

Black College Football Coaches Lose Yardage

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Special for the Sports Business Journal

Until the week before Christmas, I looked at the future of black coaches in college football as a nightmare. Instead of moving toward more opportunities for black coaches, the number of black head coaches in Division IA football was shrinking. When Wake Forest and Oklahoma State fired Jim Caldwell and Bob Simmons right before Thanksgiving, we went from a paltry six out of 115 (5.2%) black head coaches to an appalling four (3.5%).

The nightmare got some bright light when San Jose State University hired Fitz Hill as their new head coach. Not only did Division IA get a fifth black head coach, but it may have gotten a voice for change. The stories about the hiring included information on his success as a top assistant at Arkansas, but also that people might want to address him not as Coach Hill but Dr. Fitzgerald Hill.

I got to know Fitz shortly after he joined the coaching staff at Arkansas as a full-time assistant in 1992. Since then he not only received his Ph.D. but continued to do research on issues related to blacks in coaching. He is currently doing a huge research project surveying every head and assistant college football coach in the country to assess general attitudes toward the hiring of black coaches. He wants to change the way we do that aspect of the business of college sport. He writes about it and speaks about it. The last time we were together was at the 2000 meeting of the Black Coaches Association. As chair of a panel on the issue of hiring practices, Dr. Hill directly laid out the obstacles to more blacks getting college coaching jobs. The bottom line: racism and the old boys network.

Football has historically had unique problems with black head coaches. While there is certainly a substantial percentage of the student-athletes who are black in both basketball and football, head coaching opportunities for blacks are simply not the same.

In Division I basketball last year, nearly 22 % of the head jobs were held by black coaches. No one is surprised when a college hires a black basketball coach. Thus, stories are written about coaches being hired in these positions in basketball, but without the need to reference the fact that the person signing the contract may happen to be black.

Yet year-after-year in football, summary stories are written about no or few new black coaches being hired. Recently the stories focussed on the declining numbers. Not only were blacks not getting the jobs, but they weren't even being interviewed. The story is crystal clear when you examine the historical numbers. Going back 10 years, only 11 schools hired a black coach. Going back 50 years, there has been an average of approximately 15 head coaching jobs turnover each year. That means that among the top 100 schools that play football, there were an estimated 750 openings. In the history of college football, there have been less than 20 Division IA black head coaches!

I was lucky to be asked to co-author the autobiography of Grambling State's 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, a coach whose players graduated at a rate much higher than football student-athletes in general and who almost never got in trouble, was never interviewed by a predominantly white college.

When you include all of Division I, the percentage dropped from 4.8% in 1995 to an outrageous 2.9% in 1999. Not only are promising black coaches not getting the jobs, but also, like Coach Rob, they aren't nearly 400% in Division II. In Division III, blacks hold 1.4% of the jobs.

What are the differences between football and basketball? Why do the same athletics directors and the same presidents hire so disproportionately in basketball and football?

I think part of it is that basketball has had coaches with strong and persistent voices to speak up for change. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Georgetown's John Thompson and Temple's John Chaney spoke out, threatened to boycott, walked off courts in protest, and helped build the Black Coaches Association into a powerful institution. Thompson was not only bold but also was erudite. College professors and presidents listened to him and helped broaden his impact.

Division IA college football has had no such presence. Like the early days for black college basketball coaches, jobs were scarce and speaking out on issues of race could cost you your job. College football is still like that.

Dr. Fitzgerald Hill, now head coach at San Jose State, can be such a person, especially if his teams win. San Jose hired him knowing he was a spokesperson for more opportunities for black coaches. Here are some of the questions he asked on the survey of coaches I mentioned earlier. In the survey, black and white coaches were asked whether they agree or disagree with things like:

- * Black coaches who appear quiet and reserved and who do not challenge current hiring practices have a better chance of being employed at predominantly white institutions.
- * Not having played in central positions (example: quarterbacks, offensive line and inside linebackers) during their collegiate careers has led to the assignment of black coaches to basically non-central coaching positions.
- * Influential white alumni and fans often hinder the hiring of a black coach as head football coach.
- * A major barrier for black coaches is the reluctance of athletic administrators to admit there is a problem with present hiring procedures.
- * There is a strong indication that black coaches are not hired for their strategic understanding of the game, but for recruiting and monitoring black student-athletes.
- * Many black coaches are hired as racial tokens at NCAA Division IA colleges and universities.

I am going to be rooting hard for San Jose State next year so that Coach Dr. Hill can continue to ask such questions and get real answers. Maybe then the history of racial hiring practices in college football will change. I know he shares that dream with hundreds of black assistant coaches waiting on the sidelines for their chance.

Without Anita DeFrantz, the corruption and the image of corruption will run unabated. With her, I have a genuine hope for our Olympic athletes inspiring young people that they can all live within that one circle of humanity.

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