

12005T False accusations of racism won't help

By Gary Gilson

Are the news media out to get the University of Minnesota's basketball coach and its vice president for student affairs because they are black?

That's what some prominent black citizens are saying. Anyone who has evidence of racism in the news media should present it and hold the news outlet publicly accountable for unethical behavior. Anyone who does not have such evidence should stop creating racial tension where none exists.

Unfortunately, some of those who say they see racism in media coverage of the alleged basketball scandal know — or should know — better.

They also have been complaining in public that news outlets routinely publish racial identifications of blacks suspected of crimes. That's not true. News organizations were properly shamed out of that practice 30 years ago. So why would these critics of the media misstate the case, except to advance their own political fortunes?

Certainly Clem Haskins, the coach, and McKinley Boston, the vice president, have detractors in the news media, but those detractors are columnists paid to write their opinions, not reporters paid to give the news and keep their opinions to themselves.

I don't see any sports columnists using racial stereotypes or promoting hidden agendas. The Star Tribune's Patrick Reusse often criticizes Haskins for talking about himself in the third person

and for spinning the news to make himself look good. Reusse was even harder on Lou Holtz when he coached football here, calling him the Music Man — a specialist in creating excitement but not in delivering the goods.

Holtz is white. That didn't save his job at Notre Dame. Nor did being white save Paul Giel, the former athletic director, Jim Dutcher, the former basketball coach, Jim Wacker, the former football coach, or Doug Woog, the former hockey coach.

I'd bet that in a state as overwhelmingly white as Minnesota most people interested in Gopher basketball are pleased to have a black coach, especially one as talented as Haskins. For one thing, his presence tends to demonstrate that whites here are not racists. Some surely are, including some in the media, but their racism is not respectable, and the media do not support it.

None of this is to say that news organizations are doing a great job of covering communities of color. Some are trying harder and doing better than they once did, but progress is slow. Whites learn hardly anything from the media about the day-to-day lives of people of color.

No wonder so many blacks say that most blacks in the news appear in handcuffs. That concerned a list compiled six years ago by the Minneapolis Initiative Against Racism's media task force, on which I served with a dozen or so citizens. Our mission was to persuade news outlets to present a more balanced picture of life in communities of color.

One task force member, Earcie Allen, a black man who left a corporate job to become a professional photographer, once asked managers of a local TV news operation how they decided what to cover. They said they looked for stories that appealed to their target audience — suburban residents, most of them white, whose disposable income made them attractive to advertisers.

Why then, Allen asked, do you so often pack the top of your newscast with stories about black-on-black crime in the inner city? Allen said the TV managers told him they had never thought about that, but they would. They did, and so have their competitors, and these days we see fewer of those stories; stations are not censoring significant crime stories in order to be politically correct, they are raising the standard for significance.

It pays to ask for what you want.

Do you hear many people asking for the head of Clem Haskins? The few who are see big-time varsity sports as polluting academic integrity; Haskins reportedly snatched the university's tutoring program away from academia and hid it in his own bailiwick, the better to protect players' eligibility. Does that have anything to do with his being black?

It has everything to do with the pressure on him, and on all Division I coaches, to win. Clem Haskins is a marvelous teacher whose ability to keep teaching should not depend on his team's win-loss record. He and his players are trapped by a cultural hypocrisy that boils in the bellies of boosters

and of university presidents who kowtow to them.

The priesthood that sanctifies this hypocrisy is the National Collegiate Athletic Association. That governing body, which avidly hands out penalties for infractions of rules, constantly breaks the biggest rule itself: Thou shalt not prostitute the ideals of amateur sport and higher education to make millions of dollars in TV revenues off the talents of unpaid teenagers.

There's probably an even bigger national story to be covered: academic cheating that may dwarf athletic scandals. How many college students — even good ones — routinely cheat by downloading boilerplate term papers from the Internet and handing them in as their own? What will a generation of that kind of rot do to the fiber of our society?

A few years ago Neil Postman, a New York University professor, wrote a book about cultural rot, called "Amusing Ourselves to Death." We can apply his thesis to this basketball imbroglio: In our desperate and greedy lunge to create winners we manage to create losers. Injecting false accusations of racism hastens the rot.

There is more than enough real racism in this society for us to join hands in eliminating. And we need to find ways to do something of lasting good for young people who may excel only in sports, but who need to learn to be self-sufficient contributors to the community.

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