A Practitioner Analysis of the Sport Management Literature Examining the Lack of Minority Coaches in College Football

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During the 2015 season, 53.4% of Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (DI-FBS) players were Black, 27.1% of DI-FBS assistant coaches were Black, and 10.2% of DI-FBS head coaches were Black (Lapchick & Baker, 2016). This paltry coaching representation is not an anomaly as more than half of college football players from 2008-2015 were Black, yet racially similar coaches held 9.94% of the total head coaching positions in college football (Turick & Bopp, 2016). Since most college football players are Black, Everhart and Chelladurai (1998) would suggest that most coaches might be Black, if you consider former players to be prime candidates to transition into the coaching profession. When Black athletes represent a substantial portion of the total participation in a sport while holding few leadership positions within the same sport, it sends a message that they are good enough to play but not to coach or lead (Agyemang & DeLorme, 2010). Although Bopp and Sagas (2012) found a positive trend in the increase of African American head coaches in college football prior to the start of the 2010 season, recent hiring outcomes indicate that those trends have plateaued (Turick & Bopp, 2016).

Discrimination against Black coaches is common in sport, as Edwards (2010) noted when he discussed how racial and ethnic prejudicial issues have long ‘plagued’ the institution of sport, as demonstrated by the storied histories of discrimination, exclusion, exploitation, and prejudice targeted toward Black individuals. Previous researchers have attempted to utilize different concepts and theories to explain the underrepresentation of Black head coaches in college football, such as (1) homologous reproduction, which refers to a process by which individuals hire people that are similar or the same as them (Cunningham & Sagas, 2005); (2) role congruity theory, which can explain how potential prejudices associated with Black coaches might be incongruent with what individuals perceive to be the attributes necessary to hold a head coaching position (Eagly & Karau, 2002); and (3) stacking, which is the assigning of individuals to certain positions based on assumptions regarding one’s athletic ability and race (Sack, Singh, & Thiel, 2005).

Unfortunately, Black coaches do not have protections or rules in place that assist them in having an equal opportunity to obtain leadership positions within college sport. The National Association for Coaching Equity and Development recently suggested that schools adopt the Eddie Robinson Rule, which would require universities to interview at least one, but preferably more, qualified racial and ethnic minority candidate in their final candidate pool for open head coaching and executive administrative positions (Medcalf, 2016). The opportunity for minorities to interview for coaching opportunities is a step in the right direction, but it does not solve the issues that minorities experience once they obtain employment.

The fact that many minority coaches have struggled as head coaches, with White head coaches having statistically higher winning percentages, may have created a bias regarding their ability to lead winning teams (Turick & Bopp, 2016). The media also plays a role in perpetuating racial bias towards minority coaches, as they frequently depict White coaches as more knowledgeable than their Black counterparts (Cunningham & Bopp, 2010). Black coaches also may face more pressure to win sooner than White coaches, as former University of Colorado head football coach Jon Embree echoed in his farewell press conference when he said, “You know we (Black head coaches) don’t get opportunities. At the end of the day, you’re fired and that’s it. Right, wrong, or indifferent…We get bad jobs and no time to fix them” (Gemmell, 2012, para. 7).

The purpose of this research will be to provide Black football coaches with an opportunity to comment on the sport management literature that attempts to explain the discrepancy in coaching hires and allow them to suggest what issues need to be addressed by future researchers if positive social change is to be realized. This study focuses on...
Black football coaches because they are underrepresented in their sport, and the ramifications may impact career planning and the mentorship of young Black athletes (Singer, 2009). Additionally, the intent of this study aligns with Cunningham’s (2013) challenge to sport management researchers to conduct research that attempts to ensure that sport promotes equality, inclusion, and opportunities for all.

Semi-structured interviews with Black college football coaches will be conducted to provide them with an opportunity to comment on how we, sport management scholars that study race, have done in attempting to explain their under-representation and lived experiences within college football. Whether or not Black coaches are aware of the body of literature that attempts to explain their lived experiences is unknown. Based on Irwin and Ryan’s (2013) critique of sport management scholarship suffering from a practitioner-researcher divide, in which academics produce research that is read only by other academics, it may be safe to assume that Black coaches are unaware of the research on racial inequality that has been published in the sport management and sociology literature.

Much of what is known about the experience of Black coaches is based on quantitative survey research studies. These studies are rarely replicated, which is important for scholars to do in an effort to ensure the facts we use are, in fact, so (Schmidt, 2009). Another limitation of the current research related to Black coaches in intercollegiate athletic departments is the lack of applied research being utilized by sport sociologists. Yiannakis (1989) and Chalip (2015) have both advocated for an applied sociology of sport in which researchers bring knowledge to those who need it and disseminate it accordingly. Marginalized groups are creators and holders of knowledge (Singer, 2005), which means the research that has been conducted with and about those individuals within our field should be brought to them for critique.

Thus, this study aims to assist sport scholars by allowing the voices of Black football coaches to help identify gaps in our thinking and suggest questions that should serve as the focal point(s) for future research studies. Additionally, participants will offer insight into the lived experience of being a Black coach in a predominantly White profession.