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Endorsements: Is race still a factor?

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Gray, an offensive lineman, isn't, it doesn't explain why Fox, a defensive back, is doing better than Haynes, also a defensive back, and an All-Pro at that; and why Francis is doing better than Cunningham, when both are prominent offensive players, one an All-Pro tight end, the other the Patriots' leading ball carrier over the past several seasons.

Apparently neither the team you play for nor the position you play is any guarantee of commercial success. But a guarantee does exist . . .

THE SUPERSTAR SYNDROME: While it may be an advertising axiom that black athletes can't sell products to a predominantly white market, it doesn't apply in the case of a bonafide superstar. The bottom line is simply that the only sure sell is the superstar, whether he's black or white, and there's no better example than Rice.

Rice's opportunities are "infinite" according to his agent, Tony Pennacchia, and if there is any distinction to draw between the opportunities for black athletes today and those of 15 years ago, the Superstar Syndrome makes the point.

For Bill Russell, who turned the Celtics into a dynasty and changed the concept of the big man in professional basketball, there was nothing similar to what is available today for Rice.

"Here in Boston, I know of no commercials Bill Russell was getting," said Bob Woolf, the sports attorney who represented him of the 12 Celtics during much of Russell's playing days.

"I would work my head off to get a commercial for a black athlete," Woolf said. "It was awful. There was no way you could possibly do it. No matter how many times I would introduce names — like somebody would call me up and ask me for a list of six names — I would insert a black and the black would never get it."

"But there was a breakthrough around 1970 or '71," Woolf said, "with people like O.J. Simpson and Willis Reed."

Indeed, Simpson, Julius Erving, and Pele, all black, are three of the current superstars (along with Pete Rose and Joe Namath) who make the most from endorsements.

Jack Satter, president of Colonial Provisions, where Rice has his single biggest deal, never considered race a problem.

"It's a six-year contract," he said. "If it was a risk, you wouldn't go for six years. Ten years ago, it probably couldn't have happened. People would have been leery."

"Remember, too, 10 years ago we didn't have too many nice black athletes. (Reggie) Smith and Russell. In our business, you have to be a nice guy."

Which brings us to . . .

PERSONALITY: Whether an athlete is black or white, it helps if he has what Ed Keating calls "pizzazz." Keating, the Cleveland agent who represents Eckersley and several non-Boston based athletes, tells of trying to find endorsements for Chris Chambliss, the Yankees' black first baseman, after he had a big World Series in 1977.

"I got nothing," said Keating. "But after Brooks Robinson beat the Reds with some great plays in 1970, I got him about \$125,000 worth of business. Chris is a nice guy, but he isn't exactly out front. You've got to have pizzazz to get people interested in you."

Personality is the key ingredient for players trying to pick up some money through personal appearances. Tony McGee, the Patriots' black defensive end, is bereft of endorsements, but he can ped-

dle his good-natured charm at \$300 to \$750 an appearance.

With all these contributing factors, it is virtually impossible to make any definitive statements about the role race plays in endorsements. But instances do occur where it is obvious that race is the overriding issue in who is selected for an endorsement or personal appearance.

Pollack, of Sports Promotion, ran an experiment for The Globe, presenting 10 customers with lists of athletes both black and white from which to choose. Eight customers qualified their selections by asking that the athlete be either "a big name" or "personable." However, one established New England firm wanted an "articulate white" for a sales award dinner, and one bank wanted a white athlete to sponsor it "because a great percent of our clientele is conservative old Yankees."

Pollack has also found that where racial preference exists, blacks are preferred over whites in some instances. While two New England race tracks chose all white players from a list for weekly appearances, two others, Plainfield (Conn.) and New England Raceway, approved Pollack's proposals for black and Hispanic athletes.

"The customers at the first two tracks are mainly hockey and baseball fans," Pollack said. "Plainfield draws from the Hartford area, and that's about 50 percent black and Hispanic. And Foxboro (New England Raceway) wanted a lot of Patriots simply because everyone knows them."

Pollack monitored his requests over a two-month period, and concluded there "was virtually no difference" in the popularity of his black and white clients. In support of this, both the Patriots and Celtics, the two teams with the majority of the black athletes, report only an infrequent request which specifies race.

Pat Horne, the Patriots' former public relations director, received only an occasional request — which he didn't honor — and the new director, Tom Hoffman, has received no such requests. Celtics vice president Jeff Cohen honors requests for black athletes "to some inner-city thing or maybe someone needs a black on the dais because of the program," but has never had a request specifying a white.

But Cohen does feel the Celtics receive fewer personal appearance requests than the Red Sox or Bruins, not because the Celtics are any less in celebrity stature, but because the Red Sox and the Bruins are virtually assured of providing a white player. "No question it's a racial thing," said Cohen.

To Pollack, this isn't evident.

"It's who's hot first," he said. "And then, who's popular." He points out that Rice, at \$2500-\$5000 an appearance, is too expensive to be popular. Eckersley, at \$1000, is extremely popular. Haynes, at \$400-\$750, has not commanded the interest Pollack thinks he should. "Mike has the clean-cut appeal of an O.J. Simpson," Pollack said. "He should be going gangbusters, and I think he will before long." Neither Pollack nor Haynes feel Haynes' marriage to a white woman has affected his popularity. "Nobody's knocking on my door with white sheets or anything," Haynes said.

When race is a factor, Pollack believes businesses reflect what they think their market wants. "There's not a prejudiced judgment," he said. "It's business decision."

"What is racist," he added, "is the consumer who won't buy a product if a black is selling it."