

Critics Fumble Report On NFL

By Kurt Wildman
Sports Columnist

When Cyrus Mehri and Johnnie Cochran published *Black Coaches in the National Football League: Superior Performance, Inferior Opportunities* ("Report"), a report indicating that African-American coaches received inequitable treatment as NFL head coaching candidates and incumbents, the primary reaction in the generic sports media was swift, negative and... expedient.

Talk radio commentators "graciously" confirmed the abstract existence of discrimination and racism in sports. Then, as usual, they summarily dismissed the relevance when specific inequities in the NFL were alleged. While some believed questions could be asked about limited opportunities for Blacks at

"feeder" positions (for example, high school and university coaching), they still insisted that the paucity of Blacks coaching in the NFL and the truncated nature of their tenure is about the small number of qualified candidates, not the NFL's direct or indirect discrimination.

Some print journalists wondered, perhaps tongue in cheek, why Blacks would even want the headache called an NFL head-coaching job. An article in the *Washington Post*, employing a more serious analysis, suggested that because one white coach, Marty Schottenheimer (who unlike most fired Black coaches has had the opportunity to coach four separate clubs, including Kansas City for 10 years), currently with the San Diego Chargers, supposedly suffered the same fate in his career as the Black coaches considered in the report. For one, he was fired despite delivering winning seasons (at the start of this season Schottenheimer was second among active coaches with a 61.9 winning percentage), then the plight of Black coaches is not unique to them; it has very little to do with race and much more to do with capricious team owners.

"Joe Fan," calling radio shows and leaving little tidbits on Internet message boards, had all the sarcastic, pseudo-analytical answers. He discredited the report because it had a "demagogue" for an author (that is, Cochran), demonstrated Cochran's ineptitude with rudimentary statistics, proved incidentally that white running-backs are also victims of discrimination, and proved that O.J.'s race-baiting, publicity-hungry lawyer has no compunction about ramming the race card down the NFL's throat.

Good of "Joe" concluded no inequity, no discrimination, no racism and no problem, other than a litigious Black seeking remedies beyond the accepted parameters of civil rights.

The critics spoke. Too bad they got it twisted. If some of them had bothered to read more than the title, they would have realized that the authors didn't do any analysis on the back of napkin. They would have realized that Cyrus Mehri, co-author of the report, employed statistical methods previously

used by his Washington, D.C. law firm Mehri & Skalet, in several civil rights enforcement cases, including class action discrimination suits against Coca-Cola and Texaco which yielded settlements of \$192.5 and \$176 million, respectively, and extensive programs to address the discrimination within those corporations.

Further, critics would have understood that Ivy League labour economist Dr. Janice Madden of the University of Pennsylvania (not a grade nine math student) performed the statistical analysis using an extensive database of all the wins and losses for every NFL coach over a decade and a half.

Some questioned conclusions drawn from a five-person sample of Black coaches, suggesting that even a novice statistician would concede that the sample size is too small to generate valid and reliable determinations.

While sample size is a legitimate consideration, fanatical emphasis on the point seems blind and disingenuous about the strong possibility that it is the practices and systems of NFL management and ownership, the very ones drawn into question by the report, which are responsible for making the sample of Black coaches is so small.

Further, while a small sample size may discount the strength of the report's conclusions, it clearly does not void those conclusions automatically, particularly since that sample represented the entire population of Black coaches in the history of the NFL.

Whatever modest claims to legitimacy critics could assert with their statistical argument quickly disappear as they descend into white-bash politics and personal attacks to substantiate their other criticisms.

The circumstances of white running-backs the same as Black coaches? A logical extension of the analyses and conclusions of the Report? What???? History reminds us that at certain times (U.S. professional football moved from racial integration to a significant period of segregation, back to integration) all pro running-backs were white, back in those nostalgic days when Blacks could polish the golden-boy's brogues but could not cradle their pigskin.

Once the most obviously racist barriers were removed, white dominance in the offensive backfield diminished dramatically. And while white running-backs have become a relative rarity, no evidence exists to indicate that skilled Caucasian ball-carriers have been denied or lost roster spots despite their abilities and productivity.

Mehri and Cochran's report is significant proof that the same cannot be said about Black coaches.

As for Johnnie Cochran, he is a marked man in the new millennium of American racial politics. The defence counsel who successfully defended guilty and Black O.J. for killing innocent and white Nicole by, to quote Cochran's former co-counsel Robert Shapiro, "playing the 'race card' from the bottom of the deck," is considered a villain.

His collaboration on and public airing of

this report is, in the eyes of his virulent detractors, simply more legalistic treachery done in the name of civil rights.

What is obvious from this line of attack is that Cochran's critics have completely confused their personal disdain for him with something resembling a substantive critique of the report.

Put aside the fact the Cochran is a gifted advocate who supports noble causes (he will be speaking in Toronto this month at a benefit for the Association in Defense of the Wrongly Convicted). Even if you accept that Cochran-haters have even the most remote reason on which to base their views, what does that have to do with the strength of the report's conclusions? What does Cochran's fame or the authors' willingness to employ the media as a part of a strategy have to do with the quality of the report's recommendations?

Critics could have focused more on whether the evidence disclosed in the report could support a successful civil action against the NFL. They could have examined whether the action plan proposed in the report, which recommends deducting and awarding draft picks as a means of enforcing non-discriminatory hiring policies, is in keeping

with principles of fairness and/or likely to succeed. Instead, many put their efforts into simple-minded comebacks and tired insults.

But why, given the fertile ground for analysis, would the critics circumvent these and other meaty issues for peripheral bleating? If the Report is truly bogus, then a reasoned discussion should bring that to light.

Of course, instead of being truly bogus, reasoning might show it could just be true. **PRIDE**



Johnnie Cochran

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REVISITING AN OLD HAUNT

Think back, for a moment, to those hardy years of regular police shootings of young Black youth. Then there was the police beating of a Black man in California, which was caught on videotape. In spite of that piece of evidence, the police officers involved were not convicted on the criminal charges they faced. A Toronto demonstration condemning that miscarriage of justice, along with the ongoing police activities here, resulted in the Stephen Lewis Report. Some change resulted but was overturned when the government changed hands. The police got their own back.

The Black population in Toronto - and the Greater Toronto Area, for that matter - is still relatively small enough to be organized into a force to be reckoned with. There is a wealth of history in this community from elders who have seen changes - or their reversal. There are younger people who have the energy, the drive, the sophistication and the education to establish such a movement. And, perhaps more significantly, there is more of a consciousness of the relationship with Africans, from the continent and around the world.

Key to the success of this movement is a more inward-looking program to stabilize and solidify the foundation of this movement. The right structures must be incorporated that will secure a strong program of action, along with a strategy for development. There should be checks and balances.

In an earlier version, I suggested that if every Black person pledged five or ten dollars a month (a kind of tax) to one specific organization created for this purpose for a year, the result could lead to an organization that employed full time organizers and put in place many of the infrastructures and facilities for which we now depend on government. In essence, we would start looking after ourselves in many of the ways we could, and should.

Obviously, to embark on this undertaking, it would be necessary to develop a unity of purpose within the greater community and a basic belief that to whomever is entrusted the leadership of this organization, will be accountable to the entire community.

To do something like this will take a monumental effort. It would not be unlike trying to change the course of a huge river - ship, at top speed, in the middle of the ocean - you just can't do it suddenly. But, I think the time has come to start making a serious effort to try to do just that.

In fact, some of that work has already begun with the establishment of the Global African Congress, which is the outgrowth of the World Conference of African and African Descendants in Barbados.

But work needs to be done locally, earnestly. **PRIDE**

Holler back, if you want to at: pgeoh@hotmail.com