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## **NUGGETS MESS IS BICKERSTAFF'S LEGACY**

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We now have irrefutable truth that life is unfair:

While the Denver Nuggets' Monday purge claimed the jobs of Dick Motta, Jim Brovelli, Kip Motta and Gene Littles, the guy who is responsible for the team's sinful state, the guy who cut and ran and left this mess - right, Bernie Bickerstaff - is being extolled for the fine coaching job he did while guiding the Washington Bullets to the last playoff spot in the Eastern Conference. It's enough to make you gag on your shredded wheat.

Isn't there some Basketball Crimes Tribunal we can convene to hold Bickerstaff responsible? And isn't Monday's purge something of a defining moment for the Bickerstaff Regime, with Bickerstaff's assistants taking the fall while Bernie basks in his newfound glory as Washington's miracle worker? Isn't that what all seven years was about - Bernie screwing up and somebody else taking the heat?

We should have called him on it sooner. We should have seen the signs. When I say ``we," I mean the media, myself, others in the business. We should have brought down the hammer, but we didn't.

We know this to be true now, but it's too late to do anything: Bickerstaff was a monumental fraud who, except for one aberrant playoff run, took a terrible team and built it into an even worse team. Worse yet, he was doing little more than stealing Ascent's money at the end, drafting a foreign player without one member of his organization having seen the guy play in person. We can only assume he was too busy taking those scouting trips to Corvallis, Ore., where his son plays for Oregon State University. Talk about dereliction of duty.

Motta, Brovelli and Littles were guilty of nothing more than believing in Bickerstaff. They are not the reason Dikembe Mutombo was allowed to leave without any compensation. They are not the reason Bickerstaff drafted Jalen Rose and Mark Macon. They are not the reason the Nuggets won 21 games in a league that has more wretched teams than ever.

But today, they are out of a job. That is not Allan Bristow's fault. Bristow did what everybody knew he had to do: start over. This, instead, is Bickerstaff's fault. This purge is on his head. We're sure he'll lose hours of sleep over it, too.

True, Dick Motta might be and should be kept on in a consulting role, and Ascent chief Charlie Lyons made sure Motta will be well compensated, even if he does nothing next year. But what about Kip Motta? And Littles? And Brovelli and Todd Eley and so many others who could get nothing more than one-year deals out of Bickerstaff?

Bickerstaff talked all the time about loyalty. Here's loyal: Years ago, Motta hired Bickerstaff as an assistant coach in Washington. Years later, Bickerstaff brought Motta to Denver as an adviser. But just a few weeks into the season, Bickerstaff, whose entire tenure was marked by personnel upheaval, decided he couldn't get players he had handpicked for their professionalism and work ethic to play hard and win. Here, he told Motta, you try to do something with this garbage.

Another thing Bickerstaff loved to talk about was ``accountability."

Let's talk about Bernie's accountability, shall we?

Let's talk about the idiotic decision to hire Paul Westhead in 1990. Convenient, don't you think, for Bickerstaff to bring in someone so whacked out and incompetent he would make a perfect sacrificial lamb for failing to win with rebuilding, no-talent teams? It was Westhead's fault. Of course it was. It was never Bernie's fault. Never.

Let's talk about Dan Issel's resignation. It has become public knowledge Issel had told Bickerstaff there were some players, including Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, whom he simply could not coach. Bickerstaff said, in essence, ``Fine. So don't coach them. There's the door." Not long thereafter, Bickerstaff, then the coach, figured out he couldn't coach them, either. So he got rid of all of them. First, it was Issel's fault. Then it was the players' fault. It was never Bernie's fault. Never.

Let's talk about Mutombo. Somehow, some way, Bickerstaff (with Lyons' approval) allowed his most valuable commodity to walk out the door without compensation. This was an unpardonable sin, a monumental mistake. But Bickerstaff wasn't at fault here. It was Mutombo's fault because the Big Fella became selfish. It was the salary cap's fault because it made keeping Mutombo fiscally imprudent. It was never Bernie's fault. Never.

Bickerstaff was and continues to be the Teflon Don of professional basketball. He messes up, somebody else is charged for littering. This ugly mess of a basketball team is his glittering legacy. Sadder yet, he doesn't even have to answer for it.

Typical.