

## Parents vs. coach: Battle goes wild

- [C.W. Nevius](#)

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Parents interfering in their kids' sports is nothing new. But a group of parents at Castro Valley High is taking it to a new extreme.

What started as a group of unhappy parents griping amongst themselves has ballooned into multiple investigations, an observer attending every girls varsity basketball practice and a committee that will pick the team.

It's the kind of over-the-top behavior that's increasingly common -- parents running on the field, screaming from the sidelines and, in the worst cases, punching out officials. It happens when well-intentioned parents let their protective instincts for their children overwhelm their good judgment.

In Castro Valley, the club wielded by parents is legal clout.

As Castro Valley athletic director Marie Gray said when she addressed the school board last week, "Thanks. You put Castro Valley on the map."

At the center of the seven-month maelstrom is Nancy Nibarger, a quiet 20-year teaching veteran who is beginning her third year as head girls basketball coach at Castro Valley. Opposing her are a group of parents, represented by a San Francisco attorney and led by Larry Goodman, an Alameda County Superior Court judge whose daughter plays on the team.

The parents' complaints against Nibarger, who played college basketball at Kansas State and was an assistant coach at high-powered college programs like Cal and Kansas, seem innocuous: They range from missing picture day to kicking the team out of the gym after a lackluster practice. But Nibarger's supporters suspect the allegations mask the parents' real beef -- that their daughters didn't get enough playing time.

Three times Nibarger's coaching style was investigated by school officials and found acceptable. Each time the parents group appealed the results. She managed to retain her job, but with restrictions that many coaches would find impossible to bear. In fact, many think the sanctions were designed to force her to quit, but Nibarger is sticking it out.

"Some of the kids who chose to back me, and even some who decided to stay out of it altogether, are kind of being bullied," Nibarger says. "That's one of the reasons I decided not to quit. It seemed like the right thing to do."

It may be right in principle, but it won't be easy. When tryouts take place in two weeks, Nibarger will not be allowed to choose her team. That will be done by a six-person "panel," which will include parent representatives and members of the community, as well as Nibarger and her assistant coaches.

Not, however, the assistant coaches Nibarger had last year. Those two, a member of the Cal women's basketball Hall of Fame and a San Leandro policeman, were told by the school board they were not welcome back, even though there was not a single complaint filed against them.

And finally, Nibarger is required to have an "ombudsman" attend every practice to keep an eye on things. Nibarger calls the representative a babysitter. Janice Friesen, president of the Castro Valley school board, says the stipulations were actually meant to defuse the situation.

"This is to get away from all the 'He said, she said,' " Friesen says. "This is meant to be support for everyone." Attorney Andrew Sweet, who is speaking for the parents, said the program was out of control last year. "These kids were coming home from practices and leaving games crying," Sweet says.

Sweet admitted that Nibarger wasn't screaming at the players, playing favorites or subjecting them to physical abuse. It was more a matter of "communication" and "utter vindictiveness." That sounded pretty vague, so Sweet went back to the parents and came up with some specific allegations.

Sweet says Nibarger once threw the girls out of the gym when a practice was not going well. (The parents' group says it was 45 minutes early; Nibarger says it was "10 to 15.") She didn't attend picture day. (Neither do other Castro Valley coaches.) She cut the playing time of anyone who complained about her coaching decisions. (She's proud of her record of playing 9 to 10 players a game.) Once, Sweet says, Nibarger was in a restaurant, saw the players and left without saying anything. (She says she wanted to respect the privacy of what appeared to be a players-only meeting.) So?

"Look," says Lauren Otten, a co-captain on Nibarger's first team three years ago and a unanimous all-district choice. "I have played basketball all my life. I played year-round basketball for six years. I know coaches. And she was the calmest, nicest coach I ever had in my life."

Nibarger's reign had a promising beginning in 2004-2005, when the team reached the second round of the North Coast Section playoffs (admittedly with the help of a senior-laden team). But the team fell to 11-15 last year, and the grumbling began.

"They'd get a little cadre of parents together and bitch and moan," says Martha Kohl, a middle school teacher who has been the basketball team scorekeeper for 10 years. Nibarger thinks the heart of the issue is the difference between offseason, paid programs and varsity high school sports, and her former team captain agrees.

Otten says parents typically pay \$1,500 a year for private basketball club teams. They don't expect to shell out that kind of money to see their daughter sit on the bench. Nor is it atypical for club coaches to praise a marginal player to the skies. After all, the program needs to keep that money coming. That environment sets unrealistic expectations.

"A lot of people came in thinking great things about themselves," says Otten. "They were expecting a lot of playing time just because they were on the team." That sense of entitlement is threatening to overwhelm varsity sports in high school. Parents aren't just questioning the coaches, they are demanding their heads on a platter.

"If we don't stomp this out," says athletic director Gray, "whosever mommy or daddy has the most power is going to be the starter. And if you look around the country, you see we are losing that battle." As the controversy has mushroomed, the leaders of the parent revolt have retreated from public comments. A call to Goodman, for example, is quickly returned -- by attorney Sweet.

"First," Sweet said early in our first conversation, "I want to dispel one story line, which is that this is somehow Judge Goodman's case. That's not true." Maybe not, but the swashbuckling judge -- who pilots a 32-foot gunboat as a "homeland security maritime specialist" for the Alameda County Sheriff's Department -- is certainly deeply involved. Goodman was an assistant coach for the junior varsity team two years ago whose daughter, a guard, will be a senior this season. Although they are careful not to accuse him directly, almost all of Nibarger's supporters believe Goodman spearheaded the protests.

"I think the community kowtowed to these people," says Barbara Siegel, president of the Castro Valley Teachers Association. "He was certainly a part of that power group. He wasn't the only one, but he was one of them." Someone certainly had some juice. Although Gray says she didn't "get a single complaint in the AD's office during the season, even an anonymous phone call," the parents group presented Nibarger with a formal letter just after the final game of the season.

An investigation was convened by the principal's office. Shari Rodriguez, varsity girls volleyball coach and a Nibarger supporter, says the administration interviewed every player on the team and reached a conclusion -- no action was needed. The parents group took it to the district level. Once again, every player was interviewed and the conclusion was the same -- no action. Finally, the group went to the school board. The final hearing, in August, lasted nine hours. Those who were there say that the anti-Nibarger group appeared with matching binders and that Goodman was seen pulling girls aside before their appearances to "help" with their statements. The group even led cheers, Rodriguez says.

"We didn't disagree with the earlier decisions," school board president Friesen says, "but we added some additions for the best of everyone." Actually, it could have been worse. At one time there were rumors that the parents group might file a civil suit for "child abuse," but that's apparently been put on the back burner. Not that the parents are backing down.

"She's making it all about herself," says Sweet. "She has never once acknowledged that there might be a problem." In fact, Sweet says, half of the 14 girls on last year's team signed the original letter protesting Nibarger's coaching. He says Nibarger's supporters would not be standing with her if they knew the real facts.

But earlier last week, Nibarger posted the signup sheet for tryouts for this year's basketball team. Every member of last year's team signed up except one.

Nibarger says there will be another signup next week and she is hoping that last girl changes her mind and writes her name on the list. She says she is looking forward to a great year.

"What I want to know," says coach Rodriguez, "is what are these kids going to do when they leave home and have a boss or a professor they don't like? They can't destroy everyone they don't like."

*C.W. Nevius' column appears regularly. His blog [C.W.Nevius.blog](http://www.cwnevius.com) and podcast "News Wrap," can be found at [SFGate.com](http://www.sfgate.com). E-mail him at [cwnevius@sfgate.com](mailto:cwnevius@sfgate.com).*

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