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"I grew up watching women's sports, having a male role model who advocated for women's sports and felt passionate about growing women's sports. I do hope I can advocate for equality for women in sports. Softball is such an awesome sport."

COACH'S PROFILE PAGE 12

WORDS TO COACH BY ...

"Obstacles don't have to stop you. If you run into a wall, don't turn around and give up. Figure out how to climb it, go through it, or work around it."

MICHAEL JORDAN, SIX-TIME NBA CHAMPION, BASKETBALL HALL OF FAMER & APPAREL ICON



NATIONAL FASTPITCH COACHES ASSOCIATION



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FASTPITCH DELIVERY

JULY 2020 ♦ VOLUME 25, NO. 7

Helping understand the struggle

Carnegie Mellon coach Harrison shares her experiences as a Black woman

By **MONICA HARRISON**

Head Coach, Carnegie Mellon Univ.

THINK back to when you were preparing for your interview for your first head coaching job. Focus in on the night before the interview. What were you doing to prepare for it? What were you most concerned about?

Next, I want you to go back a little further and think about your first day of classes as a freshman in college. You just finished your first class on Monday morning at 8 a.m. It is a course for your major, and you are bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, ready to dive into the full experiences of college. Remember your feelings in that moment.

Hold on to those thoughts and feelings. I'll tap into those in a minute.

The current state of our nation has been impactful for me personally. I have had lots of great conversations with people from all walks of life on the subject, but I keep going back to how I can make a difference.

We all know that our sport has been one of the fastest-growing sports in participation, viewership and overall excitement for the game. But what hasn't grown is diversity and representation.

Statistics in our sport were startling for me to see. I have always known that



Carnegie Mellon head coach Monica Harrison, left, talks with one of her players. Photo provided.

softball has never had a lot of Black girls/women playing or coaching the sport. But, to see the numbers on paper was an eye-opener for me: 45 Black head coaches in all of collegiate softball and approximately 5.5 percent of the student-athletes playing softball at the collegiate level are Black — as reported by the 2019 NCAA Demographics Database. I have been reminding my players that we have direct impact over

our circles of influence. In my conversations with people, I was encouraged to impact others by sharing some of my experiences to provide perspective to some as to what minorities face on the campuses of predominately white institutions (PWI).

While I cannot speak on behalf of all Black students at PWIs, I feel confident that my experience is a shared one on some level by a majority of Black

students at PWIs at some point in their college career. My hope in sharing some of these experiences, is that it will help broaden your perspective on unconscious biases, explicit and implicit biases, and microaggressions that continue to harm the psyche of young Black students who are attending college.

We all go to college to learn to become confident in who we are, and our ability to bring our most authentic selves to our everyday lives. That is no different for marginalized groups.

I hope my stories open conversations as to what we need to learn, train and focus on as a department to in turn educate and train our predominantly-white rosters and support our diverse student-athletes that we have on roster, during not only this unique time in history, but also in this unique stage of their lives.

My whole life I've been considered Black enough. Black enough not to be threatening to the white people I'm around, but with enough melanin in my skin to remind all people that I am Black.

So, that meant that I've teetered on this ledge of self-identification my whole life. Things that drive me nuts to hear as a Black person (and I have

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INSIDE

Find out what softball trailblazer Judi Garman has been up to since retirement in this new feature profiling NFCA Hall of Famers.

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Camp changes

The Atlanta Legacy EXCEL camp will lead off a revised 2020 NFCA summer camp schedule.

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heard them many times in my life):

- Can you dance?
- Can I touch your hair?
- You don't sound Black
- I'm darker than you, or you're an Oreo (Black on the outside and White on the inside)
- You are so aggressive/too loud
- Wow, you're very articulate

I could spend hours explaining the deep-rooted cultural biases that exist in those statements. Those are just some quick-hit microaggressions that are thrown around every day.

For a long time, I have felt that I had to gracefully endure these silent attacks to pave the way for the next generation, so it wouldn't be too hard for them to get to the next level. People have commented that I am an unabashed, confident woman who is comfortable in her own skin.

It wasn't until I birthed my child, a young Black girl, that I started down the journey of accepting my Blackness and accepting my best self and feeling confident in bringing my authentic self every day. The journey isn't complete. It hasn't been and still isn't easy.

Let's go back to our first visualization. You're getting ready for your interview for your first head coaching position. Anyone want to share what you were thinking about/focusing on the night before? My main point of focus was my hair.

My natural hair, in all its untamed glory, has been a struggle for me my whole life. Even interviewing for this role at Carnegie Mellon and feeling the need to straighten my hair to look presentable and accepted — as if my naturally curly hair is deemed less put together — was something I struggled with. I woke up the next morning at 6 a.m., and begged my sister to straighten my hair for fear that my hair would be the reason I didn't get the job.

Let's go back to your freshman year. What was day one of school like for you? In my freshman year at Bucknell, on the first day of class, a professor told me that I had to prove to him and my classmates that I deserved to be here. Little did he know, I didn't check the race box on my college application. It

was optional. I did, however, write my college essay on having to work twice as hard to get what I deserve. Unfortunately, my interaction with that professor was manifest destiny.

I chose to go to Bucknell because I knew it was a PWI (two percent Black at the time of my enrollment) and I knew that a large population of the student body was wealthy and sheltered. In my collegiate search, I knew I needed to go to a school that was predominantly white to learn how to function in that environment and practice my responses to challenges faced so that I could be successful when facing those challenges in the work world.

I have many more stories of discrimination, microaggressions and unconscious biases that I have faced in my lifetime from coaches, colleagues,

bosses and others. Even being a Black head coach at such a prestigious institution as Carnegie Mellon, I am still overlooked by travel ball coaches. They won't acknowledge me at tournaments and pass me by when handing out team flyers to the college coaches at the fields. Some don't address me in conversations when out recruiting with my white assistant coach; they only speak to her in the conversation until she politely defers to me once the coach finishes their pitch.

I say all this in challenging you all to think about how are we preparing our student-athletes for these encounters in life? Is it our job? Yes, it is. If we say we are teaching life through our sport, it is our job to prepare them for all aspects of life ... good, bad and ugly. While many of our student-athletes may not

encounter these issues being directed at them, they will be a part of the experience in some way.

How are we fostering our cultures and environments to support the growth of upstanders — a person who speaks or acts in support of an individual or cause, particularly someone who intervenes on behalf of a person being attacked or bullied. We want to encourage our student-athletes to be an upstander, not a bystander, for marginalized communities.

Here are a few actionable thoughts to start you off:

- We have to have uncomfortable conversations with our players.

► Ask them if they have been in a situation where they have heard untow-

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How to talk with your team about racial issues

Emmanuel College head coach Olivia Berry shared with the NFCA a letter that she recently sent to the members of her team addressing the current racial situation in



Berry

our world and offering them a perspective from a person of color who has had experiences that they may not have had in their own lives due to their own skin color and therefore can't fully understand, even if they sympathize and want to help.

She hopes coaches around the country can use her words as a guide to help talk to their own teams about what is going on and how they can help each other work together to improve conditions and make a real difference advancing toward equality for all.

Hi all:

I just wanted to send a quick note about what is happening right now in our country and beyond.

It has honestly taken me a few days to reach out about the senseless killings of people of color because unfortunately it has been my reality for as long as I can remember. My mother talked to me very early in life about how to respond to getting pulled over or having any interaction with police. I have been sworn at for holding the hand of the person that I love walking down the street because of our differing skin colors and genders. I have been called racial names at parties late at night when people have had too much to drink. It has been part of who I am, how I interact with the world and how I unfortunately (one day) will probably have to raise my children.

With that being said, I want all of you to understand that not knowing how to feel as a person of color or a white person is very understandable; angry, scared, anxious, invalidated, sad, confused. Every emotion is valid. With that being said, figuring out how to feel is going to be different for all of us, but the method of how we move forward should be consistent.

We love each other within this program despite the colors of our skin, our religious backgrounds, sexual orientations or otherwise. This love and empathy needs to carry to others whether we know them personally or not. A life is a life and is a precious gift. Having empathy for others that do not have the same ability to mold that gift how they want because of their "differences" needs to be part our foundation.

Reach out to people in your life that matter to you who are people of color. Let them speak freely about their pain and anxiety. Being someone to listen and then move forward with taking action is imperative. Registering to vote, pushing unconscious biases training in your job or school groups, talking to others in your family who have differing views in a respectful manner are all actions that need to happen as we move forward.

I, personally, am very sick of seeing the news or opening Instagram to see people not value my life, my brother's life, his soon to be son's life, and all the people of color's lives as they do their own. Please put your best foot forward to figure out what small and big actions you can make today and every day moving forward to make sure all people feel valued, accepted and heard.

Sport is always said to be a place where people of all types come together for the love of the game, but I hope you all come together as a family for the love of humanity. I love you all.

Coach

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ard things being said about minorities or a minority athlete on campus.

- ▶ Ask them their opinion on how Blacks are represented in film and media, and if it matters.

- ▶ Ask them do they see a difference in news reporting when referencing Black people versus white people.

- We have to understand and acknowledge the issues Black students face on campuses of PWIs.

- If we are going to attempt to attract diverse student-athletes, we have to be able to tackle the tough conversations about race and experiences at PWIs and in our predominately white sport.

- Are you prepared to talk to recruits' parents about how we will support and foster growth during the unique nuances of their child's college experience because there is an added level of discovery in our college experience that is different than our white peers?

Don't brush these topics to the side and say to recruits or parents that your program is colorblind. To not see color is to not see us.

Now is not the time for passive apologies, empty words or catchy hashtags. Your players, your recruits and your alumni are all watching. We need to challenge our players to educate themselves on these issues.

Tori Tyson, the head softball coach at Howard, recently stated it best why it is important for white coaches to also discuss these topics. To paraphrase, she said, "This generation of college athletes that we have will become world leaders. They may be lawyers, marry lawyers, become law enforcement, be judges, work in the White House or be the next president. We must empower this generation to be better ... even better than us. We have to empower them

to know that they can be the change. You can't empower them or encourage them unless you have these tough conversations. Challenge them to have tough and uncomfortable conversations every day."

However, I will caution you that in this challenging time, these tough and uncomfortable conversations are not easy. As people are transitioning from being non-racist to actively anti-racist, there is a lot of deep self-reflection and unlearning that is taking place for non-Blacks. Simultaneously, there is a level of unlearning that the Black community is also going through.

How Black people have interacted with the world for a very long time has been learned. Keep white people at an arm's length. Don't show too much emotion, for fear of perpetuating a stereotype. Voice your opinion in palatable doses, so you don't make too

many waves. Curb your enthusiasm. Don't be overly confident, because it will automatically be misconstrued as cocky. Expect to work twice as hard to get what others around you are receiving for minimal work.

As we unlearn these and figure out how to interact with the world as our true authentic selves, there will be missteps. We have to approach these conversations from both sides with love and patience. The foundation of how we have perceived each other is being stripped away. The true test of our character will not be in this moment, but in the moments of the future and how we as humans pick up the rubble and rebuild.

I have tossed and turned for weeks about how to talk to my softball community. What people are bringing to the forefront is my reality and has been my reality. However, I am very aware

that it is not everyone's reality, and not all people care to make it their problem.

I never want to be a person who shoves my philosophies down someone's throat. I don't even want that for my own child. I want each individual to shape their own perspectives. But to truly do that in a holistic manner, I believe you need to have all perspectives to make an informed opinion.

Ultimately, that is why I have decided to share my truths, so you all, in turn, have diverse perspectives to make your own opinions on the world. And I hope our players do the same.

The more we equip them with perspectives, the more prepared they are when they encounter a situation. We want to empower them with an informed opinion on the matter, which will give them confidence and space to react in whatever way they deem most appropriate.



The game of softball does not discriminate. Softball coaches and players come from incredibly diverse racial, cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. It's one of the most beautiful things about our sport.

The NFCA embraces inclusivity as a core value. Our Association is committed to treating ALL people with respect and dignity. We stand united with the Black community. We are committed to working together to understand, educate, and support our coaches.

Let this time in our history serve as an important reminder of the power in being a role model. No one is born feeling animosity toward anyone else. Our platform as softball coaches can make a difference.

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