

Hardaway's gay bashing brings swift rebuke

Former pro basketball player Tim Hardaway felt heat from all sides one day after making anti-gay comments

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By Barry Jackson and Steve Rothaus

A day after declaring "I hate gay people" on a South Florida radio show, former Miami Heat guard Tim Hardaway was banned from this weekend's NBA All-Star Game activities, lost a national endorsement deal and drew intense criticism from gay-rights advocates.

Five-time All-Star Hardaway, who apologized on WSVN-Fox 7 several hours after making the comments Wednesday, released another apology Thursday through his agent, Henry Thomas.

"As an African American, I know all too well the negative thoughts and feelings hatred and bigotry cause," Hardaway said in Thursday's apology. "I regret and apologize for the statements that I made that have certainly caused the same kinds of feelings and reactions.

"I especially apologize to my fans, friends and family in Miami and Chicago. I am committed to examining my feelings and will recognize, appreciate and respect the differences among people in our society," he said. "I regret any embarrassment I have caused the league on the eve of one of their greatest annual events."

STERN AND RILEY REACT

But Hardaway's backtracking on the comments he made during an AM radio interview with 790 The Ticket failed to undo the damage.

"It is inappropriate for him to be representing us given the disparity between his views and ours," NBA Commissioner David Stern said in a statement canceling Hardaway's appearance as an "NBA legend" at the YMCA of Southern Nevada and participation in the NBA's community caravan leading up to Sunday's All-Star Game in Las Vegas.

Heat president and head coach Pat Riley, who coached Hardaway during his Heat tenure, said he was "a little bit shocked by some of the words that he used."

"That kind of thinking can't be tolerated. It just can't," Riley said during a WQAM (560) radio interview. "But I do know that Tim's a good spirit and I'm sure now wished he could take all of that back. And I hope he's not severely judged."

Hardaway's comments could hurt him financially. BaldGuyz, a New Jersey-based company that makes grooming products for bald men, dropped him as a spokesman Thursday, four months after making him the first former pro to represent the two-year-old company.

"BaldGuyz, like baldness, does not discriminate based on lifestyle choice, color, education, financial resources, religion, physical capabilities or in any other way," Howard Brauner, CEO of BaldGuyz, said in a statement.

Matt Foreman, president of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, released a statement calling Hardaway "a hero to thousands of young people. And that's what makes his comments so troubling. Sadly, his words simply put the pervasive homophobia in the NBA on the table."

Local gay leaders spoke out as well.

"These comments dehumanize the gay and lesbian community, which, in turn, leads to more hate," said Heddy Peña, executive director of SAVE, Safeguarding American Values for Everyone.

"People like Tim Hardaway are not just celebrities; they're role models," Peña said. "He's using his celebrity to promote hatred. We expect more from people of his prominence."

"Obviously, I'm disappointed in Tim Hardaway, being that Tim Hardaway was one of my favorite basketball players," said Donnell Morris, managing director of Black Gay Pride of South Florida. "It creates a hostile environment for any player contemplating coming out of the closet."

BUSINESS VENTURES

Hardaway has an ownership stake in several South Florida businesses. A person who answered the phone at Tim Hardaway's U.S. 1 Car Wash in Miami, but declined to be identified, said more than 20 people had called to complain but that customer flow had not dropped. A man who identified himself as the manager at Tim Hardaway's House of Wings in Coconut Grove declined to comment.

Hardaway's comments followed last week's disclosure by former NBA center John Amaechi that he's gay.

Amaechi, who is promoting a book, told ESPN Radio on Thursday that the comments by Hardaway "and . . . people like him are the loud comments that pollute the air. These are the comments that create the atmosphere that allows some of the tragic incidents of homophobia that we've seen -- some of the attacks, some of the deaths. . . ."

"Is it his fault? Is it him that makes these people do these terrible acts? No, but it creates this atmosphere of permissiveness" in which "important people think it's OK to treat gay people this way. This is what makes the lives of gay and lesbian young people in school miserable."

Hardaway played for the Heat from 1995 through 2001. On several occasions, he has expressed interest in returning to the Heat's roster but was turned down.

The incident sparked a call for pro sports teams to put their players through sensitivity training.

"Instead of being in denial about homophobia in sports, they need to take action," said SAVE's Peña. "It's time for the NBA and the NFL to bring in people who will sensitize the players to these issues. We would facilitate it."

And gay leaders pointed out the Heat's popularity with all kinds of fans.

"If he thinks homosexuals are not sports fanatics, he better wake up and smell the coffee," said Ron Brenesky, co-founder and vice president of Unity Coalition, Miami-Dade's leading Hispanic gay-rights group. "There are plenty of Heat fanatics who happen to be gay."

"We go to those games."

