

Are Celtics' public-relations problems racial?

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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Willie O'Ree

Willie O'Ree's entry into the NHL in 1958 hardly caused a stir compared with the breaking of baseball's color line. The O'Ree story, Page 60.