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Crew accident suit against U. dismissed

By **STEPHEN GLASS** | 11/15/91 5:00am

After five years of legal wrangling, a Common Pleas Court judge last week absolved the University of any responsibility for the death of a high school crew coach who had fallen over a dam while boating on the Schuylkill River in 1984. Judge Curtis Carson said in his findings of fact that "there is no evidence of a willful or malicious action by the University." Claims Supervisor Ron Jasner and Associate General Counsel Neil Hamburg said yesterday that although the incident was tragic, they were pleased with the decision since the University was not liable. Kip Liddle, a Brooks School assistant rowing coach, was reviewing a spring pre-season training on the Schuylkill as a guest of the University in March 1984. Brooks School is a preparatory high school in North Andover, Mass. The University allowed the Brooks Crew team to use their motorized boat, shell -- the boat used by rowers -- and safety equipment free of charge. According to the 17-page findings of fact compiled by the judge, Liddle and another coach supervised the training while the head coach was away on the afternoon of the second day of practice. Liddle and coxswain Susan Bully, a Brooks sophomore, were in the motorized boat and began travelling downstream toward the dam, the finding states. 100 yards in front of the Fairmont Dam, the City of Philadelphia had installed a cable across the Schuylkill equipped with hanging vertical lines in the river. The cable was designed to warn boats that were dangerously close to the dam, while the vertical cables could be used to stabilize a boat in the event of an emergency -- either by tying them to the craft or manually holding on to them. However, the propeller of the boat became entangled in the vertical cables, causing the engine to stall. Bully grabbed one of the cables, while Liddle untangled the propeller. But, according to the findings of fact, Liddle did not secure her boat by using the rope attached to the boat or the vertical safety lines before detaching it from the cable, and the craft began to drift toward the dam. "It was impossible to hold the boat and the boat started to float to the dam," University attorney John Barret said yesterday. "Instead of remaining with the boat, she jumped out." A group of three rescuers set out to aid Liddle and told her by megaphone not to leave the boat. But she handed Bully a flotation device and forced her out of the boat and then jumped out herself, the document states. Liddle was swept over the dam and plummeted to her death. Bully was not injured and was able to walk out of the river to shore. The rescuer's boat subsequently stalled and was swept over the dam, but they remained in the boat and were not hurt. "If Liddle had just done nothing she would have been safe," Barret added. "They would have brought her in and she would have been fine." Brooks Athletics Supervisor Dan Rourke declined to comment and Liddle's attorney did not return phone calls placed at his office. The case against the City of Philadelphia is still pending.