

Smashing Barriers in College Football

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Notre Dame may have cracked one of sports toughest racial barriers by hiring Tyrone Willingham as its head football coach on New Year's Day. While there have been a handful of other African-American head coaches in college football, this is sports' most segregated major position. And Notre Dame is the most storied program in the history of the game.

Athletics Director Kevin White inherited a university program that had no African-American head coach in any sport. Was White simply out to hire a person of color? If he was, then his first offer would not have been to George O'Leary. I met with Kevin White last year when he told me he was committed to the issue of diversity at Notre Dame. One of his first hires was Bernard Muir as an Associate Athletics Director. He became Notre Dame's only African-American in a senior post. White emphasized that he needed the best person available to fill that key post and he got Muir after years of service at the NCAA.

Now Kevin White feels he got the best person available in Tyrone Willingham. It would be hard to find a better fit. Willingham coached at what might be the only comparable program in the nation regarding top athletic and academic achievement. Father Edward Malloy, the President of Notre Dame, noted that he was "the very best coach who was appropriate for Notre Dame and all that it represents."

In his last seven years, Willingham took Stanford to four bowl games, was PAC 10 Coach of the Year twice, and this year had a top 10 BCS ranking. His student-athletes had a high graduation rate and represented the university as leaders and not troublemakers as sometimes happens in top 10 programs.

What will he face at Notre Dame? The expectations are high that a Notre Dame coach will achieve great things on the field. History says so and alumni demand that history be repeated even if it has not met those historical standards for many years. Many have said that Notre Dame cannot uphold its academic standards and return to the glory years of football.

I am betting that there will be many African-American parents who have bright and talented sons and will now want them to choose Notre Dame. There are so many winning programs to choose from such as Michigan, Michigan State, Penn State, Florida, Florida State and Nebraska. I believe Notre Dame just got a competitive edge in recruiting by hiring Willingham.

As an African-American, he might also face a skeptical group within the Notre Dame alumni. After all these years of no African-American coaches in any sport, to have an African-American in their most important sport has no doubt created an uncomfortable buzz among some alums. As with other African-Americans who broke barriers as coaches or general managers, when they won big, the fans joined the parade. When they lost, the parade got rained out no matter what color the coach was. Because it is Notre Dame with all of its academic and social successes, Notre Dame football players are very likely to do well in those areas.

Tyrone Willingham has to win big on the field at Notre Dame to succeed there. What else is at stake here? While everyone at Notre Dame downplayed the social significance of the hire, it cannot be ignored. To put

it simply, few athletics directors have had the courage to hire the best head football coach available irrespective of color.

While it has been significantly better in college basketball, the record in college football is scandalous. Instead of moving toward more opportunities for black coaches, the number of black head coaches in Division IA football has actually been reduced this year for the second consecutive year. The hiring of Willingham does not change the numbers of African-American head coaches which sunk from an already appalling five out of 115 (4.3%) African-American head coaches to an even more disgraceful four (3.5%) this year when University of Southwestern Louisiana-Lafayette fired Jerry Baldwin. That is a 4.3 percent drop from the 1997-98 season in Division IA football.

In the combined Division I football programs the story was worse with only 2.9 percent of the head coaches African-American. The football pyramid, so narrow at the top, got slightly wider at key positions of offensive and defensive coordinators with nearly 10 percent of those posts going to African-Americans, and wider still at the assistant level where African-Americans held 20.4 percent.

But the disparity shows its greatest side at the base of the pyramid where 46.4 of the Division I football scholarships go to African-Americans. The historical record is astonishing. Looking at the last 10 years, Notre Dame became only the 12th school to hire an African-American coach.

Over the last half century, there has been an average of approximately 15 head coaching jobs turnover each year. Among the top 100 schools, there were an estimated 750 openings for head football coach. In the history of college football, there have been less than 20 Division IA black head coaches!

I co-authored the autobiography of Grambling State's Eddie Robinson with him. His story tells us all we need to know about college football. Coach Robinson is 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. Yet Coach Robinson was never interviewed by a predominantly white college.

Promising African-American coaches aren't even being interviewed. Kevin White did his search, gave Willingham the interview and then offered him the job. He was the best person for Notre Dame. But this is much bigger than a Notre Dame story and the immediate result will allow other athletics directors more running room to hire the best candidates out there.

There are many African-American assistants waiting for their chance which seemed far less likely to come before Notre Dame's New Year's present to itself and all of college football.

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