



Best Employment Practices from the Wide World of Sports

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Following professional sports can be a welcome diversion from everyday life. For a few hours, at least, people can forget about their responsibilities and root for their favorite team (or whichever one happens to be playing on ESPN that night) in blissful ignorance of the outside world.

Two recent off-the-court stories, however, remind us that the world of professional sports might actually teach us valuable lessons about best practices for workplaces. Business owners, managers and human resources professionals would do well to tune in to these stories.

Is it OK to ask football players about their sexual orientation?

To date, no American professional athlete competing for a major team sport has come out of the closet to reveal that he is gay. Society has grown more accepting of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual) individuals by leaps and bounds in recent years, and several high-profile athletes have stood up to criticize homophobic language and behavior. However, athletes have noted that a stigma still is associated with gays and team sports — both in the locker room and in the ranks of fans and media.

Professional team owners and managers are cognizant of the tension that exists about this issue. Perhaps worried about the disruption that a player “coming out” would cause among the team members and in the media, indications suggest that some teams are taking steps to ensure that their team is not the first to deal with an openly-gay athlete.

Do professional athletes have to be accommodated under the ADA?

The National Basketball Association’s Houston Rockets took a risk when they selected Iowa State’s Royce White with the 16th overall pick in the 2012 NBA Draft. Although there was little doubt that he was an elite athlete, he admitted last year that he has a mental illness known as generalized anxiety disorder.

Because of this illness, White is deathly afraid to travel — and fly on airplanes, in particular. This would greatly hamper his ability to play in the NBA given its busy travel schedule. The condition also causes him to exhibit panic attacks and obsessive-compulsive behavior.

In this case, the Houston Rockets appear to have done everything that they should do in order to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act and to work with their player. Rather than pass up “hiring” a worker with known mental disabilities, the team looked at White’s skills and abilities and selected him in hopes of getting the best of the situation.

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