

## COACHING IN COLLEGE FOOTBALL: THE BEAT GOES ON

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All across the nation, cheers are rising for the return of college and pro football. The threatened labor dispute and questions about steroids in baseball have made the start of these seasons even more anticipated than usual. Great players, great teams and their fans, the fall is arriving as a breath of fresh air. Yet serious commentators on sport have focussed closely on football's lingering problem of the lack of African-American head coaches.

In the entire history of the 117 Division IA schools, some going back more than 100 years, plus the history of the two schools that hired African-American coaches but no longer play Division I football, there have been 11,413 seasons of football played. During that same time period, it is astonishing to see that only 72 of those seasons have been led by an African-American head coach. Only 19 African-American men have ever led a Div IA team. Their average tenure was less than 4 years and only Dennis Green, Ron Cooper and Tyrone Willingham ever got a head coaching job at more than one school.

Looking at the complete history of the all current and former NFL teams, there have been 1,636 seasons of pro football played. Yet only 34 of those seasons have been led by an African-American coach. If you count Terry Robiske's three games as head coach of Washington in 2000, then there have been six African-American heads coaches in the history of the NFL. Their average tenure was less than 6 years. Only Ray Rhodes and Tony Dungy got second chances

How often do we hear white coaches say, in their press conferences upon hiring, "dreams do come true, I worked hard, I was patient and my dream came true." History teaches African-American coaches to scale down their dreams.

Right now only 4 of the current 117 Division IA schools and two NFL teams have an African-American head coach in the 2002 football season. Five years ago there were twice that many in college and three in the NFL. It is getting worse, not better. None of the African-American college coaches are at the top 25 schools. In the Sports Illustrated pre-season ranking, Michigan State was first at 28th, Notre Dame was 39th, New Mexico State 97th, and San Jose State was 107th. The medium ranking of these 4 teams was 68th.

African-American coaches, when they do get a chance, usually end up in troubled programs where there is very little likelihood for success. Here are all the schools that have ever hired an African-American coach, in order of the hiring starting with Wichita State in 1979, Northwestern University which hired both Dennis Greene and Francis Peay, Ohio University, the University of Las Vegas, Stanford University which also hired two African-American coaches (Dennis Greene and Tyrone Willingham), Long Beach State, Wake Forrest, Eastern Michigan State University, Temple University, North Texas and Louisville and Oklahoma State when their program was not winning as much as they have recently.

The most significant hires arguably took place between 1996 and 2002. John Blake took over at the University of Oklahoma in 1996, Michigan State hired Bobby Williams in 1999 and Notre Dame hired Tyrone Willingham in 2002. In that period New Mexico State and Southwest Louisiana State hired African-American head coaches. In 2001 the first 24 openings went to white coaches until San Jose State hired Fitz Hill

for the final vacant position. In the last six years, there were 109 vacancies in Division IA. African-Americans took over six of those posts.

Throughout this history, various assumptions have been made by some athletics directors who did not consider African-American candidates. Among some frequently heard doubts behind closed doors were the feelings that African-Americans cannot lead white players, that African-Americans cannot work with white alumni organizations, and that African-Americans would be unable to raise the funds to support a big time football program. The fact that head coaching packages now regularly surpass \$1,000,000 makes ADs even less likely to take a chance on an "untested" coach. But how do you get tested without the opportunity?

African-American assistant coaches were hired in the 1980s and 1990s. Dr. Fitz Hill, whose PhD thesis studied attitudes on this issue, said that many African-American assistants felt they were brought in to watch over and handle the increasing number of African-American players on the teams. Most were receivers coaches, running backs coaches, and defensive line coaches.

Fitz Hill said that African-Americans don't speak up for fear of retribution that they would be labeled a malcontent while whites don't speak up for fear of retribution if they were thought to be "politically incorrect." The result is that real feelings are being suppressed and the undercurrents of stereotypes and covert racism are left to fester.

In 1997, there was an all time high of eight African-American head coaches. The number dropped to six in 1998, five in 1999 where it would remain for two years, and four in the year 2001.

Current hiring practices in college football can be portrayed as a pyramid.

- \* At the bottom of the pyramid 50.6% of the Division IA scholarship athletes are African-American.
- \* Looking up the side of the pyramid as we get closer to the top, 20.4% of the assistant coaches in Division I football are African-American. Are there coaches in the pipeline below Division I? When you combine all three NCAA divisions only 14.9% of assistant coaches are African-American.
- \* Approaching the pinnacle, approximately 10% of the coordinator positions, considered to be the most important channels to head coaching positions, are held by African-Americans.
- \* At that top a narrow 3.5% of all Division IA schools and 2.4% of all Division I schools have an African-American head coach.

I don't think we need to know anything more than the Eddie Robinson story. As this college football season began, many debated whether Bobbie Bowden or Joe Paterno will hold the all time record for wins in college football. Most seem to have forgotten that Eddie Robinson had 80 victories more than either one of these giants by the end of his incredible career. He sent more athletes to the NFL than any other head football coach in the history of college football. His athletes graduated at nearly a rate of 80% in a sport where the rate is nearly 50%. And only in this last year were any of his players ever in trouble for crossing social norms. In spite of this amazing record, Coach Eddie Robinson was not only never hired by a Division IA school but was never offered an interview. I think that tells the story even more than the numbers.

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