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Minority coach hirings are rare, except at UB, SU

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Staff writer

As a nationally known expert on diversity in college sports, Richard Lapchick is disappointed by the lack of minorities in the coaching and administration fields.

But one shining light in his quest to see minorities more fairly represented is just down the Thruway from Rochester.

The State University of New York at Buffalo is the only Division I-A school with African Americans in the three most visible posts in its athletics department: athletic director (Warde Manuel), football coach (Turner Gill) and men's basketball coach (Reggie Witherspoon).

"What I did wasn't intentional," Manuel said. "All that we talked about was opening the opportunity for minorities and women. Ultimately, Turner and Reggie, regardless of race, were my choices to lead the programs."

In addition, UB has a men's tennis coach (Sherif Zaher) from Egypt, a women's soccer coach (Jean-A. Tassy) from Haiti and a men's soccer coach (John Astudillo) from Ecuador. Buffalo's five minority head coaches is one fewer than Rochester's seven Division III programs combined.

"I think Buffalo is a model," said Lapchick, a professor at the University of Central Florida.

In the other direction down the Thruway is Syracuse University, which is also making great strides in minority athletic hirings. Daryl Gross, an African American, was hired as athletic director in December 2004. SU has two minority coaches: Quentin Hillsman, women's basketball, who was hired last June after serving one season as an assistant, and Jing Pu women's volleyball, a native of China who came to America in 1985.

Gross and Manuel are in an exclusive group: There are only 17 minority ADs out of 119 NCAA Division I football-playing schools. Twelve are black, four are Latino and one is American Indian.

"The presidents at Syracuse and Buffalo decided that they would expand their searches and get the best candidates available," Lapchick said. "As a result, they both got young, dynamic and forward-thinking ADs. The very best people available. In these cases, they both happened to be African American."

Witherspoon says progress is being made, "but the fact that we're still discussing this means there is still progress to be made."

Last March, 13 of the 65 basketball teams that made the NCAA Division I tournament were coached by black men. A modest number, to be sure, but meaningful for Witherspoon.

"When I played, there was never a black head coach or assistant," he says. "And I went to three different high schools, a junior college and an NAIA school."

On a national scale, Division I football teams have come under fire for their lack of progress in hiring minority head coaches. In 2005, there were only three black head coaches out of 119 programs. In 2007, that number has risen to seven, which NCAA President Myles Brand recently called "too slow of a pace."

The National Football League, where 70 percent of the players are black, has seen its minority coaching hirings rise since implementing the "Rooney Rule," which requires teams to interview a minority candidate or face fines. There are six black head coaches in the NFL, and two of them — Indianapolis' Tony Dungy and Chicago's Lovie Smith — made history this month by becoming the first two black coaches in the Super Bowl.

Brand has suggested the Black Coaches Association's "hiring report card" would punish schools with bad publicity.

The statistics are staggering. Of 616 football teams affiliated with the NCAA, only 16 (2.6 percent) are guided by African-American head coaches, even though an estimated 32.7 percent of the players last year were black, according to an NCAA survey. (The figures do not include historically black colleges and universities.)

In the New England area, all but one of the 54 head coaches for NCAA football teams are white. The lone minority is Mel Mills, a former Arena Football League player who took over a fledging Division III Becker College team in Leicester, Mass.

"I think people are more comfortable with people that are similar to them," Witherspoon said.

"Sometimes it's narrow-minded thinking. If the only thing you see is their color, you've got a problem."

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