

How Title IX plays a vital role in Pitt women's basketball players' lawsuits against coach Tory Verdi, university



"I don't like you as a player, but I'd let my son date you."

That comment, allegedly made by Pitt women's basketball head coach Tory Verdi in a private meeting with former Pitt player Isabella Perkins in 2024, is one of many claims of mistreatment included in six lawsuits filed by Perkins and five other former Panthers players against Verdi

and the University of Pittsburgh.

In the lawsuits, the plaintiffs — Favor Ayodele, Raeven Boswell, Makayla Elmore, Brooklynn Miles, Jasmine Timmerson and Perkins — detailed what they believe was a pattern of verbal abuse, psychological manipulation and racial and gender-based harassment within the program. The players say it created a hostile environment and put their confidence, medical care and academic opportunities at risk.

The six former players say repeated complaints to university officials, including former athletic director Heather Lyke, went unaddressed, too.

[Abby Schnable](#)

[Six former Pitt women's basketball players file lawsuit against coach Tory Verdi, university](#)

Taken together, the lawsuits filed Friday in federal court in Pittsburgh portray a program in which Pitt players were repeatedly humiliated, isolated and subjected to tactics that exceeded what is considered standard coaching practice.

A spokesperson for Pitt said in response to the lawsuits, "The University is aware of these lawsuits and their allegations, which are without merit and will be vigorously defended."

Legal experts say the cases illustrate broader issues in collegiate athletics, from the need for independent medical oversight to institutional accountability for preventing abuse and highlight the

protections Title IX is intended to provide.

A hostile environment

Verdi was hired by Lyke in 2023, coming from Massachusetts, where he spent seven seasons turning that program around and leading the school to the NCAA tournament in 2022. He aimed to put the Panthers on a similar trajectory.

But former players say his methods at Pittsburgh crossed the line. The lawsuits describe a program where verbal attacks and manipulative tactics went far beyond what most athletes would consider standard coaching.

Some allegations point to extreme statements made in team settings. According to the filings, after a practice in the 2023-24 season, Verdi told the team, "Every night I lay in bed I want to kill myself because of you." Following the death of a teammate's father, he allegedly said, "I knew you guys were bad basketball players, but I didn't know you were bad people, too."

Racial and gender-based harassment also is alleged.

International players reportedly were told to "go back home because ICE is coming" and were instructed, "We speak English here."

Other players were mocked for their weight or appearance, including comments such as "you look pregnant" during injury recovery.

Joseph Lento, founder of LLF National Law Firm — a practice focused on Title IX matters — emphasized that comments about perceived

femininity, toughness, body image or leadership qualities can constitute sex-based harassment if they are tied to the athlete's gender.

"Female athletes who are mocked for not being tough enough, for how they look, for how they lead or for not fitting a particular mold are not simply experiencing a hard-nosed coaching style," Lento said. "They may be experiencing actionable sex discrimination. Coaches and institutions that dismiss these complaints as normal athletic culture are often missing the legal reality."

The complaints continue to describe a team culture defined by fear, humiliation and psychological volatility. Plaintiffs allege that Verdi fostered an environment in which players were publicly shamed, isolated from support structures and forced to question whether their treatment was abuse.

A key feature of the alleged culture is what the lawsuits describe as the "practice cauldron," a system in which performance statistics reportedly were manipulated to discredit certain players. Plaintiffs contend the system was less about development and more about control, creating a climate of uncertainty and intimidation.

All of this allegedly occurred while the program continued to struggle, with the Panthers under Verdi posting records of 8-24 in his first season, 13-19 in his second and 8-17 this season.

"What matters practically is whether the conduct, viewed as a whole, was tied to sex and whether it materially interfered with the athlete's ability to participate and benefit from their program," Lento said.

“Courts look at the totality of circumstances — how often the conduct occurred, how serious it was, the power dynamics involved and whether the conduct was humiliating or threatening.”

Physical health concerns

Independent medical care is a cornerstone of athlete safety, ensuring that decisions about diagnosis, treatment and return to play are made based solely on medical expertise. Experts emphasize that in college athletics, keeping medical staff separate from coaching influence is crucial as outside pressure can put athletes at risk of further injury or poor outcomes.

Dr. James Borchers, president of the U.S. Council for Athletes’ Health and chief medical officer for the Big Ten Conference, explained the risks when this separation is not maintained.

“There can be inappropriate decisions regarding diagnosis, treatment and return to activity when non-medical personnel are influencing medical decision-making,” Borchers said “This can put the athlete at risk for poor outcomes and further injury.”

He adds that institutions carry ultimate responsibility for ensuring that medical staff can operate independently and adhere to best practices and standards of care.

Two plaintiffs in the lawsuits allege that their medical care was compromised under Verdi’s leadership.

Ayodele alleges that Verdi engaged in prolonged periods of emotional withdrawal when she was injured. For nearly six months, she says, he

refused to communicate with her, ignoring both her medical and emotional needs and isolating her from team support. According to the filings, this deliberate neglect was not incidental but functioned as a mechanism of retaliation and control.

Perkins claims she was “routinely denied adequate medical care” and forced to play while injured. She reported Pitt’s hostile environment to the team doctor, but that disclosure was allegedly communicated to Verdi and met with retaliatory actions.

“A lack of confidence and trust in medical personnel and their ability to make independent decisions can lead an athlete to potentially not disclose important information that can affect their ability to perform and could put them at risk for further injury,” Borchers said.

Pitt’s alleged inaction

The lawsuits assert that university administrators were aware of Verdi’s behavior but failed to take meaningful action. Complaints cite Lyke, senior woman administrator Jennifer Tuscano and assistant vice chancellor for compliance, investigations and ethics Laurel Gift as officials who received reports but did not intervene.

Miles and other players allegedly documented the verbal abuse, arbitrary punishments and escalating hostile behaviors in text communications with Tuscano. Miles also raised concerns directly with Gift. Despite repeated reporting, no significant investigation, protective measures or corrective action was taken, according to the lawsuits.

Lento explained that under Title IX's framework, the school must have had "actual knowledge" of the alleged discrimination through an appropriate official who had the authority to take corrective action.

"Actual knowledge can be established through emails, conversations, meetings with athletic directors, reports to Title IX coordinators or communications with compliance officers or any other officials who had the power to act. When a family raises concerns repeatedly and those concerns reach multiple administrators over time, courts examine whether those individuals had corrective authority and whether the institution was effectively on notice of ongoing harm," Lento said.

Gabby Hutcherson, a former player from the 2023–24 season, told Tuscano and Lyke she was leaving the women's basketball program because of Verdi's conduct and the university's failure to intervene, according to the lawsuit. The filing states Hutcherson said the hostile environment and lack of oversight made her continuation in the program untenable.

Despite these warnings, no remedial measures were implemented and the university took no meaningful steps to protect current or incoming players.

The complaints further allege that Pitt recruited some of the plaintiffs into the program knowing about the existence of prior complaints against Verdi, exposing the players to foreseeable emotional and psychological harm.

"Deliberate indifference is a high legal standard," Lento said. "Courts

examine whether the university conducted a meaningful investigation, put protective measures in place, monitored the situation going forward and took steps reasonably calculated to stop the misconduct."

Added Lento: "When a school receives complaint after complaint and responds with nothing more than a dismissive conversation or no action at all, that is exactly the kind of institutional failure Title IX is designed to address."

Retaliation for reporting?

The lawsuits also claim that players experienced direct retaliation for reporting concerns or asserting their rights. Near the end of the 2024-25 season, Verdi allegedly pressured players into the NCAA transfer portal without their consent, a violation of NCAA rules.

Timmerson, a North Allegheny graduate and two-time Fab 5 selection, says she was forced into the transfer process and denied her scholarship, leaving her no viable option but to leave Pitt.

Elmore reported NCAA practice-hour violations to the compliance office, only to have her identity disclosed to Verdi, who allegedly responded with sarcastic remarks and arbitrary disciplinary actions.

Perkins claims she initially was praised during preseason workouts and promised a meaningful role but was later shifted into unfamiliar positions, undermining her development and jeopardizing her medical redshirt eligibility. She ultimately was removed from the team in December 2024, which the filings describe as direct retaliation for

speaking out.

“Title IX expressly prohibits retaliation against anyone who reports sex discrimination and this protection is one of the most vital in the statute,” Lento said. “To establish a retaliation claim, the athlete generally needs to show three things — that she engaged in protected activity by reporting discrimination, that she suffered a materially adverse action afterward and that there is a causal connection between the two.”

The plaintiffs say the alleged misconduct caused significant harm to their mental health, academic focus and athletic careers.

Miles withdrew from collegiate basketball, citing a psychologically unsafe environment. Perkins claims she suffered emotional and reputational harm, academic disruption and deprivation of athletic opportunities as a result of both Verdi’s alleged abuse and the university’s inaction.

“The legal question ultimately comes down to whether the alleged conduct effectively deprived athletes of equal participation in and benefit from their athletic program,” Lento said.

“That can manifest in many ways — athletes withdrawing from the team because the environment was intolerable, losing scholarship opportunities, being denied proper access to training resources or suffering psychological harm serious enough to interfere with academic performance.”

Part of a larger trend

According to Lento, these cases can pursue both individual recovery and broader institutional reforms. Institutional remedies often sought by plaintiffs include policy revisions, mandatory training, independent monitoring, external investigations and structural reforms to how athletic departments handle complaints.

On the individual side, remedies might include compensatory damages, reinstatement to the team, restoration of scholarships and other forms of “make-whole” relief.

The players are seeking remedies that include accountability for Verdi, changes to university oversight and redress for the harm they suffered.

Across women’s college basketball, multiple programs have faced lawsuits or public allegations over abusive coaching. In the past year alone, Wisconsin and Western Oregon have been in similar situations to Pitt. Elsewhere, coaches at Florida, Purdue Fort-Wayne and Texas Tech resigned amid allegations of belittling players or inappropriate conduct.

Importantly, most of these cases have not gone to trial and there are few — if any — public reports of players receiving monetary awards or formal legal vindication. Many were resolved through resignations or remain ongoing litigation.

Recent Supreme Court rulings, including *Cummings v. Premier Rehab* (2022), generally have limited the ability to recover damages solely for emotional distress under Title IX. As a result, documenting financial impacts — such as lost scholarships, tuition or medical expenses —

alongside psychological harm can be an important part of seeking compensation.

"In my experience, the most impactful outcomes combine meaningful individual recovery with real institutional change that makes the next athlete's path a little safer," Lento said.

First Published: February 12, 2026, 4:00 a.m.