

# CAN THE NFL'S ROONEY RULE BE REVISED?

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Brian Flores, who led the Miami Dolphins to two winning seasons as head coach, was about to interview for the New York Giants' head coaching position when he received a suspicious text message. "Sounds like you have landed – congrats!!" from the legendary NFL head coach Bill Belichick. He added, "I hear from Buffalo and NYG (Giants) that you are their guy. . . . Hope it works out if you want it to!!" (Schrotenboer). Flores had not been interviewed yet, so he was confused and reached out for clarification. Belichick admitted he meant to congratulate a different Brian, Brian Daboll, a white coach who was eventually hired by the Giants. Since the Giants had already decided who to hire before interviewing Flores, who is Black, the upcoming interview was a sham interview designed to satisfy the NFL's Rooney Rule (Harper). "I've worked so hard to get to where I am in football to become a head coach, for 18 years in this league, and to go on what was a sham interview," Flores said, "I was hurt" (Fieldstadt). In January 2022, Flores filed a lawsuit against the NFL alleging racial discrimination in hiring practices, drawing significant attention to the Rooney Rule's failure almost twenty years after its implementation (Sheinin et al.).

The Rooney Rule, established in 2003, requires NFL teams to interview at least one minority candidate for every head coaching vacancy before making a hire ("Rooney Rule"). This was set in response to a drastically low number of Black head coaches; only three out of thirty-two were Black, while almost seventy percent of NFL players were Black. Despite many qualified minority candidates, even the most successful assistant coaches were unable to land head coaching positions (Garcia-Roberts). In the years following the Rooney Rule's adoption, there was an immediate improvement, as the number of Black head coaches jumped to seven by 2006 (Sheinin et al.). However, the improvement leveled off. Today, there are only three Black head coaches in the NFL, demonstrating that the Rooney Rule did not meet its goal of increasing the number of minority head coaches long-term. From 2012 to 2022, according to the 2022 NFL Diversity and Inclusion Report, there were fifty-eight white head coaches hired and thirteen Black head coaches hired (Harrison and Bukstein 9). Despite the NFL's strong Black culture, reinforced by the fifty-eight percent of players nowadays identifying as Black ("Key Findings"), why do Black coaches continuously fail to land and retain head coaching jobs, even with increased interviewing opportunities from the Rooney Rule?

To understand the failure of the Rooney Rule, it's important to examine the main problems that Black coaches face. Head coaches are hired by team owners and their executives who are predominantly white. Out of the NFL's thirty-two teams, there are only two non-white majority owners: a Pakistani American and an Asian American

(Sheinin et al.). White owners tend to trust white coaches with the responsibility of leading the franchise to success and growth because of their feelings of similarity. For example, white owners frequently say white candidates remind them of themselves when justifying their hires (Sheinin et al.). On the other hand, Black coaches are unable to resonate with white owners as strongly in interviews, possibly because of cultural differences in mannerisms and expressions (Sheinin et al.). In this way, Black coaching candidates are judged beyond their leadership ability or game knowledge, and these biased mindsets are not addressed by simply requiring owners to interview more minority candidates with the Rooney Rule.

For owners intent on hiring head coaches who look like them, the Rooney Rule becomes a check-in-the-box exercise. The Rooney Rule was established with language that was “worded more like a gentlemen’s agreement than a contract”; the possibility of sham interviews was known from the start, but the league hoped the teams would be sincere about their interviews (Garcia-Roberts). However, the “football mentality” of circumventing rules and gaining advantages, prevalent throughout the NFL, conquered the Rooney Rule almost immediately after its passage. Two weeks after its implementation in 2003, Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones hired a white coach named Bill Parcells after a five-hour meeting on a private jet. To satisfy the Rooney Rule, Jones interviewed a Black coach on the phone shortly after (Garcia-Roberts). That same year, before the Detroit Lions hired a white coach named Steve Mariucci, no minority candidates agreed to interview because they all knew the Lions were going to hire Mariucci (Garcia-Roberts). Black candidates rightfully feared that their interviews could be shams, which was extremely demoralizing, as weeks of preparation were required for these pivotal meetings. Anthony Lynn, former head coach of the Los Angeles Chargers, received many more interview offers than he actually accepted because he said he “refused to meet ‘with an organization that had not already interviewed a minority because [he] did not want to be a token interview’” (Sheinin et al.). In some extreme cases, the Black candidates were directly told they were not being seriously considered. In 2004, Maurice Carthon was directly told by an Oakland Raiders senior personnel executive, “[y]ou know, you’re not going to get this job” (Sheinin et al.). In this way, the Rooney Rule negatively affected Black coaching candidates, as they were thrown into interviews where they stood no chance of being hired. The rule became a time waster that benefitted no one in the process.

However, even if owners’ biases were not a factor, this policy would still not be effective, as a research group at the University of Colorado’s Leeds School of Business showed that having one candidate of a certain race or gender in a hiring pool almost never leads to the minority being hired. In their study, they showed 144 undergraduate students profiles of three candidates with the same credentials for an athletic director job. When there were multiple white candidates and one Black candidate, the majority of participants recommended hiring a white candidate, but, when they presented one white candidate and multiple Black candidates, participants tended to recommend a

Black candidate for the job. The research group also performed an observational study on various university finalist pools, ranging from three to eleven candidates. When there were two or more minorities in the finalist pool, the odds that a minority was hired were 193.72 times greater than if there was only one minority in the pool (Johnson et al.). These results suggest that the Rooney Rule was set up to fail because of its design, as giving one minority an interview has virtually no sway on the racial biases of team owners.

Even if the Rooney Rule effectively addressed the interviewing process, it would still only be half of the fight. It is equally, if not more, difficult for a head coach to keep his job than to get hired, and Black coaches who get the job still face discrimination. Black head coaches are held to a higher standard than white coaches; they are fired more quickly and are fired, on average, after having better seasons than fired white coaches. Since 1990, Black head coaches who lead their teams to a losing season are fired nine percent of the time, whereas white head coaches are fired four percent of the time for doing the same (“Key Findings”). When they win nine or more games in a season, which increased from a total of sixteen to seventeen games in 2021, Black head coaches are fired eight percent of the time while white head coaches are fired two percent of the time, showing that even success is often not enough for Black coaches to keep their jobs (Sheinin et al.). In a position where it takes time to fully bond with and earn the trust of players, assistant coaches, and other staff members, a lack of patience for success is especially detrimental to Black head coaches. These short leashes are contradictory to the time required to achieve success and further decrease their chances of becoming a long-term head coach. These racial biases faced by Black coaches extend past the interview process into an area unaddressed by the Rooney Rule, and this failure is largely responsible for the lack of Black head coaches in the NFL.

It is evident that the Rooney Rule fails to address the main problems facing Black coaches. But can the Rooney Rule be revised to make it more effective? Some individuals point to corporate hiring policies as a framework for revising the Rooney Rule. Across the board, creating diverse interview committees and committing to a diverse culture have been cited as factors for increased diversity in corporate settings (Reiser and Mackenzie). For example, Mozilla is committed to doubling the percentage of Black and Latinx representation with “dedicated and comprehensive recruiting, development and inclusion efforts” (Baker), and Google is working towards this goal by training their employees on racial consciousness (Langley). However, these strategies are not applicable to the NFL. Hiring efforts for head coach vacancies are typically led by white-dominated positions—owners, general managers, and/or team presidents—meaning there are few opportunities for diverse committees to impact the hiring decisions (Tomlinson). In addition, head coaches play a much greater role in the team’s success than an average corporate employee. Winning games is closely related to “[t]he financial success of the franchise” through fan attendance and television

deals, so the NFL will never force teams to hire specific kinds of people for such pivotal positions (Tomlinson). Due to a team-centric power structure in the NFL, the NFL's policies can only improve diversity if teams respond favorably to them, and history has shown that teams will find ways to circumvent them. Presently, the NFL requires at least two in-person interviews of minority candidates for head coaching jobs as well as for offensive and defensive coordinator positions, but the prospects of increased diversity still seem bleak since the Rooney Rule is still unable to change the biases of team owners (Garcia-Roberts). When trying to bring social change to an institution with a long history of bias, a single rule or policy is not enough to force large-scale change. However, a social movement involving players, coaches, and fans could create enough noise to make a meaningful difference.

To increase Black representation in head coaching, it is helpful to use past social breakthroughs as a model. In *Does the Civil Rights Movement Model Still Work?*, Nicole Austin-Hillery studies the Civil Rights Movement as a model for present-day applications of social change. She argues that a successful social movement relies on four key features: visionary leaders, legal support from the courts, support of the public, and an effective mass movement (Austin-Hillery 110). A movement to increase Black head coaches has the potential to have all four components. Brian Flores could be a visionary leader, the face of the movement, and a figure who is brave enough to risk his own career for social change. His lawsuit, if successful, could provide direct change through the courts and spark confidence in this movement—like how the *Brown v. Board of Education* court victory led to desegregation in more than just schools. This could also increase public awareness and support, which are critical, as the NFL is a product for fans. Finally, an effective mass movement would have to come from other coaches and executives of all backgrounds across the NFL who recognize the problem and use their unique platforms to advocate for change.

Some white head coaches have already been advocating for Black coaching candidates. In a meeting between NFL head coaches, executives, and owners just weeks after the Flores lawsuit, current white NFL head coaches broke a “vexing culture of silence” by giving impassioned speeches and challenging the status quo with their honesty (Brewer, “Voices”). Andy Reid, head coach of the recent Super Bowl champion Kansas City Chiefs, said, “I want to know about my guy. . . . About one-third of the teams in this room have interviewed him. I’ve had a few of my guys become head coaches, none of them more prepared than Eric Bieniemy” (Brewer, “Voices”) in reference to the Chiefs’ Black offensive coordinator who was passed over for multiple head coaching positions. More coaches of all races spoke, too, further demanding equality and increasing the discomfort in the room. It is yet to be seen whether this uncomfortably honest meeting will lead to real change. Numerous head coaching positions are expected to be vacant after this season, and the pool of qualified Black candidates continues to grow (Giambalvo).

During the 2016 season, the NFL released a video featuring prominent players from the past and present repeating the phrase “Football is America.” Filled with patriotic imagery and music, the video was supposed to reassert football as “America’s game” after Colin Kaepernick kneeling to the national anthem caused controversy that preseason (Brewer, “Football”). However, the video epitomized a common theme that stands today: the NFL’s shallow responses to social justice issues and false pioneering of support. In a game where predominantly Black players put their bodies and brains on the line every week for the profit of white owners, the teams and executives of the NFL must do more for them than flattering themselves with military symbolism and social justice hashtags. The NFL instituting the Rooney Rule in 2003 was an ambitious idea, but, after almost twenty years of waiting, seeing, and revising, it is time to recognize its failure. NFL owners, executives, and coaches engaging in a movement to increase the number of Black head coaches would be a powerful statement to make to America. If the NFL truly wants to be “America’s game,” it must use its platform to set an example for the nation beyond the gridiron.

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