

Making Sports History

BY COURTNEY MCBRIDE

The man who sent shock waves through the college sports world last month is about as far removed from the pomp and pageantry of big-time athletics as one can get.

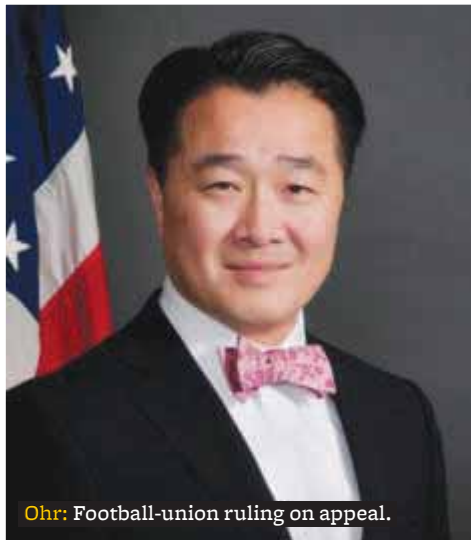
Peter Sung Ohr, the regional director for the National Labor Relations Board in Chicago who ruled March 26 that Northwestern University football players have the right to form a union, played only high school sports before deciding to pursue a legal career devoted to social justice.

Raised in modest circumstances by parents who “worked any job they could get to provide for the family,” Ohr was 3 years old when his family emigrated from Seoul, South Korea, to Boise, Idaho, in 1970 and eventually settled in Chicago. There Ohr learned about the importance of sports and their “transferable life skills,” playing football and wrestling in high school.

Ohr went west after high school, earning a bachelor’s at the University of California (Riverside); a law degree at Pepperdine University; and an MBA at Hawaii Pacific University. Ohr said his goal in attending law school was to focus on human rights or immigration, but eventually came to see labor law as a form of human rights law, as it deals with “a core right that people have throughout the world.”

After clerking for a state judge in Hawaii, Ohr landed a job as a staff attorney in the Honolulu field office of the NLRB in 1997 and began a 17-year rise through the independent agency, moving to the Washington headquarters as a deputy assistant general counsel in 2005 and then to the regional office in Chicago, where he took charge as director in December 2011.

The move to Chicago was not only a home-



Ohr: Football-union ruling on appeal.

coming for Ohr; it offered fertile ground for labor cases. There are “very few places in 2014 that have as vibrant a labor community—on both sides—as the city of Chicago,” he says, and that vibrancy can yield “interesting, sometimes head-scratching cases.”

One of those, of course, is the case for which Ohr will go down in sports history. His ruling that current scholarship football players at Northwestern can be considered employees of the university with the right to unionize could trigger significant changes in college sports whether it is upheld or not. The university has appealed the ruling to the full NLRB, but while it is pending the ruling body for college athletics, the NCAA, has already begun proposing alternative ways to meet athletes’ demands.

“Clearly, the Employer’s players perform valuable services for their Employer,” Ohr’s ruling said. “Monetarily, the Employer’s football program generated revenues of ap-

proximately \$235 million during the nine-year period [from] 2003-2012....

“The players spend 50 to 60 hours per week on their football duties during a one-month training camp prior to the start of the academic year and an additional 40 to 50 hours per week on those duties during the three- or four-month football season,” the ruling said. “Not only is this more hours than many undisputed full-time employees work at their jobs, it is also many more hours than the players spend on their studies.”

Ohr said he could not discuss his ruling with the media; Northwestern’s players voted last Friday on whether to organize a union, but the ballots will be kept under lock and key until the NLRB has decided on an appeal of Ohr’s ruling.

Ohr, 46, is the first Asian-American regional director in the history of the NLRB, a fact that he acknowledges is a source of pride for his parents. While he understands the significance of the milestone, Ohr said the distinction is not foremost in his mind and has no bearing on his decision-making. That said, he hopes that his ethnicity and immigrant background help to bring a fresh perspective to the role.

Ohr and his wife, Julie, a Hawaii native he met in law school, live in the Chicago area with their three children. Although he “could barely get across the pool” in his youth, Ohr became an official for his children’s swim meets as a way of engaging in their activities.

He also remains in contact with his own former coaches—his wrestling coach was one of his first calls upon returning to Chicago and he attended Ohr’s swearing-in ceremony—and says that “coaches have a significant persuasion in a child’s life—hopefully good.” ■

PEOPLE ROUNDUP

Dotson Departure ...

Greg Dotson, Rep. **Henry Waxman**’s top aide on energy and environment issues for 18 years, is moving to the Center for American Progress as vice president for energy policy.

“Greg has devoted his career to protecting the environment,” said Waxman, a California Democrat who is ranking member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee. Waxman, a 40-year veteran of the House, announced earlier this year that he will retire after the current Congress.

Dotson began as Waxman’s counsel and then became his chief environmental counsel when Waxman was a member of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee. He earned his law degree at the University of Oregon Law School and his undergraduate degree from Virginia Tech.

... Brings Panel Changes

Waxman announced several staff changes Tuesday in the wake of Dotson’s departure.

Jeff Baran, a counsel to Democrats on

the Energy and Commerce Committee since 2009, will take Dotson’s place as Democratic staff director for energy and environment. From 2003 to 2008, Baran worked for Waxman as counsel on the Oversight and Government Reform Committee.

Alexandra Teitz will become the committee’s chief Democratic counsel for energy and environment issues. She has been senior counsel on the panel as well as for Democrats on the Oversight and Government Reform Committee. Earlier she was an attorney at the Environmental Protection Agency.

Mike Magner