

Where Are All the Black NBA Coaches? Examining a Sudden, Silent Disappearance

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Stephen Dunn/Getty Images

On March 3 of this year, the Denver Nuggets fired head coach Brian Shaw. It was not a controversial decision. The Nuggets were listing. Shaw was struggling. A change seemed inevitable.

Shaw's dismissal came 26 days after the Orlando Magic fired Jacque Vaughn, another embattled coach who seemed destined to fall.

Vaughn's dismissal came 220 days after the Milwaukee Bucks fired Larry Drew, who lost his job 49 days after the Cleveland Cavaliers fired Mike Brown, who lost his job six days after the Golden State Warriors fired Mark Jackson, who was terminated 14 days after the Utah Jazz fired Tyrone Corbin, who was axed the day after Mike Woodson lost his job with the New York Knicks.

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And his ouster came 71 days after the Detroit Pistons fired Maurice Cheeks.

Before Cheeks, it was Lionel Hollins (Memphis), Keith Smart (Sacramento), Alvin Gentry (Phoenix), Avery Johnson (Brooklyn), Paul Silas (Charlotte) and Nate McMillan (Portland).

Most of these moves were unremarkable. Each came with a plausible rationale: a failure to meet expectations, a clash between coach and players or coach and management, a vague call for change.

But this three-year flurry of firings, each unrelated to the next, produced an unintended cumulative effect: a dramatic decrease in black head coaches in the [NBA](#).

By the time all vacancies had been filled this summer, there were seven—a 50 percent drop from three years ago, and the lowest total in 16 years.

"That's not enough," said Silas, who is now retired after three decades in the NBA coaching ranks. "There are more guys that understand how to coach basketball. And they should have a chance."



Paul Silas spent 12 seasons as a head coach in the NBA, including two with LeBron James from 2003 to 2005. *Andrew D. Bernstein/Getty Images*

(The total actually hit eight last week, with Sam Mitchell taking over in Minnesota following Flip Saunders' untimely death. But Mitchell has an interim title and no assurances beyond this season. Because he was not specifically hired for the job, Mitchell is not included in the figures used in this story. All interviews were conducted from mid-September through mid-October, prior to Saunders' passing.)

The causes for the decline in black coaches are hard to pinpoint. But the trend is startling.

From 2001-2014, the NBA [averaged 11 black head coaches](#) per season—easily the most diverse era in league history. On opening night in 2012, half of the NBA's 30 head coaches were people of color, including 14 black coaches, an all-time high.

But the number has been declining ever since, leaving the league with its lowest total since opening night 1999, when there were six black head coaches. Yet the decline has gone virtually unnoticed and unexamined. Nearly everyone interviewed for this story—coaches, executives, agents and academics—expressed surprise at the numbers, and ambivalence about how to interpret them: An anomaly? Or a worrisome trend?

"I think it bears watching, to see what happens," said New Orleans Pelicans head coach Alvin Gentry, who is black. "Five years from now, where are we going to be, from a numbers standpoint?"

Gentry, 61, has been working in the NBA since 1988, as both an assistant and head coach. He said it's too soon to call the trend a concern, and he expressed a firm belief that NBA teams "try to hire qualified people, regardless of race."

That wait-and-see approach was prevalent among those interviewed for this story. The NBA has long been the most progressive of the major North American sports leagues, setting the standard for both racial and gender diversity and, as such, has earned some benefit of the doubt.

Toronto Raptors coach Dwane Casey, who broke into the NBA as an assistant in 1994, cited his own experience, which includes two head-coaching jobs.



Dwane Casey was an assistant for 11 seasons with Seattle before getting his first head coaching position with Minnesota in 2005. *David Sherman/Getty Images*

"If anything, I trust that the league is fair," said Casey, 58. "So I trust that this is probably going to be a blip on the radar, and you'll see that number go back up again, hopefully in the next couple years."

Mark Tatum, the NBA's deputy commissioner, dismissed the downturn as "cyclical."

Historically speaking, this has been the NBA's most diverse era in the coaching ranks.

The league averaged just five black head coaches per season from 1990-2000—with a low of two (in 1992) and a high of seven (1993). The average more than doubled over the next 13-year span, before the recent dip.

Still, the NBA has the same number of black coaches today as it did in 1993, and a lower proportion, because there were only 27 teams in 1993.

No one who spoke to Bleacher Report said the NBA has a race problem (although a few came close). No one advocated an NFL-style Rooney Rule—the edict that requires teams in that league to interview minorities for head coaching vacancies.

The general consensus is the decline in black NBA coaches is, as Casey said, a blip, a snapshot in time.

Yet it's a snapshot that warrants scrutiny. Seventy-five percent of NBA players are black, which begs the question: If blacks are dominating the court, why are so few on the bench?

Some academics blame age-old racial dynamics, in which whites mostly socialize with and hire whites.

Some team executives point to a lack of qualified and/or ready black assistant coaches.



Byron Scott and Derek Fisher are among a relative few number of black coaches hired since the end of the 2012-13 season. *Andrew D. Bernstein/Getty Images*

Some coaches blame teams' embrace of analytics—a theory that suggests black coaches are perceived as either less intelligent or less willing to adapt.

There is also a sense among some black coaches that they simply do not get the same support and trust from team executives that their white peers enjoy. That could mean fewer opportunities to become a head coach, and shorter tenures for those who do.

"I think that it is a big deal," said a black coach who has been working in the league for more than two decades, referring to the decline in black head coaches. "I think the message that it sends is that maybe black coaches aren't as competent or as able to do a good job as other kinds of coaches."

The coach asked for anonymity to avoid alienating potential future employers.

In an era where "culture change" is the mantra of every losing team, head coaches need the time and the authority to establish values and to set boundaries. They don't always get it.

Over the last 10 years, white head coaches have lasted 3.2 seasons, on average, while black coaches have lasted just 2.85 seasons, according to a [study of coaching tenures](#) by Bleacher Report. That's a difference of just 12 percent, or 29 games, but coaches view it another way: It's the difference between getting fired in the middle of your third year, versus starting a fourth season—after another round of roster moves and a training camp.

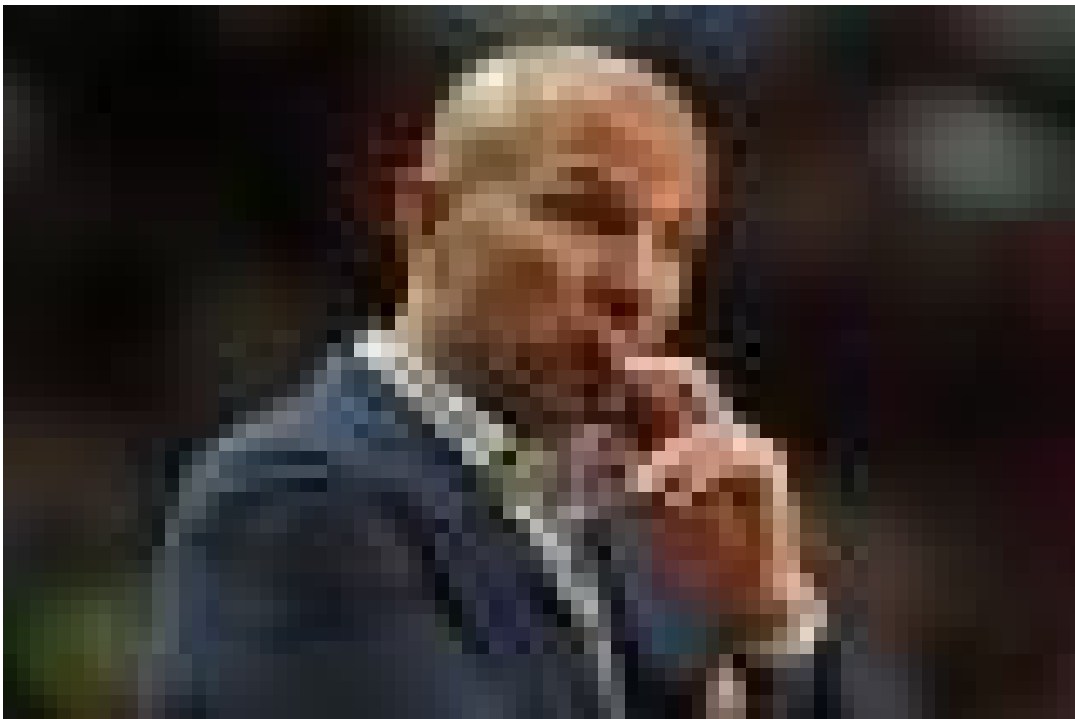
In starker terms, it means white coaches generally get more time to prove themselves, and fix flawed rosters, than black coaches do.

That gap is shrinking, however, and the average tenure for black coaches has been growing.

In the prior 10-year period, from 1995-2005, black coaches lasted just 2.26 seasons on average, compared to 3.2 seasons for white coaches—a 42 percent gap, equivalent to 77 games.

Black coaches from 2005-2015 lasted 48 games longer on average than their predecessors in the prior 10-year span, a promising trend. Concerns remain, however.

"A lot of us walk into situations that aren't ready-made, and you can't really succeed," said the veteran black coach. "There's a difference there, too, in the kind of jobs that we get an opportunity to do."



Jonathan Daniel/Getty Images

Despite a strong record on diversity, NBA teams still hire white coaches at a much higher rate than black coaches, according to a study by Bleacher Report of the last 10 years. Of the **96 full-time head coaches** hired since 2005, 36 were black, and 59 white. The only other person of color hired in that span is Miami's Erik Spoelstra, who is Filipino-American.

Turnover has been especially fierce in the last two-and-a-half years, with 29 coaches hired since the end of the 2012-13 season. Just 11 of those hires were black.

It's imprudent to blame any single cause. These are 30 independent teams, led by 30 different owners and 30 front offices, each with its own personality and vision.

But there is one broad trend that partially explains the racial shifts: NBA teams, now more than ever, are seeking unconventional hires—college coaches, first-time coaches, foreign coaches, broadcasters, former video coordinators—and turning away from the standard pool of former players-turned-coaches, a pool that is, by definition, predominantly black.

Three current head coaches were plucked from the college ranks, with no NBA bench experience: Brad Stevens (Boston), Fred Hoiberg (Chicago) and Billy Donovan (Oklahoma City).

Two head coaches, Spoelstra and Indiana's Frank Vogel, began their careers as video coordinators, with no NBA playing experience.

The Cleveland Cavaliers reached overseas last year to hire David Blatt, who won titles in Europe and Israel but had never worked or played in the NBA.



Ben Margot/Associated Press

The Golden State Warriors plucked Steve Kerr from the broadcast booth, to replace Jackson, who had also moved straight from TV to the bench.

The New York Knicks last year hired Derek Fisher just weeks after he played his final game—a move that echoed the Brooklyn Nets' unusual decision a year earlier to hire Jason Kidd, just days after he retired.

Stevens, Hoiberg, Donovan, Vogel, Blatt and Kerr are white. Fisher, Kidd and Jackson are black. Going unconventional does not automatically lead to a white coach, but it does skew in that direction, however unintentionally.

A trend toward college coaches would automatically be skewed, as nearly 87 percent of Division I coaches are white (not counting historically black universities), according to Richard Lapchick, of the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport.

Although teams are still hiring head coaches from the NBA assistant pool, most of the recent hires in that category are also white and never played in the NBA: Mike Malone (Denver), Steve Clifford (Charlotte), Dave Joerger (Memphis), Brett Brown (Philadelphia), Mike Budenholzer (Atlanta).

As recently as 2010, two-thirds of NBA head coaches had significant NBA playing careers. Today? Less than half (excluding Donovan, whose playing career lasted 44 games).

If NBA experience is deemed unnecessary, then it follows that former players—a group that is predominantly black—would be the most impacted by the trend.

"I think that's a good theory," said Dr. Todd Boyd, a professor of race and popular culture at the University of Southern California. "If you go around the NBA, you can find a lot of white people working in various positions who never played in the NBA. Almost every black person you find within the NBA...the majority of those people played in the NBA."

The numbers support the theory. Consider the current roster of coaches (excluding Mitchell):

- Among the seven black coaches, five are [former NBA players](#) (71 percent).



Alvin Gentry is one of only two black coaches currently in the NBA who didn't play in the league. *Craig Mitchell/dyer-USA TODAY Sports*

- Among the other 22 coaches, just eight had significant NBA playing careers (36 percent).

To put it another way: Of the 16 coaches who never played, only two are black.

To put it in starker terms: If you are black, an NBA playing career is almost a prerequisite for landing a head-coaching job. If you are white, it is not essential.

This is not an anomaly. Consider these figures from the last decade:

- Of the 36 black coaches hired since 2005, 28 were former players (78 percent).
- Of the 59 white coaches hired since 2005, 30 were former players (51 percent).

The traditional path for an ex-player is to become an assistant, establish your credentials and wait for a head coaching vacancy. That was the route followed by Monty Williams, Maurice Cheeks, Brian Shaw, Jacque Vaughn and countless others.

Yet the number of black assistants has also shrunk in recent years, according to Lapchick.

Last season, 40 percent of NBA assistants were black—down from 46 percent in 2013-14 and 44 percent in 2012-13. Before that, the number had hovered around 40 percent for several years, so in some respects the figure has simply returned to the norm.

Are those assistants getting a fair chance to move up? One industry source estimated that blacks have comprised just 20 percent of all candidates interviewed for NBA head coaching positions in recent years.

"There's a lot of discussion that goes on among black assistant coaches that don't feel like they're getting a fair shot," said the veteran black coach. "When somebody out of just nowhere comes in, and an owner or a GM is having so much faith in this guy who they don't even know much about, and doesn't have a track record on this level, and they choose to roll with that person, as opposed to somebody who's been grinding for years and years...there's definitely conversation that goes on."

That the NBA would be confronting this issue at all in 2015 is surprising, given its strong record on diversity. Last season, the NBA received an A+ for its racial hiring practices, and a B+ on gender, from Lapchick, who has consistently awarded the league high marks in his annual study.

A report card for the new season has not yet been compiled.

Lapchick said the decline in black coaches might be "a snapshot in time." But he added, "For it to be down this long and to go to seven is definitely something that has to be very noteworthy and paid attention to."



Elsa/Getty Images

Despite some damaging episodes at the ownership level—most prominently, the Donald Sterling saga—the NBA has largely been insulated from racial concerns in recent years. And the speed with which Commissioner Adam Silver punished and removed Sterling arguably enhanced the league's reputation. Players cheered Silver's swift and decisive judgment.

Also of note: Tatum, the deputy commissioner, who is black and Vietnamese, is the highest-ranking person of color in any of the major sports.

Yet the NBA power structure remains largely stratified along racial lines. Twenty-eight of the 30 team owners are white. Only five teams have a black executive in charge of basketball operations: the Los Angeles Clippers (Doc Rivers), the Brooklyn Nets (Billy King), the New Orleans Pelicans (Dell Demps), the Toronto Raptors (Masai Ujiri) and the Timberwolves (Milt Newton).

Newton, as general manager, had been reporting to Saunders, who was also Minnesota's team president. Steve Mills similarly works in a secondary role for the Knicks, reporting to team president Phil Jackson.

This dynamic fuels another concern, one that permeates all industries: that people tend to associate with people who look like them. And those relationships can influence hiring decisions, Boyd said.

"Maybe if there were more black executives, maybe if there were more black people making the hiring decisions, then you might see more coaches who are black, as well," said Boyd, who called the paucity of black executives "a major issue."

Boyd added, "You look at any entity in our society. When people make hiring decisions, they often hire people they know. They hire their friends. They hire people who their friends recommend. So the sort of social circle that's involved in making these sorts of decisions are also potentially biased in terms of race. Because if you're

not part of the right social circle, then those opportunities aren't going to come for you."

Several team officials who spoke to B/R flatly conceded the point.

"Like hires like," a white team executive said. "If you want to get to the root cause, you go back to the GMs. And then you can go one step further, to the owners."

One source after another—coaches, executives and agents, both black and white—expressed faith in the NBA as a meritocracy. Yet few could dismiss these concerns outright.

As in any industry, connections matter in the NBA.

Scott Skiles, the new Orlando Magic head coach, benefited from his close ties to Magic chief executive Alex Martins. Hoiberg, a former Bulls guard, benefited from his longtime friendship with Bulls GM Gar Forman, who hired Hoiberg without interviewing other candidates. Kerr was golfing buddies with Joe Lacob, the Golden State Warriors owner, long before Lacob hired him as coach. Atlanta Hawks coach Mike Budenholzer was hired by Danny Ferry, a friend from their days together with the Spurs.



Bulls GM Gar Forman hired the only person he interviewed for the Bulls head coaching job, his friend Fred Hoiberg. *Randy Belice/Getty Images*

This is not to imply that race or friendship were overriding factors in these cases, or that any of the coaches were undeserving—only that they had some built-in advantages. As one team executive noted, hiring decisions are often based on "a comfort level, more than anything" that an owner has with a coach.

And that comfort can certainly cross racial lines, as it did when Kidd—a longtime friend of Milwaukee Bucks owner Marc Lasry—landed the Bucks' coaching job last year.

To sign Kidd, the Bucks had to fire Larry Drew, effectively jettisoning one black coach for another, and demonstrating that when it comes to hiring practices, friendships often trump everything.

Indeed, it's worth noting that many of the black coaches who were fired over the last two years were replaced by other black coaches—an indication that race isn't necessarily the issue, at least for those franchises.

The Nets replaced Kidd with Hollins, while the Knicks went from Woodson to Fisher and the Pelicans went from Williams to Gentry.

And yet the ranks of black head coaches dwindled anyway.

Some black coaches suspect they are still being hurt by old stereotypes, whether conscious or unconscious, about athletes and intelligence.

As Boyd put it: "We know he can play, but can he teach someone else to play? I think there's this perception, perhaps unconscious and perhaps unspoken, that a lot of black guys just aren't smart enough to do the job. And when you throw something like analytics in the mix, it adds to that even more."

These twin concerns, of perceived intelligence and the rise of analytics, were cited by multiple black coaches, unprompted.

More teams than ever are employing advanced stats to inform roster building and game strategy, and they prefer coaches who embrace the movement. Some black coaches fear this has produced a bias, whether conscious or unconscious, against them.

Team executives who spoke to B/R generally dismissed the suggestion.

Race aside, some coaches simply resent the idea that a team might value statistical fluency over practical experience.

"I'm not trying to knock anybody else's strength," said the veteran black coach. "A lot of coaches that were hired were video guys, that were analytic gurus, whatever. ... But you can't tell me as a [former] player that's played the game, that has a feel for what it takes, the grind of a season, that I don't know the game."

If teams are gravitating toward unconventional candidates, it might be because they're not sold on the current crop of NBA assistants, whether black or white. More than one team executive said the pool of top assistants has been tapped out.

There are potential head coaches on NBA benches, both black and white, but in the words of one industry source, "they're just not ready."

Among the current group of black assistants, Cleveland's Tyronn Lue is viewed as the strongest candidate for a promotion. Lue previously apprenticed under Rivers and is widely respected by players, coaches and executives around the league.



Tyrone Lue is one of the few current assistant coaches league executives felt was ready to take over a team. *David Liam Kyle/Getty Images*

Other black assistants with head coaching potential, per league sources, include David Fizdale (Miami), David Vanterpool (Portland), J.B. Bickerstaff (Houston), Melvin Hunt (Dallas), Stephen Silas (Charlotte), Robert Pack (New Orleans), Randy Brown (Chicago), Ime Udoka (San Antonio), Ed Pinckney (Denver) and Adrian Griffin (Orlando).

Of course, opinions on those candidates vary from one executive to the next.

The job of the head coach has evolved and expanded significantly in recent years, one executive noted. It's no longer enough just to have a grasp of X's and O's.

Shorter player contracts, ushered in by the 2011 labor deal, have fueled more rapid roster turnover, requiring coaches to be more flexible and creative. Player development may be more critical now than ever. The growth of analytics and sports science requires coaches who are open-minded and adaptable, and who can manage a wealth of information.

These are recent developments, and it might take time for veteran coaches—particularly ex-players, who came up in a different era—to adapt to it all, one executive said.

This theory could help explain why teams would reach for college head coaches, who already have the management experience and have dealt with some of the newer challenges.

And then there was this theory, posited by some industry sources: that the brightest players, the ones best suited to the job, simply aren't pursuing coaching careers. Today's NBA player might retire with tens of millions in his bank account. He doesn't need the money, or the stress.

Several retired players with the acumen to coach—guys like Shane Battier, Chauncey Billups and Grant Hill—have instead moved into broadcasting.

Tatum said it is a mistake to assume that NBA players want to be coaches at all, noting that many are instead pursuing front-office jobs or starting their own businesses. And some players have joined the ownership ranks as minority partners: [Shaquille O'Neal](#) (Sacramento), David Robinson (San Antonio) and Hill (Atlanta). Michael Jordan is the majority owner of the Charlotte Hornets.



Grant Hill has struck some in the NBA as head coaching material but he has dedicated his focus on being a broadcaster and now a minority owner of the Hawks. *Scott Cunningham/Getty Images*

"We have several players in our league who aspire to be owners, not head coaches," Tatum said.

By any measure, the NBA remains far ahead of its peers. The NFL has just five black head coaches among its 32 teams, and has never had more than seven. Major League Baseball has just one black manager—Dusty Baker, who was hired by the Washington Nationals Tuesday—with one vacancy left to fill.

Still, the NBA's downturn merits a deeper examination, said Jeremi Duru, an American University law professor who worked on the NFL's Rooney Rule.

"When you've got this sort of drop or backslide, I think it's crucial [to explore the causes]," Duru said. "The NBA has always taken great pride in its diversity among coaches, it seems to me. If they are losing that, if they really do have pride in it, they need to find a way to systematize ensuring that individuals of color are getting the opportunities that white coaches are getting."

Tatum added it is too soon for that discussion. The league already monitors hiring trends at both the team and league levels, and it bolstered that effort by hiring a diversity and inclusion officer earlier this year, he said.

"I think our teams, again, are already taking an approach of hiring and finding the best talent out there, regardless of that coach's ethnicity, gender, background," Tatum said.

The number of black coaches could dip even further. Scott was always viewed as a short-term solution in Los Angeles, and the Lakers' horrid start leaves him vulnerable. And though the Raptors have started strong, the sense around the league is that this is a make-or-break season for Casey.

Yet there's a sense, a faith even, among many executives and coaching sources, that the cycle will correct itself, that the percentage of black head coaches will rise again before long.



Having already drawn interest from the NBA, UConn's Kevin Ollie is one of a small handful of black college coaches who will likely be a candidate for NBA openings in the immediate future. *Joe Robbins/Getty Images*

Some longtime assistants will finally get their breaks. Some former head coaches, such as Nate McMillan and Monty Williams, may get another shot. Some team might convince Connecticut's Kevin Ollie or Texas' Shaka Smart, two highly regarded young coaches, to leave the college ranks for the NBA.

But it may take a more assertive stance by the NBA to change anything. Boyd called on Silver to investigate the issue.

"It's a consciousness, really, that has to be developed," he said. "I know a lot of people would like to say, 'Well, race shouldn't have anything to do with it.' But race has everything to do with it."

Howard Beck covers the NBA for Bleacher Report. Follow him on Twitter, [@HowardBeck](https://twitter.com/HowardBeck).

Notes

- *The number of black full-time head coaches per season is based on opening-night rosters. It does not account for in-season changes, and thus excludes interim coaches.*

- *To calculate "coaching tenure" averages, B/R examined every coach who left his team—whether voluntarily or involuntarily—from 2005-15. We did not include interim coaches, unless they were later given the permanent job.*

Because we only evaluated complete tenures, B/R did not include coaches whose tenures are continuing this season. So, for example, Gregg Popovich (in his 20th season with San Antonio) is not included in the tenure calculations. Nor are any other coaches who are still with their teams. We also excluded Flip Saunders, who died on Oct. 25, after just one season with Minnesota.

The same standards were applied for the 1995-2005 period: Only coaches who were fired or resigned during that span were counted in the average. If a coach continued into the 2005-06 season, he was excluded from the 1995-2005 calculations.

For statistical consistency, we treated the two lockout-shortened seasons (50 games in 1998-99, 66 games in 2011-12) as full, 82-game seasons, by prorating the number of games coached. Thus, if a coach logged 33 games in 2011-12, it was treated as 41.

Based on these standards, from 2005-2015 there were 36 black coaches with complete tenures, who presided over 8,414 games—an average of 234 games, or 2.85 seasons, per coach. There were 44 white coaches with complete tenures, presiding over 11,572 games—an average of 263 games, or 3.21 seasons, per coach.

The white coach statistics exclude Jerry Sloan, whose 23-year tenure with Utah was such an outlier that it singlehandedly skewed the averages. If Sloan were included (and his career games adjusted for the '98-99 lockout season), the average tenure for white coaches would leap to 298 games, or 3.63 seasons.

From 1995-2005, there were 32 black coaches with complete tenures who presided over 5,926 games—an average of 185 games, or 2.26 seasons, per coach. There were 63 white coaches with complete tenures, presiding over 16,537 games—an average of 262 games, or 3.2 seasons, per coach.

- *"Coaches hired since 2005" only includes coaches who were specifically hired to be head coach, starting with the 2005-06 season. It does not include interim coaches, unless they were later rewarded with the permanent job.*

The new hires for 2005-06 include three who began as interim coaches in 2004-05, before being rewarded with multiyear deals: George Karl (Denver), Avery Johnson (Dallas) and Mike Fratello (Memphis).

The total is based on vacancies filled, not individuals. Therefore, coaches who were employed by multiple teams—such as Byron Scott, Alvin Gentry and Mike Brown—were counted again each time they were hired.

- *"Former NBA player" was defined as any coach who played at least 100 games in the league.*