

MOAA | CORNER

GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER?

"Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" is my favorite movie of all time. Beah Richards, Spencer Tracy, Katherine Hepburn and Sidney Poitier starred in this 1967 groundbreaking film — groundbreaking because of what was going on in our country at the time. In Montgomery, Ala. in 1955, the bus boycott was born; Central High School in Little Rock, Ark. in 1957 was integrated with nine black students; 1963 saw the march on Washington; and in the case of *Loving v. Virginia* 1967, the Supreme Court ruled that prohibiting interracial marriage is unconstitutional. Sixteen states that still banned interracial marriage at the time were forced to revise their laws.



Darlene Gordon



In "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner," Joey Drayton brings her fiancé, Dr. John Prentice, home to sunny San Francisco to meet her affluent parents. Their liberal persuasions are now being challenged. Although the young man is an ideal candidate by many standards (he's held in high esteem and internationally respected in the medical community, and he exhibits impeccable decorum, is handsome, well groomed and of a respectable California family), he is also black. We are given a peak into the family cross-conversations between the young doctor and the girl's parents about their decision to marry and should it be approved. A simple dinner is extended to include the doctor's parents, who fly up from Los Angeles for the evening, and the longtime but benevolent old Irish priest, a friend of the family. Thus, the title of the film...Matt Drayton played by Spencer Tracy is completely opposed to the marriage; however, he is searching through most of the film for a logical reason the marriage should happen.

This is where I shift gears in a way...institutions and athletics departments across this great nation have had some "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" moments. These are moments in athletics where we stumbled. As the country tackled issues of race, so too did those in intercollegiate athletics. Not surprisingly, racial integration in college athletics came earlier in the North than in the South. In the 1950s, few African-Americans were competing in sports like football and track in the North, although African-American players on Northern football teams were still denied playing time based on the demands of Southern opponents. In basketball, the first African-American players did not compete in college basketball in conferences like the Big Ten until the early 1950s. It would not be until the 1970s that most Southern teams allowed African-Americans to compete in basketball, as well as football. A turning point occurred during the 1966 NCAA Finals when the perennially powerhouse, but all-Caucasian Kentucky team lost to an all African-American starting five from upstart Texas Western (now UTEP). During the 1970s and 1980s, however, there were quotas for the number of African-American players on a given squad, as well as unwritten limits on the number of African-Americans that could be on the court at any one time.

Athletics also has a proud history of leading the way through difficult times and bringing people, communities and countries together. This type of leadership is the main reason I wanted to be a part of athletics and make it a career. Collegiate and professional sports alike stepped

up in leadership as was needed (i.e., World War I and II, the World Trade Center attacks, the Virginia Tech tragedies). This strong sense of community is taught from when children join their first t-ball team, middle and high school sports and among participants on intercollegiate teams. These bonds link students across many differences, including race, socioeconomic status and geographic background. This is what we need to grow and be great.

What's interesting to me is that we are still having those "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" moments when it comes to sexual orientation. Athletics is a microcosm of American society, and as such, the differences in how athletes respond to race compared to homosexuality may be understood in light of the relative progress our society has made in responding to these different issues. Although racism is still prevalent in the United States, including in intercollegiate athletics, our society has made progress in its elimination. These strides are reflected in the election of former Senator Barak Obama as the President of the United States, minority athletics directors heading major Division I programs (i.e., Gene Smith, the Ohio State University; Barry Alvarez, University of Wisconsin; Dan Guerrero, UCLA) and Division I conference offices led by women (i.e., Carolyn Schlie Femovich, Patriot League; and Bernadette McGlade, Atlantic-10). The civil rights laws of the 1960s, for example, codified enforcement of equal protection, and policies such as affirmative action in the 1970s gave expression to these ideals. These laws help to open the door to exposure on a regular basis to cultural, gender and ethnic difference of people. Exposure is a component that has helped bring together diverse groups of people and foster an environment of common ground and community.

Coaches have traditionally been able to require that student-athletes conform to typically conservative team norms — norms that do not recognize the presence of discrimination in sports, overall a good thing. Moreover, individuality is commonly second to the team for student-athletes. "There is no I in TEAM," so the saying goes. Many of our campuses emphasize conformity rather than individuality. Making identity development a negative as a means of emphasizing the notions of team, cooperation and community discourages student-athletes from proceeding along the stages of identity development, whether it is homosexual, racial or gender identity development. We don't want that notion in our quest to develop tolerant communities to override our student-athletes, coaches or athletics administrators the ability for individual exploration and growth. We are many things within the United States of America: male, female, numerous ethnicities, cultures, religions, gay, straight, conservative, liberal, creative, athletic, physically challenged and the like.

I have high hopes for athletics because we have changed the world in so many positive and wonderful ways. The bottom line for me is that within athletics departments we understand our role as educators. Each fall, parents are handing off their precious cargo to us for safe keeping and to take them the rest of the way on their journey of development. We cannot drop the ball.

Thanks for this article to Darlene Gordon, director of championships and business operations for the Patriot League and MOAA Board Member.