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Patston draws on own experience when she advises women

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Australian rugby union coach Ewen McKenzie. Source: AFP

DI Patston hates that she feels the need to give this advice but it comes from her own brutal experience and it's now what she believes. Any woman sexually degraded and humiliated in the workplace should keep her head down and say nothing.

A month ago, that's the last advice she would ever have passed on. A strong, confident woman, she was in almost every way a feminist role model, the business manager of the Wallabies.

It can't have been easy being the only woman in the otherwise all-male environment but Patston, though on her first major overseas tour with the team, was gradually finding her feet. But then, somewhere over the south Atlantic Ocean on South African Airways flight 222, it all went horribly wrong.

It began when Wallabies coach Ewen McKenzie directed two players, Kurtley Beale and Sam Carter, to change into team issue clothing. Carter complied without fuss but Beale, grumpy from lack of sleep after partying into the wee small hours following the Wallabies' agonising loss to South Africa the previous evening, made a smart-arse crack.

What happened next is not entirely clear but the escalating argument came to involve three players and three officials. According to one participant, Patston was the last to join in and then as peacemaker, telling Beale to calm down.

But from the way he aggressively responded, it quickly became evident, especially to McKenzie, that there was some unspoken subtext to their argument.

Not entirely unspoken, if Beale's written statement to the Code of Conduct tribunal last Friday is accurate. As things flared, he claims she said: "Do you want me to bring up the text?" McKenzie's ears pricked up but it would be some while yet before he got the answer to his mental question: "What text?" Eventually, however, the truth came out — that Beale had inadvertently texted her on June 9 a grotesque photo of a nude, obese female crossbow hunter accompanied by the caption "Di??"

When confronted by Patston, he had begged for forgiveness, reassuring her he hadn't sent the image to anyone else. But he lied. Six days earlier, as he revealed in his own statement, he had sent the same sexist image and text to an unspecified number of fellow Waratahs, not one of whom thought to report Beale's reprehensible behaviour.

There could scarcely be a more clear-cut case of villain and victim, but in one of the most extraordinary pieces of spin-doctoring in Australian sporting history, those roles were turned on their head.

Beale somehow became the put-upon victim, complaining in his statement that he began to feel during the team's Sanctuary Cove camp that his relationship with McKenzie "had become a whole lot worse than what it had been during previous times in camp".

It was a curious assertion, not least because that was the first time he was ever in camp with the Wallabies under McKenzie. Even when the independent tribunal found Beale guilty of a serious Code of Conduct breach and fined him \$45,000, he claimed a victory. Sunday newspapers perversely displayed cosy pictures on their front pages of the smiling workplace bully being hugged by his girlfriend.

Patston, meanwhile, was left to hug herself in her pyjamas. Beale's supporters realised that in order to save him, they needed to destroy her and McKenzie. And so the rumours started that the two were having an affair.

Patston and her husband, Wayne, put on a brave face and in truth were more concerned for McKenzie, who was put through a horrendous press conference in which he was forced to deny a lie too delicious to die.

She had hoped Wallabies captain Michael Hooper might lend her support, approaching him in Melbourne shortly after the June 9 text landed.

"He was one of the first people I told," Patston revealed. "I said to him 'This has happened ... I'm really struggling in dealing with it and it's affecting me' and he just brushed it off and said 'You'll be right. You'll deal with it.' He actually didn't want to know."

She didn't think too much of it at the time but last week, upon learning for the first time of the June 3 text, she began to review all her dealings with Waratahs players in a new light.

Humiliated within the Wallabies and feeling at odds with the players, Patston quit the Australian Rugby Union, but still she was pursued, with her workplace qualifications being openly, sceptically questioned.

She tried to laugh it off, pointing out that her son had written her CV profile as a part of a school project. The fact he described her as a Mr Whippy driver should have given the game away, she felt, but if anything the media attacks intensified.

“I don’t think anyone really realises what’s happened to my life,” said Patston, who admits she was driven to the brink of suicide.

“They (the media) think it’s just a good story and I think that’s what I’m struggling with. I said to my Dad last week that it’s not going to be until I jump or slit my wrists that someone says ‘Aw shit, there’s a woman there. There’s a person.’ And that’s too sad.

“I didn’t do anything wrong. I did nothing wrong. I just went to work.”

But her workplace let her down. Surely there will be more to come on this front. In the meantime, Patston has some melancholy advice to pass on.

“If I had my time again on this, as sad as this sounds, I would never report the matter — I would sit and suffer in silence,” she said. “I wish I had done nothing. The very fact that I did has now lost me everything I worked so hard for — my professional integrity.

“My reputation is ruined, I no longer have a job and the person I was is no longer. I would have been better off saying nothing.”

Australian rugby, this is your greatest day of shame. And to think that the player who caused it all is gloating that he has been vindicated.

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