

John Chaney

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE

John Chaney
MARCH 8, 2005

Over the past week I have been looking for the time to write about the incident involving John Chaney. I have also been thinking about the incident and trying to clarify my thoughts on the matter. The more I think and the more time passes I find myself with less clarity, rather than more clarity on the matter.

Prior to the game last week against St. Joseph's Chaney complained that St. Joseph's set illegal screens and if this continued he would send in "one of my goons and have him run through one of those guys and chop him in the neck or something."

True to his threat Chaney sent Nehemiah Ingram into the game early in the second half and told him to commit some hard fouls. Ingram at 6 foot, 8 inches, and 250 pounds who plays an average of just under four minutes a game, picked up four quick fouls. On the last one Ingram slammed John Bryant to the floor with enough force to break Bryant's arm. Oddly Ingram was not ejected from the game.

Chaney later apologized for his actions, suspended himself for one game, and offered to pay the medical bills for Bryant, bills already covered by insurance. Temple then suspended Chaney for the remainder of the season, or two more games. Then finally Temple suspended Chaney for the Atlantic 10 Tournament, but not the NCAA Tournament.

The uproar from all of this has been loud although it seems now to have left the headlines. No doubt in Philadelphia and at St. Joseph's there is still plenty of discussion. Some have argued for Chaney's dismissal, some for his suspension through the remainder of the season, some say enough has been done.

There are any number of points being made by those arguing the case for or against John Chaney. Those who argue for him point to Chaney's 23 years as head coach at Temple, as well as his highly successful career at Cheyney State where he coached his teams to Division II championships. Chaney's coaching has led any number of students out of the ghetto and into a college education over the many decades. Overall he has earned and

retains the support and respect of his fellow coaches, the general public in Philadelphia, as well as the media. He takes education seriously, but perhaps takes basketball games too seriously. If he had worn out his welcome at Temple he would have been fired within hours of the incident, just as Woody Hayes was shown a quick door when he gave officials at Ohio State their opportunity.

On the other side of the ledger is the fact that John Chaney is known for his quick temper, his less than elegant vocabulary on the bench, and his dictatorial approach to his players. He grabbed former George Washington coach Gerry Gimelstob by the throat in 1984 over GW tactics, and in 1994 got into an ugly argument with John Calipari during which Chaney had to be restrained while threatening to kill Calipari.

Does one incident every ten years constitute a pattern or ongoing problem? Perhaps. Are the tactics employed by Chaney last week unusual in the game of basketball? No. Coaches telling players to go into a game and get physical or do some hard fouling is, in fact, fairly common. One of the oldest tactics, which is a variation on this theme, is to send in a player to try to draw the star of the other team into a fight so that both players will be ejected from the game.

In the glory days of the Boston Celtics "Jungle Jim" Luskatoff and Tommy Heinson were the designated enforcers and intimidators for Red Auerbach's team. The hard foul and intimidation in the lane have always been a part of the professional game, and that has had an influence on the college game. Chaney's instructions to his player are not all that unusual. What is unusual is the coach announcing in advance in a press conference that this tactic would be used.

The problem then is not so much what Chaney told his player to do, but the outcome of the actions. If no arm was broken, no injury sustained, would anyone be calling for John Chaney's head? I doubt it. Unfortunately for Chaney someone did get injured and it was on videotape where America could watch it over and over again on news and sports shows.

One other consideration in all of this is the officiating of this game. Four hard fouls in just a few minutes certainly could not have gone unnoticed by the referees. Could they have done something to calm the atmosphere? Did they not have instructions to control the physicality of the game given Chaney's announced intentions?

In point of fact anyone who has watched college basketball over the past few decades has to be struck by the quantum leap in physical play. The pushing, shoving, hard fouls in the lane and elsewhere, along with the clutching and grabbing that have entered this non-contact sport at the college level is striking. The only surprise is that there have not been more injuries in college basketball and more incidents of this nature.

So where does all this leave the John Chaney case? It seems to me that a suspension through the remainder of the season, including all of March Madness, is required. Then I would hope that in the quiet of the summer John Chaney would decide, either on his own or with the encouragement of friends, that it is time to retire. No one wants to see John Chaney leave in the style of Woody Hayes. Chaney has reached an age at which patience normally wears thin and energy levels are waning. It is time for John Chaney to stop and enjoy the fruits of a life's work well done, before they get lost in another kind of legacy.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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