

Lamell McMorris

INTERVIEW



Serving the NBA referees' union as its lead negotiator and spokesperson, Lamell McMorris discusses the job action he helped orchestrate last season and the new contract the NBA officials recently signed.

Negotiating a New Deal for NBA Refs

Lamell McMorris' firm, Perennial Strategy Group, first did business with the National Basketball Referees Association (NBRA) last season when the NBA officials' union needed an outside entity to conduct a secret ballot among its membership. After the NBRA severed its relationship last February with Howard Pearl, the group's former legal counsel, McMorris and his team at Perennial were hired to negotiate a new contract with the league for the officials (see "The News," p. 10).

Referee: What strengths do you bring to the table when it comes to an organization like the NBRA?

McMorris: It's the ability to know people. You're dealing with 50-plus personalities, very different personalities, very strong personalities, because they have to be strong on and off the court. Our ability and my ability in particular to navigate those personalities and bring those interests together around one single agenda is the major strength. Perennial has a very unique and diverse background. We have a very broad and diverse range with our public relations expertise, a very broad range of skill sets. With the uniqueness of officiating "errors" being made so public now, with the public's ability to scrutinize, there are several aspects beyond the contract, beyond legal disputes and fines, that you have to manage. These days you have to manage a public relations aspect.

Referee: That brings to mind last season's Michael Henderson action. Was that your idea?

McMorris: Which idea?

Referee: The idea of having members of the NBA staff

turn their uniform shirts inside out and write Henderson's number 62 on them. It was a very public action (see "The News," 5/04).

McMorris: I won't take full credit. I think what you saw with the Michael Henderson scenario was a very unified effort on the part of the members of the NBRA to show an act of civil disobedience, their protest for an unprecedented act taken against one of their colleagues. And it was a very intense moment, but yet it was a very unified moment for those individuals who refereed those 10 games to take that step on that night. (Henderson was suspended by the league for an officiating error and most of his fellow officials wore his number in protest for one game shortly following.)

Referee: It got a lot of attention.

McMorris: Yes.

Referee: Was attention your main goal?

McMorris: To bring attention to how wrong we thought the step was taken by the NBA, sure, it was. And to show, one, our support for Mike. Then, yes, to let the world know our dissatisfaction with what happened to our colleague.

Referee: What was the immediate reaction from the league after that happened?

McMorris: We received several phone calls right away. They were angry and upset, and perhaps even disappointed by what they may have deemed to be behavior that they were not accustomed to. But again, unprecedented action taken on their part made for what

could be an unprecedented action taken on ours. Both sides were upset.

Referee: It was a bold move coming right out of the gate. You hadn't been working for the NBRA for more than a month at that time, correct?

McMorris: That's true. But listen, do you think that I'm starting out with the NBRA as its new lead negotiator and with my firm as its new general counsel, and I want to now initiate and engage a protest with the NBA on the NBRA's behalf just starting out? Absolutely not. But when I've got 50-plus guys calling me, leaving voice mails, angry, threatening not to go on the court, etc., etc., I had to deal with the ball that was handed to me. We had to deal with it in the best way we could. The measure that was taken was not the most extreme measure that could have been dealt. We tried to deal with that in a very professional way. There was no work stoppage. There was no game disruption. But there was an obvious sign of disagreement and disapproval of what took place.

Referee: In hindsight, would you have handled it differently?

McMorris: No, I think we handled it quite appropriately, and I think we handled it very professionally.

Referee: You recently completed negotiations for the NBRA on a new contract with the league. It looked touch and go for awhile with (NBA Deputy Commissioner) Russ Granik saying the league might have to hire replacement referees. Your office put out a press release stating that the league introduced two new elements into the negotiation process at the 11th hour. What were those new elements that the NBA introduced and how did you deal with them during the negotiations?

McMorris: I can't speak to what happened ultimately as it relates to the collective bargaining agreement (CBA), but at the time that press release went out, there were two items that were new to us. Deputy Commissioner Granik said that he would contemplate hiring replacement officials if a deal was not done by that following week. One was a new element of charging a \$1 million fine to the NBRA for any game disruption. And then for every referee involved in any type of game disruption, a \$50,000 fine per referee to the association. So, that was something that we had never discussed. As we were trying to wrap up negotiations, it

Lamell McMorris Bio

Lamell McMorris is the founder and CEO of the Perennial Strategy Group, a consulting and public relations firm based in Washington, D.C. McMorris, 31, is from the south side of Chicago. He graduated in 1995 from Morehouse College, where he majored in religion and political science. From there, he went on to the Princeton Seminary, earning a Master's degree in ethics and public policy. After periods of work within the Democratic National Committee and on Capitol Hill — aiding New Jersey Mayor Sharpe James and U.S. Rep. Jesse L. Jackson Jr., respectively — McMorris took a leadership position with the Chicago Urban League's Youth Development Initiative. He also served as the national coordinator for the 37th Anniversary "Redeem the Dream" March on Washington, which attracted more than 100,000 participants. He founded Perennial in 2002 and was hired last February by the NBRA, which has a three-year agreement with Perennial.

was introduced to us. The other one was just some wording on relieving the NBA and owners, etc., of any liability if anything would happen to a referee while performing the job. We took exception to that.

Referee: How did both ultimately come out?

McMorris: There were changes made, that's all. I won't get into the specifics on what happened, but there were alterations.

Referee: Are they currently in the CBA?

McMorris: There were alterations to those clauses as it pertains to how they were incorporated into the CBA. (Editor's note: After conducting the interview, to obtain more details, *Referee* secured a copy of the CBA. Both fines are included in the new contract. For details, see "The News," p. 10.)

“ I've got 50-plus guys calling me, leaving voice mails, angry, threatening not to go on the court. ... I had to deal with the ball that was handed to me. ”

Referee: It was reported that the referees were asking for a six percent raise. Did that occur?

McMorris: I'm not going to talk about any details of the actual collective bargaining agreement. It was considerably more than what the NBA wanted to pay, and probably less than what we ultimately would have wanted. It was passed with overwhelming support by the association, and we're getting ready for the new year.

Referee: There's been talk in recent seasons of having alternate officials available during the playoffs, especially in light of the number of injuries officials suffered in last season's playoffs. Was that part of the negotiations?

McMorris: There has been agreement to continue discussions. It's highly likely though. One, it makes sense. And two, it at least makes sense to be comparable to what you see happening in other leagues, like the NFL. The bottom line is we've had some injuries. If you want the standards of officiating to remain at the level that they are, which is very high, then you can't be satisfied going from three refs to two. I'm not saying two NBA refs can't handle it, but the ideal setting is for three referees to be involved in a game.

Referee: What's next on the horizon for you regarding the NBA staff?

McMorris: We are going to launch a new website in the next month or less. We presented it and the prototype is already there. There are ongoing issues, too, that occur from a legal perspective for the referees that occur throughout the season that have to be addressed with the NBA.

Referee: The website sounds interesting. Is it just for NBRA members to use or will the public be able to access the site?

McMorris: All I can say now is that people should anticipate the launch of the NBRA website and we'll tell you more about that when we get to it. □