

Usher becomes part owner of pro hoops' Cleveland Cavs

Singer joins short list of Black sports executives

By Sandra Clark
Special to Sentinel-Voice
CLEVELAND, Ohio (NNPA) - Once upon a time, it was common for Blacks to own professional sports teams. But that was way back in the day. And they were owners of Negro league baseball teams.

With integration, the escalating costs of teams and a White fraternity of owners still guarding the door, it was almost impossible to imagine that African-Americans could ever own professional sports teams again. But it is happening.

Forty-three years after the last Negro league folded, a host of Blacks are vying for and buying teams once again. Usher Raymond IV of Atlanta is among the slew of young Black men to purchase a sports franchise.

Known to fans as simply Usher, the R&B singer came to Cleveland recently to confirm that he would be part-owner of the Cavaliers, an NBA franchise simply known as the Cavs.

"As a young Black man, who would ever have thought that this opportunity would have presented itself," Usher, who is 26, said following the press conference at the Gund Arena.

"Obviously, it means you should continue to believe in yourself."

Usher won five Grammy Awards and his most recent album, "Confessions," led Billboard sales charts for 12 weeks. "Confessions" earned the performer, whose moves recall both James Brown and Michael Jackson, almost \$26 million last year, according to *Rolling Stone* magazine.

The singer and his partners entered the conference to strains of his hit song "Yeah."

The upbeat anthem often is background music at basketball games punctuating slam dunks and other acrobatic plays.

Usher said he saw the Cavs play once. "They were playing a record and it happened to be mine, 'Yeah.'"

Usher reportedly put up almost \$50 million, or 13 percent of \$375 million paid to buy the Cavs from its previous owner, Gordon Gund, who will retain a minority ownership interest in the team.

Usher is part of a group led by Daniel Gilbert, the Detroit-area founder and chairman of Quicken Loans, Inc., an online mortgage lender. Gilbert also owns Rock Financial and Title Source, Michigan's largest home mortgage company, Gilbert's biography said. The other major partner in the deal is David Katzman, managing partner of Camelot Ventures and vice chairman of Quicken Loans. Gilbert and Katzman flanked Usher at the press conference.

Asked how the two businessmen met an A-list entertainer of the Hip Hop persuasion, and Gilbert said a banker whom they all knew said Usher was interested in acquiring a sports franchise. After that, it was on.

"I'm interested in making sound moves as a young man," Usher said.

"When the opportunity presented itself, I jumped in." Before Usher, rappers Nelly and Jay-Z jumped into sports ownership. Jay-Z is an investor in the New Jersey Nets. Nelly is a minority owner of the Charlotte Bobcats. Major League Baseball's Arte Moreno owns the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim. Reggie Fowler, a former NFL player and low-key multimillionaire businessman from Arizona, could become the NFL's first Black owner if his offer to buy the Minnesota Vikings is approved by the league's team owners.

Bob Johnson, founder of BET and majority owner of the expansion Charlotte Bobcats, became the first African-American owner of a professional sports team when the NBA granted him the franchise early in 2004.

This new crop of team owners will put an asterisk in the pages of sports and American history.

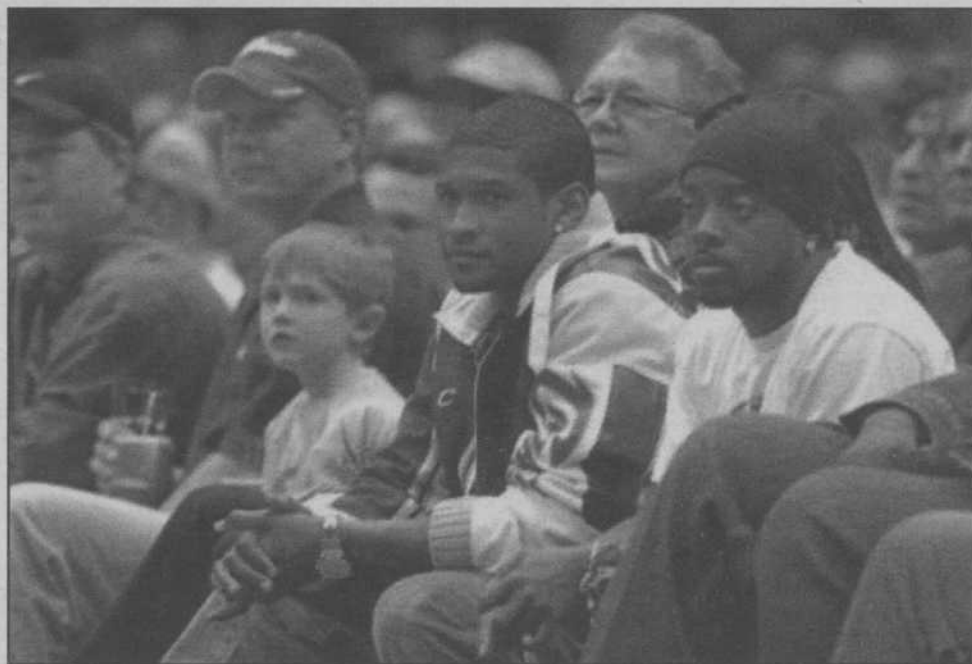
In 1962, the Negro American League folded. Since then, team ownership has been a quickly fading memory for those old enough to have been there, an impossible dream for everyone else.

What ownership will mean today is yet unclear.

Usher tried to explain, as security hurried him out of the press conference, "It's not just the money, but the empowerment."

Sandra Clark writes for the City News Ohio

R&B artist and Cleveland Cavaliers' minority owner Usher, center, watches the Cavaliers take on the Orlando Magic in the first quarter Tuesday in Cleveland. Sources say the singer paid \$50 million to buy a share of the NBA franchise.



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