

NASCAR in middle of political, racial hurricane

By Steve Wilstein
Associated Press

NASCAR is caught in the middle of a relentless attack by a dogged critic on the right against the Rev. Jesse Jackson on the left.

At stake are NASCAR's commitment to diversity and the allegiance of some fans who are riled by Jackson's opposition to the war in Iraq, resent him for other reasons, or simply don't want the complexion of the sport to change.

So far NASCAR has done the smart thing, steering clear of the political issues without backing down from support for Jackson in their joint efforts to draw more minorities to auto racing at all levels - as fans, drivers, crew members and owners.

"NASCAR does not en-

dorse political views," president Mike Helton says. "NASCAR endorses diversity."

Dora Taylor, hired by NASCAR to head its diversity program after she helped turn Denny's from worst to first in its industry, says NASCAR remains serious about going after new markets by attracting minorities.

"It's a win-win scenario all the way around," she says.

Not if it involves Jackson, counters one of his most vehement critics, conservative activist Peter Flaherty.

Flaherty is president of a tiny outfit with a pretentious title, the National Legal and Policy Center, in Falls Church, Va., which purports to promote "ethics in government" while exposing the

"hypocrisy of the left."

To this end, Flaherty, conservative cohort Ken Boehm, and their staff of three, have been waging a campaign against NASCAR's relationship with Jackson on the Internet, radio, television and in newspapers.

"We have an ongoing campaign to dissuade corporate America from supporting Jesse Jackson," Flaherty says.

They have been trying to bring down Jackson for a couple of years, alleging his nonprofit Citizenship Education Fund is crooked and that the \$250,000 NASCAR has donated to it over the past two years - among the contributions of many - is going into his pockets.

"It's basically a slush fund

for Jackson," Flaherty says. "One thing that is indisputable is that it has nothing to do with broadening the base of NASCAR. This is not a nonprofit, it's an entity that's run to push the financial benefit of Jesse Jackson, his friends and family, some of whom have become quite wealthy."

That's a charge that Charles Farrell, director of Rainbow Sports, a division of Jackson's Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, calls "an absurd accusation ... ridiculous."

"Mr. Flaherty's attacks have no basis in fact," Farrell says.

Farrell works closely with NASCAR, as well as with major league baseball, the NFL, NBA and NHL, supporting their diversity efforts and criticizing them at times.

"That fund helps pay my salary and the staff, our travel, the seminars and conferences we put on, the whole infrastructure of the organization," Farrell says.

Taylor says the money NASCAR gives goes toward support of the annual conference Rainbow/Push sponsors in Chicago. This year's conference, June 21-25, features

workshops on sports, the influence of the Hip Hop culture, economic and educational issues. Among the speakers are NCAA president Myles Brand and several members of Congress.

"We support the conference because we support the issues that are important to the African-American community," Taylor says.

Flaherty has been punching out e-mails to the media once or twice a week since April 3, starting with a letter he sent to NASCAR chairman Bill France Jr. asking that NASCAR stop support for Jackson and his organizations. The issue then was Jackson's opposition to the Iraq war.

The letter attacked Jackson's "extreme and provocative anti-American rhetoric" and tied him to "an alleged Marxist front group."

For Flaherty, the war issue was fresh fodder to use against Jackson.

"When the war came along, it provided a real hook when it came to NASCAR," Flaherty says. "Because NASCAR was doing so much to show support for the troops, we just pointed out that

they're being hypocritical ... while supporting Jackson, who was leading anti-war protests.

"The thing that keeps it going is the outrage of NASCAR fans on this. I sent the letter two months ago and it's still a very hot topic."

NASCAR wisely backed away from any political position while standing by Jackson on diversity.

"NASCAR, being an incredible marketing organization, has a serious sensitivity that fans are upset with them and what they're doing," says Richard Lapchick, the sports sociologist who has worked with NASCAR and Jackson.

Taylor didn't directly respond when asked whether Flaherty's attacks and NASCAR's relationship with Jackson have undermined her efforts or brought a backlash from fans.

"Our fans know what we stand for," she said. "Supporting diversity is important to the growth of our sport."

That's something NASCAR fans shouldn't forget as the attacks on Jackson go on. Political agendas come in many guises and can be hidden behind lofty ideals.

Silas takes over young Cavaliers

CLEVELAND (AP) — The Cleveland Cavaliers got a father figure, teacher, counselor and close friend wrapped up in a burly, smiling 6-foot-7 package.

The Cavaliers think Paul Silas is much more than an NBA coach, which is why they feel so lucky to have him.

"For us, for this team, Paul is the right man for the job," general manager Jim Paxson said.

On Monday, Silas was named coach of the Cavaliers, a young, struggling team that should get much better with the impending arrival of high school star LeBron James.

Silas, credited with developing young players throughout his coaching career, will be the Cavaliers' 15th coach — but the first who will have James, the Akron 18-year-old and Cleveland's soon-to-be No. 1 overall draft pick.

"I love my players and I think at times I take on that (father figure) role," Silas said. "It's not something that I consciously do, but I like to talk to them about every aspect of their lives, not just basketball. I want them to become good men, good citizens."

According to a source within the league, Silas, who won 208 games in five years with the Hornets, got a four-year contract. The source, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said the deal includes a club option for a

Mistakes

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conduct.

"The police commissioner says there will be an investigation," Siegel said. "But years ago we all learned that the police cannot adequately investigate the police."

In the Spruill case, officers burst in with a flash grenade and handcuffed Spruill, 57, before realizing they had the wrong apartment. Spruill later died from cardiac arrest.

The circumstances of the Zango shooting remain murky.

The shooting came after a task force raided two units in the massive, 5,000-room storage building as part of an investigation into street sales of counterfeit compact discs, police said.

An officer identified in published reports as Bryan Conroy told investigators that Zango

fifth year.

Financial terms were not immediately available.

Money is less of a problem these days for the Cavaliers, who went 17-65 this season but have seen their season-ticket base jump by thousands since winning the May 22 draft lottery and the right to pick James.

"We couldn't be happier," said owner Gordon Gund, wearing the same lucky wine-and-gold tie he had on when the Cavaliers won the lottery.

"We wanted the best coach available, and we think we got him."

In less than two weeks, the Cavaliers, who have lost 220 games in the past four years, have gone from the NBA's wasteland to one of the league's hottest commodities.

First, they won the rights to the hometown player everyone covets. And now, the Cavaliers have a coach to help James fulfill his massive potential.

"He was the right guy for this job," Gund said. "There was no question about it."

A fierce rebounder during 16-year NBA playing career, Silas knows as well as anyone what is awaiting James.

"This is a tough league," said Silas, a two-time All-Star. "It's not a boy's league. This is a man's league. He's going to have to grow up right away."

tried to take his gun during a skirmish. Zango had no police record and made his living repairing African art in a unit he rented in the building.

An autopsy determined Zango was shot once in the chest, once in the abdomen and once in the upper back. He also suffered a graze wound to his right arm.

Conroy, who has been on the police force for three years, was placed on modified duty.

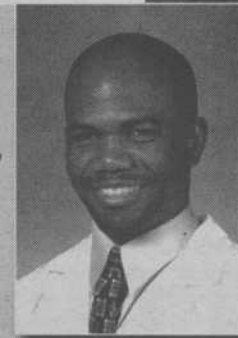
The shooting brought back memories of the death of African immigrant Amadou Diallo, who was killed in a hail of gunfire by four white officers who said they mistook his wallet for a weapon.

The officers were cleared of murder and other charges in a state criminal trial in 2000, and the case inflamed racial tensions in New York.

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