

CHAPTER 3 THE LAST TO KNOW

THE RUMOR MILL

Rumors had begun circulating that Providence College was going to cut some of its men's sports programs even before the ruling had been made on Brown University's Title IX sex discrimination lawsuit. Some PC athletes had heard the whispers, but the administration never confirmed or denied the allegations, so the discussion remained merely background noise. That fall, however, the static started to pick up its intensity.

Baseball was certainly not excluded from the debate, but no one really believed that America's pastime would be one of the programs that a Catholic school, so steeped in tradition, would simply eliminate to improve their bottom line. With the success that the baseball program had enjoyed in recent years, the threat just wasn't taken seriously. Swimming or track, or any one of the other sports, really, would be the program or programs that everyone thought would be the first to go.

While the game clock on several Providence College sports was ticking down to zero, the individual male athletes whose programs were targeted for elimination were completely unsuspecting. Conversely, school administrators had known for quite some time which teams were in their last days. The announcement was forthcoming, and the secret needed to be kept just a little longer. However, as the semester got underway, the students who were around the administrative offices began to notice an inordinate number of men in suits coming and going. One of those students was Dave Regan, who worked in the office of the Vice President for Student Affairs. It was not difficult for him to determine that these men were attorneys, and for whatever reason he was under the impression that some kind of lawsuit involving the women's hockey team was brewing. That got the student thinking about contacting a friend who worked for the college paper, *The Cowl*. He thought his friend would be interested in pursuing the story further. The friend he contacted was Joe

Valenzano who, besides being a sports writer for the school paper was also the statistician for the baseball team. Joe was very interested. When he began to look in the story, the first person he talked to was Brian Tamul, a former PC baseball player and graduate student who worked as an assistant in the Athletic Compliance Office.

Brian sounded a bit anxious to Joe as soon as he brought up the subject of the lawyers on campus. Brian refused to speak over the phone, and arranged a meeting in the rafter seats of Alumni Hall where they could talk in private. Joe thought it was very odd, and did not understand the need for all the secrecy. However, once they started talking Brian told him off the record that baseball was on the chopping block and that it was probably going to be one of several men's varsity teams eliminated by the college at the end of the academic year.

Joe was stunned, even more so because this story was totally different from the one his friend had given him. There was no way this was not going to make the next edition of the paper, he thought to himself. Even though Brian refused to be named as the source, Joe ran the information by the paper's Sports Editor, Ken Martin, who was also a one-time member of the Friar baseball team and had played alongside Brian. Another clandestine meeting was arranged, this one between Ken and Brian, who was fearful of losing his grad assistantship for speaking out. The two met in the back of a car one night in a parking lot off campus, and Ken reassured his former teammate that under no circumstance would his name be disclosed. Brian trusted him and revealed everything he knew.

TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES

When Ken returned from the meeting with Brian, he told Joe that they were going to write the story, listing Brian as an unidentified source. The two school journalists put in some very late hours trying to get the piece completed before that week's deadline. It was close, but they got it in just before the copy went to print. There was no time to even have the story approved by the college administration, which looked over the content of everything that went into *The Cowl*. Truth be told, there was a very real concern that the administration would not approve the

story, so a more conscious effort was made to sneak it by them. In going forward, they knew they were taking a great professional risk. Then, on Thursday, October 1, 1998, the headline in the sports section of *The Cowl* read, "Title IX Enters Eleventh Hour."

The article addressed the gender equity disparity at Providence College head on, reporting that several men's teams were in jeopardy as a result. Citing an unspecified source within the Athletic Department, it was speculated that baseball might very well be the sport that would be eliminated by the college in order to comply with NCAA regulations regarding Title IX.

In print now, in black and white for everyone to read, the shadowy rumors were suddenly transformed into something more substantial. The article generated an instant buzz around campus and among the PC athletes. It also rattled the cages of college administrators, who threatened to shut down the entire newspaper if the source was not revealed. Ken and Joe were the only ones on the paper's staff who knew it was Brian, and they were not about to give him up. They called the school's bluff and won. Shutting down the paper then would have only underscored the conclusion drawn by the article and affirm what had been written. Besides, the administration had more important issues at hand.

To the utter amazement of those responsible for the story, word quickly spread far and wide about Providence's Title IX problem and the phones began ringing off the hook all around campus with calls from sports columnists representing regional and national newspapers. Ken and Joe knew they were on to something big, but they didn't know just how big until an editor from *Sports Illustrated* contacted the college to verify the story.

The administration did not immediately respond, but they knew they had to do something, and fast. A plan was quickly devised over the weekend to answer the claim. It was determined that before they made any public statements they should first sit down with the coaches and athletes of the sports programs that were going to be impacted by the cuts, and that it should take place as early the following week as possible. They would need Monday to finalize all the details, so the college set Tuesday, October 6, as the day of reckoning.

A BOLT FROM THE BLUE

When the players got onto the field that afternoon, it was a picture perfect fall day, with mild temperatures and plenty of blue sky and sunshine. They had just started working out when Coach Hickey was suddenly called away to attend a meeting, and that changed the entire complexion of the practice. It was more than just not having Coach around to run the team through their drills and bark Hick-isms at them when they messed up. The other coaches and team captains could handle those things well enough, but the players all sensed that something was wrong. From the unannounced meeting to the persistent rumors to *The Cowl* article, it was all too much to overlook.

It was like an oppressive wet blanket had been tossed over them, dampening their spirits. They spent the next hour or so playing long toss, or pepper, just trying to stay loose. Before too long, that activity degraded until they were all just milling around. They were busting balls and joking as usual, but even their light-hearted banter had an air of uneasiness to it. They could have officially ended practice and gone back to their dorms, apartments, girlfriends, barstools, but they didn't. They didn't know when Coach Hickey might get back, but none of them were going anywhere until he returned.

After gathering up the equipment and raking the infield, Coach Hickey finally walked back onto the field, about an hour and a half after he had left. He walked slowly across the infield, just inside the third base line, shadowed by his coaches. He motioned for the players to gather around near home plate. He looked like someone had punched him in the gut.

"This is bad," he began.

None of the players seemed to be breathing.

"The college is cutting the baseball program," he said quickly, like pulling a Band-Aid off.

He looked around at the shock and disbelief painted on the faces of his players.

"It's official," their coach informed them. "1999 is going to be last season for baseball at PC."

Marc DesRoches, the big right-handed ace of the staff, had to take a knee. He had been through so much with the program. After his freshman year he had considered moving on from PC. That year, 1995, the Friars were ranked 15th in country, and he appeared

in only 1.3 innings. Discouraged, he sat out the entire 1996 season, and returned the following year only to throw a total of 9.3 innings. Marc bounced back with a solid 1998 campaign. Despite pitching through pain that limited his success, he still won eight games.

With his eyes clouded, Coach Hickey tried to focus on the one positive aspect that remained by telling the team that they would still have the season to play out and that all they could do was win as many games as they could to put pressure on the administration into rethinking their decision. He had no other answers for his players. There were still many questions that Coach Hickey had himself for college administrators, as well as a few choice words, but he didn't share any of that with them. Instead, he informed them that the Assistant Athletic Director wanted to meet that evening to talk to them about Title IX and why the baseball program was being eliminated.

Additionally, Coach Hickey advised his team to take the rest of the week off from practice and to use the time through the weekend to talk with their families and think about what they wanted to do with regard to their futures at Providence College.

By 7 p.m. a brief closed door meeting between the players and the administration took place in the college press room. Assistant Athletic Director, Mark Devine, addressed the athletes. He explained the reason for the school's decision to cut baseball, along with golf and tennis, the two other men's sports programs that were being eliminated in order to comply with Title IX mandates. After he spoke, he allowed the players to ask questions, but most were too angry or upset to respond. They were all still in a state of shock after getting the news from their coach. Some cried, some got angry and some kept their emotions to themselves, but for all of them it was a moment in their lives that they would never forget.

DECISION 1998

Title IX was something that not every member of the Providence College baseball team had been familiar with prior to this stunning announcement. Many knew about it to varying degrees, but a few had not been aware of the federal law at all, including freshman, Jamie Athas. After the article came out in *The*

Cowl, Athas went back to his dorm and *Googled* “Title IX” to find out more about it. Even senior, Paul Costello, had to admit that he had no real knowledge of Title IX. In the coming months, both Paul and Jamie, along with their teammates, would learn all there was to know about this anti-discrimination act. For all of the Providence College baseball players in the fall of 1998, however, it could be said that until that otherwise perfect October afternoon, the significance of Title IX seemed altogether foreign, a distant concern, at least, like a skirmish in some remote part of the world between two countries whose names they could not even pronounce. It was something that had little or no impact on their small world of Big East college baseball. But that had suddenly all changed.

For Mike Scott, it was more like what Yogi Berra would have referred to as ‘*déjà vous* all over again.’ It was the second time that a college baseball program had been pulled out from under his feet. While still in high school, and captain of the basketball and baseball teams, he had all but signed a letter of intent to go to the University of New Hampshire to play baseball, but then he learned that they were dropping the program because of a Title IX problem. When Scooter decided on Providence College, he thought that an issue like that would be the last thing he had to worry about. He could not believe that it had happened to him again.

Junior outfielder, Jason Hairston, was also devastated by the news. Like others on the squad, he had chosen PC specifically because of its baseball program. As a high school senior in Connecticut, Jason made All-State in soccer and baseball and he had been heavily recruited in both sports by such institutions as the Naval Academy, West Point, and Boston College. Some considered him a better soccer player, but he chose to pursue his options in baseball because of his love for the game.

The atmosphere and location of Providence College, as well as the reputation of its baseball program in the prestigious Big East Conference, not to mention the academic opportunities, inclined Jason to choose Providence.

The qualities that enticed Jason to Providence were the same ones which had recently been helping the school attract the top ballplayers from all around the region and produce the best baseball teams in Providence College’s history.

The unexpected demise of Providence's baseball program forced Jason to make a tough decision. He had already completed two full years of studies, and if he played his junior year at Providence, the team's last season, it was unlikely that he'd be able to transfer to another school and play in his final year of eligibility. And even if he had transferred successfully to another school to play his senior year, it would cost him academically. Most schools do not accept three years of academic work, so transferring would delay his graduation for at least a full year.

When Jason originally signed his letter of intent with Providence College, he planned to play four years of Division I baseball with the goal of getting drafted, which was not an unqualified pipe dream. In the 1990's, PC had produced several players who went on to play Major League Baseball, including Lou Merloni and John McDonald. Providence had also been consistently producing prospects that were sprinkled throughout the minor league system year after year since the mid 1980's. Now, if Jason chose to stay and play out the 1999 season as a Friar, he would have to give up on a dream, but it was a decision he did not have to think long about and it was one he would never regret.

There were other student-athletes with difficult choices to make. Juniors Jeremy Sweet and Coley O'Donnell were in the very same boat as Jason. They were juniors, but if they decided to stay at PC their college baseball careers would end that season. All of them, however, had made up their minds to graduate from Providence, remaining through 2000 without a team to play for.

Not all the players accepted their fate so easily. To the man, they experienced the full range of emotions associated with the grieving process. Initial disbelief and sadness quickly gave way to anger. They felt abandoned, betrayed and disrespected by a college administration that did not seem willing to fight to save their program. It was difficult not to take it personally. An uncontrollable fire had been lit inside every one of them. It was them against the world from that moment on, and the funny thing was they all seemed to like it that way, even thrive on it. Holding onto that anger would become a tremendous motivating factor, and they were determined to take that anger out on any team they played and use it to accomplish something special that year.

