

Race Remains 'Flashpoint of Controversy' in American Sports, Cultural Anthropologist Says

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A new study about bias in NBA refereeing -- and the angry reaction of the league commissioner -- makes clear that race remains a flashpoint of controversy in American sports, says a Duke University cultural anthropologist who studies sports and society.

“Franchise owners and league officials in the multibillion-dollar sports business would like to present their sports as 21st century models of racial harmony and color-blind opportunity,” said Orin Starn, a professor of cultural anthropology. “But, in reality, the dynamics of race and money are clear enough in professional basketball arenas and football coliseums nationwide, where the majority of the athletes are black and yet, because of expensive ticket prices, there are few African Americans in the stands.”

Starn, who teaches a course on the anthropology of sports, said the NBA has been more progressive than other sports leagues about race, including a growing number of black coaches.

“Every single NFL team has white ownership. Major League Baseball recently celebrated the 60th anniversary of Jackie Robinson’s breaking baseball’s color line, but the number of African-American players has declined steeply in recent years. And two of America’s largest sports -- NASCAR and golf -- have an even worse record. There is not a single black NASCAR driver and Tiger Woods is the lone African American

among the more than 200 golfers on the men's and women's professional tours.”

And even though there has been an increase in the number of black NBA coaches and 60 percent of NBA players are black, only one franchise -- the Charlotte Bobcats -- has majority black ownership, Starn noted.

Starn said the fact that the NBA rushed to discredit the paper's findings -- that subconscious racial bias could play a role in officiating -- makes it appear that Commissioner David Stern is “afraid to open to the Pandora's Box of race.”

“The NBA would like the uncomfortable question of race in sports to vanish, as if it were just a matter of a few troublemaker academics getting the math wrong,” Starn said. “It won't anytime soon.”

Source: Duke University

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