Football team illustrates shift in attitude toward use of a once-taboo word

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SILVER SPRING, Md. - Teaching and coaching at Springbrook High School in Montgomery County, Maryland, requires one, at some point, to come to grips with the n-word - to figure out where you stand on it, and to choose a level of tolerance and a response. This year, for the first time, Adam Bahr, English teacher and head football coach, has chosen to let it go. He is finished, more or less, with policing it.

It has taken Bahr, 40, more than half his life to reach this point. When he attended the school in the 1990s, he says, the word was used only by some African-American kids, and even then, only sparingly. He never had to think about where he stood: For a white kid such as himself, it was taboo.

But now, as Bahr strolls the hallways and athletic fields of a school that has become far more diverse in recent years - the student body is 42 percent black, 34 percent Hispanic, 12 percent Asian and nine percent white, according to data from the 2013-2014 school year - he says he hears the word on a daily basis, and not only from the black kids.

"It's everywhere," Bahr says. "I hear it in school, every single day. At practice, every single day. At games, regularly. I hear it from all racial groups, depending on who else is in the circle."

Before the start of fall practice in 2012, his first season as head football coach at the school in suburban Washington, Bahr gave a standard speech to his players - roughly 90 percent of whom were African-American - about what he expected of them with regard to conduct. He told them that he would not tolerate curse words - among which, he made clear, was the n-word.

Bahr's discomfort with the word was ingrained and complete. He was raised to believe the word was all but unspeakable - although he says he has family members in Georgia who use the word to speak disparagingly about African-Americans. When he tells stories about those family members, he uses "blank" instead of "n-word" or the actual word - a euphemism of a euphemism.

His views meshed with those of other white teachers and coaches of his generation, as well as with the views of older black coaches, including some on his staff. The word was hurtful. End of story.

But the more Bahr got to know his players at Springbrook, the more he came to realize that not only was it futile to ban that particular word - but it might also be unfair, an imposition of his own cultural mores on a group that did not share his views or his hang-ups, let alone his race. It was an essential part of the vocabularies and discourse of his players - and even the youngest of his coaches - tossed among them freely as a term of endearment. Who was he to say that was wrong?
So this year, somewhat grudgingly, he has stopped policing the word.

"I don't view myself as an old-school, militaristic football coach," he says. "I want them to be free-thinking. ... Things are just so different from my generation to this one. I don't want to deny myself a chance to gain some insight into their lives. But it's tough to let go of our (generational) disdain for that word."

Bahr's coaching staff is mostly African-American, ranging in age from 26 to 61. The 26-year-old, defensive coordinator Drew Gloster, was a Washington Post All-Met wide receiver and defensive end at Our Lady of Good Counsel High School in nearby Olney. He went on to play at the University of Maryland, graduating in 2010. The 61-year-old, Darnell Myers, has been a fixture in Washington-area coaching circles for decades, known primarily as a basketball coach who once served on John Thompson Jr.'s staff at Georgetown University.

Gloster and Myers, who are black, occupy polar-opposite positions on the appropriateness of the n-word - a word that frequently divides by generation as much as by race. Gloster grew up using the word and is comfortable enough with it (and close enough in age to his teenage players) that he occasionally drops an n-word when on duty.

"That's what I grew up with," Gloster says. "If someone's my friend - 'That's my nigga. That's my man.' That's how you greet each other. That's how you define one of your best friends. When I played college ball, it was a word we used. And now I look at my players - they're my players first, but in another way they're my little brothers.

"There have been times where I could have used it less. I try to use their name or another nickname I might have given them, instead of calling them 'nigga.' But every once in a while, it happens. ... It's an aggressive word as well. So when you're out there and it's an intense moment, and you're trying to coach a kid up, it just comes up sometimes: 'C'mon, my nigga! You know better than that.'"

Standing near the doorway to the Springbrook football office, Myers looks on with a grimace. In the 1960s, he and his siblings were among the first African-American families to attend Glenelg Country School in Howard County, Maryland, where he says he encountered white classmates who called him "nigger" to his face. More than a half-century later, that's still what he hears when black kids call one another "nigga" - no matter how different its spelling or its intent.

"I shut it down right away," Myers says. "I don't even let them play rap music with the word in it. I take offense. I will not tolerate it, to have the kids using it. I understand the way the young generation uses that word. But I still let them know: 'This is why I don't want you to use it. Don't use it to me.'"

Gloster responds that he respects history. "But I wasn't there to experience the history," he says. "I didn't have to deal with it. It wasn't a part of my life. It was something my ancestors had to deal with. I learned about it, and I respect the history. But generationally speaking, it's just another word that gets used."
Another voice in the room breaks in, offering an explanation: “The people who are against it are older people. Because they understand the meaning. They understand the history. These kids, if we don't educate them, they don't know. They don't know it was hurtful to their grandparents or their great-grandparents. They don't think of it that way. It's just a word. Nothing harmful. Nothing bad. Nothing good. They're saying, 'Well, it didn't offend me.' The generation we're in is the Me Generation.”

The voice belongs to assistant coach Robert Bass, a former University of Miami linebacker who played in two National Football League games for the Chicago Bears in 1995. At 43, he more or less splits the difference between Gloster and Myers both in terms of age and his stance toward the n-word. He sums up the difference like this: "It changes your perception if you've had the word used against you in anger."

Bass, who is black, has two teenage sons, including one who is a freshman on the Springbrook football team, and fatherhood has changed his views on the word as much as anything else. "It's not part of the mainstream," he says, correcting one assumption about the spread of the word's use. "It's part of the youth culture."

"I still use the word from time to time, if I'm really comfortable with someone," Bass explains. "But I don't use it consistently. It's a term I try not to abuse. My kids use it around their friends, but they don't use it in my presence. I tell them there's a time and a place for everything. So even though it's part of their culture, I know they're going to grow out of it someday."

One might assume that this is all terribly confusing for Springbrook's players. They have a white head coach who doesn't like the word but won't police it anymore, and a staff of assistants divided roughly into those who use the word, those who won't tolerate it and those who are somewhere in between. At school, they have white, Latino and Asian classmates who sometimes use the word, too. How can a 16- or 17-year-old kid ever hope to navigate this landscape? Actually, it isn't hard at all.

"We don't get enough credit," says senior Clinton Ngang, a middle linebacker on defense and a center on offense. He is sitting on the couch in the coaches' office after practice one late-summer evening, still in his uniform pants. Coaches and teammates shuffle through the room, listening in, moving along.

"We realize more than adults give us credit for," says Ngang, who is African-American. "I know when I need to tone it down. Nobody needs to tell me that. A lot of us know that. We're not going to go into the setting of a business place and use that word. It's a word you use when you're kicking back with your friends."

Springbrook's players know they can say the word around Coach Gloster, they know Coach Bahr isn't comfortable with the word but probably won't make them run laps if he hears them use it, and they know they should never, ever say it around Coach Myers.

"I'll respect an adult who feels that way, because of the era they were raised in," Ngang says of Myers.
and other hard-liners, "but at the same time, I didn't live through it. When they tell me to stop using it, and I keep using it - I'm not disrespecting them. I completely respect what they went through. But it's different for us."

Quarterback Neiman Blain, also a senior and also an African-American, adds: "It's detached from the meaning it had in the past. That's not the way we use it."

Compared with the days when Bahr roamed the same hallways, the landscape around the n-word is more complicated at Springbrook, as it undoubtedly is at most, if not all, high schools. Of Springbrook's enrollment of 1,749, there are nearly 600 Hispanics and 151 Asians, and many use the word liberally among themselves.

"To me," Ngang says, "an alarm goes off in my head when it's said a certain way. ... Like today, this white kid was just doing it too much - like, every other word. I was like, 'You need to stop.' He was like, 'Why?'"

Jayvon Jackson, a senior lineman, says he almost never hears white kids use the word, which is probably for the best. He equates the word to a family nickname, tolerated only out of the mouths of family.

"If your momma calls you a nickname, you're comfortable with it," says Jackson, who is African-American. "But you don't want that nickname getting outside the family. It's like that. I feel comfortable with my own kind using it, but I would take offense if it gets outside the family."

The Springbrook players trace the use of the n-word by other races to the popularity of hip-hop music and culture across all races at the school. "Everyone listens to Jay Z," Jackson says. "He says the word, so I guess when the other races listen to it, that's the cool word to use, when they don't really know the history of the word."

"The people who are saying it, of different races, some of them are saying it just to fit in at the school," says Tommy Nguyen, a senior lineman who is half-black, half-Vietnamese. "They feel like they'll get more respect if they do."

Though it has been obscured and bent by years of shifting notions of who can and can't say the n-word in a typical American high school, the line is still there at Springbrook. Latinos may use the word among themselves, and Asians might, too. But it isn't something they often say to African-American classmates. Clearly, they know better.

"If it's somebody I completely don't know, and he's not of my ethnicity," Ngang says, "that's when I'm like, 'You don't know anything about that (word). You've never experienced it.' My godmother always says other races want to (dress) and act like us, but they don't want to have the baggage we have."
The Springbrook players ask to be given credit, and that credit, it appears, is earned. They grasp the history but still choose to use a word that has come to mean something entirely different for their generation.

They can detach themselves from that history just enough to permit their own use of the word - and to give grudging permission for certain others to adopt it for themselves - but not so much that they will tolerate those others saying it to them. They have a keen understanding for when - and out of whose mouth - the word is appropriate. And they grasp the complex social underpinnings that tether the n-word to the larger fight.

"It has to work both ways," Ngang says firmly from the couch in his coach's office. "If we allow you the privilege to be allowed to say that, shouldn't you allow us the privilege of being treated equally?"

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