

## Women of Color in Sports: Double Jeopardy

By Richard E. Lapchick  
*Special for the Sports Business Journal*

Last week I was honored to have been asked to speak at the Women's Sports Foundation's Summit on the combined topic of gender and race in sport.

Women of color face a double barrier: racism and sexism, in sport and also in society. People who look like me control too much of the power – from the media which shapes our images to sports organizations which control the sports themselves.

The Women's Sports Foundation gives hope because it confronts the challenges. It is making an impact not just on elite athletes who happen to be women of color but also in urban communities where young girls have almost no opportunity to compete in sport.

An African-American girl in a city has 33% of the opportunities to play youth sport when compared to a white girl and only 15% compared to a white boy in the suburbs. That is a big challenge. Women of color are constantly fighting stereotypical images that impede their chances to obtain more control and influence in the world of sport. If it is hard today, imagine how hard it was 20, 30 or 40 years ago. We needed pioneers and we are so lucky that we had women out there blazing trails.

Athletes like Wilma Rudolph, Althea Gibson, Wyomia Tyus, Flo Hyman and Willye White, along with coaches like Tina Sloan Green and Vivian Stringer reached great heights and, thus created opportunities for those who would follow.

Now African-American women are bursting onto the scene in pro and college sport, especially the WNBA where 64 percent of the WNBA players were African-American last year. The Williams sisters have helped further the popularity of tennis.

But what of opportunities on the business side of sport?

The pioneers wanted chances to run the games, not just run in them. Most think colleges present the best shot for employment. They are thought to be the keepers of our ideals of fairness.

According to the most recent NCAA data, as reported in Northeastern University's Racial and Gender Report Card (Center for the Study of Sport in Society), among the 312 NCAA Div. I schools in 1997-98, African-American women represented 13.9% of all female student-athletes. They were concentrated in basketball at 35% and track and field at 28.6%. In all other sports combined, African-American women were a mere 5.3% of the total of women student-athletes while Latinas made up 2.9%, Asians 2.3% and Native Americans 0.5%. Those percentages have all been growing, albeit slowly.

Place that in contrast to the fact that, excluding the Historically Black Colleges and Universities, there is not a single African-American, Latina, Asian-American or Native American woman as an athletics directors in Div. I at present. In Division II there are two African-American women and one Asian-American woman in AD positions. There are two women of color who are ADs in Div. III.

In other words, while there are more than 1,000 NCAA schools only five have women of color as athletics directors! Who is coming up in the ranks? Only 1.5% of all the senior athletics administrators holding the

titles of associate and assistant ADs were women of color. In Division II and III, 2.8% and 1.8% respectively, were women of color. That is not very promising in the short term.

In Div I, African American women make up only 2% of all coaches of women's teams; all women of color comprise only 2.7%. In fact, women only hold 43.6% of the women's jobs. Men hold the majority! Nearly 73% of the few women of color holding college head coaching jobs are in basketball and track and field. Look in the other sports and we would find what they call in softball, a "shut out!"

At the NCAA Headquarters in 1999, Danita Edwards, VP for Public Affairs, was the only African American woman vice president. If the ideals for equality rest among the colleges, then where is the reality on our campuses? On all pro sports teams in the NBA, NFL and Major League Baseball, there were 401 positions of vice-president. African-American women hold three. There were a total of four women of color as VPs in all of the league offices combined. No African-American women held such positions in the NFL, NHL or Major League Soccer league offices. Leilani Serrechia, a Latina, was a Sr. VP for San Jose in the MLS.

In the NBA, which consistently gets the highest grades for both women and people of color in the RGRC, Judy Holland, VP Community Relations with the Washington Wizards, was the sole African-American woman among the 159 team VPs. The NBA League Office had half of all women of color in any men's league in this post: Marcia Sells was VP /Player Continuing Education and Leah Wilcox, was VP /Player and Talent Relations. On NFL teams, Adrian Barr, VP for Finance (CFO) with the St. Louis Rams, was the only African-American woman among the 109 VPs. There were no women of color as VPs in the league office.

Among Major League Baseball teams, Elaine Weddington Steward, VP Assistant GM & General Counsel of the Red Sox, was the sole women of color among 134 team VPs. In the league office, there were two African-American women as VPs or at the VP level: Kathy Francis, Vice President/ Marketing and Wendy Lewis, Executive Director Human Resources / Office Administration.

Because of staff shared with the NBA, it was difficult to compare the WNBA with other leagues. However, wherever there were dedicated staff, the WNBA had a high representation of both women and women of color in high posts. Renee Brown, an African-American, was VP Player Personnel in the central office. A bottom line for the future is that unless more women of color compete in sport as youngsters, it is unlikely that they will be part of the sports world as adults.

Right now those chances are severely limited by lack of opportunities for girls in urban areas to begin playing in youth sport programs. With those opportunities come the greater possibility of making it to college where their chances for graduating skyrocket as student-athletes of color. African-American female student-athletes graduate at a rate of 57% vs. 43% of African-American female students; Latina student-athletes graduate at a rate of 57% while only 49% of Latina students finish; among female Asian-Americans, 74% of student-athletes graduate vs. 68% of Asian female students in general. Native Americans who are female student-athletes graduate at a whopping 16% higher than Native American female students as a whole (54% vs. 38%) do.

However, what girls and women of color confront on a daily basis is that white males control the operations on most franchises, in college and high school athletics departments, and in youth sport programs. With degrees and higher level athletic experiences, at least women of color will not give employers in the business of sports any excuses about lacking qualifications.

Many observers believe that new beginnings came with the opening of the Millennium. Perhaps it will be a moment for sport to rededicate itself to truly become America's first professional arena where the principle of equal opportunity for all becomes reality. Running faster or jumping higher will not be enough to take us to this goal.

I do not think that we can reach this goal unless women and people of color raise their voices to call for it.

Let's all raise our collective voice to demand it.

**Northeastern University's  
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF SPORT IN SOCIETY  
360 Huntington Avenue, Suite 161 CP  
Boston, MA 02115-5000  
Phone: (617) 373-4025  
Fax: (617) 373-4566 / 2092**

**E-MAIL US at [sportinsociety@neu.edu](mailto:sportinsociety@neu.edu)**