

Are Celtics' public-relations problems racial?

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By Steve Marantz
Globe Staff

Rich, the Causeway Street barber, dispenses sports gossip for the price of a haircut. Many of his customers are Garden regulars, so while Rich keeps one hand on his scissors the other is on the pulse of the sports fan. Rich hears people say things that they might not say in polite company.

"It's pretty obvious," says Rich. "I mean, it's all right to have black players, but to have black players and a bad team is suicide. Who's going to watch?"

Having started last season with two white players out of 11 total, the Celtics wheeled and dealt to a 6-5 ratio; thereby prompting the question: Did they intentionally accumulate white players?

"Sure looks like it," says Rich the barber.

"That's just speculation and supposition," says Red Auerbach.

"That's some people from South Boston talking," says Dave Cowens. "They don't even come to the games."



The black athlete
in Boston

Auerbach, the Celtics general manager, rejects the notion that he built a white team to encourage Larry Bird to sign with him. It was thought that Bird, who has small-town southern Indiana roots, might be more responsive to joining a racially balanced team.

"I don't pay any attention to that stuff," says Auerbach. "You think I'm going to jerk around a whole franchise because of one player? Ain't no way you can do that. He's a great player, but it just doesn't work."

On the other hand, Auerbach concedes that white players are promotionally advantageous. This would be particularly pertinent were the Celtics to move to a new arena in a suburban location.

"What happens is that people say 'You'll draw better if you have white players, or you don't have too many black players,' says Auerbach. "Well, that's common sense. I've had black managers come over to me and say 'Jeez, I gotta get a white player.' I mean, they're not stupid. It's much more difficult for a white guy to say 'Hey, I gotta get some white players,' but when a black guy says it, then you know there's a problem.

"But nevertheless, as a general manager or a coach, your No. 1 priority is to win. If you have all black players and you don't win, they'll murder you. If you have all black players, or a majority of black players, and you win, a lot will be forgiven."

Bob Woolf, the Boston attorney who represents Larry Bird, claims the promo-

For the past several months, Globe reporters Steve Marantz, Larry Whiteside and Walter Haynes have talked to Boston's black athletes, both past and present, examining the early years and assessing their present situation and their role in the community. Their reports will appear from time to time in The Globe.

tional appeal of white players is reflected in salary.

"The only sport that exists today where there is still a disparity between white and black is basketball," says Woolf. "If there were two centers of equal ability, and one was white and one black, I think the white center would receive more money. I don't say that it should be so, but it is so, because of the preponderance of black athletes."

Cowens, who will play next year, but not coach, refuses to believe the public is interpreting the player movement in racial terms.

"There may be a few people out there who believe it," he says. "There are. But most people don't see it that way. The players don't consider it an issue."

In better times for the Celtics and the NBA, there wouldn't have been racial interpretations of player movement. In better times, the Celtics had little player movement, and the NBA wasn't having to explain declining attendance and television audience.

In fact the racial ratio on the Celtics changed with the recent signing of free-agent M. L. Carr and will change again when the compensation for Carr is established.

But talk about the Celtics is relevant to what is happening throughout the entire league, with declining popularity being defined in racial terms. With blacks representing 75 percent of the players, and whites representing 75 percent of the audience, it was inevitable that a racial analysis would arise. Unfortunate perhaps, but inevitable.

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du into the game of basketball," says Tom Heinsohn, former player and coach of the Celtics. "But to say there are too many blacks in basketball is a copout. Even if it were 80 percent white, there would still be the same problems."

"The ownership has stripped the enthusiasm of the players with long-term contracts. There's no incentive to improve."

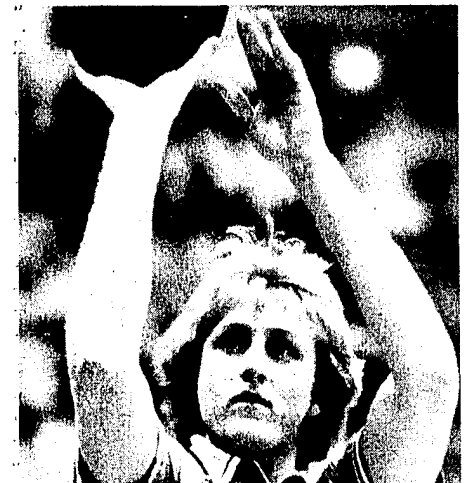
But while Heinsohn does not view the NBA's loss of appeal in racial terms, he suggests that racial factors have influenced the game, the way it is played, and the way it is perceived by fans. He suggests that the demise of the Celtics, which led to his dismissal in 1977 was partially explained in racial terms. His theory reaches into the realm of sports sociology.

"Basketball has always been a city game," says Heinsohn. "And when the whites left the cities it became essentially a black stronghold. The playground became the focus of life for a lot of young black kids, sort of their clubhouse."

"But what was happening was that these kids were learning the game without the proper coaching. They were making it on their superior physical abilities, while the occasional white kid who made it was an exceptional athlete who was also well-coached."

"So you had players coming into the NBA who were one-dimensional, who didn't know the fundamentals. And I can't say these were only black players because there were white players who were just as deficient. But there are players making the All-Star team now who wouldn't have got past the first cut when I broke in."

The modern basketball phenomenon, the black star with a style distinct from what was in the past considered fundamentally sound, was visited upon the Celtics



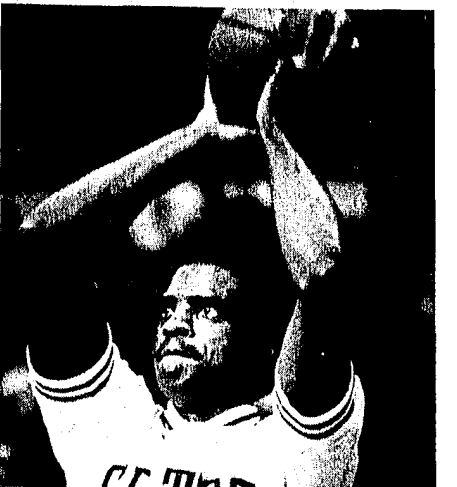
Some people were saying the Celtics built a white team to help their chances of signing Larry Bird.

in the person of one Sidney Wicks. Acquired to fill the power forward role of the departed and highly proficient Paul Silas, Wicks ultimately was unable, according to Heinsohn. Other factors accompanied his arrival, such as the upsetting of the established team salary structure, but it was Wicks' failure on the court that catalyzed everything.

"He tried to learn power forward," said Heinsohn. "And his first year here was valuable to us, especially when Cowens took his sabbatical. But he still felt he had to prove himself, and when things started going bad he reverted to what he knew best."

he was to be Sidney," says Sanders. "He'd say, 'I know about the Celtic way, but that's not me.' He was a star before he came here, and he had his own way of doing things."

There was added pressure on Wicks, said both Sand-



Sidney Wicks was a convenient scapegoat for the media when he stopped doing things the Celtics' way.

ers and Heinsohn, from a particularly condemning media which saw in Wicks a scapegoat for the team failure. Wicks was portrayed as lazy, egotistical and selfish.

"When things go bad," said Heinsohn, "people have a tendency to go back to what makes them comfortable. They tend to fall back into their old habits and seek out people they already know."

With Wicks and Curtis Rowe establishing their own clique, the Celtics became a team divided. In the past this would have been less likely to happen, says Heinsohn, because players had roommates on the road. "When the players association did away with roommates," he said, "each guy started going his own way. The teams I coached didn't have the camaraderie of the teams I played on."

Cowens views the Celtics decline differently. Choosing not to interpret Wicks' failure as symptomatic of a stylistic division in basketball.

"We just didn't have enough good players," he explains. "If you have eight people who know how to play the game, the three who come in will get better. But we only had three who could play (naming himself, John Havlicek, Jo Jo White), and so the other eight didn't get better."

"You've got white white and white black and black white, I've heard all of that. But basketball is a game.

It's going to turn itself around. The game will survive. People will change their thinking."

Auerbach thinks basketball fans are race-conscious because of the intimate nature of the game. "In football or baseball they have nine black players out there and

here, because of their size, type of uniform, closeness of people and so forth, you're much more aware of the situation."

Sometimes, more aware than the NBA, and the Celtics, would like.