

Few minorities get the reins in college football

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By Bob Hohler, Globe Staff | September 21, 2006

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A football teacher chasing his dream, Robert Talley tried time and again to overcome one of the starkest racial inequities in American sports.

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A former All-America football captain at Boston University, Talley pursued a career as a collegiate head coach by building an impressive résumé: Eight years as an assistant at Dartmouth, Colby, and the University of Massachusetts.

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His credentials were solid enough that he landed interviews in recent years for head jobs at Northeastern, Dartmouth, and Holy Cross. But like legions of other qualified African-Americans who aspire to lead college football programs, Talley was shut out, left clinging to his dream of one day entering a domain ruled and overwhelmingly populated by white men.

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The statistics are staggering, both nationally and in New England. Of 616 football teams affiliated with the National Collegiate Athletic Association, only 16, or 2.6 percent, are guided by African-American head coaches, even though an estimated 19,667, or 32.7 percent, of the players last year were black, according to an NCAA survey (the figures exclude historically black colleges and universities).

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The landscape is even grimmer in New England, where all but one of the 54 head coaches for NCAA football teams are white, according to a Globe survey. The lone minority is Mel Mills, a former Arena Football League player who has taken over a fledgling Division 3 team at Becker College in Leicester that went winless last year in its inaugural season.

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In an age when minorities are gaining positions of power throughout American culture, the ranks of head coaches in intercollegiate football remain an enduring bastion of racial separation. "It's tough," said Talley, 37, now a special assistant to San Francisco 49ers coach Mike Nolan. "As a minority coach, you're facing a lot of obstacles, like first getting in the door and then getting people to say, 'We're going to hire you because you're the best guy.' "

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African-Americans head only five, or 4.2 percent, of the nation's 119 Division 1-A football teams, even though 46.1 percent of Division 1-A players last year were black, according to the NCAA study. In New England, every Division 1-A and 1-AA head coach is white, even though 37.2 percent of the players are black, the Globe survey found.

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The disparity is so dramatic in New England that only one Division 1 program ever has hired a black head coach: Floyd Keith, at the University of Rhode Island, from 1993-99.

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“Isn't that sad?” said Keith, executive director of the Black Coaches Association. “The bottom line is, when you can count all the head coaches of color in Division 1-A on one hand, that tells you something is gravely wrong. It's a social injustice.”

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Stymied for decades in trying to narrow the racial divide, Keith and other advocates said they are considering seeking a remedy in the federal courts. They said they are looking for a case to pursue under Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which bars discrimination in employment. The case could threaten funds colleges receive from the federal government.

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“That's when things will change, when it starts hitting people's pocketbooks,” said Eugene Marshall, deputy athletic director of the US Military Academy and president of the Black Coaches Association.

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The NCAA, which this year marks its 100th anniversary, has yet to pursue a plan that would financially penalize schools for failing to promote diversity among head football coaches, as it has done for schools that fail to improve the academic performances of their student athletes.

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Yet NCAA president Myles Brand has made no secret of his disdain for the racial inequity. Since he took office in 2003, he has launched coaching academies aimed at helping minorities advance their careers. He has supported the annual Hiring Report Card compiled for the Black Coaches Association to promote fair hiring practices. And he has created the organization's first vice presidency for diversity and inclusion, appointing Charlotte Westerhaus, a former University of Iowa diversity specialist.

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Still, little has changed. Indeed, the number of minority head coaches in Division 1-A has slipped to five this year from eight in 1997.

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“In the 21st century, there is something inherently wrong with those numbers,” said Herman Boone, the African-American coach who guided a newly integrated high school team to the 1971 Virginia state championship, a feat memorialized in the 2000 film, “Remember the Titans.”

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“It seems like we're going backward, and we shouldn't be,” Boone said. “Enough is enough.”

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Diversity is no greater in the NCAA's lower football divisions, where minorities account for only six of the 115 head coaches in Division 1-AA, one of the 151 head coaches in Division 2, and four of the 231 in Division 3.

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“This is a serious, systemic problem throughout NCAA football,” Westerhaus said. “It's troubling when we see gains in the hiring of minorities in faculties, national government, and the corporate sector, and yet we are not seeing the gains in college football.”

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Diversity deficit

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In New England, only four colleges other than Becker have entrusted their head coaching jobs to African-Americans, according to college sports officials. Since 1904, when Matthew Bullock served as head coach at Massachusetts Agriculture College, now UMass-Amherst, the only African-Americans other than Mills to join the ranks of head coaches have been MacDaniel Singleton at Boston State College (1975-77), Keith at Rhode Island (1993-99), and Mark Garrett at Assumption (1996-97).

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“There are plenty of [minority] coaches who can do the job, but people just don't want them,” said Singleton, now a minor league hitting instructor for the Los Angeles Dodgers. “That's what it boils down to, and it's not getting any better.”

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Changing the culture will require college presidents and athletic directors to ensure minority candidates are recruited and given fair consideration, according to Westerhaus and other diversity specialists. Part of the problem, they said, is the meager number of minorities among the nation's athletic directors.

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“There are a small number of schools where institutional racism is part of the problem,” said Richard Lapchick, director of the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport at the University of Central Florida. “But more commonly you see very short searches in which an overwhelming number of white athletic directors hire people who look like them.”

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In New England, only two of the 54 athletic directors at colleges with football programs are minorities: Charles Jones at Division 1-AA Central Connecticut State, and Sean Frazier at Division 2 Merrimack. Thirteen of the 54 ADs are white women. Nationally, just 10 of the 119 athletic directors for Division 1-A football schools are minorities.

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“Women have made some strides, but African-Americans and other minorities are pretty much nonexistent among athletic directors, especially at Division 1-A,” said Frazier, who played football for the University of Alabama and served as an assistant football coach at BU. “It's pretty much the same old story.”

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The diversity deficit has prompted the National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics to partner this year with the Minority Opportunities Athletic Association.

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“We can get 500 top-notch [coaching] candidates ready, but we need to have somebody on the other side who will accept them,” said Stan Johnson, a former NCAA diversity specialist who heads the Minority Opportunities Athletic Association. “We need to break through that ‘old boy’ system.”

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The “old boy” system, as described by diversity specialists, generally involves white administrators hiring white coaches who are considered acceptable to deep-pocketed boosters and alumni with political influence. In New England, 16 NCAA football programs have no minorities among their athletic directors, head coaches, and assistant coaches.

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“The real initiative rests with the athletic directors,” Westerhaus said. “If they value diversity, they need to cast a wide net and be prepared to make some positive history by hiring the first African-American, who also happens to be the best person for their program.”

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Just as African-Americans long were passed over as quarterbacks, many have yet to overcome the perception that they cannot be effective head coaches, particularly as fund-raisers, several diversity specialists said. But fund-raising prowess has nothing to do with a coach's color or ethnicity, they argued.

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“It wouldn't matter if you were a martian,” Keith said. “If you're winning, people are going to give.”

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Frazier said hiring minority head coaches requires identifying potential candidates and building relationships.

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“I have two drawers in my office,” he said. “One is for coaches who are here, and one is for coaches who could be here. I have 50 names of people of color and every one of them could contend for a national championship.”

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Marks reflect problem

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The Black Coaches Association, by funding two Hiring Report Cards since 2003, has exposed a number of programs that demonstrated little or no commitment to promoting diversity. Of the 58 schools with head coaching vacancies in Divisions 1-A and 1-AA in the first two years of the study, 17 received a D or F, including one in New England: Sacred Heart, a Division 1-AA program in Fairfield, Conn., which received a D because it was “ineffective in attempts to bring diversity to the institution,” according to the report.

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Schools were not graded on the color of the coaches they hired but on the processes that led to the hirings. Of the remaining 41 schools, 30 received an A or B, including Holy Cross (A), Northeastern (B), Dartmouth (B), and UMass (B). The other 11 received a C, including Central Connecticut State University, which failed to include a minority in its candidate pool.

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“A C is not good enough,” said Keith Harrison, the report's author and principal investigator. “That just means you're doing what has always been done.”

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Jones, Central Connecticut's athletic director, said he was unable to identify a qualified minority candidate who would fit well as the school's head coach. He said the report card should have credited the school with hiring Rod Boykin as the first minority to serve as a full-time assistant football coach.

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UMass initially received a C in the report card but was upgraded to a B after alerting Harrison that it offered its head job to an African-American, Norries Wilson , before hiring former Northeastern coach, Don Brown, who is white. Wilson, then the offensive coordinator at Connecticut, turned down the job, saying the timing was not right. This year, he accepted the head job at Columbia, becoming the first African-American head coach in Ivy League history.

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As for Talley, his job search proved fruitless for various reasons. He said he found himself ill-prepared for his first interview, when Holy Cross called him on short notice in 2003 before hiring Lehigh defensive coordinator Tom Gilmore as its head coach.

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“Some of the questions kind of blew me away,” Talley said. “I wasn’t as prepared as I needed to be.”

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He said he felt fully prepped three months later when he interviewed for Northeastern’s head job.

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“It went a lot better,” Talley said. “I thought I had a legitimate chance.”

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But Northeastern opted for Rocky Hager, the recruiting coordinator and tight ends coach at Temple. Talley, while acknowledging that Hager was qualified, noted that Hager had worked under Northeastern athletic director Dave O’Brien for five years during O’Brien’s previous tenure as Temple’s AD.

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“It definitely makes it tougher when the AD has had experience with another guy,” Talley said.

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Asked whether the “old boy” factor played a role in Hager’s hiring, O’Brien said he knew Hager only minimally at Temple and tried to ensure their previous association was not a factor in his decision.

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“I was confident at the end of the day that I was able to eliminate the fact that we had worked together as a consideration,” O’Brien said. “In the end, it neither helped him nor hurt him.”

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While O’Brien described the number of minority head coaches as “staggeringly low” and “unacceptable,” he said Hager’s résumé, which included a 91-25-1 record and two Division 2 national championships as head coach at North Dakota State, was unmatched by the other finalists.

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Talley’s next chance was at Dartmouth, where he had spent eight years developing his credentials, including four as the Big Green’s defensive coordinator. He said he believed he had a reasonable chance to land the job, despite his connection to the previous head coach, John Lyons, who had been fired in November 2004 after going 16-53 his final seven seasons.

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Then came word that Buddy Teevens was a candidate. Teevens had coached Dartmouth to Ivy League titles in 1990 and '91 before serving as head coach at Tulane and Stanford. And Dartmouth wanted him back.

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“For the sake of the program, it was a logical choice because the alumni all wanted Buddy Teevens and he's a real good fund-raiser,” Talley said. “To me, that made sense.”

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With Teevens taking over, Talley departed Dartmouth and hooked on with Nolan, with whom he had worked as an intern for the Giants. But he said he has yet to abandon his dream of becoming a collegiate head coach, despite the prohibitive odds.

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In New England, 33 of the 54 college football teams have changed head coaches since 2000 and only Becker has hired an African-American.

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“I think there's still hope,” Talley said, “but you have to get lucky.”

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Encouraging signs

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Eddie Robinson never did. No college football coach won more games and sent more players to the NFL than Robinson before he retired from Grambling State University, a historically black institution, in 1997. But no predominantly white college ever offered Robinson a head coaching job, according to Lapchick, who co-authored, “Never Before, Never Again: The Autobiography of Eddie Robinson.”

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“That's a pretty telling statement, the most discouraging of all,” Lapchick said.

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Similarly discouraging to diversity specialists was the fact that 40 percent of the minority head coaches in Division 1-A will be involved in a single game Saturday when Karl Dorrell guides UCLA against Tyrone Willingham's University of Washington team in Seattle. The only other minority head coaches in Division 1-A are Turner Gill at Buffalo, Ron Prince at Kansas State, and Sylvester Croom at Mississippi State.

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“That disturbs me more than anything else,” Boone said. “It's a shame.”

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Still, a number of black assistant coaches expressed hope that one day they will conquer the inequity. They were heartened in part that two of the 10 openings for head coaches in Division 1-A and two of the 16 vacancies in Division 1-AA in the last year were filled by African-Americans.

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“I know what the reality is: it's bad,” said Peter Quawey, 31, an assistant at Rhode Island who in June was invited to the NCAA's academy for minority coaches. “But I'm trying not to look at the negative. I think we're making strides. I can see the light at the end of the tunnel.”

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All it will take is college presidents and athletic directors who are willing to blaze a trail for a new generation of head football coaches, according to diversity specialists.

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``The time is now," Frazier said. ``This is an opportunity for the decision-makers to become heroes."

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