Racism not an issue in firing of NBA coaches, study

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Race is not a factor in the firing of NBA coaches, although white coaches with losing records had somewhat longer tenures before being fired than African-American coaches with more losses than wins, a new study shows.

The University of Michigan study looked at differences between firing of African-American and white coaches in the National Basketball Association. The study found no difference in "technical efficiency" by race of coach, and found no evidence that there are differences in firings based on race, says lead researcher Rodney Fort, U-M professor in the Division of Kinesiology.

"The only strange thing about race that we came up with is that of the coaches who were fired, white coaches seemed to have a little bit longer tenure," Fort said. In other words, losing white coaches may get a slight benefit of the doubt relative to African-American coaches. Fort stressed this as an area for future research.

Fort said the NBA is the most integrated professional sport, so the results are not all that surprising, but they are significant.

The market for coaches in the NBA works like any other healthy labor market is ideally supposed to work—coaches must perform. By using the same scoring method researchers used, owners can calculate their current coach's value, or technical efficiency, by how many wins were produced. It appears that many owners already use the score system, since the league average score was about 13 percent higher than the average score of fired coaches, according to the paper. This is a valuable tool when setting salaries, Fort said.

Fort stresses that there are many types of racism in professional sports and the study looked at only one type over a three-year period. It does not mean that racism is absent in hiring or salary decisions in the NBA, or in the more general networking relationships among players and coaches, he said.

Fort and colleagues looked at 27 coaches of color over a three-year period. They chose the NBA because there are enough African American coaches to have a reliable research sample, Fort said. In contrast, an earlier study of hiring and firing NFL coaches found racial disparity, Fort said, but there were only five African-American coaches in the football league sample.

"As the number of coaches of color in football increases into the future, we need to see if they are still being treated in a discriminatory way," Fort said, referring to the earlier study. "This does not mean (racism in hiring coaches) is not a problem in the NFL, it means we need to look at football again."

The paper, "Race, Technical Efficiency, and Retention: The Case of NBA Coaches," appears in the recent issue of International Journal of Sport Finance. Co-authors on the paper include Young Hoon Lee, of Sogang University, Seoul, South Korea, and David Berri of California State University-Bakersfield.

Source: University of Michigan

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