

[Tuesday, April 24, 2007]

African American hire has national impact

By Mark Viera
Collegian Staff Writer

Coquese Washington calmly stepped onto the podium yesterday in Beaver Stadium's media room and seated herself next to Penn State President Graham Spanier and Athletic Director Tim Curley. Before the packed crowd of faces looking her direction, she was cool at the microphone and adlibbed without a prepared statement.

"The thing that made me comfortable is the people here," she would later say. "A university is not the bricks and mortar of the buildings, it's the people ... If I seem at ease it's because of the reception I'm getting from the people here."

But it wasn't necessarily a familiar situation for anyone. She was announced Penn State's fifth women's basketball coach and became the second African American head coach in the more than 130 years that Penn State has competed in varsity intercollegiate athletics.

She is the first black female head coach in the history of Penn State's varsity intercollegiate athletics program; currently, there are no other black head coaches of varsity sports teams.

Jerry Dunn was Penn State's lone black head coach, fronting the men's basketball team from 1996 to 2003, prior to Washington's hiring.

"The first thing we did is looked at her résumé and looked at her total set of credentials that had nothing to do with her race and made the decision based on that," Curley said. "And certainly being an African American is just a bonus in terms of her opportunity to be able to lead this program and to be somebody, as she mentioned in her comments, that others would be able to follow her lead is just a great thing. I think you'll be able to see more African Americans come into the coaching position at all levels." Minority hiring in intercollegiate athletics has recently been an issue on a national level.

Congress' Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade and Consumer Protection, led by chairman Rep. Bobby L. Rush (D-Ill.), held a hearing on Feb. 28, urging "the NCAA to change is discriminatory hiring practices in collegiate sports," according to a press release on Rush's Web site. A key focus of the hearings was the lack of black head coaches in Division I football.

NCAA president Myles Brand, Rev. Jessie Jackson and members of the Black Coaches Association were in attendance at the hearing two months ago. Brand said the status quo is "unacceptable."

"Part of my personal frustration with this issue is the lack of direct control the NCAA has over the matter," Brand said in the press release. "The colleges and universities will not cede to the NCAA the authority to dictate who to interview or hire in athletics."

The press release bolstered claims made at the hearing, citing a few damning statistics. Of 616 teams associated with the NCAA at any level last year, only 16 had black head coaches, excluding historically black universities, and only seven of 119 Div. I-A football programs have black head coaches.

The University of Central Florida's Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport gave "college sport" as a whole a B- for racial diversity in its 2005 report card. Div. I college football received an F for racial diversity in coaching positions.

Whites held 90.6 percent of all Div. I head coaching positions, according to UCF's report. Blacks held 7.3, Latinos held 1.1 and Asians held .4 percent of head coaching positions.

"Given the prominence of minority athletes in this multi-billion industry, which the courts have ruled involves interstate commerce, the lack of people of color in administrative and leadership positions is troubling," Rush said in an e-mail message. "If racial discrimination (intentional or not) is a reality in the upper echelons, and people of color are not a part of the strategic, decision-making process, Congress should examine and shed light on this systemic exclusion in order to determine if further remedial action is necessary."

Title VII may help

Since 1987, the Black Head Coaches Association has tried to help develop racial and ethnic equality at all levels of athletics. The hearings, which BCA members attended, will help illuminate its cause. "It's gotten to a stage where it somewhat is like the charge for women's athletics back in the early Title IX years when that started the issues," BCA Executive Director Floyd Keith said in a phone interview last month. "Unfortunately, change is a difficult issue, particularly when it involves social change and social issues. A lot of times, legislation has been the catalyst."

Much the way Title IX helped women, Title VII may help minorities attain balance within intercollegiate athletics.

Title VII, which is part of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, prohibits employment discrimination based on "race, color, religion, sex or national orientation."

"If Title VII is utilized in a certain capacity that appears to me to be something that has potential to have some answers or shed some answers to this," said Keith, who helps the BCA compile a hiring report card for head coaching positions in college football. The BCA is going to start making report cards for the hiring of athletic directors and women's basketball head coaches.

The NFL has taken a lead on the issue, employing the so-called "Rooney Rule." Named for Pittsburgh Steelers owner, Dan Rooney, the chairman of the league's committee on diversity in the workplace, the rule has led to a record number of black head coaches in the NFL (seven). The Rooney Rule, which was instituted in 2003, ensures that at least one minority is interviewed for head coaching vacancy. The Steelers hired a black coach, Mike Tomlin, to succeed Bill Cowher this offseason.

Two black head coaches squared off against each other in the Super Bowl this year, and Tony Dungy of the Indianapolis Colts became the first African American to win the title as a head coach.

"The NCAA also works with constituent organizations and individuals in its membership who have the hiring responsibility in order to make sure a network of qualified candidates is available should a head coaching position become vacant at a university," NCAA spokesperson Gail Dent said in an e-mail message.

Often, schools hire head coaches who were formally assistants within the program in the form of assistant coaches.

"I think being mentored, being given an opportunity, being given opportunity to advance with responsibilities doing things to show capabilities, and show the ability to manage aspect of game -- I think it's really crucial," Keith said.

The Penn State Way

A hallmark of the Penn State athletic department has been the practice of retaining coaches for decades. Penn State, which fields 29 varsity sports teams, has five coaches who have been at the university for 20 years or more. Nine have been head coaches for 10-15 years. Joe Paterno, the university's longest mainstay, has been head football coach for the past 41 seasons.

The university's proclivity to tenure head coaches doesn't lend itself to much turnover. Firings are scarce and more often coaches retire or leave the university.

But, when a coach does leave, the first step in the hiring process typically involves posting the job opening at a number of outlets, including the BCA and NCAA sites. In this case, the beginning of the process began a month ago.

Then a selection pool with representatives from different areas within Penn State's athletic and academic system is formed. Members of the athletic department compile a list of likely candidates, who go through a screening process where applicants who don't meet standards are weeded out. Following that, there the remaining applicants are interviewed and ranked by the selection committee. Then a selection is made.

"It's a rolling process," said Dr. Scott Kretchmar, the faculty athletics representative who chaired the selection committee. "We have top priorities and we go through the priorities and find out who we liked the best."

Throughout, Penn State strives seek a diverse, national pool of applicants, Kretchmar and university administrators said.

"I think as in any search, you're looking for best candidate," said Penn State Associate Athletic Director Susan Delaney-Scheetz in March. "But you're also taking a look at who has applied, and you're always trying to encourage as many people to apply to legitimize that you've had a good selection process and allowed access to all different individuals.

"You are looking to do [gain diversity], but you're not going to sacrifice a search because, ultimately, you want student athletes to be coached by best possible applicants," she said.

Washington, who will be assuming her first head-coaching job, was an assistant coach at Notre Dame for the past eight years. She helped lead the Fighting Irish to eight consecutive NCAA Tournaments and an NCAA championship in 2001.

She interviewed at Penn State three times in the weeks leading up to her hiring, Kretchmar said. Washington said she was "immediately interested" the moment she heard from Curley regarding the job opening and that she didn't interview anywhere else.

"I tip my hat to Dr. Spanier, and I tip my hat to Tim Curley, who had the foresight to step out, who had the courage to do something that is really not popular in hiring not only an African American, but an African American with no prior head coaching experience," Washington said. "I think this is an opportunity. Hopefully people will understand that if you're prepared, if you have the credentials, opportunities will come your way."

She added later: "Hopefully this is the beginning of something positive."



PHOTO: Meagan Kanagy
Coquese Washington speaks in a press conference at Beaver Stadium yesterday.