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Kali Herbst Minino  
*Seattle University*

Andru Zodrow

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# Seattle U Athletics Navigates a Complicated Relationship With Volleyball Athletes

Kali Herbst Minino and Andru Zodrow

The lights in the California Baptist University (CBU) gym shut off after the Seattle University 2021 volleyball team lost their game 0-3. They engaged in their regular postgame locker room conversation, and their former Assistant Coach Bouaketh Chanthavisouk noticed the conversation took an unusually long time.

“I didn’t realize how long we had been in there, but [CBU] had started closing things down because people were starting to leave,” Chanthavisouk said.

Chanthavisouk had left the locker room conversation earlier, feeling frustrated that Michelle Cole, the current Seattle U volleyball coach, had insinuated that according to her standards players were not talented enough to wear a Seattle U jersey.

Sierra Bartley, a player on the 2021 team, brought up concerns about serving primarily short balls, which sparked feedback from Cole.

“[Cole] ranted for probably 30 minutes at least, saying ‘that’s why I played my level and why you guys played your level. If we were on the same team I would have had your faces, I would have been grabbing your jerseys,’ going off about how she was this great player, and how this is Seattle U volleyball,” Bartley said.

Cole’s mention of her own volleyball experience was the breaking point for Chanthavisouk, who left the room in frustration.

“You know, everybody has a different athletic experience, a different history with the sport, but it’s not necessarily relevant to the current team that you’re coaching,” Chanthavisouk said.

While holding back tears, one of three past team members who chose to remain anonymous described the emotional impact of the coach’s alleged treatment of the players at the game.

“After losing for so long, you believe that you aren’t good enough, so everyone was taken aback by those comments, because we know we are good. We come from really good club teams, and we didn’t get to D1 for no reason—when you are losing it is a reflection of the coach,” the athlete said.



Jake Nelson

Freshman Merima Smajlovic lofts the ball over the net while playing Sam Houston State University during the 2022 season.

Chanthavisouk watched the players emerge from the locker room, many of them upset. In past games, she had seen one or two players crying after a tough loss, but there was a notable difference after the CBU game.

“They were in tears. I’ve never seen so many kids upset after a locker room talk before,” Chanthavisouk said.

Bartley illustrated a picture of deteriorated trust between Cole and the team after the CBU game. Seattle U Athletics became involved in the situation after players voiced their frustration with the state of team leadership. One team concern was player safety.



Seattle U Head Volleyball Coach Michelle Cole speaks with her previous team the Citadel Bulldogs. (Courtesy of Seattle University Athletics)

“We took the light rail home, which drops you off in Cap Hill, and Michelle, Michael [Hobson] and Kelsey [LaMont] all took their cars home from the airport. So they left Boo [Chanthavisouk] and fifteen athletes to take the light rail through downtown Seattle, then walk through Cap Hill at twelve on a Saturday night,” Bartley said. “We felt super unsafe, we were getting cat-called as we were walking, it just wasn’t an ideal situation.”

Athletics responded to complaints by occasionally sending representatives to practices to monitor Cole and the players. Bartley asserts that Cole had a different attitude when Athletics employees were watching practices; Cole’s general demeanor toward the players did not change when athletic administration wasn’t watching. The second of three anonymous past players described the difficulties of walking home from the light rail station late at night.

“Our female assistant coach was about 5-foot-3, so not really an image of someone that is there to protect us,” the second player said. “It was not a pleasant experience.”

Several players on the team felt that Athletics was more interested in protecting Cole’s interest than the wellbeing of the players.

“They [Athletics] did nothing,” Bartley said. “The problem really starts at the top, they were the ones who hired Michelle. In my opinion, Michelle was unfit to be a D1 coach.”

The second of three past team members who chose to remain anonymous noted athletic scholarships as a point of tension between the team members and Cole. The timing of Cole’s February 2020 hire did not allow her to choose the upperclassmen on the team or their respective scholarships.

“[Cole] would sometimes mention, ‘you are very expensive to be on this team,’ ‘you have a full ride scholarship,’” the player said. “I understand that you [Cole] are not the one who gave me this scholarship, but I still own it.”

Chanthavisouk felt that scholarships were often on the player’s minds. She did not know if the scholarships were held over the player’s heads covertly or overtly, but felt confident that financial stability was a consistent concern for student athletes deciding whether or not to speak to administrators about their frustrations.

"If that's the kind of fear that you're living under as a student athlete, then there's very little hope that things will improve because you obviously don't have an administration who's keeping tabs on that or monitoring that," Chanthavisouk said.

Two anonymous sources stated that they turned down scholarships to continue play at Seattle U due to Cole's continued presence as head coach.

"I had a really bad experience there and I am no longer playing," the third anonymous former player said.

Sarah Finney, Associate Athletic Director for Strategic Communications at Seattle U Athletics, declined multiple requests for an interview on behalf of Cole, offering a prepared statement instead.

"Seattle U Athletics is committed to the well-being of Redhawk student athletes. As seasons conclude, programs assess, adjust and maintain a forward-focused growth mindset. The 2022 volleyball season concluded this past weekend and the coaches and student athletes are now looking towards 2023," the statement read.

Towards the end of the season, Bartley decided to set up a meeting with administrators. She remembers having a meeting by herself, followed by a meeting involving the whole team.

"Everybody on the Zoom call was saying how traumatic the season had been, how miserable we were, how bad our mental health had gotten," Bartley said.

After one of the meetings, Cole apologized alongside an athletics administrator. The first anonymous former player expressed frustration at the lack of a specific topic for the apology.

"If you're apologizing, you should know what you're apologizing for," the anonymous player said.

Bartley also felt that the lack of specific topic made the apology inauthentic.

"That's the only thing administration did, it didn't help at all."

Chanthavisouk, who many players identified as an advocate on their behalf, didn't feel that the Seattle U athletic administration was receptive to the students' concerns.

"When you work with student athletes it's important for them to know that there's an adult who's looking out for them. I don't feel that the administration did that, I don't feel that Michelle did that. I feel like they [the students] were justified in how angry they were, because no one stuck up for them except for me," Chanthavisouk said.

Lack of support from Seattle U athletic administrators is not a new allegation. When Jim Hayford resigned from his position as head basketball coach in 2021 after using a racial slur, similar concerns circulated.

"The athletic department did get complaints about things that were going on within the basketball program and they didn't do anything about it. As far as being supported by the athletic department ... I didn't feel that way," a former basketball player said in an article written by the Spectator.

Annoyance about the amount of time it took for the coach to resign were also noted in the 2021 Spectator article, a frustration that Chanthavisouk echoed.

"How long did it take for them to decide to remove the basketball coach when he used the n-word?," Chanthavisouk said. "If they cared about volleyball enough, they'd do a better job of making sure that Michelle got the support she needed to make those changes, or they'd fire Michelle and find someone better."

Chanthavisouk was fired after the 2021 volleyball season, and chose to decline her severance package, which she remembers as \$3000, because of the non-disclosure agreement attached to it.

"I want to be able to talk about the situation freely if someone were to ever ask, and if one of the students were to ever engage the university in a lawsuit, I'd want to be able to offer what I experienced without any repercussions," Chanthavisouk said.

Chanthavisouk was never given a reason why she was fired, but feels that advocating for the players may have been a primary factor.

"I know my place as an assistant coach, I've been doing it for 18 years. I know that all the things that I did were to protect the student athletes and to protect my other assistant coach. I knew at some point that I would probably be dismissed from the team because of my behavior," Chanthavisouk said, "I most certainly did my job and I think I was fired for doing my job."

The first anonymous former player described the end of the season as exemplifying the failure of the head coach to care for the athletes as whole persons.

"Our last game was at Utah Valley University [UVU], we lost and all went into the locker room. Mind you, this was our last game. Usually the coaches come in and give a speech for the seniors who weren't returning," the player said. "The coaches didn't come in at all to talk to us. They were just like, oh, we have to go to the airport like shower up and get ready to leave...Michelle avoided us. That's how our season ended."

The 2021 volleyball season ended with an 0-3 loss at UVU with a season record of four wins and 21 losses. The 2022 volleyball season ended Nov. 12, with an 0-3 loss at, of all places, CBU. The 2022 season record was four wins and 18 losses.

As Athletics continues to strategize ways to recruit strong leaders and recover from the firing of a coach for verbally abusing athletes last year, it is unclear whether its "forward-focused growth mindset" will shift given the concerns of past assistant coaches and students. Whether future seasons see more success for the team will be dependent on the ability of Cole to lead the coaching staff in securing the trust of their players.

Editor's Note: There are three separate anonymous sources in this article, all of whom were athletes on the 2021 Seattle University volleyball team.