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EDITOR'S PICK

FEATURED

TOP STORY

(VIDEO) Davies could be out as Madison High School field hockey coach

Players, parents, alumnae rally around Davies

By CHRISTINE LEE Staff Writer Apr 26, 2019



ANN MARIE DAVIES



MADISON - The varsity head field hockey coach at Madison High School could be forced out of her position — and past and current players and supporters are rallying for her to keep coaching a winning team.

Head Coach Ann Marie Davies said before a packed Board of Education meeting Thursday, April 25, that her contract as coach wasn't being renewed. Although she is still employed by the school district, her position has been posted on the district's website for applicants, Davies added.

Before the public comment portion of the April 25 meeting, board President Leslie Lajewski made it clear the board and administration couldn't respond to any public comments on personnel matters.

"Our regulations require that all personnel matters be treated confidentially," the board president explained to the crowd. "We are basically prohibited from discussing any aspect of any personnel matter with the public."

Joining Davies at the meeting were more than 100 people, including current players, alumnae, and the parents of current and former players. About 15 people addressed the board on her behalf. The meeting was moved from the Madison High School library to the school cafeteria to accommodate the large crowd.

The school board scheduled the meeting to conduct a public hearing on the proposed 2019-20 school year budget.

During the course of a 37-year coaching career, Davies, of Main Street, has won 25 Conference titles, 23 Morris County Tournament titles, 15 State Sectional titles and five State Group titles. Her most recent win occurred in October at the Morris County field hockey tournament.

After Davies reached her 600th career win in 2017, Mayor Robert Conley honored the lifelong resident with a proclamation at an October 2017 Borough Council meeting.

A petition supporting the coach distributed via Change.org received more than 2,000 signatures as of Friday, April 26.

Keep On Coaching

At the meeting, Davies expressed outrage about the administrative process concerning her job, stating that she did not receive any signed evaluations or a plan to improve her performance in the district. She urged the board to reconsider its decision, and rehire her for the next season.

"I am blown away by this decision," she said. "I want to walk away from here with my head held high and on my terms. I deserve it."

She described her coaching style as "tough love" and acknowledged that although she drives players hard on the field, she embraces them off the field.

"It's not about the (wins) at this point, it's about how you get to those (wins)," Davies exclaimed. "You work hard, you're accountable, you teach those kids how to pick themselves up when they fall, you care about them on and off the field, work with their academics and family lives.

"They become my kids for three or four months. I never give up on a kid."

Davies concluded her remarks by raising her plaque recognizing her as "New Jersey Coach of the Year." Many of those in attendance chanted "Madison" following the coach's remarks.

'A Better Person'

Among those who showed up to demonstrate their support for Davies were Borough Councilwoman Astri Baillie and her husband John Kimball of East Lane, whose daughters, Emily and Elizabeth Kimball, played field hockey for Davies. Also present was Borough Councilwoman Maureen Byrne of Albright Circle, whose daughter, Maeve Byrne, also played for Davies. Neither councilwoman spoke at the meeting.

Davies' mother, Joyce Mantone, and her family members also were among those who came to express support for the coach.

John Kimball told the board that failing to rehire Davies would be "a terrible mistake" for the school.

"We need to make sure she is back on the field, coaching our field hockey team for many years to come," he said.

Although they played the sport long ago, Kimball remarked that his daughters still talk about playing field hockey under Coach Davies "as the standout experience of their high school years."

Madison High School field hockey players Nicole Ducey and Margaret Sheelergh, wearing black team shirts, spoke about Davies' impact on them. Ducey said Davies was "so much more than a coach" to her.

"She's a mentor, an inspiration and to me and many others, a second mother," Ducey told the board.

Ducey added that Davies drove her and her teammates to be better players on the field. Her teammate Sheelergh told the board that when the team headed into the state tournament in 2017, the coach promised them that for every game they won, she would run a mile. Davies kept the promise.

"We ended up making it to the state finals and she ran eight miles before our game," Sheelergh said. "I think that's a testament to how much she cares about her players and how far she's willing to go to motivate and be there for us.

"She's made me a better person."

Long Career

Former longtime Board of Education member Lisa Ellis of Brittin Street ran the field hockey booster club for six years. Her daughters, Mackenzie and Tori Ellis, played field hockey at the high school under Davies and later in college. Ellis, who left the board after 15 years last year,

serves as Madison's director of business development and as program director for the Downtown Development Association (DDC).

"The skills they learned through this program have carried them on through college into their work lives," Ellis said of her daughters.

Her daughter Mackenzie Ellis carried the grit she learned from Coach Davies to the University of Michigan, Ellis pointed out, playing one game against the University of North Carolina with a broken thumb.

"That started here," Ellis remarked.

She urged her former colleagues on the board to "look at the totality of her career" before choosing not to renew Davies' contract.

Katie Senna of Valevue Road, a field hockey player from 1989 to 1991, said Davies taught her about the value of working hard, competing as a team and never giving up.

"She fostered camaraderie among the girls, and we learned what it took to be on a winning team," she remarked. "I learned how to be a confident, moral person, and know that I could always pick myself up and try again to achieve the goals I set for myself."

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