

SportsWednesday

The New York Times

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 25, 2006

DI

Sexual Harassment Suit Filed Against Thomas and Garden

By RICHARD SANDOMIR

A former high-level Knicks executive filed a lawsuit yesterday accusing Isiah Thomas, the team's president of sexual harassment and discrimination, saying he had made unwanted advances, cursed her and barred players from working with her on community events.

In a lawsuit filed in federal court in Manhattan, the executive, Anucha Browne Sanders, said that Thomas refused to stop his actions despite her protests and discomfort, and that her immediate supervisor, Steve Mills, the president of Madison Square Garden Sports, did nothing to intercede on her behalf.

Last Thursday, Browne Sanders was fired as the team's senior vice president for marketing and business operations after an in-house investigation by the Garden found her complaint to be "unsupported."

Browne Sanders, 43, said in a telephone interview yesterday that she had found her dream job with the Knicks, whom she joined in 2000. Now, she said: "I'm outraged at the termination. I feel they've destroyed a stellar sports career."

She named Thomas and the Garden as defendants in the lawsuit, which charges them with two counts of sex discrimination and two counts of retaliation. She is seeking reinstatement and unspecified damages.

Ron Green, the Garden's lawyer, called the lawsuit "fabricated and outrageous." He said that Browne Sand-

Continued on Page D4

Thomas and Garden Face Sexual Harassment Lawsuit

Continued From First Sports Page

ers was fired "because of an inability to fulfill professional responsibilities," and said she "is now seeking a financial windfall." He said the Garden had a policy to prevent a hostile work environment, and called Browne Sanders's claims "baseless allegations."

In their statement, Thomas's lawyers, Peter Parcher and Sue Ellen Eisenberg, called the lawsuit a "cynical attempt to get a large sum of money from Madison Square Garden by taking advantage of the celebrity status of our client, who had no day-to-day interaction with her." Garden officials referred all questions for Thomas to his lawyers.

Parcher and Eisenberg accused Browne Sanders of demanding, as a condition of her departure, a \$6 million payment, more than 20 times her salary.

"That statement is false, as the lawyers who made it should know," said Judith P. Vladeck, one of the lawyers for Browne Sanders.

The Garden, and two of its officials, are defendants in another sexual discrimination suit. In October 2004, Courtney Prince, a former captain of the Rangers' ice-skating cheerleaders, charged that she was harassed and then fired after she told other skaters that she had been solicited for sex by a public-relations manager for the team during a postgame encounter in a bar. The case is awaiting a decision on a motion to dismiss one of its claims.

Browne Sanders — a star basketball player at Northwestern and the fourth-leading women's scorer in Big Ten history — said in her lawsuit that the work environment within the Garden changed drastically soon after Thomas was hired in December 2003.

She described in court papers several occasions in which Thomas harassed her coarsely, once after a Knicks loss the

day after a community event she had organized, and another time during a meeting with Mills and Thomas, who she said made his remarks when Mills left the room.

Browne Sanders, who worked for I.B.M. before joining the Garden, said that Thomas spoke of her cruelly to members of his basketball operations staff, telling them not to take directions from her.

In late 2004, she alleges, Thomas's hostile behavior changed to making sexual overtures. After one game, she said in her lawsuit, he hugged her tightly and told her he had figured out why they had problems. He said he was "in love" with her and they were "so much alike." She said that he compared his feelings for her to experiences the characters had in the film "Love and Basketball."

She said that he once told her: "I know you think I'm inappropriate. But I'm in love with you."

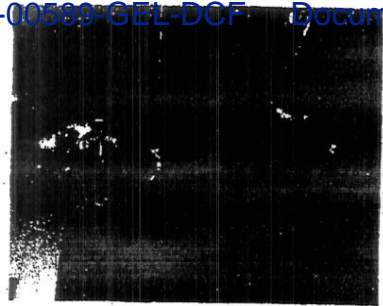
Last month, she charges, he again tried to kiss her, and when she pulled away, he said, "What, I can't get any love from you today?"

She said that she had made clear that his advances were unwelcome.

Browne Sanders's suit alleged that Thomas's attitude toward her was mirrored by the star point guard Stephen Marbury. In the suit, she asserted that other Garden employees informed her that Marbury had made derogatory comments about her.

When she told Mills about Marbury's remarks, according to the suit, she said that Mills warned her that if she kept making sexual-harassment claims, she should be prepared for Thomas to "spread a damaging and false rumor" about her.

She said that Mills also told her early last year that Knicks players were not cooperating with her, at Thomas's di-



ANUCHA BROWNE SANDERS CHARGES SHE WAS HARASSED BY ISIAH THOMAS.

rection. She said that led directly to a promotional campaign using cardboard cutouts of the players.

Twice last year, she said she met with a human-resources consultant hired by the Garden, who she claimed told her that Mills had asked him to set up a program for Thomas "because he has problems with women."

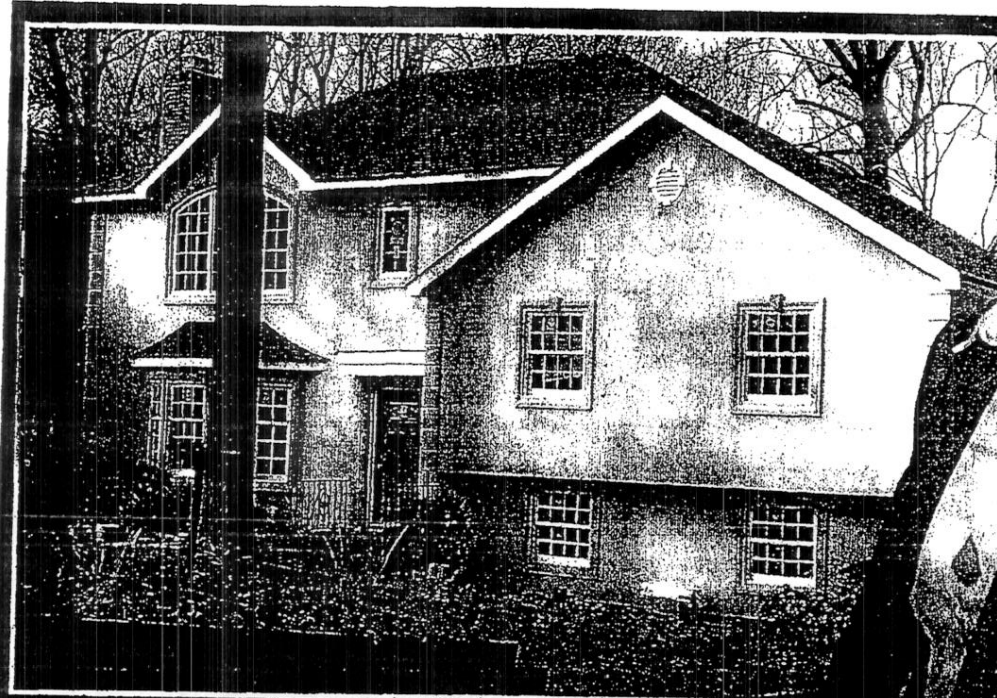
This past November, after Browne Sanders retained a legal team, the Garden initiated an investigation but refused to let her work for three weeks. Finally, last Thursday, she was told by the Garden that her claims could not be substantiated and that she was being fired.

The lawsuit alleges that by firing Browne Sanders, Madison Square Garden flouted the antidiscrimination laws to a degree rarely seen in the contemporary workplace.

She said that a Garden lawyer said that she was dismissed because she could not function effectively in her job and interacted poorly with senior management. She said, however, that her employee evaluations were strong and never cited her for-poor performance.

TRADES SHOTS

New York Post, Thursday, January 26, 2006 nypost.com



FURY: Anucha Browne Sanders and Isiah Thomas (far left) traded charges yesterday. She played college hoops in the '80s (below), and lives in this million-dollar Short Hills, N.J., home (above).



Exec's harass suit

At her press conference, Sanders spoke in a firm, slightly angry voice, saying she expected to be attacked by the Knicks. "I was warned that Mr. Thomas and the Garden would launch a campaign to smear me," she said. "I am not surprised... if any false and vicious accusations that they may spread about me and my family."

claim that Thomas said, "What, I can't get any love from you today" sounds like something he has said to others. "That rings true to anyone who knows him," said a former co-worker of Thomas.

Thomas, the former head of the Toronto Raptors team, has had trouble with women and sex claims in the past. John Lashworthy, a vice president with the Raptors, said that while Thomas was with the team in the 1990s, a woman threatened to go public with claims she had a sexual relationship with him if she wasn't paid.

"There was an incident when a woman tried to extort money from him," he said. "Our investigators looked into it, and found it was completely unfounded."

Sanders' suit also alleges that Thomas worked with the concierges of hotels where teams playing the Knicks would be staying. She said Thomas got the concierges to strip clubs and nightclubs so that they would be too hung over to play well.

Sanders also claims that Thomas' campaign of harassment turned Knicks players against her.

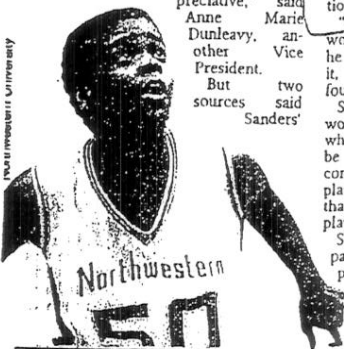
Among them was star Stephon Marbury. She said he one day declared, "F--- that black bitch, she thinks she runs the Knicks, but she don't

run s---!" Yesterday, Marbury responded by saying, "I'm not at liberty to talk about that." But he spoke out in defense of Thomas. "I know Isiah," he said. "And I know he's an honorable man."

In a bizarre twist, Sanders last month fired a cousin of Marbury named Hasan Gonsalves, who worked in the marketing department. A Garden source added that Sanders was then scared of the man.

This prompted the team to post added security by her seat, the source said. The source said Sanders complained that the security was not enough and wanted a private guard, but the team denied her request.

Additional reporting by Heidi Singer
toda.venezia@nypost.com



More in Sports / Pages 68-69

JUST VANDERKAM



The Star-Ledger

Dismissal could be heart of Isiah case

Thursday, January 26, 2006

BY DAVID WALDSTEIN
Star-Ledger Staff

NEW YORK -- The actual accusations in the sexual harassment lawsuit filed by a former Knicks executive against team president Isiah Thomas and Madison Square Garden might not be the most important part of the case, a prominent Montclair lawyer said.

How the Knicks responded to the allegations -- by firing senior vice president Anucha Browne Sanders -- could be the bigger issue.

"I think it's unbelievable that they fired her after she complained about his behavior," attorney Nancy Erika Smith said. "Even if she was wrong, even if it didn't arise to the level of harassment, firing her is exactly what the law prohibits."

Stephen Orlofsky, a former U.S. District judge for the state of New Jersey from 1996-2003 who has heard numerous sexual harassment cases, agrees with Smith, saying the Knicks could be liable for damages even if Thomas is cleared of all accusations.

"In theory that's possible, if the plaintiff can prove she exercised her legal right under the company's anti-sexual harassment policy," he said. "Even if the harassment claim itself was found to be meritless, if she can prove the termination was the result of her exercising her right to complain about it, in theory, she could still prevail on that."

Browne Sanders, 43, filed a lawsuit in Manhattan district court Tuesday, stating that her boss at the Garden, MSG sports president and chief operating officer Steve Mills of South Orange, did nothing to address the situation. The Garden says it launched an internal investigation that found her claims baseless.

Browne Sanders said she was fired last Thursday from her position as senior vice president for marketing and business operations, a month after alleging that Thomas made inappropriate sexual comments to her, and in one case made physical contact, a tight hug.

During a day of he-said, she-said press conferences and prepared statements, Ron Green, the attorney representing the Knicks, discredited Browne Sanders' suit.

"These fabricated and outrageous charges come from an individual whom MSG fired because of an inability to fulfill professional responsibilities and who is now seeking a financial windfall," Green said in a statement.

A person familiar with the case who requested anonymity because of his involvement with one of the legal teams, said negotiations to settle the case have started, but he indicted the sides are far apart.

Both sides appear to have powerful attorneys.

Green handled the sexual harassment case against Fox News Channel's Bill O'Reilly, a case that was settled out of court.

Browne Sanders has hired Judith Vladeck. Smith says her presence discounts Madison Square Garden's claim that Sanders is attempting to extort money out of the Garden and Thomas.

"(Vladeck) is a pioneer. She's brilliant," Smith said. "She created the law. She's fearless. And she doesn't take junk cases. If I were them (the Knicks), I would be afraid."

Thomas clearly is not.

Thomas and Mills each issued brief statements yesterday, which Thomas said was against the advice of his attorney.

"For me this is just wrong," an angry Thomas said at the attorney's Midtown offices yesterday, with Mills at his side. "All the lawyers are telling me, 'Oh, don't worry, this will pass. We will win in court. Don't say anything.' But it is not their name, their family, their career and their reputation that is being hurt.

"I did not harass Anucha. I did not discriminate against her. I did not participate in any discussion that led to her being fired. She did not even work for me. I will not allow her or anyone else to use me as a pawn for their financial gain."

While the Garden claims Browne Sanders asked for a \$6 million settlement, Vladeck denied that the sum was that high.

Browne Sanders said the problems began shortly after Thomas joined the Knicks in December 2003. In court documents, Browne Sanders said Thomas often berated her and made crude comments about her to Knicks officials, telling them not to listen to any of her directions.

Browne Sanders said Thomas' behavior soon became sexually charged, saying he told her he was "very attracted" to her and "in love" with her and tried to kiss her.

When reached at her Short Hills home last night, Browne Sanders declined to comment, but at her attorney's office in Manhattan during the day she reiterated her claim that Thomas and the Garden broke the law.

"I took this action because I had no choice," she said. "My pleas and complaints about Mr. Thomas' illegal and offensive actions fell on deaf ears. He refused to stop his demeaning and repulsive behavior and the Garden refused to intercede. I am outraged that I was fired for telling the truth and I am outraged that they have destroyed what was a stellar sports career."

She also claimed she was told that she would be attacked for filing the suit.

"I was warned that Mr. Thomas and the Garden would launch a campaign to smear me and I am not surprised nor will I be at any false and vicious accusations that they may spread about me and my family," she said. "This is all a diversion. In court, they will have no choice but to deal with the real issues of my complaint."

According to the team's media guide, Browne Sanders is married with three children.

© 2006 The Star Ledger

© 2006 NJ.com All Rights Reserved.