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Buffalo coach Gill can't avoid discussion of race

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AMHERST, N.Y. -- Turner Gill would rather not talk about race. The first-year football coach at Buffalo would like to be considered "just another guy."

In a perfect world, Gill could devote all his time to the challenge of reviving a program among the nation's worst -- 10-69 since entering Division I-A in 1999.

But he understands that's not reality.

The University at Buffalo has emerged as the nation's athletic model for racial diversity: the first Division I-A program to have blacks holding three high-profile posts. Gill joins athletic director, Warde Manuel, the former Michigan athletic administrator who was hired a year ago, and Reggie Witherspoon, who has turned around a struggling men's basketball program since being named coach in 1999.

Hired in December, the former star Nebraska quarterback and Heisman Trophy finalist is under the microscope at the Mid-American Conference program.

"I'm in a situation here where I know people are watching me," Gill said. "And I understand the standpoint -- the angle of a reporter, how you want to push it. Because you can push the story how you want."

Gill joins a select group -- led by Tyrone Willingham at Washington -- of just five black head coaches among 119 Division I-A programs.

But it's not just the media taking interest -- and Gill understands that, too. The Black Coaches Association and the NCAA also are touting Buffalo's story.

"The lack of racial diversity in the ranks of Division I head-football coaching is an abysmal failure," said Charlotte Westerhaus, NCAA vice president for diversity inclusion.

It won't change until school presidents insist on opening their interview processes to minorities, she said. It also falls on current coaches to hire qualified blacks as coordinators, then tutor and promote them into head-coaching positions. Those are among the recommendations expected to be included in an upcoming NCAA diversity committee report.

In the late 1990s, there was an all-time high of eight black head football coaches. The number dropped to three last season before Gill and Norries Wilson, at Columbia, were hired.

"It will take not only the will to do it, but more emphasis on the way," Westerhaus said. "And there are athletic directors such as Warde Manuel and presidents who have done it and know the way."

At Buffalo, it began when John Simpson was hired as president in 2004, taking over the largest school in the State University of New York system. It's highly regarded for its academics -- specializing in

medicine, engineering and computer science -- but not athletics.

Simpson's goal to change that began when he hired Manuel to take over an underfunded department that lacked direction when the previous administration rushed to jump from Division III to I-AA in 1992 and, ultimately, to the elite level.

Manuel, Simpson said, was simply the best candidate for the job. The former Michigan defensive tackle spent eight years as an assistant AD at Michigan and held the same position at Georgia Tech. Manuel has an MBA and master's degree in social work from Michigan.

"I got a bunch of resumes in black and white on paper and looked at them and said, 'This guy looks terrific; let's get him here for a conversation,' " said Simpson, who is white. "I had no idea what his ethnicity was nor, frankly, did I care."

Manuel, one of 11 Division I-A black athletic directors, was impressed with Simpson's vision and commitment, which included increased funding, particularly for football.

Manuel's first major decision was firing Jim Hofher in 2005 after the Bulls lost their first nine games and finished 1-10. Then came Gill's hiring. The coach was selected from a final list of five, which included one other black candidate, Columbia's Wilson.

"I had no intention of hiring somebody because of the color of their skin," Manuel said. "But as it turned out, Turner to me had the best plan and one that I felt most comfortable with."

There has been a significant increase in the number of black men's basketball coaches since the 1980s when there were four notable names among a handful of coaches -- John Thompson at Georgetown, Temple's John Chaney, George Raveling at Southern California and Nolan Richardson at Arkansas.

Today, almost a quarter of the nation's 334 Division I men's basketball programs are led by blacks, said Richard Lapchick, director of the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport at the University of Central Florida.

"My goal is that some day we will not notice when an African American is hired or fired," said Lapchick.

Not much was made over Witherspoon's hiring, Buffalo desperate to find a coach after Tim Cohane resigned in the midst of a recruiting scandal in December 1999. Now, Witherspoon's signed through 2012 after receiving a three-year extension in May -- a reward for going 59-35 in his last three seasons.

"It's not something you think about everyday until you're asked about it," Witherspoon said, referring to Manuel and Gill. "But if it can ignite a dream of a young man or woman of color to work in an athletic department some day, then it's a good thing."

Gill, 43, long ago learned the importance of racial diversity. He remembers his parents' advice when, entering fourth grade, he was bused to an integrated school in Fort Worth, Texas.

"Don't look at this as a negative," Gill was told. "It's something for you to now have an opportunity to grow, to meet people and prepare yourself for the future by being involved with people of another race."

It's why race isn't a dominant issue for Gill.

"This is who I am. I'm African American," he said when asked if there will come a day when he's not identified as a black coach. "But you have to make that decision to stop saying that, 'He's a black coach or he's this,' not me."

Gill, though, does know what his hiring represents.

"What happens here in the future, none of us know," Gill said. "But I think at this point in time, it gives people hope. And that's the way I look at it, period. It's hope."

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