

COMMISSIONER POSITIONS NOT A BLACK AND WHITE ISSUE

Diversity coming slowly to major league sports but will likely stop short of the top job

The title of commissioner of any major league sport is a highly coveted post. As rumors of names like Bill Clinton and Condoleezza Rice swirled this year for the NFL commissioner position, and with an NBA vacancy possibly next in line because of David Stern's advancing age, a question was thrown into the forefront: With black players in the majority in both leagues, should the men who hold the highest position also be black?

Stern says qualifications should be the only factor and believes that a qualified black candidate would have an excellent chance of becoming NBA commissioner. "I can tell you a major advantage for me was the fact that I was a lawyer, so I understood the important legal issues that surround our sport," he says. "There also needs to be a firm grasp of how to market the game and how to make business decisions that won't just help in the short-term, but in the long-term. You also have to be passionate about basketball."

Stern's comments on legal expertise were followed by the announcement of five finalists for the NFL commissioner position. Of the finalists, Roger Goodell, who does not have a law degree, got the coveted job. The only black candidate, Frederick Nance, a prominent lawyer and managing partner in a Cleveland law firm, was passed over.

Although NFL commissioner Paul Tagliabue would not comment, Greg Aiello, vice president of public relations for the NFL, says it is "difficult to evaluate the racial history of the position since there have only been two NFL commissioners in the last 46 years." But this fact underscores the significance of the choice of commissioner, since that individual could hold the position for decades. Stern points out that the NBA, the commissioner post aside, annually ranks at the top in surveys of the number of blacks in coaching and executive positions.

"We have programs geared to helping former players get jobs in the NBA, regardless of race. If you look at the coaching jobs that go to African Americans, it's very much in line with the percentage of African Americans in the nation." But is that saying much for the NBA, since around 70% of players are black, whereas African Americans make up only 13% of the U. S. population?

Although the majority of NBA coaches are white, most of



the league's first-time coaches are black. This clearly signals a change in attitude. With only nine of the 30 head coaching positions belonging to first-timers, though, it also signals that change is coming slowly.

The NBA league office is also making steady improvements. Minorities make up approximately one-third of its employees. This could bode well for the appointment of a black commissioner. The NFL has made significant strides of its own, most notably the hiring of Gene Washington as director of football operations and Michael Haynes as vice president of player and employee development. The highest-ranking African Americans in the NFL are Harold Henderson, executive vice president for labor relations, and Ray Anderson, senior vice president of football operations.

B.J. Askew, an African American fullback for the New York Jets, likes the direction in which both sports are heading but believes they have a long way to go. The NFL's Warren Sapp went further, claiming that the league was run by "slave masters." Though most players probably would consider that view extreme, there's one trivia question the answer to which you don't have to be a sports fan to know: How many black commissioners have there been in the history of the four major sports? With the answer being zero, this is one area where the major leagues clearly need to get on the scoreboard.

—Eric Butterman