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Gary Charles

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THE VOICE OF RACIAL EQUALITY IN SPORTS

ADVANCEMENT OF BLACKS IN SPORTS
ADVOCATES FOR RACIAL EQUITY, AND
SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR
BLACKS IN SPORTS.

● By Jeremy Reynolds

Almost four years ago, as Gary Charles watched the brutal murder of George Floyd at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer play repeatedly on his television, he was spurred to do something that went beyond venting on social media or protesting in the streets. He wanted to create lasting change by advocating for racial equity and social and economic justice.

As a sports pioneer and change agent known as the Godfather of Grassroots Basketball, Charles knew that sports have always been a major platform for social change. Black athletes in particular have played a significant role in advocating for racial justice and equality. So, he decided to use his platform in sports as the vehicle to drive change. And, within months of Floyd's murder that "something" became the formation of Advancement of Blacks in

Sports (ABIS), a non-profit created to "boldly advocate for a culture of equity and inclusion that results in the advancement of racial, economic, and social justice for Blacks in sports."

Through the organization, Charles is pushing for racial equity in sports, whether through financial literacy programs for student-athletes or advocating for talented Black women and men who deserve coaching jobs.

“We want to be the voice for racial equity in sports; we just want equality. There are so many things that happen in sports and they’re always leaving us out. Why is that? We want to be that voice that says, ‘No, not on our watch,’” Charles says.

Organized sports have played an integral role in Black culture for centuries. But like much of society, professional sports in the U.S. were segregated in the first part of the 20th century, preventing Black athletes from competing with white athletes. In baseball, the “Negro” leagues were created for non-white players through the early 1950s. The National Basketball Association (NBA) officially integrated in 1950. While professional football began with integration from the 1900s-1930s, the National Football League was completely segregated from 1934-1945.

Today, Black players greatly outnumber whites in most major sports in the U.S. In the 2023 season, 70.4 percent of the players in the NBA are Black; 70.3 percent of the players in the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) are Black; and 56.4 percent of National Football League (NFL) players are Black, per Statista.com. But the disparity between the number of Black players and Black head coaches, executives, and owners in these sports is jarring.

Of the 151 sports teams in the five major professional sports in the U.S., there are no majority owners who are Black. The vast majority of owners are White males, as are the head coaches and executives in those leagues. The only two Black majority owners in the history of modern major sports franchises have been former NBA player Michael Jordan, who recently sold his stake in the Charlotte Hornets, and Robert L. Johnson, who was the previous owner of the Hornets when they were known as the Bobcats.

In 2023, over 92 percent of the team presidents in the NBA are white, while 7.9 percent were African American; Cynthia Marshall of the Dallas

Mavericks is the NBA’s first Black female CEO. Of the 32 teams, only eight have Black general managers.

Since its inception, only 28 managerial jobs in Major League Baseball have gone to Blacks. Currently, Dana Brown is the only Black general manager in the league.

In the 2023 NFL season, there are four Black head coaches—Mike Tomlin (Pittsburgh Steelers), Todd Bowles (Tampa Bay Buccaneers) and DeMeco Ryans (Houston Texans) and Antonio Pierce (Las Vegas Raiders).

However, the Raiders is the first team in the league to have several positions held by Black individuals—the first Black woman president, Sandra Douglass Morgan; a Black general manager, Champ Kelly, and Pierce.

The NFL now has seven minority team presidents, including five who are Black, and nine general managers, including eight Black men.

In contrast, the WNBA has been the league that has led the way in the area of diversity. The 2023 season began with three Black general managers and two Black women at the CEO or team president level—Liberty CEO Keia Clarke and Aces President Nikki Fargas, who is an ABIS board member.

ABIS is focused on ending the discrimination that Black coaches, athletes, and administrators face when it comes to getting hired for key positions and fair wages. To advance the organization’s mission, Charles has reached out to his vast network of celebrities in sports, music, law, and business. The organization’s board members and advisors are a who’s who of the sports, entertainment, and business worlds, including former President and CEO of the Milwaukee Brewers Ulice Payne Jr., University of South Carolina women’s basketball coach Dawn Staley, Good Morning America host Robin Roberts, former women’s basketball coach Vivian Stringer, civil rights attorney Benjamin Crump, NBA Hall of Famer Tracy McGrady, rap legend Chuck D, and NBA Hall of Famer Julius Erving.

The fundamental factors to ABIS’ “keys to victory” include economic sustainability, education, grassroots and community outreach, racial equity research, student-athletes, and voting and civic engagement.

For student-athletes, the organization has partnered with JPMorgan Chase & Co. to implement a financial coaching program at seven historically Black colleges and universities and five predominantly white institutions. The initiative is designed to provide student-athletes with the information and skills they need to ensure their financial health during college and beyond.

With the 2021 implementation of name, image, and likeness (NIL) that allows student-athletes to make money from their personal brand, the organization’s financial coaching program is timely. In its first year, college athletes earned an estimated \$917 million from NIL deals, according to data from Opendorse.

“What we’re looking to do is teach them how to manage money and understand how to start creating generational wealth,” says Tricia Messeroux, ABIS’ chief creative officer. “Some of them may go pro and they’re going to make a lot of money. So, the program teaches them what to do with the money, how to think smarter, and how to do better with their finances.”

To address the disparities in the college coaching ranks, ABIS created a list of viable coaching candidates, which Charles says has already made an impact.

“We created a watch list because too many times [athletic directors] will tell us, they don’t know who the top coaches are. And that’s why [they] can’t give them a job or promote them. What we said was, ‘Oh yeah? Well, here’s the cheat sheet. We’re giving it to you. Here are the top coaches voted by their peers in the game right now,’” Charles says. “And since we’ve done that, 50 percent of the jobs that opened have now gone to minorities. And that’s for all sports. We do it for basketball,

Tricia Messeroux, chief creative officer and member of the ABIS Board of Directors, with Jada Peacock, Hofstra graduate. Peacock played guard for the Hofstra women's basketball team, and successfully completed the ABIS financial literacy program.



"Since its inception, only 28 managerial jobs in Major League Baseball have gone to Blacks."

football, track and field, baseball, volleyball. And now administrators are asking us, 'Gary, can you please do one for administrators?'"

A graduate of the nation's first HBCU, Cheyney University and former Wall Street executive, Charles has spent most of his life involved in basketball. He founded the Long Island Panthers, a grassroots basketball program, that has produced more than 20 NBA players, helped direct the legendary ABCD Basketball Camp, and started the Fab48 Tournament, which four years ago was changed to Las Vegas Big Time.

Last year, ABIS held its 2nd Annual Champions & Legends Fundraising Weekend, "Our Race. Our Playbook" at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas. The three-day event included a community service project, professional development sessions, a fundraising gala, and a gospel brunch. The highlight of the weekend's events was the Champions & Legends gala presentation of awards, one of which was named after legendary basketball marketing guru Sonny Vaccaro.

Vaccaro, who previously worked at Nike, Adidas and Reebok, was

one of the men responsible for signing Michael Jordan to Nike and Kobe Bryant to Adidas. He's also the catalyst behind the 2014 class-action lawsuit against the NCAA that resulted in players earning money from their NIL. Vaccaro has also been instrumental in Charles' career, signing the Panthers to a shoe deal, the first grassroots program to receive such an honor.

"I met him when he was a big-timer on Wall Street, and [he] was working with the AAU kids," Vaccaro recalls. "I was at the Final Four in Minnesota, in the early '90s and Gary came into my room and introduced himself.

I was trying to meet new people to bring over [to Adidas]. And I had heard of him. He was one of the first influencers to come in to the '90s. We started our relationship that day, me recruiting people like Gary to get people like Tracy [McGrady]."

The 2024 Champions & Legends Weekend will be held May 31-June 2, at the MGM National Harbor Hotel & Casino in Washington, DC. More

information can be found at <https://weareabis.org>.

In its short existence and through its many initiatives, the organization's impact is noted by the people it was created to help.

"One day I went into a restaurant [and] there was this young man that kept looking at me and he looked familiar. He said to me, 'Mr. Charles? I'm one of the athletes that's part of your program. I

go to Prairie View and I just want to say thank you because this meant so much to all of us because we didn't know. We didn't know how you get a house or why we need to save our money and understand that being an athlete is not going to be forever." ■

(L-R) Chuck D, rapper/frontman for Public Enemy; Tracy McGrady, former NBA player and member of the NBA Hall of Fame; Gary Charles, founder & CEO of ABIS; Nikki Fargas, president of WNBA champions Las Vegas Aces; and Dave Leitao, president and chairman of ABIS Board of Directors at the ABIS Champions & Legends Gala.

