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New Buffalo trifecta busting racial barriers

By Erik Brady, USA TODAY

AMHERST, N.Y. — The University at Buffalo, which rarely makes national sports news, is making sports history these days as the only Division I-A school with African-Americans in the three most visible posts in its athletics department.



Basketball coach Reggie Witherspoon, left, and football coach Turner Gill helm programs that have notorious histories of ineptitude.

AP photos

Turner Gill, 43, once a Heisman Trophy candidate at Nebraska, was named UB football coach in December.

Athletics director Warde Manuel, 37, was hired in July.

They joined Reggie Witherspoon, 45, who's in his seventh season as men's basketball coach.

"I'm very pleased it has turned out this way, but I think honestly we hired in terms of excellence, not in terms of who happens to be African-American," UB President John B. Simpson says. "It's an embarrassment for the country that we're the only Division I school that has this particular constellation. Statistically, that shouldn't be the case, certainly in terms of the talent pool."

Turner is one of five African-American head football

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coaches and Manuel one of 10 African-American athletics directors at the 119 schools in Division I-A, according to a report issued last month by the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport at the University of Central Florida. (There are also three Latino athletics directors and one Latino football coach.)



By John Hickey, Buffalo News/AP
"That's not what we're out there selling: 'Come to Buffalo because we have three African-Americans.' We're proud of that, but we want you to come to Buffalo because we have three great, qualified people." — Wardell Manuel

Manuel was hired from the University of Michigan, where he was an associate athletics director overseeing football and men's basketball. Gill was hired from the Green Bay Packers, where he was an assistant coach after 13 seasons as an assistant at Nebraska.

"I don't ever want it to be misconstrued that this was done to be the first," Manuel says. "I didn't even know until somebody told me. Then I said to myself, 'Yeah, that makes sense. I should have realized that.' Hopefully there will come a time when this doesn't need to warrant the interest it has."

Gill didn't know either. "Until Wardell mentioned there was history here, I didn't even think about it," Gill says. "I mean I could see it. But I'm not into this, 'Well, this person is black or white.' I hope it shows it doesn't matter about color. It's really about people."

Now comes the hard part. Manuel's mandate is to build competitive programs at a school where the men's basketball team has never made the Division I NCAA Tournament and the football team is the worst in Division I-A over the last seven seasons (10-69).

The basketball Bulls have made great strides under Witherspoon. They missed the NCAA Tournament by an eyelash last season, when Ohio beat UB 80-79 on a tip-in at the buzzer of overtime in the Mid-American Conference championship game. The Bulls are 17-11 this season, struggling after an 11-1 start.

The football program moved to Division I-A in 1999. Since then the Bulls are 7-49 in the MAC. They were 1-10 overall last year.

"If you're the first at something, people are going to be watching you closer," Manuel says. "So now you've got to work harder, and you've got to show some results. It's not that I feel the weight of the African-American community on my shoulders. I don't. But what I feel is that in order for this trend to continue — or to start, if you will, for the opportunities to grow — we have to have successes when we take over these programs."

Manuel says to understand how he feels it helps to have some understanding of what African-American activist and author W.E.B. DuBois called "double consciousness" a century ago.

Football woes

Worst combined winning percentage by a Div. I-A football

"Once you have an opportunity as an African-American to take a job, it's not just you," Manuel says. "Your race comes with you. You can't turn away from the fact that people are going to see the

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team since Buffalo gained admission to I-A and the Mid-American Conference in 1999:

School	W-L	Win%
Buffalo	10-69	.127
Duke	12-67	.152
Army	14-66	.175
Temple	17-62	.215
Baylor	20-59	.253

Basketball hope

Record of the Buffalo men's basketball team since Reggie Witherspoon officially took over as head coach of the Bulls (he was interim coach in 1999-2000):

Season	Overall	Conference
2000-01	4-24	2-16
2001-02	12-18	7-11
2002-03	5-23	2-16
2003-04	17-12	11-7
2004-05	23-10	11-7
2005-06	17-11	7-9

Sources: NCAA, University of Buffalo

decisions you make not just as an athletics director but as an African-American athletics director.

"That's how it works in this society. That is the dualism that exists — the consciousness of knowing that people are looking at you not just as a man but as an African-American."

Highly qualified

Gill's name is better known in college football than UB's.

He quarterbacked Nebraska in the early 1980s and was 28-2 as a starter. He was quarterbacks coach at Nebraska when the Cornhuskers won three national championships. Last season Gill was a Packers assistant and director of player development.

"I've been in programs that already had tradition," Gill says. "Here we have to build it, and I'm grateful for the opportunity."

About half the players in Division I-A football are African-American but just 4.2% of the coaches are, perhaps giving Gill a recruiting edge.

"I think that would give us at least an inroad on some people to at least consider us," he says. "Unfortunately — or fortunately, depending on how you look at it — we all see people by their outward appearances. Over time, you don't. But I think initially you can make a connection."

"If it makes a difference for some to have an African-American head coach, fine," Manuel says. "But that's not what we're out there selling: 'Come to Buffalo because we have three African-Americans.' We're proud of that, but we want you to come to Buffalo because we have three great, qualified people."

Manuel is UB's second African-American athletics director and Gill its second African-American football coach. Witherspoon is the third African-American to coach men's basketball there. Two other UB coaches are black: Jean-A. Tassy of women's soccer and Perry Jenkins of men's track.

"I don't want it couched in any way, shape or form that this was done because of race," Manuel says of his hiring. " 'Oh, he got that job because he's black.' No, I got that job because I have a master's degree in social work. I have an MBA. And I have 12 years of experience at Michigan."

"I'm prepared for this job. And Turner's prepared, too. Regardless of being any color of our skin, that's what we are: We're prepared people who have a right to have an opportunity to do a job."

Witherspoon was coaching at a junior college when UB hired him as an interim coach in 1999. Last season his Bulls split two games in the NIT, UB's first postseason play since moving to Division I in 1991-92.

Destiny calls Witherspoon

The University at Buffalo launched

"Reggie didn't come in with the same credentials," Manuel says. "But more than me and more than Turner, Reggie has earned his accolades."

national searches before hiring football coach Turner Gill and athletics director Warde Manuel. It did not have far to go to find Reggie Witherspoon.

"I was the ball boy when my brother Greg played for UB" in the 1970s, says Witherspoon, in his seventh season as coach of men's basketball. "I remember back then I'd read about the big schools like Nebraska and Michigan in the sports magazines, and I'd think, 'Why isn't Buffalo in there?'"

Witherspoon played at Erie Community College, not far from UB, and at Wheeling Jesuit, a Division II school in West Virginia. Those aren't national names like Nebraska, where Gill played football for Tom Osborne, or Michigan, where Manuel played for Bo Schembechler.



Witherspoon AP

But the basketball coaches Witherspoon played for became national names. At Erie, he played for John Beilein, now coach at West Virginia. At Wheeling, he played one season for Jim O'Brien, later coach of the Boston Celtics and Philadelphia 76ers.

Witherspoon was coach at Erie in 1999 when UB hired him as interim coach to replace Tim Cohane, who resigned amid a recruiting scandal that would lead to NCAA sanctions. It was five games into the season; next up was a home game against North Carolina.

Witherspoon's players didn't always turn when he called to them during that game. He thinks now it was because they were not used to the noise of a sellout crowd or to his unfamiliar voice. But at the time he thought he must be calling out the wrong names.

"I asked my assistant, 'Who's No. 10?'" Witherspoon says, laughing. "And he gives me the name of No. 10, or whatever number it was, on North Carolina. And I said, 'No, no. I know them. They're on TV every week. I'm talking about our guys.'" "

UB led at the half but lost 91-67. The Bulls were 3-20 under

Making history

Witherspoon's accolades include MAC coach of the year in 2004. It is a nice honor but small potatoes in his family. That same year, Levi Pearson, the brother of Witherspoon's grandfather, was awarded a Congressional Gold Medal, the nation's highest civilian award.

Levi and Hammitt Pearson, Witherspoon's grandfather, were brothers in rural South Carolina in the 1940s, a time when their children walked 9 miles each way to segregated schools.

"I remember when it was rainy and cold and miserable, the white kids would drive by in their bus and spit on us," says Phynise Witherspoon, 76, Reggie's mother. "I'll never outlive the feeling."

Levi, with the backing of his brother, filed a desegregation suit, among the first of its kind in the country. It was dismissed on a zoning technicality. Harry and Eliza Briggs filed a follow-up suit, also in South Carolina, the first of five cases merged in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the landmark Supreme Court decision that outlawed segregated schools.

Congressional Gold Medals were awarded posthumously in 2004 to Levi Pearson, the Briggses and the Rev. Joseph A. DeLaine, a minister who organized complainants and brought in lawyers from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, including the late Thurgood Marshall.

Witherspoon says when he is asked about history being made at UB, he always thinks of the history made in his family. "That was my introduction to things being the first," he says.

Phynise Witherspoon and her husband, Moses, moved from Summerton, S.C., to Buffalo in the early 1950s in search of opportunity. Years later they moved with their four sons to Amherst, a Buffalo suburb, for its schools.

"When we came we were one of the first black families in Amherst," Witherspoon says. "And not everybody was happy about that. But it was progress."

His parents moved back to South Carolina after their children were grown. They were visiting in Amherst when Gill was hired.

"I looked at that and I thought, 'If my father and my uncle were here today, they would be so happy to see this,'" Witherspoon's mother says. "We know,

Witherspoon during his interim season. They were 21-65 from 2000-03 and are 57-33 since.

Greg Witherspoon is his brother's team chaplain: "Reggie was a real student of the game even" as UB's ball boy. "I guess he was born to be on that bench."

and everybody knows, we have a long way to go in this country. But to see what is happening at one university is a blessing."

Low profile

What did Gill know of the University at Buffalo before the school called him? "Zero," he says.

UB is a fine academic institution with a modest national sports history. It is one of 62 schools in the Association of American Universities, representing top research schools in North America. Its athletic budget is about \$16.2 million, which UB says is in the middle of the pack in the MAC.

The University of Buffalo began as a private school in 1846. Its first chancellor was Millard Fillmore, who continued to hold the title as 13th president of the United States. UB was bought by New York state in 1962 and absorbed into the state university system, where it is the largest school (18,165 undergraduates and 9,055 grad students).

UB's notable alumni include broadcasters (CNN's Wolf Blitzer and NPR's Terry Gross), actors (Ron Silver of *The West Wing* and Peter Riegert of *The Sopranos*) and Pulitzer Prize winners (cartoonist Tom Toles and historian Richard Hofstadter).

Its roster of sports stars is less well known, including Gerry Philbin, defensive end for the New York Jets in Super Bowl III, and Joe Hesketh, who pitched for three major league teams.

UB's 1958 football team went 8-1 and won the Lambert Cup as the top small college team in the East. But UB says it turned down an invitation to the Tangerine Bowl in Orlando because its two African-American players were not welcome. That remains the only bowl bid in UB history.



By David Duprey, AP

Witherspoon may be the closest to leading Buffalo to success. The Bulls lost a bid to the NCAA Tournament last year in the final second of overtime in the conference title game. This year his squad is 17-11, although it has slipped since an 11-1 start.

"Some day Turner Gill is going to get us another one," says Willie Evans, 68, one of the African-American players on that team and its leading rusher. Evans was a member of committees that recommended Manuel as athletics director and Gill as football coach.

"I'm very proud of our school," Evans says. "I was proud in 1958. And I am proud today."

American Dream

DuBois wrote about double consciousness in 1903's *The Souls of Black Folk*. Two years later he came to Buffalo for meetings that launched the Niagara Movement, a name meant to convey the place of its origin and the power of its civil rights argument.

DuBois and other leading African-American intellectuals met to oppose Booker T. Washington, the era's dominant African-American political leader. Washington advocated conciliation on segregation; the Niagara Movement demanded change.

Although the movement foundered organizationally and disappeared in a few years, it was the ideological forebear of the NAACP, which DuBois and others founded a few

years later.

The leaders of the Niagara Movement met formally at the Erie Beach Hotel in Fort Erie, Ontario, a terminus of the Underground Railroad. A founding meeting took place at the Buffalo home of Mary Talbert, an African-American social reformer for whom UB's Talbert Hall is named.

"The Niagara Movement," says Lillian Williams, chair of UB's African-American Studies department, "sought a place for African-Americans in the American Dream."

Manuel and Gill were hired during its centennial year.

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