

# TWO BOYS ON NEW YORK HIGH SCHOOL GIRLS VOLLEYBALL TEAM STIRS CONTROVERSY

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Mike Zacchio, USA TODAY Sports

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From left, Horace Greeley volleyball players Andrew LaFortezza and Jason Elbaum wait their turn to serve during practice. Frank Becerra Jr./ The Journal News

While Title IX was instituted to provide equality for women in sports, there's usually controversy anytime a female attempts to compete in a predominantly male sport.

The same holds true when a male tries to play on a women's team.

Last season, Yonkers (N.Y.) senior [Jenson Daniel](#) was denied the opportunity to play on the Yonkers varsity team, despite playing for the Bulldogs as a junior. The section deemed Daniel "too strong" to play with the girls during his fitness test, and later denied his appeal in October.

When Horace Greeley (Chappaqua, N.Y.) takes to the court this season, the Quakers will carry not one, but two boys on their varsity roster; a decision that has left coaches in the section with mixed emotions.

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Seniors Andrew LaFortezza and Jason Elbaum will suit up for the Quakers this year after going through the proper channels, sending the section — predominantly Class A — into a whirlwind.

LaFortezza said that he and Elbaum, both of whom played for Greeley's co-ed volleyball club last season, first had to tell Greeley athletic director Peter Kuczma that they had interest in playing for the girls team.

Once the boys participated in a fitness test to determine whether or not they were "too strong" to play with girls, Kuczma had to give the OK before moving onto the superintendent. When the superintendent approved the request, the case made its way to the last stop at Section 1, which gave the final approval a few weeks ago.

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"The first thing (Jason and I) said was, 'Is it possible that (Horace Greeley) could have a boys team?'" said LaFortezza, who checks-in at 6-feet, 150 pounds. "When that wasn't possible, we just decided to play with the girls team. We're hoping that this — us playing for the girls team — starts (building) momentum towards a boys (team)."

LaFortezza said that the Greeley co-ed club consisted of approximately 15 male volleyball players, and that despite losing some to graduation, "people always come to play." Still, a boys volleyball team was not to be in Horace Greeley's future.

Daniel, who had only heard that the boys would be trying out for Horace Greeley, was informed that they had made the team Thursday night.

"For these kids to actually go through (the process) and take a chance, even if it would have been time that was wasted ... I think that's cool. I admire that, actually," said Daniel, who is now attending LIU-Brooklyn.

Daniel expressed his support for the boys in making the team, but said he felt Section 1 should have been more consistent in their rulings.

"For (Section 1) to deny me and then accept these guys; I'm happy for (the boys), but in terms of Section 1, I think they did a poor job," he said.

Boys volleyball has been a hot-button issue for years in Section 1. Rockland County started a boys league six years ago, with four teams — Suffern, Clarkstown South, Clarkstown North and East Ramapo — in the mix.

Section 1 coordinator and Suffern boys volleyball coach Kim Cleary expected Arlington to join in 2013, and heard rumblings that at least two other schools may put a boys team together, which has since fell by the wayside. Due to budgetary reasons, not only did Arlington not join, but East Ramapo has also dropped out, leaving the league with just three teams.

Despite attempts to expand, boys volleyball seems to be becoming more obsolete with each year, making the decision even more baffling to Cleary.

"Since 2008, we're trying to expand such a great sport for guys, that has great opportunities for guys," Cleary added. "To see districts not embrace it, and allow boys to play on girls teams, is really disappointing."

If a boy is approved to play on a girls team, there are no restrictions on him playing in the front row, although the politically correct move has been to play him in the back. The net for a boys volleyball game is four inches higher than that of a girls game, giving a significant advantage to boys on a girls team who may have any experience playing on the higher nets.

"It is a dramatic difference," Cleary said. "Net play is really where I saw it. In 2007, when our Suffern girls played in the state regional against Horseheads — who now have a boys team — they had a young man named Kyle Ray on their team and it really threw off the girls at the net."

Suffern was 20-0 that season before losing to Horseheads, 3-1.

Section 1 coordinator and Hen Hud coach Diane Swertfager said she plans to address the matter at the state level when she represents the section for the annual meeting in November.

"What are we doing? If we're such good educators, why in the world are we not pushing to help boys volleyball?" Swertfager said. "I'm so happy that boys are playing (volleyball) ... But it's a concern, and for me, if there's a need, we should address it per school and we should make boys volleyball a priority. ... There are scholarships available for boys."

In fact, Elbaum, who moved to New York for his sophomore year, played for his high school's boys volleyball team in California as a freshman. Elbaum said that he was already drawing college interest from schools in New Jersey, but when there was no boys volleyball in New York, the contact stopped.

"When I moved out here, they sort of lost interest and lost contact because there was no boys team (in New York); there was nowhere that I could play," Elbaum said. "That was really a big letdown for me; I thought that maybe I would have the chance to play in college. It would be really cool if I could start that up again when I go to college."

Elbaum said he is looking at Vanderbilt, University of Maryland, Lehigh, Boston University and Syracuse, where he hopes to major in business. Elbaum said he would "absolutely" play volleyball at the collegiate level if the school offers it.

"It's a shame," Swertfager said.

"I'm more concerned of, 'Where do we go from here?'" she added. "How many guys are going to be allowed to participate on the court?"

Swertfager suggested that in addition to the evaluation tests given before the season, tests should also be given during the season to track a boy's progress throughout the year. The three-time state champion coach even referred to Daniel as an example, citing his progress throughout his junior year which ultimately led to an incident where one of his spikes injured an opposing female player.

"There's no evaluation process throughout (the season), and that concerns me because like I said, (the boys) should be improving," Swertfager said. "Are we putting girls in harm's way? Yes we do. There's no question about it."

Swertfager speaks not just as a coach in the section, but as a mother of a female volleyball player in the section. Theresa Swertfager, a senior at John Jay, is a libero for the Indians — the prime position for defending kill attempts.

First-year Quakers coach Daniela Denis said she is not sure where the boys will play this year, but hopes that Greeley doesn't catch too much flack this season either way.

"We haven't played any games, so I can't tell you what (the backlash) is going to be like," said Denis, who served as an assistant on Panas' section and regional championship squad last year. "The team works really hard, and (the boys) work really hard, so hopefully it will be OK."

Panas coach Joe Felipe sympathized with his former assistant, calling it a "lose-lose situation" for the 22-year-old's first coaching gig.

"I'm sure she'll get backlash on both ends," Felipe said. "If these boys start, other girls' parents will be like, 'Why is that boy playing over my daughter in a girl's sport?' and if (the boys) don't get to play the front row, the boys and their parents might be upset that they're supposed to be allowed to play (anywhere on the court) and they're not letting them in the front row and they're better than some of the front row players."

Felipe also added an interesting perspective as an opposing coach.

"I'm promoting the boys hitting in the front row," he said. "My philosophy is: I don't want to see anybody get hurt, but you know what? Maybe it takes the right person to ... see one of these guys go up, jump so high and hit a ball so hard that they're going to say, 'Wow, that doesn't look right.'"

*Mike Zacchio writes for The Journal News, a Gannett affiliate.*