

USF's Azzi, basketball's lone out LGBT head coach, draws support

By Ann Killion | April 14, 2016 | Updated: April 14, 2016 8:14pm

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Photo: Marcio Jose Sanchez, AP

IMAGE 1 OF 8



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return for sophomore

Blair Hardiek was taking a picture. Through the camera lens, she saw University of San Francisco women's basketball coach Jennifer Azzi standing on stage and taking a deep breath. Hardiek sensed something big was coming.

She was right. As she watched, Azzi told a crowded ballroom at the Fairmont Hotel that she and Hardiek — her associate head coach — are married. With that statement on March 31, Azzi became the only publicly out LGBT head coach working in Division I college basketball.

The moment wasn't planned. It wasn't intended to make history.

"You just get to the point where it's so stupid to not be honest," Azzi said recently at the Mill Valley home she and Hardiek share with their bulldogs, Izzy and Ella. "When you're with someone who gives you so much courage there's no reason to be afraid."

So that night, Azzi blinked back the tears filling her eyes and spoke from the heart. She made her announcement as part of her introduction of Rick Welts, the Warriors' team president who was receiving an Anti-Defamation League award for being a modern civil rights pioneer. Welts came out five years ago, becoming the first major U.S. professional sports executive to do so.

"I felt like it couldn't just be random that I was introducing him," Azzi said. "I couldn't go up there and not say anything. I wanted him to know he's given me courage."

When she looked at him in the audience, she saw tears in his eyes, too.

"Courage encourages courage,"



Hardiek said.

Though there are plenty of gay coaches and players in women's basketball, many of them are unwilling to publicly acknowledge their sexuality. Three years ago, Baylor star Brittney Griner said that her coach, Kim Mulkey, had forbidden her and others to be open about their sexuality for fear it would hurt recruiting. Almost a decade ago, Penn State's Rene Portland had to resign after saying she forbade gay players in her program. For coaches, negative recruiting remains a real fear, that other coaches will denigrate their programs to recruits and their parents.

Azzi knows that could be an issue.

"But I've flipped it to a positive," she said. "Anyone who has an issue, I don't want to coach them anyway. I think the reason we've been successful is because we have a common value system, as simple as respect, love, belief and faith."

Faith is certainly an issue at USF, a Jesuit institution. The Catholic Church has not wavered in its stance against gay marriage; Pope Francis, while urging tolerance, reiterated that position in his most recent document on love and family.

USF President Paul Fitzgerald did not know Azzi and Hardiek were married, but was quick to offer congratulations the day after Azzi's announcement.

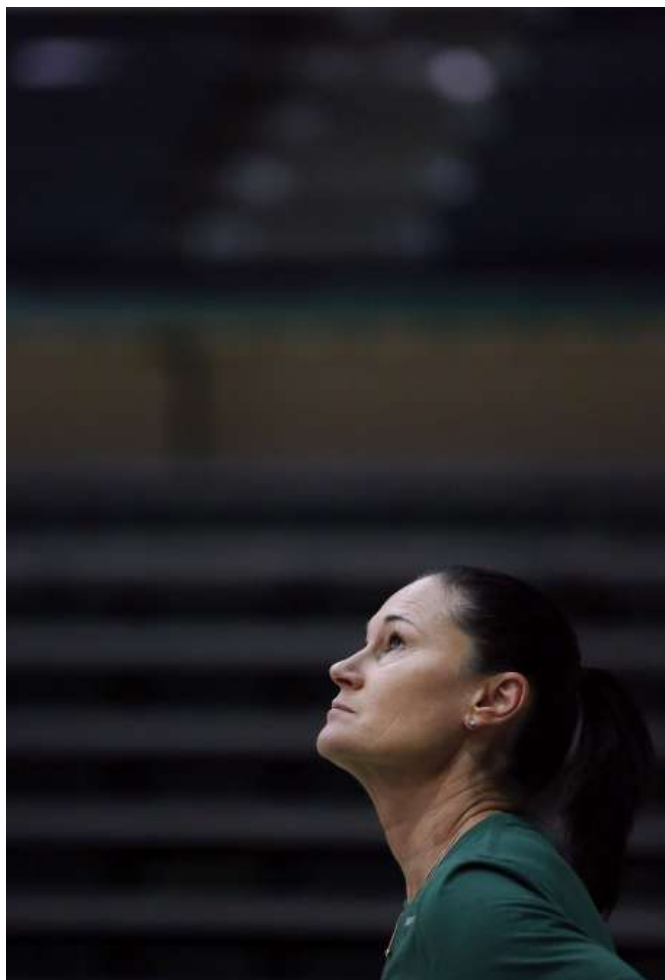


Photo: Leah Millis, The Chronicle

Above: USF women's head coach Jennifer Azzi revealed her same-sex marriage last month.

“Coach Azzi has entered into a civil marriage according to the laws of the land,” Fitzgerald told The Chronicle in an email. “We will afford her every benefit and legal protection which she is due. The university is a Catholic Jesuit institution that is purposefully diverse and dedicated to inclusivity.”

Positive response

Fitzgerald added that he had received just one negative response to the news, balanced against a flood of more positive feedback from the USF community.

Both Azzi and Hardiek were raised Catholic, Azzi in Tennessee and Hardiek in Illinois. They still pray before every meal and every evening.

When Azzi came out to her mother in her early 20s, she asked her if “God would love me differently.” Her mother assured her that God’s love was nonjudgmental, like a parent’s love.

Azzi and Hardiek have always had the support of their families. When Azzi told her father she was gay, he took her hands and told her, “you’re just as beautiful to me now as you’ve always been.”

Azzi, 47, is an icon of women’s basketball. She came to Stanford as coach Tara VanDerveer’s first major recruit, and found herself homesick and overwhelmed. But within four years, she led Stanford to its first national championship, then reunited with VanDerveer in 1996 to win a gold medal at the Atlanta Olympics.



Photo: Marcio Jose Sanchez, AP

San Francisco head coach Jennifer Azzi directs her team against Stanford in the first half of a first-round women's college basketball game in the NCAA Tournament Saturday, March 19, 2016, in Stanford, Calif. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)

Azzi was a pioneer of women's professional basketball, first with the short-lived ABL and then with the WNBA. That's where she got to know Welts, who was instrumental in the league's founding. Playing in San Antonio, Azzi also got to know Steve Kerr, then a guard with the Spurs, and teamed with Kerr and Manu Ginobili in an All-Star weekend shootout.

Hardiek, 31, played basketball at Missouri, then interned at Stanford under VanDerveer. When Azzi was putting together her staff at USF in 2010, several people recommended that she hire Hardiek, a bright offensive mind.

No gay role models

Growing up in the Bible Belt, Azzi didn't have gay role models. She wasn't quite sure she

was gay until she was older. Even though she played a sport alongside many gay women, there was a secretiveness about sexuality.

“Everything was under the surface,” Azzi said. “You just didn’t talk about it.”

A moment that made a large impact on her came when she was in her 20s, when comedian Ellen DeGeneres came out.

“That gave me a lot of hope and courage,” Azzi said. “Someone who was so brave, who could lose it all.”

Hardiek proposed on the Greek island of Santorini in May. Five weeks into their engagement, the Supreme Court ruled that same-sex marriage was legal. In August, Azzi and Hardiek went to Big Sur for a private wedding. Wearing similar long white dresses, they exchanged vows, then FaceTimed their family members afterward.

When they came back to work, they told their players. Over the next few months, the couple received congratulations and wedding presents from many players and parents.

“They are the two most professional women I know,” junior Rachel Howard said in an email. “Frankly, I don’t see how this can have a negative effect on our program. If someone loses interest in our program because they hear that two of our coaches are married to one another, they are clearly missing the point.”

Under Azzi, the USF program is thriving. This past season, the Dons won the conference tournament and made the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 1997, losing to Stanford in the first round. Last year, Azzi received a contract extension through 2021.

Supportive boss

“I’m super proud of Jennifer as a leader and a coach,” Athletic Director Scott Sidwell said. “Our university is a place of inclusive excellence. We’ve had a tremendous outpouring of support.”

Married coaches are not unusual in

women's basketball. Bill and Mary Nepfel coached together at USF in the 1990s. At several other schools, such as Gonzaga, LMU, Washington State and UC Davis — and Santa Clara until last month — the head coach is married to an assistant coach.

But same-sex marriage in the sport is unique.

Azzi and Hardiek have been deluged with congratulatory messages. Most of their friends knew they were married, so many well wishes were for Azzi's honesty. Azzi is on an email thread with her former Stanford teammates, who were all quick to offer cheers.

VanDerveer called with congratulations. They heard from old friends and from strangers, such as a heterosexual couple in their 70s who praised them for sharing their truth.

Azzi doesn't know what the impact of her action will be.

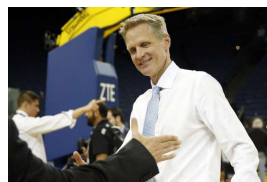
"We're not telling anyone what they should do," she said. "But if this gives other people courage to be free and live truthfully, that's great.

"If someone came to me and asked what they should do, I would say that you need to be who you are. But you might have to unwind some of what you've been taught."

That unwinding is helped by those who step forward.

Welts said he's sure what Azzi's impact will be, because he saw it in his own life.

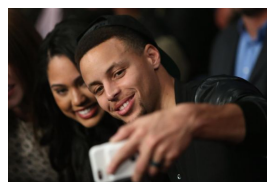
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“A lot of young people will read about her and get closer to believing they can be open about who they are,” Welts said. “She will be the person I didn’t have. That she didn’t have.

“It takes the first person to take action. I’m so proud of her.”

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