Ex-N. Stafford gymnast is one of nine plaintiffs in a discrimination case

PHILADELPHIA -- Liz Barrett knows a little bit about adversity but what she has encountered over the past year is more than most college athletes should have to endure.

Barrett, a junior at West Chester State University (Pa.), was a standout gymnast at North Stafford High School.

Each year for the Wolverines, after overcoming some major injury, she got better and better and closed out her career with a trip to the state tournament, among other accomplishments.

West Chester State University junior Liz Barrett, a former North Stafford athlete, is involved in a Title IX lawsuit in Philadelphia.

Once she arrived at West Chester, the injury bug hit again in her first year.

“My freshman year, I got hurt in December with a sprained ankle,” Barrett said. “It took about two months [to heal] but then I went back to competing on the bars and we finished the year with a 7-3 record.”

In her sophomore year, Barrett thought she had broken her ankle, and the team suffered through a season of only three wins. Both years the team had a different coach.

Then, around exam time in the spring, the university dropped a bombshell on the nine members of the gymnastics team. The school cancelled the women’s gymnastics program. Men’s lacrosse was also cut, but the school added women’s golf.

“At the end of that school year, in April, we had a meeting and they told us our team got cut,” Barrett said.

“Ever since then our parents started getting together and contacted some lawyers to see what our legal rights are. Since then the case unfolded and we let the university know last Thursday [Sept. 4] that we had filed a lawsuit. The local papers and television stations were there and we even had a write up in USA Today.”

Barrett doesn’t care about delving into the specifics; she wants to be like every other college student. She wants to get good grades in her communicative disorders major and also find time for her part-time job at Abercrombie and Fitch/Kids. Plus, she wants to hang around with her close friends.

But she does feel betrayed.

The case is now being called Barrett v. West Chester State University.

“I feel like I’ve been ripped off,” Barrett said.

“I could have gone to a school in Virginia and saved my parents a lot of money. What I miss most is the competition. I feel like they have ripped that away from me.”

One of the things Barrett, who boasts a 3.2 GPA, is sure of is the school is going to regret its decision.

“I think the school didn’t understand what they were getting themselves into. We
don’t want any money; we just want our team back. We had five new recruits coming in and they have now gone elsewhere.”

Barrett, along with her eight gymnastics teammates, contacted the Trial Lawyers for Public Justice and then filed the sex discrimination lawsuit on in Philadelphia.

“This lawsuit will make sure that West Chester women get the athletic opportunities that they were promised and that they deserve,” said Sharon McKee of Hangley Aronchick Segal & Pudlin, who is co-lead counsel for the team.

“WCU cannot cut athletic opportunities for women when it should be offering more.”

The lawsuit charges that WCU’s decision to cut the gymnastics team violates Title IX’s three-part test for determining whether a university has provided “equal opportunities” for members of both sexes to participate in sports.

According to McKee, there are three ways to meet the Title IX criteria: (1) Percentage of women at the school is comparable to the women participating in varsity athletics. (2) Continually expanding opportunities for more women and more women varsity sports. (3) Even if you can’t show proportionally that the school is meeting the needs, you have to be able to fully and effectively accommodate the interest of the women on campus.

And WCU has shown the ability to have not complied with any of the three, McKee argued.

After the team was dropped, the gymnasts worked to get the team reinstated. After obtaining legal counsel, they sent a letter in July to point out the school was not in compliance with Title IX and asked for reinstatement but were denied.

“When it became clear they weren’t going to reinstate the gym team and comply with Title IX,” McKee said, “we brought the lawsuit against the university, the president, the athletic director and the assistant AD.”

A hearing on the motion was scheduled for Sept. 29, McKee said. “We also filed a motion for preliminary injunction to have the gymnastics team re-instated. If the judge rules in our favor the school must reinstate the team, at least temporarily while litigation is still going on,” McKee added.

The team normally starts its competitive schedule in January.

McKee sympathizes with the existing eight plaintiffs (one transferred to Penn State) and for the incoming recruits.

“It’s very unfair to have your athletic team eliminated at the end of the school year,” McKee said.

“You don’t have an opportunity to compete or to do anything about it. It is very unfair and very sad. [Even if the athletes wanted to] it’s hard to get a slot on a gymnastics team somewhere else and maybe even harder to not have the ability to compete.”

But McKee remains optimistic that Barrett can resume the role she loves dearly — a student-athlete competing every day at the college level in gymnastics.

“Our hope is not only that the gymnastic teams gets reinstated but that this results all sorts of improvements for women.”

“We want women to be able to compete when they want, and we want to make more coaches, better coaches, better equip and better overall everything for women who want to compete at the varsity level.”