

# With all-white leadership, Gophers athletic department under fresh scrutiny to improve diversity

Athletic director Mark Coyle has hired 11 white head coaches in his tenure.

By Megan Ryan (<https://www.startribune.com/megan-ryan/6370472/>) Star Tribune |

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The University of Minnesota has gone 14 years without hiring a person of color as a head coach and remains the only Big Ten institution without a single person of color in the role of president, athletic director or head coach.

With men's basketball coach [Richard Pitino's tenure likely nearing an end](https://www.startribune.com/gophers-prepare-for-big-ten-basketball-tournament-amid-speculation-on-coach-richard-pitino-s-future/600032287/) (<https://www.startribune.com/gophers-prepare-for-big-ten-basketball-tournament-amid-speculation-on-coach-richard-pitino-s-future/600032287/>), the Gophers' lack of diverse leadership is drawing renewed scrutiny. Even before the speculation about Pitino's future, Big Ten Commissioner Kevin Warren had noticed how the university's president, Joan Gabel, athletic director Mark Coyle and all 19 head coaches are white.

"They're aware," Warren said of Gabel's and Coyle's recognition of Minnesota's diversity gap. "I trust them. And I trust that they will always be focused on doing the right thing."

In the midst of renewed calls for racial equality after George Floyd's death under the knee of a Minneapolis police officer in May, the Gophers have fallen behind their peers in diversity hiring.

In the Big Ten, Maryland and Michigan have the most people of color in top decision-making roles with five each. Those are also two of the three conference schools with Black athletic directors, along with Ohio State. The Gophers' only athletic director of color was McKinley Boston, also the Big Ten's first AD of color, from 1991 to 1995.

*"If you look from year to year ... nothing has improved. To me, it speaks for itself."*

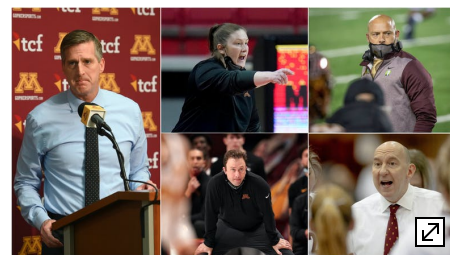
Linda Roberts, former U athlete and employee

Since Coyle came to the Gophers in 2016, he has made 11 head coaching hires, including for revenue-generating teams football and men's hockey as well as programs such as wrestling, softball and women's basketball. All are white. The Gophers haven't hired a person of color at head coach since Tubby Smith in men's basketball in 2007.

Coyle called his athletic department "the most diverse group on campus" in terms of staff and athletes.

"It's important that we have role models for those people that they have a chance to look up and see that you can have these opportunities," Coyle said. "There's no doubt that we just need to continue to be very deliberate in what we're doing and how we're trying to improve and get better."

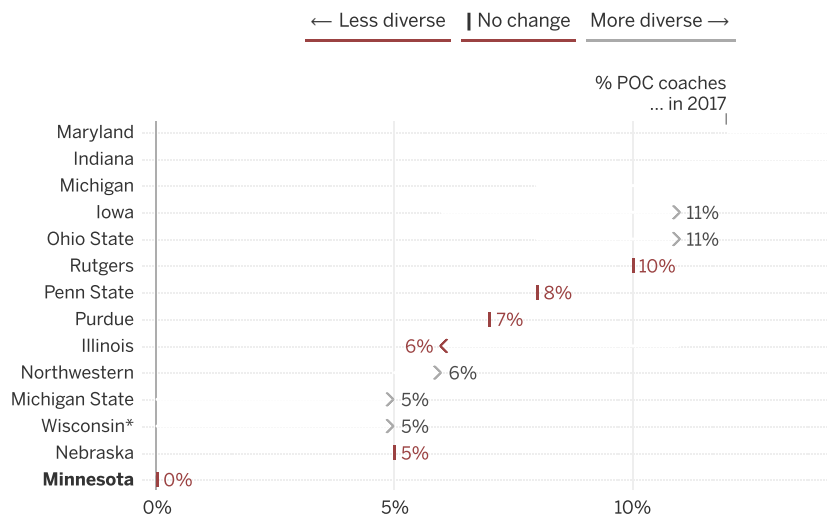
Gabel declined an interview request for this story. Coyle detailed how the athletics department formed a Diversity and Inclusion Committee in 2017 and is in process of a four-year plan that began in 2019 to promote education, hiring and outreach.



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## Gophers last in Big Ten on head coach diversity

The Star Tribune surveyed every Big Ten school in 2017 and again this year to determine coaches – the highest-ranked individual overseeing each sports program – identify as people of color. The University of Minnesota's head coach is white, as was the case in 2017. Meanwhile, much of the rest of the conference has increased its diversity.



\* Wisconsin's athletic department declined to confirm 2021 data, but at least one coach is publicly identified as a person of color. By C.J. Sinner, Megan Ryan and Marcus Fuller, Star Tribune • Source: Star Tribune analysis of Big Ten athletics staffs

But progress is not happening as quickly as some would like. Former Gophers running back Darrell Thompson said he feels "frustration" when he thinks about the department's lack of diversity.

"If you look from year to year ... nothing has improved," said former Gophers basketball player Linda Roberts, who worked in the department for 25 years. "To me, it speaks for itself."

### 'Trying to improve'

Little has changed since summer 2017, [when the Star Tribune last wrote about the athletics department's lack of diversity \(https://www.startribune.com/university-of-minnesota-where-sports-leaders-and-coaches-all-are-white-looks-to-revive-diversity-after-tense-year/436049783/\)](https://www.startribune.com/university-of-minnesota-where-sports-leaders-and-coaches-all-are-white-looks-to-revive-diversity-after-tense-year/436049783/), pointing out just one person of color among 28 head coaches and senior athletics administrators.

Peyton Owens is now the department's only Black person with a senior associate athletic director title. In 2021, he added the chief diversity and inclusion officer title.

"I would argue that we've done many things that are visible to the outside world," Coyle said. "If you look at our football program and putting 'End Racism' on our football jerseys for the Purdue game, highly visible, national audience."

The Gophers list other efforts, from Zoom meetings on race with all 260 employees to partnering with the YWCA for training. But N. Jeremi Duru, sports law professor at American University, said those initiatives aren't enough.

"What's on the back of helmets is talking," Duru said. "Incorporating that into the actual entity is walking that talk."

The Gophers did not release how many applicants they received for head coach openings since the 2017 story, or the diversity breakdown of that group.

Through a department spokesman, Coyle provided the demographics of his 16-person "senior staff." Four are people of color. But Coyle included roles beyond senior administrators, such as heads of event management, facilities or ticket sales. While

Coyle said all wield decision making power, Roberts and others questioned how that comes into play with major calls, such as cutting sports or hiring a coach.

*"We're defined by our actions. Every one of us is defined by our actions."*

Mark Coyle, U athletic director

In providing head coach data, the Gophers reported one coach identified as Asian. But that individual is not atop the entire program.

Coyle declined to share specific hiring candidate information, citing privacy concerns. But Duru said showing at least the numbers could help people understand how the Gophers have continually hired white leaders.

Coyle and Owens said the department has hired the best candidates, regardless of race. Coyle mentioned he hired Dino Babers at Syracuse in 2015 as the program's first Black head football coach.

"Is it conceivable that each of those people is the very best possible person for the position? It's conceivable, but it's highly unlikely," Duru said. "It's more likely that there are other folks out there. Individuals who have not been presented the opportunity."

#### **'Part of who you are'**

Warren is more than a year into his tenure as the first Black man to head a Power Five conference (<https://www.startribune.com/new-big-ten-boss-kevin-warren-has-the-common-touch/568194022/>) and models what being an advocate for diversity and inclusion means from the top. That includes hiring people of color, including Omar Brown, who works closely with Owens and his counterparts around the league as the Big Ten's vice president, people and culture officer.

Many institutions now have some form of a chief diversity officer. But Maryland athletic director Damon Evans said it was important to bring in an expert in that role — Cynthia Edmunds, whom he hired this past fall — instead of adding titles and duties to an existing staff member. Owens' day-to-day responsibilities with the Gophers involve overseeing baseball and rowing, running the Varsity M Club for alumni, preparing more than 660 college athletes for life after sports and heading the department's diversity and inclusion efforts.

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N. Jeremi Duru, sports law professor

Maryland is the only Power Five school with Black men as president, athletic director and football coach. Evans said any leader's ability to find and hire people of color, especially in leadership roles, comes down to individual values.

"As an administrator, you develop a reputation," Evans said. "There are people around the country I know who are going to be inclusive at what they do. And then there are just some who have their mind set on someone. ... It's got to become a part of who you are."

Warren said he takes pride that of the 14 chancellors or presidents in the conference, three are people of color — Robert Jones (Illinois), Jonathan Holloway (Rutgers) and Darryll Pines (Maryland). Four athletic directors are people of color — Evans, Gene Smith (Ohio State), Warde Manuel (Michigan) and Barry Alvarez (Wisconsin).

"The biggest thing, the most impactful, is when people of color ... are actually hired," Warren said. "The Big Ten made it very clear where they stand on diversity and inclusion when they hired me. And I've been able to carry forward [with] that."

"We're starting now."

### 'Work that's left to be done'

Dr. Richard E. Lapchick, director of the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport, has long advocated for the NCAA to adopt the NFL's Rooney Rule, which ensures teams interview coaches of color.

In Lapchick's most recent study surveying FBS leadership of 130 schools, he found 17.7% of university presidents or chancellors were people of color, 16.9% of athletic directors and 16.2% of football coaches. Meanwhile, 61.6% of college football players are people of color. Across all sports and divisions, 31.7% of college athletes are people of color, according to Lapchick's 2020 report on the NCAA.

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Damon Evans, Maryland athletic director

For men's basketball, where the Gophers' next leadership hire could come, there are only 13 Black head coaches of 75 programs in the six major conferences. Since Smith, whom the Gophers fired in 2013, the Big Ten had no Black coaches until Juwan Howard took the Michigan job in 2019.

"It saddens me that in this day of 2021, in a year after the racial reckoning, that the state of college athletics in terms of hiring practices is the worst of all report cards we do," Lapchick said. "You can go on pretty much anybody's website, and diversity and inclusion ... will be listed as one of the principles of the university that they stand by most. Yet the hiring practices are what they are."

Coyle said the Gophers will be "intentional" as they work toward a more inclusive department.

At Maryland, Evans worries progress has stagnated or declined in recent years, with people of color finding it harder to obtain and keep jobs. The Terps have the most diverse leadership in the Big Ten, but that amounts to just five people of color in 19 positions.

"By no means are we where we should be," Evans said. "There's a lot of work that's left to be done."

The Gophers named their strategic plan "United Are We," emphasizing diversity and inclusion. When entering the Land O'Lakes Center for Excellence, the department's hub, the phrase "we all belong" is painted on the wall.

But those are just words.

"We're defined by our actions," Coyle said. "Every one of us is defined by our actions."

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