

Black Coaches Association

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There was a time when the Black Coaches Association struck fear in the hearts of sports administrators on college campuses and at the NCAA. Powerful and untouchable coaches like John Thompson and John Chaney spoke out for all black coaches with the BCA, which they helped found, as their platform. Boycotts and protests were part of the BCA's action list. They were probably most powerful when John Thompson walked off the court in 1990 to protest academic standards being imposed on freshman student-athletes. The sports community was electrified by his courageous action.

Times had changed in the 25 years since Tommy Smith and John Carlos raised their fists in Mexico City, but Thompson's act was no less defiant. With the possible exception of Chaney, no other black coach could have done that and kept their job and their standing in the coaching community. Thompson spoke for the BCA and all black coaches. The NCAA backed down and the standards were reversed.

A couple of years later when the NCAA passed a new round of higher academic standards, the BCA made threats but did not follow through with action. I personally felt that that was the end of the fear that they struck with colleges and marked the decline in their influence. An internal power struggle ensued.

Rudy Washington, the founding Executive Director, left amidst controversy and the BCA's ship tumbled in rough waters without a strong director. I have attended their conventions for most of the past decade, including their recent meetings in Atlanta. It used to be a gathering place for all the top black coaches and many white coaches as well. The power coaches have disappeared from the convention. Ever since the BCA failed to take a stand that year, the numbers of African-Americans have declined as student-athletes, as coaches and as athletics directors. I believe there is a direct correlation.

This situation begs for the need of the strong, powerful and unified voice that the BCA used to have. I recently wrote on these pages about women of color in sport so I am going to concentrate here on men in the NCAA's Division I. However, I must note that the record in Div II and III is far worse than Div I in all areas I mention below. Here are their sad numbers.

African-Americans dropped overall as student-athletes from 21.5% of all student-athletes in 1995 to 18.9% in 1999. In the revenue sports, the percentage of African-American student-athletes dropped from 47.5 to 45.3%. Yet the public's strong perception, fueled with media images, makes us believe that the number of African-Americans playing sport continues to spiral upward. Those numbers are in an 8 year long swoon that started in 1992.

Yes, I know that the percentage of white student-athletes is also declining but I am not so worried about them for they have a safety net that is nationwide which does not exist for African Americans. The latest NCAA report was released last month showing that a sad 2.4% of athletics directors are African-American, a 30 percent decline from an already embarrassing 3.7% in 1995.

Overwhelmingly white, ADs are the people who are hiring young coaches as they move up in the ranks and even as they achieve the very highest ranks. How will they find black coaches? Do they bring expectations about Black coaches that differ from white coaches?

I do not mean to imply for a second that I think white ADs are racist simply because they are white. There

are some extraordinary white men and women ADs who are on the right side on this issue. However, we were all raised in a society in which many whites have consistently held some powerful stereotypical views of African-Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities.

Opportunities in men's basketball continue to be reasonably good as the percentage of Black head coaches increased from 17.4% in 1995 to 21.6% in 1999.

Football is terrible. I was blessed to be asked to co-author the autobiography of Eddie Robinson with him. What more do we need to know about college football other than the fact that the all-time winningest coach in college football history, the coach who sent more student-athletes to the NFL than any other coach while graduating 80% of his players, was never interviewed by a predominantly white college. The percentage of head football coaches who are Black dropped from 4.8% in 1995 to an outrageous 2.9% in 1999. Not only are Blacks not getting the jobs, but they also aren't even being interviewed.

Baseball is even worse where Blacks hold 0.4% of the head jobs.

OK, so not many African-Americans play college baseball. But they do run track and field in large numbers. African American men hold only 8.7% of the head jobs. Blacks are virtually shut out of coaching positions in other sports.

The future is not promising unless the BCA somehow regains its influence and powerful voice. There were a lot of coaches at the 2000 BCA Convention in Atlanta. Most were assistants or coaches at smaller schools. They are too vulnerable to speak up individually and need the collective, unified and clear voice of a BCA ready to call for action.

Decision-makers may need a feeling that they have something to lose if they don't change their hiring practices. Boycotts are one answer. Women have been very effective in using lawsuits that costs universities big dollars. The BCA can use these and other tools. I hope these coaches come off of the sidelines in unity to work for real change that will not only help them but all of sport to live up to its ideals of being an equal playing field.

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