ruth was prepared to file against the Martin County School Board, which wisely decided to reinstate her as coach rather than risk a big loss in court.

She coached barefoot.

It wasn't because she lost too much. (She didn't.) It wasn't because her players didn't like her. (They do.)

Oh, and her dismissal had nothing to do with Ruth requesting that her varsity team be allowed to play its games in the football stadium and, when Costello refused, raising the issue of Title IX — that pesky, federal law governing gender-equity in education.

It was the shoes. Or, to be more precise, the lack of them.

That's what Featherstone and Costello tried to sell as their excuse for getting rid of a coach who refused to cower to their will, surrender her principles and relinquish her legal rights.

In fact, a requirement that Ruth "at all times wear close-toed shoes while working in her capacity as lacrosse coach" was cited prominently in the incredibly petty and ridiculously wrong-headed "Last Chance Agreement" she refused to sign.

Just one problem: Ruth said her barefoot coaching didn't become an issue until AFTER she started pestering Costello about playing in the stadium, which was used by the football team in the fall, the boys and girls soccer teams in the winter and sat idle in the spring.

"My first year, R.J. stood next to me on the field and had no problem with it," said Ruth, who has been coaching for 30 years, began the Jensen Beach program in 2009 and guided the Falcons to a district runner-up finish in 2010.

"It wasn't until my second year, after I brought up Title IX, that he made it an issue. He said it was a safety concern, because of glass and nails and snakes."

Glass and nails and snakes. Oh, my!

Certainly, walking barefoot on a field where glass and nails and snakes pose a health hazard is a matter to be taken seriously. But didn't the lacrosse teams playing on that same field deserve the same consideration?

Didn't those public-school teams deserve the opportunity to play in the best available facility, a stadium that was built for them by the taxpayers?

Didn't the girls lacrosse team have the same right to play in the stadium as the football team, just like all the other girls lacrosse teams at football-playing schools on the Treasure Coast?

Those are among the questions I'd like to ask Costello and Featherstone and even schools superintendent Nancy Kline. I'd especially like to hear from Featherstone and Kline, who, as women devoted to education, should be particularly sensitive to Title IX issues.

But neither Featherstone nor Costello returned phone messages or replied to emails Thursday.

Cathleen Brennan, the school district public information officer, responded with an email saying, "The district does not comment on personnel matters."

Doesn't matter, really.

What matters is that Ruth believed her girls should be allowed to play in the stadium. She believed they were being denied that opportunity because they were girls. She believed they were being wronged.

So she spoke up and wouldn't back down, even after Featherstone and Costello refused to budge — even after she was told she wasn't being a "team player," even after they fired her.

Then came that silly "Last Chance Agreement," which gave her all the ammunition she needed to make a federal case of a situation the Jensen Beach administrators botched from the outset.

Ruth contacted Public Justice, the Washington, D.C.-based, public interest law firm that prides itself on fighting injustice and holding corporate and government wrongdoers accountable.

The firm recently won a \$3.4 million settlement for two former coaches at Florida Gulf Coast University, which was accused of retaliating against the women after they voiced gender-equity concerns in the school's athletic department.

But Ruth didn't want money.

She wanted her coaching job back. She wanted Jensen Beach to let her team play in the stadium. She wanted that "Last Chance Agreement" to be voided and the administrators prohibited from enforcing its conditions in the future.

She won.

And she won big — not financially but on principle, though the settlement requires the school district to pay her attorneys' fees. Truth is, the school board was smart to settle this thing.

You don't need to be "Matlock" to see how Ruth could make a convincing case that she was fired for raising the Title IX issue and that the "Last Chance Agreement" was a form of retaliation, so going to court could've cost the district a pile of cash.

I mean, what was the district's defense?

Shoes?

Really?