



Montclair State College track coach John Blanton, center, smiles as he celebrates a winning season with team members Amod Field and Rosa Dominguez

Undefeated season helps coach overcome controversy on hiring

By JERRY THOMAS

John Blanton of Orange can boast, at least for a while, following a winning track season at Montclair State College.

But the first-year coach, who faced a hurdle when some of his critics cried "reverse discrimination" after the school picked him over a "dedicated part-timer," refuses to "stick his chest out."

"I am not that kind of coach; my athletes' records speak for themselves," said a confident Blanton last week, days after the school's women's cross-country team finished the season undefeated. The season also marked the first time in the school's history that a female track member had made it to the NCAA finals.

Last spring, Blanton, who is black, was a successful coach at East Orange's Clifford Scott High School, where he led the girl's track team to several championships and produced

standout runners for top universities. While at Clifford Scott, Blanton, 31, was named Northern Hills Division coach of the year twice.

Despite his record of accomplishments, some people close to the Montclair State program complained that Blanton's credentials still were not good enough for the collegiate level, especially to replace Victor Mizzone, a successful part-time track coach for four years. Mizzone is white.

After Blanton's selection in April, the school received pressure from some longtime supporters and the 15-member men's track team, who threatened to boycott the season if Mizzone were not reinstated.

"I think everything was poorly done," said George Horn, a former track coach who holds the Montclair State record for the most wins in cross-country competition.

On the day Blanton was officially named coach, Horn withdrew his name from the school's Athletic Hall of Fame to protest Mizzone's firing and what he described as "injustices." He then labeled the appointing committee incompetent.

"On a rating of 10, they have about a 2, and that includes the athletic director and administrative director," Horn fumed.

"Track experts," Horn continued, "felt Blanton was not qualified, because of the lack of experience." And the school search committee, he noted, did not even have Blanton on the list of possible candidates for the job.

Mizzone, a Montclair State alum who teaches at Paterson Eastside High School, followed through with a suit against the school, arguing that he was overlooked because Blanton is black. The school denied that race was a factor.

Montclair State spokesman Ivan Tolbert said Blanton has a master's degree in business and past administrative skills that made him most qualified for the job.

At a recent party for Jean Armstrong, one of MSC's vice presidents, Blanton became the subject of discussion by administrators who praised him for his fine record.

"John was hired because we thought he was an excellent coach," said Gregory Lockard, athletic director. "Everything so far has shown us we were right. He's charismatic and a quality administrator. He seems to have a good rapport with the athletes and, to top it off, he's a good coach."

Some of the compliments were echoed by members of both the men's and women's track teams, but even they admit they were reluctant for Blanton to replace coach Mizzone.

"I thought and said some of the same things, like, 'Is he really going to be able to meet the standards of a college team? You know, he had never trained college students,'" said LaTanya Jones, a 19-year-old sophomore majoring in broadcasting and a member of the women's track team.

She recalled Blanton telling the athletes that "everyone has to start

somehow. He said, 'How do you think college coaches get to become college coaches?'"

Like most members of the track team, which is split almost 50/50 between blacks and whites, Jones, 19, of Mizpah in Atlantic County, wanted to know if Blanton was hired because he is black.

"That question still bothers me," said Jones. "I was glad of the fact he is black. We as black people need to stick together, but they (Blanton's critics) were throwing around the phrase 'reverse discrimination.' But Coach Blanton said there is no such thing. The more he said it, the more I thought about it."

Amod Field of Passaic said he was disturbed about the rumor and the loss of Mizzone, especially when "the administration had given the impression he would get the job."

Field, a 21-year-old junior majoring in physical education, said, "Personally, I was stunned by what happened."

He said Mizzone had put in "hard work and time" and at times "sacrificed his family to be with the team."

"I felt the guy who was there deserved a spot," Field said. "I felt my guy (Mizzone) should have gotten the job."

Although Field is black, he said he backed Mizzone, because "personally, I had grown to love him as a coach and a friend. That's very important in a program like this. You don't get scholarships or any kind of money. You are on your own."

Field's announcement last spring that he would boycott the season if Blanton was hired did not go too well with minorities on campus. He never did.

"How could you go against your own people?" Field asked. "But that wasn't the circumstance; I was fighting for what I felt was an injustice."

In addition, he added, "African-Americans are always thrown in track and field or departments like that. I thought that was an insult. You are saying to me, all the guy can do is coach track."

Field said he was never given a chance to explain his position on the issue. His reaction, he explained, was geared more at the "politics" of the administration than at Blanton.

"We have nothing against Coach Blanton," he said. "He was just a man trying to get a job. A lot of things were blown out of proportion, like we hated this guy. It was not like that at all; we just wanted our man to get the job."

Blanton said he understands the situation the students were forced into.

"I think those who were close to Coach Mizzone may have resented me initially, but as time went along, things worked out. We just asked them to give us a chance. They have given us a chance, and those who gave us a chance see the results. Those who didn't will never know. Amod is a witness to that. He admitted that. You never fail until you fail to try."

AFTER CHRISTMAS SALE AT the city STORES

UP TO 1/2 OFF!

STOREWIDE SALE OF OUR ENTIRE STOCK! PRICES SLASHED ON TREES, ORNAMENTS, GARLAND, WREATHS, LIGHTS, GIFTWARE, GIFTWRAP.

SALE STARTS MONDAY DEC. 26th

7:30 AM

GIFT ITEMS AVAILABLE ONLY AT THE PARAMUS STORE.

the city STORES

PARAMUS 141 RT 175
NEAR CENTURY RD EXIT
21 265 6800

NEW! N. PLAINFIELD
1250 RT 22 E. (next to K Mart)
201 769 6656

OAKHURST 2121 RT 35 N
(BETWEEN SEAVIEW & MONMOUTH MALLS)
201 493-4075

LINDEN RT 1 (NEAR STILES ST) 201 862 5232

BRICKTOWN BRICK BLVD
(WINDING RIVER PLAZA)
201 477 7000

Suspended cop chief denied reinstatement

By KEVIN DILWORTH

A judge in Newark has denied suspended Orange Police Chief Robert Sorge's request to be reinstated while awaiting a hearing on charges of bribery, insubordination and conduct unbecoming a police officer.

Superior Court Judge Paul B. Thompson turned down both of Sorge's requests on Friday and denied the chief's request to name an acting chief to run the department while he awaits disposition of the charges filed against him Monday.

"There's absolutely no basis for these allegations," argued Jerome Convery, Sorge's attorney, referring to the chief being accused of using an Orange auto repair shop's license plates on his private car between July 25 and October.

Sorge "unlawfully borrowed (license) plates from a car dealer in town." It is "highly likely he conspired with a city businessman and personal friend of his" to get the plates, and he failed to even register the car with the state Department of Motor Vehicles until recently, countered Robert Westreich, a Morristown attorney who represents the city of Orange.

Sorge has 25 years of law enforcement experience and is president of the Essex County Police Chiefs Association.

Judge Thompson said the departmental charges against Sorge appear to be too serious to just summarily dismiss them and allow the police chief to return to his job.

Police Director Charles Cobbert, who filed the charges, and Mayor Robert L. Brown are trying "to get complete control of the police department by getting my client out of the (police) building," Convery charged.

"This suspension is a subterfuge to get him to circumvent the court's (Sept. 20) restraining order" against Cobbert and Brown, that sought to protect Sorge's "rights and duties as the chief of police," the defense attorney added. "They don't care how much they hurt this man."

According to Convery, the tactics Cobbert and Brown are using repre-

sent "sandbagging of the worst level by the city of Orange."

In September, Sorge complained that he had been the object of "political interference in the workplace and political harassment" by Cobbert and Brown since July.

Brown became mayor July 1 and appointed Cobbert as Sorge's boss four days later.

Stephen Shaw, an attorney representing the New Jersey Association of Chiefs of Police, argued Friday that Cobbert's suspending Sorge in the absence of filing any criminal complaint was "an extraordinary step."

Judge Thompson reasoned that Sorge's suspension, and the departmental charges against him, put matters regarding his Sept. 20 restraining order against Orange in a different light.

"I can't interfere with an administrative (departmental charge) function," the judge said, "especially when there's the allegation" of a motor vehicle violation.

Cobbert, in a certified complaint submitted to the court, said it was "evident Mr. Sorge violated a variety of laws, flaunted his violations in front of the entire (police) department, participated in and condoned violations by others and accepted a gratuity from persons doing business with the city."

"It appears that Mario's Auto Shop permitted its dealer plates to be used on a vehicle that it did not own," Cobbert's affidavit said. "It also appears that Mr. Sorge knew of and participated in this motor vehicle violation and failed to issue a summons or take other law enforcement action, despite his duty to do so."

"The department has additionally learned that although (Sorge) began using the vehicle in July and presumably purchased it at that time," the affidavit continued, "he did not record (the) title to it until Aug. 19 and did not register it prior to using it," violations of state law.

Thompson, in response to Sorge's request to have Capt. Richard Conte become acting chief, as opposed to Cobbert's selection of Capt. Anthony Benvenuto, said, "Once (a) chief is suspended, he has no powers."