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Two NBA Teams Being Investigated for Workplace Harassment

Two National Basketball Association (NBA) franchises are currently mired in allegations of sexual harassment, racism and misogyny. A closer look at the details reveals a broken system that protects the mighty and silences the few.

By **Jeffrey Campolongo** | November 24, 2021



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Two National Basketball Association (NBA) franchises are currently mired in allegations of sexual harassment, racism and misogyny. A closer look at the details reveals a broken system that protects the mighty and silences the few. The Portland Trail Blazers launched an investigation into team president Neil Olshey over alleged workplace misconduct. And the NBA announced recently that it will launch an investigation of Robert Sarver, the owner of the Phoenix Suns, who is accused of using racist and misogynistic language and of fostering a hostile work environment by current and former team employees. The Trail Blazers and the Suns have both issued statements confirming the existence of independent investigations that are under way by outside law firms. Sarver has also issued a statement vehemently denying the accusations.

Problems in Portland

It was recently reported that the Trail Blazers opened an investigation into Olshey, who is the team's president of basketball operations and general manager. The investigation is said to extend to complaints on behalf of employees alleging a toxic, hostile work environment where staff members have been

subjected to intimidation and profanity-laced tirades, among other bullying tactics. In an unrelated twist, the investigation also involves the organization's handling of the 2020 death of a video assistant who worked for the team. Olshey has been with the Blazers since 2012. He was promoted to president of basketball operations in 2015 and extended his contract in 2019.

The statement issued by the Trail Blazers makes no mention of Olshey but instead references "concerns around workplace environment by nonplayer personnel at the practice facility," according to the team's press release. "In response, we immediately engaged O'Melveny & Myers, an outside firm with significant expertise in this area, to conduct a full, fair and independent review into these concerns and will take appropriate action based on its outcome. While we cannot comment on this pending matter, we are committed to continuing to build an organization that positively impacts our colleagues, communities and the world in which we live and play."

Olshey arrived in Portland after spending nine years with the Los Angeles Clippers where he worked under owner Donald Sterling. Sterling was no stranger to controversy himself. In April 2014, Sterling was banned from the NBA for life and fined \$2.5 million by the league after private recordings of him making racist comments were made public. Since joining the Trail Blazers, Olshey has been said to have a fiery demeanor. One report from The Athletic described Olshey this way: "Olshey swears a lot. He rants often. And he has little patience for incompetence. Catch him at the wrong time and all three of these traits can manifest into a red-faced, vein-popping tornado of anger. For the past 10 years, the norm around the Trail Blazers has been to check the Olshey weather forecast: Bad mood? Best to steer clear of the storm."

More recently, Olshey drew criticism when he decided to hire Chauncey Billups as the new coach of the Blazers last June. Billups had been accused of sexual assault in 1997 and reports surfaced that the Blazers had not even contacted Billups's accuser as part of their vetting process. The hiring of Billups had the blessing of Trail Blazers team owner Jody Allen. Allen inherited control of the team after her brother, Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen, passed in 2018.

Ironically, the Allen family settled a lawsuit in 2013 following allegations that Jody Allen sexually harassed her bodyguards. At least 15 former members of the Allens' personal security detail brought civil claims. According to depositions taken in one of the lawsuits against the Allens, Jody Allen bought tight, revealing swimsuits for the security detail and asked the men to "do a fashion show" for her. When they did not comply, the bodyguards alleged that Jody Allen "spearheaded" an effort to deny them bonuses because she had been spurned.

The firm handling the investigation into Olshey recently confirmed that over 60 witnesses were interviewed as part of the inquiry. Olshey remains to be interviewed but is expected to be questioned in the next week or two. Adding further insult, the Trail Blazers top executive on the business side, Chris McGowan, resigned on Nov. 1, revealing "there's a lot of things that led to this" but did not specifically cite the investigation or Olshey as the reason for his departure.

Suffice to say Olshey has managed two different NBA teams, the Blazers and the Clippers, under ownership that has been credibly accused of fostering sexist and racist work environments. In light of the recent accusations against Olshey, the proverbial apple not falling far from the tree comes to mind. One also has to wonder the extent to which certain NBA owners have allowed this type of behavior to fester and go unchecked.

Phoenix (Not) Rising

The Phoenix Suns made it to the NBA finals last season for the first time since 1993 when they were led by the league MVP by the name of Charles Barkley. Last season's magical run for the Suns came on the heels of two decades of organizational dysfunction. Since Robert Sarver became the team's owner 17 years ago, the Suns have had nine head coaches, including seven in an eight-year span, and eight general managers.

A recent report from ESPN detailed many of the accusations against Sarver including those of former coach Earl Watson. Watson, who is Black and Hispanic, recalled a postgame incident with Sarver, who is White, where Sarver repeatedly used the n-word after hearing a Black player use it on the court. Watson told ESPN that Sarver stormed into the locker room after a game and said:

"You know, why does Draymond Green get to run up the court and say [N-word]."

"You can't say that," Watson told Sarver.

"Why?" asked Sarver. "Draymond Green says [N-word]."

"You can't f—ing say that," Watson said again.

Sarver denied Watson's retelling of the incident and said "Let me be crystal clear: I never once suggested on that night (or ever) that I should be able to say the N-word because a player or a Black person uses it." Nevertheless, other anonymous sources expressed to ESPN that Sarver's "level of misogyny and racism is beyond the pale" and "embarrassing." One Suns executive recalled Sarver hiring Lindsey Hunter as head coach over Dan Majerle because "These [N-words] need a [N-word]" reasoning that a Black coach could "speak their language."

The allegations against Sarver go beyond issues of race. Multiple employees alleged Sarver had discussed his sexual relationships during staff meetings and made "demeaning sexual comments" toward them. According to the report, more than a dozen employees recalled Sarver making lewd comments in all-staff meetings, including discussing times when his wife would perform oral sex on him. Some former employees even alleged that Sarver claimed he needed to wear Magnum or extra-large condoms. One former Suns employee also said Sarver pantsed him in front of 60 of his co-workers during an ice bucket challenge. The employee was 25 years old at the time and felt powerless to do anything.

In response to the accusations, Sarver issued a statement saying "I would entirely welcome an impartial NBA investigation which may prove our only outlet for clearing my name and the reputation of an organization of which I'm so very proud." About Sarver, Suns president Jason Rowley, has said: "the Robert Sarver I've worked alongside of for 15 years is not a racist and he's not a sexist. He's a hard-driving, competitive and compassionate man, and I'm proud to work with him. ... The language attributed to him—many times by anonymous sources—is a complete fiction."

Not everyone in the Suns' orbit, however, has defended Sarver. Jahm Najafi who is vice chairman of the Suns, issued a statement condemning the conduct and saying he is stunned and saddened, and that "it is unacceptable." Other former employees said that members of the Suns' executive team contributed to the workplace toxicity of the organization.

Toxic work environments are not uncommon. This is not new, and some might suggest not even newsworthy when it involves millionaires complaining about billionaires. But minimizing racism, sexism and misogyny in any workplace only serves to embolden those in positions of power like NBA owners and

executives. More can and should be done to call out this callousness wherever, and to whomever, it occurs.

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