

No, Stephen A. Smith, the Hiring of Steve Nash Is Not 'White Privilege'

Must everything be about race? Can nothing be about merit? Can owners of a sports franchise no longer hire the person they believe is best qualified without making it into an issue of race?

I'm talking here about the claim of the popular (and controversial) sports commentator Stephen A. Smith that the hiring of NBA great Steve Nash to coach the Brooklyn Nets can only be explained on the basis of "white privilege."

To be sure, Smith loves Nash as a person and has the highest respect for him as a basketball player. In no way is he criticizing Nash, who was a greatly loved player during his long career. Smith even thinks that Nash will do a great job as coach.

But since Nash has no coaching experience and there are other, experienced Black coaches who were passed over, then Nash's hiring can only be attributed to "white privilege."

With all respect to Smith's sporting acumen, his argument is without merit.

First, the NBA is a Black-dominated sport, as a large percentage of the world's best basketball players are Black. Men like Michael Jordan and LeBron James have been the faces of the league for decades, and it is not uncommon to see 10 Black players on the court at any one time. (For those not familiar with basketball, that would mean that every player on the court would be Black.)

Second, it is not just Black players who are dominant but

Black NBA studio analysts also dominate the airwaves. I'm thinking of men like Shaquille O'Neal and Charles Barkley and others who moved on to TV commenting after finishing their successful playing careers. Shaq and Barkley are joined by Kenny Smith—the three of them Black—to interact with Ernie Johnson (who is white) on the NBA on TNT. Others who fill in include Chris Webber and Grant Hill, both of them Black.

So, viewers are used to enjoying a game dominated by Black stars and then analyzed by Black former players. Where is the white privilege when it comes to hiring NBA TV analysts?

Third, in contrast with some of the other major sports, NBA coaches have hardly been shut out. It's true that the number of NBA coaches dropped from a high of 14 in 2012-2013 to 8 at the beginning of the playoff season. (That number is now down to 5.) But why must this be judged on race, as if the league has seen an increase in "white privilege" since 2013? Wouldn't it be equally wrong to accuse the league of "Black privilege" since about 70% of the players are Black?

To put this in context, the first Black head coach in the NBA was none other than the legendary Bill Russell back in 1966. Yes, 1966, just three years after the historic March on Washington and Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Yet already, the NBA had a Black head coach. To suggest that Nash's color was the deciding factor in his hire is to regress by decades.

And does anyone really think that these owners, who are driven by a desire to win, make money and have a successful franchise, would fire a winning Black coach in favor of a losing white coach?

But Smith is not alone in raising questions.

Writing in Yahoo Sports, Vincent Goodwill noted that, "At the intersection of relationship, privilege, Black grievances and an ugly history of NBA coaching hires sits Steve Nash?

“On Thursday, the Brooklyn Nets made the stunning hire of a Hall of Fame point guard with two MVPs yet zero days on a coaching sideline, seemingly a prerequisite for most coaches—especially Black coaches.”

This echoes Smith’s argument, namely, that there were other Black candidates with plenty of coaching experience, yet they were passed over in favor of a white man with no coaching experience.

But what about all the white candidates with plenty of coaching experience who were passed over? Do they not count?

And what about other players—both Black and white—who were previously hired as head coaches without prior coaching experience?

According to Dan Feldman at NBC Sports, “Since the league’s last player-coach (Dave Cowens with the 1978-79 Celtics), 16 people have become NBA head coaches without prior coaching experience.”

The first of the 16, Paul Silas, hired in 1980, was Black. So were NBA greats like Magic Johnson (1994), Doc Rivers (1999 and still coaching), Isaiah Thomas (2000), Mark Jackson (2011), Jason Kidd (2013; Kidd’s father was Black, his mother white) and Derek Fisher (2014).

So much for Nash’s hiring being a glaring example of racial favoritism.

To Goodwill’s credit, he wrote, “It’s clear the Nets made this hire with one player in mind: Kevin Durant.

“Durant appears to want Nash, and Nash, revealing coaching has been a secret desire after years of denying interest, wanted in.”

So, when one of the games top five players (Durant) moves to a new team (the Nets) and has a good working relationship with a

potential coach, you bump that coach to the top of the line. All the more is this the case when Nash already had a great reputation as a mentor and teacher. Surely Smith knows this too.

In keeping with that understanding, Magic Johnson tweeted, "Last year Steve Nash was working with Kevin Durant at the Lakers facility and I could see that they had a really good working relationship. With Steve's basketball IQ, he really knows what it takes for players to go to the next level."

More bluntly, and with obvious reference to the criticisms against Nash's hiring, former player Richard Jefferson tweeted, "Derek Fisher, Jason Kidd all got jobs right away because of 20 years of HIGH LEVEL BBall IQ. Please don't question Steve Nash's hire or make this about anything else."

Exactly. To read anything more into this is to inflame tensions and divisions at a time when they are already raging out of control. Not only so, but when false charges are raised, they detract from true concerns that should be addressed. (For those who don't know me, I actually wrote an article in January of this year, agreeing with Tony Dungy that the NFL might be overlooking potential Black head coaches.)

Should Nash prove an excellent hire, this proves nothing about whiteness (any more than Durant's basketball mastery proves something about Blackness).

It simply proves to be a savvy business move. Let's leave it at that. {eoa}