Gary Benz checks in this morning with his take on the recent brawl between the Knicks and the Nuggets, chastising Knick guard Steve Francis for playing the race card in the wake of the fight. Gary's take? The goal of rooting out racism for good is dealt a serious blow when boneheads like Francis toss out unsupported, ridiculous allegations.

Is there anything more tiresome than a highly-paid, high profile athlete, in the midst of a mess, playing the race card? And no, we're not talking about O.J. Simpson this time. Instead we turn the glare of this most serious of charges to New York Knicks guard Steve Francis and NBA Players union chief Billy Hunter.

In case you missed it, the injured Francis was widely quoted as suggesting that the coverage of the Knicks-Denver Nuggest brawl was somehow racist and that race played a part in the penalties assessed. Of course Francis also strongly suggested that Nuggets head coach George Karl was essentially a coward for graphically referring to Knicks coach Isiah Thomas as a jackass because the Nuggets have no more games at Madison Square Garden this year. It seems that Francis is essentially playing into stereotypes by making such a suggestion, but that misses the larger point.

The least racist of all sports is professional basketball as practiced in the NBA. Countless franchises have African-Americans in key management positions, including ownership. The NBA's record of inclusion at all levels far exceeds any other professional sport anywhere. Playing the race card in that context is so monumentally ridiculous that Francis risks playing into an even more common stereotype—the lunkhead jock.

The problem with guys like Francis is that they've grown up in an entitlement culture because of their athletic prowess. No request is too minor to make and no measure of disappointment

is too small to endure. In his bubble, bad things are what happen to other people. If misfortune befalls his tender little universe it must be someone else's fault. It's no surprise, then, that Francis sees the chilly specter of racism lurking over the coverage of this rather ugly incident or the punishment meted out by white commissioner David Stern. Clearly, the participants, whatever their color, weren't at fault.

We're pretty sure that racism is carried out every day in every corner of the globe. Some of it is overt, most of it subtle. But the goal of rooting it out and eliminating it once and for all is dealt a serious blow when boneheads like Francis toss out unsupported, ridiculous allegations. Nonetheless we are all forced to reflect on such charges, even if it's to dismiss them summarily. But in the process, we inevitably end up cheapening the next charge, which may actually be legitimate and risk the chance of actually addressing and eliminating a true instance of racism.

We listened, too, to NBA Players union head Billy Hunter essentially back Francis's statements. Hunter said that the coverage of the Knicks brawl was more intense because of the race of the participants and that other sports, like hockey, aren't subjected to similar treatment. Where to begin, where to begin?

While we will never understand it, there is no question that in this country at least the NBA is significantly more popular than hockey. This may change, of course, if that hockey strike ever gets settled (they're still on strike, right?), but for now hockey gets covered in the local newspaper or television station if, and only if, your town actually has a franchise and/or there is a six-inch column space or 45-second hole to fill. If that's the best argument in support Hunter can muster, hopefully Carmelo Anthony gets the opportunity to hire his own representative in the upcoming arbitration over his suspension.

Hunter seems to forget, too, that the brawl took place in the nation's media capital. If that means that what happens there is likely to get more play than it otherwise might, so be it. That's the price for playing your games in New York.

We doubt that Joe from Brunswick was more interested in the brawl because it involved black participants. More likely, what drew him in is what drew us all in—the fact that the brawl spilled into the stands and featured an increasingly image-conscious Carmelo Anthony apparently landing a sucker punch and then duck for cover.

We all would benefit from a serious examination of racism in society and the important work that still needs to be accomplished to ensure equal opportunities. But every once in awhile we need to be jolted back to reality and understand that these kind of athletes and their representatives are so removed from the reality of every day life, it's dangerous to even invite them to the forum.