

Long Way to Go for Racial and Gender Equality in Sports Hiring Practices: Major League Soccer Lags then Leads

by Richard E. Lapchick
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With Title IX under attack and Affirmative Action being assaulted in the courts, it was striking when the 2003 Racial and Gender Report Card revealed that when it comes to hiring practices in professional and collegiate sport, women and people of color have lost ground. Recently released by the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport at the University of Central Florida, the Report Card is considered to be the definitive assessment of hiring practices in professional and amateur sports in the United States.

Every professional sport had lower averages for gender in the 2003 Report when compared to the previous Report. The single worst grade in the Report was the "F" received by Major League Soccer on the issue of gender. It was the first "F" in the history of the Racial and Gender Report Card. Along with the bad news, the National Basketball Association, Major League Baseball, the National Hockey League and college sport improved their grades for race. Major League Soccer (MLS) was one of the three men's leagues to receive a "B+" or better on race.

College sport also improved in the gender category. I have been the author of the Racial and Gender Report Card since the 1980s. When I first started writing it, the general reactions of most league offices was that it was a nuisance to deal with but that two days after the release the issue would be dead until the next report was released. Gradually, as issues of diversity became more important in the workforce in general and also in sport, the Report was viewed by most commissioners as a resource to help get the teams to open their hiring processes to include more women and people of color. We gave advanced copies to the league offices and to the NCAA.

On the night before the release, Kristina Maloney, the MLS Director for Human Resources, requested a conference call for the morning of the Report breaking in newspapers across the country. On the call with Ms. Maloney was Nelson Rodriguez, the MLS Vice President of Administration and Operations. The morning papers were quoting MLS sources as being "stunned" by the "F" and I was really not sure what to expect.

Nelson Rodriguez took the lead. "I want you to know how much we respect the work that went into this report. We want to understand exactly why we got the "F" for gender so that we can deliberately work toward getting an "A" in the future."

By the end of the conversation, which lasted for an hour, MLS had decided on a course of action that included having the league office, the players and each team front office do diversity management training to help improve the understanding of all diversity issues.

By the end of the week, MLS Commissioner Don Garber, wrote to all league and team staff and coaches: "With the F given to MLS, we have become the first-ever major sports organization to receive a failing grade.

"While we are proud of our record in developing a very high percentage of a racially diverse pool of players, coaches, administrators and referees, our accomplishments are obviously incomplete. It is imperative that MLS demonstrates progress in employee representation in both areas, particularly with respect to that of genderS "

"Our goal should not be to simply improve our grade; improvement in this area should reflect the significance of recognizing the skills and contributions of diverse employees currently under-represented

throughout our League and team staffs. We must continue to celebrate our diversity, and be authentic in our claims that we are the "League for a New America."

"Nelson Rodriguez ... and Kristina Maloney will spearhead this important effort League-wide."

Garber, obviously proud of the MLS past performance on race, took immediate action to improve the MLS record on gender. It was the most proactive and immediate response we have ever received with the publication of the report and set a standard for all professional sport. Hopefully, other leagues will soon respond where the records show need for action to improve their own performance on diversity.

As it has in all previous reports, the NBA had the best record for racial and gender hiring practices among all the men's professional leagues. The WNBA had the best record for gender and the best combined record for race and gender. College sport made the greatest overall gains.

Considering the scrutiny that the NFL was under regarding African-American coaches last year, the deeper look in the 2003 Report across the league in all positions showed significant declines for both race and gender. The NFL had the lowest combined grade in all the sports covered in the report.

For the 12th consecutive report, the NBA continued to have the best record for diversity among all the men's professional sports leagues. Commissioner David Stern has made this a priority in throughout his tenure and the record shows the results. People of color held significant positions throughout the NBA, with strong showings among players (80 percent), league office vice presidents (10), league office professional staff (28 percent), limited partners as owners (6), team presidents (3), general managers (17 percent), team senior administrative posts (19 percent), team professional administrative posts (21 percent), head coaching positions (48 percent) and assistant coaches (33 percent).

Robert Johnson became the first African-American owner in sport when he purchased the NBA's new Charlotte franchise. The NBA also had the best opportunities for women in the men's leagues, with 13 league office vice presidents, 15 limited partners as owners, one team president, 29 percent of team senior administrative posts and 48 percent of team professional administrative positions.

With Don Garber's actions in May, Major League Soccer is likely to move toward achieving NBA-like results. Creating positive change on issues of race and gender is, of course, the very purpose in publishing the Report. Commissioner Garber has seized the issue.

Richard Lapchick is the author of the Racial and Gender Report Card, Director Emeritus of Northeastern University's Center for the Study of Sport in Society, and is Director of the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport and of the DeVos Sport Business Management Graduate Program at UCF.

**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