

Case 12: Pregnant Athletes

During her junior season, Fantasia Goodwin started every game for the Syracuse women's basketball team. That is, she started every game except the final game of the season. Just before the final game, Goodwin told head coach Jack Warren that she was pregnant. Coach Warren responded by telling her to sit out the final game. A spokesperson for the Syracuse athletic department reports that "when the athletic department becomes aware that a student-athlete in a physical contact sport is pregnant, we pull her immediately and refer her to our medical staff."¹ This response may be motivated in part by concerns for the student, fetus and the university's potential liability.

The American Gynecological and Obstetrics Association officially recommends that certain activities be avoided during pregnancy, including "contact sports, such as ice hockey, soccer, and basketball [which] could result in harm to both you and your baby."² Aside from contact, another source of potential harm from athletic activity is the potential for fetal overheating. Fetal temperatures average 1 degree C above maternal readings, and a maternal temperature of 102.6 degrees has been identified as a possible threshold for developing teratogenic and neural tube defects during the first trimester of pregnancy.³ Despite these warnings, medical professionals point out that there is wide variability among women and pregnancies, suggesting that in individual cases vigorous athletic activity may be more or less dangerous.

Interestingly, Goodwin played the entire season pregnant and waited until the last game of the season to tell her coach; she delivered a healthy baby boy less than two months later. Why would Goodwin play nearly an entire season of competitive collegiate basketball knowing that she was pregnant and taking a substantial risk of miscarriage? Goodwin herself has remained largely silent on this matter, but other elite athletes have been more forthcoming. For some the reason is simple: they enjoy competing in their sport and believe that it is possible to continue playing in relative safety.⁴ For scholarship athletes there may be a financial incentive to keep pregnancy quiet and continue to compete. While Title IX of the Civil Rights Act specifically prohibits public discrimination against pregnant women, some may assume pregnant women are unable to compete in athletics and this view may lead to the termination of athletic scholarships.⁵

The NCAA's rules provide that pregnant athletes may be medically redshirted to allow an extra 6th year of athletic eligibility.⁶ However, the medical redshirt option is used at the discretion of the

¹Zach Schonbrun. "Fantasia Goodwin speaks about pregnancy," The Daily Orange, Apr. 30, 2007, <http://www.dailyorange.com/2.8655/year-in-sports-fantasia-goodwin-speaks-about-pregnancy-1.1233371>.

²"Exercise During Pregnancy," The American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, June 2003, http://www.acog.org/publications/patient_education/bp119.cfm.

³"Exercise and Athletic Participation During Pregnancy," The American Chiropractic Board of Sports Physicians, http://www.csmfoundation.org/ACBSP_Position_Statement_on_Exercise_and_Athletic_Participation_During_Pregnancy.pdf (last accessed Aug. 1, 2010).

⁴Dr. Suzanne Gilberg-Lenz, "Are Pregnant Athletes Selfish?" MomLogic.com (opinion), Feb. 17, 2010, http://www.momlogic.com/2010/02/are_pregnant_athletes_selfish.php#ixzz0vqCon9bM.

⁵Lindsay Rovegno, "Athletes often forced into heartbreaking decisions," ESPN.com, May 12, 2007, <http://sports.espn.go.com/ncaa/news/story?id=2865230>; Deborah L. Brake, "The Invisible Pregnant Athlete and the Promise of Title IX," 31 Harv. J. L. & Gender 323, Summer 2008, <http://www.law.harvard.edu/students/orgs/jlg/vol312/323-366.pdf>.

⁶Issues Related to Pregnancy and Athletic Participation: The Foundation Position," Women's Sports Foundation, 2008, <http://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/Content/Articles/Issues/Equity%20Issues/1/Issues%20Related%20to%20Pregnancy%20%20Athletic%20Participation%20The%20Foundation%20Position.aspx>.

school's athletic program. It is not a right provided to pregnant women. One athlete who lost her scholarship due to pregnancy reports, "this may sound stupid, but the way I look at it is God will forgive the premarital sex more than he would killing my child. But if I had an abortion, I'd still be on the team."⁷ Others wonder, "Are pregnant athletes selfish?"⁸ For many women athletes there is a tension, perceived or real, between motherhood and athletics.

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⁷ Jeff Jacobs, "Son's Smile Erases Pain, But Not The Injustice," *courant.com* (The Hartford Courant Online), Mar. 25, 2003, http://articles.courant.com/2003-03-25/features/0303251484_1_tara-brady-title-ix-church-and-state.

⁸ Gilberg-Lenz, http://www.momlogic.com/2010/02/are_pregnant_athletes_selfish.php#ixzz0vqCon9bM.