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UH athletics to review privacy policy

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The University of Hawai'i athletic department is reviewing its controversial policy prohibiting the release of medical information about injured athletes and their playing status, a spokeswoman said yesterday.

Sports information director Lois Manin said the review will be done "as soon as possible."

UH announced last month that it was changing its long-standing policy of releasing information about athletes' injuries and commenting on their playing status. Previously, athletes who had signed waiver forms permitting the release of certain information could have their injuries and playing status disclosed to the media.

Yesterday, following a week of speculation about her status, all-Western Athletic Conference outside hitter Tara Hittle announced on her own that she is finished for the season because of an ankle injury. UH volleyball coach Dave Shoji followed with a comment on her decision not to play.

Since last month, UH's official policy has been only to disclose whether an athlete has been "cleared to participate" or "not cleared to participate" although some coaches have provided more detailed information.

Manin said the department, faced with some athletes who requested privacy and some who agreed to waivers, wanted to adopt a uniform approach. She said the policy was "implemented to protect the privacy of student-athletes in accordance with the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)."

Manin said, "part of the problem stemmed from a large number of student-athletes on one team that did not sign the medical consent waiver, which allows the university to release the information." UH officials have said that was the case with the Rainbow Wahine volleyball team while most of the football players did sign the waiver forms.

"We are trying to be consistent in our policy making and, therefore, stretched the current policy across the board for all student-athletes," Manin said. "We thought it would be somewhat confusing if we had to go back and check, as each injury occurred, which student-athletes signed the consent form and which ones didn't, especially with injuries that occur during competition or during practice where the media was in attendance."

In its review, UH has asked the WAC for help in surveying the membership and other conferences on the issue. WAC commissioner Karl Benson, in town to meet with UH officials on a variety of topics, said he wasn't aware of any other WAC schools that have taken the same approach.

During a conference call of WAC football coaches Monday, most talked freely about their players' injuries and playing status.

Benson said Dutch Baughman, executive director of the Division I-A Athletic Directors Association, said, "he wasn't aware of any other institutions that were enforcing it this way but he also acknowledged there are varying policies in place addressing the whole student-athlete privacy issue."

Manin said, "our main concern is to protect the privacy of our student-athletes as they request." She said the department was hopeful a compromise that will protect the university from legal action while accommodating "the needs of media and fans" could be found.

Meanwhile, UH-Hilo has had a policy of not releasing medical information for more than two years, sports information director Kelly Leong said.

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