

# The Underlying Truth about the National Football League

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## Abstract

*This research-based project offers an insight into the misrepresentation of minority coaches in the National Football League. My goal for this project assigned to me in Advanced Composition was to collect findings and explore relationships between various subjects while determining any internal communication that was used. The NFL is a professional football league consisting of 32 teams distributed nationally, run by a league commissioner, owners, coaches rather than players. During the fall semester, I spent a significant time analyzing and engaging on the most conflicting issues between owners and coaches' internal communication factors. More specifically, I collected data on top-tier coaching positions based on league rules, race, qualifications, and achievements which increased knowledge of the ongoing controversy revolving around the NFL. This project does explore my findings on the lack of diversity in coaching, the Rooney Rule, and race relations on NFL attendance. In addition to what it is like to work for the National Football League as a minority coach and the possibilities it holds as a future football coach working your way up in the various positions.*

Progress and innovation are steadily advancing our human race forward. New coaches are hired every year, the coaching position is more easily accessible than ever, and coaching opportunities can now be obtained by all ethnicities or races. The head coaching position is developing at an expeditious pace, so naturally, human behavior must adapt along with these improvements. At an early age, I was oblivious to the fact that the intercommunication between the NFL owners and NFL head coaches during the hiring process was not on good terms. Even though several owners displayed negative

body language towards minority coaches during the hiring process, I was blinded by a substantial number of coaches especially African-Americans who were denied the position each year. Now, various interactions, patterns, and issues between the NFL owners and minority coaches are being revealed more frequently with the assistance of social media such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook.

## Lack of Diversity in Coaching

During their research, Dr. C. Keith Harrison and Scott Bukstein analyzed the racial disparity in NFL leadership positions

and examined the “performance-reward” bias. Based on their findings, minority coaches were initially hired into lower-tier positions with minimal promotion opportunities. According to their information, it was evident that the performance-reward bias implied that even when racial minorities are allocated to relatively promising positions, they are less likely to continue ascending the corporate hierarchy as white, equivalently performing position-holders” (Harrison and Bukstein, 2020).

Based on the Sports Business Journal’s findings, the NFL saw a decrease in its racial hiring practices in 2018 while maintaining its levels for gender hiring practices. At the beginning of the 2018 season, an NFL record 8 minority coaches were selected to be on various staffs. With that being said, there are only 32 teams in the league that are able to hire numerous coaches and players. However, towards the end of the season, there were only 3 coaches of color that remained on their respective teams. Coaches being fired and replaced is not unusual, but there were not many coaches of color to begin with. However, the NFL has made strides in diversifying their vice presidents around the league from 9 to 11 in 2017, but the number of women vice presidents decreased from 28 to 23 in 2018. This caused some concerns for coaches of color and of the female gender because they are not gaining the same opportunities as white candidates. In my investigations, no coaches or staff members of the female gender plus numerous minority coaches that I have analyzed were seen on NFL teams.

### **Rooney Rule**

Whereas researcher Justin Chaljub takes a deeper look into exploring coaching diversity from the aspect of the Rooney Rule. Essentially, The Rooney Rule means “that for every head-coaching vacancy, at least one

minority candidate must be interviewed for the position.” Through his research, Chaljub’s main objective was to observe the key successes and failures of the Rooney Rule within the NFL. Based on his findings, diversity results worked better “when tactics are relaxed in favor of more focused policies like mentoring programs, targeted recruitment, and task-forces rather than having mandatory diversity training, hiring and performance rating tests, and grievance systems.” (Chaljub, 2019) While this is what the Rooney Rule embodies, my observations show a different result. Even though the Rooney Rule has promising upsides for minorities, many upper management professionals are not putting it into effect. More minorities are getting interviewed for a top-tier position however they are not being hired. Further, it is shown that their rejection from the position is not based on their performance or lack of qualification.

Similar to Justin Chaljub, researcher Matthew Welker analyzed the effectiveness of the Rooney Rule in the National Football League. His research explores the positions of Offensive Coordinator, Defensive Coordinator, and General Manager in all 32 NFL franchises to determine if the implementation of the Rooney Rule has impacted the racial diversity of those holding the positions. Based on his findings, only the position of General Manager had increased for minority candidates over the past 9 years since the Rooney Rule was first implemented. The main components for the lack of advancement in the league were racism, reverse racism, and Title VII. Other professional sports leagues in (MLB, NBA, WNBA, etc.) have been able to achieve a more diverse field however the NFL is still behind. In agreement, my findings can support this information because many minority coaches have been considered to be on a “shorter leash” than white coaches. For example, Mike Tomlinson, the current

Pittsburgh Steelers Head Coach remains the longest tenure black coach in the NFL mainly because of his great success. As head coach, he has not had a losing record in his career therefore upper management can not find any loopholes for having him replaced.

### **Race Relations on NFL Attendance**

On the other hand, the PLoS One journal investigates the fluctuations in attendance at National Football games and if race, implicit racial prejudice, and racial animus within a population, and how they are the main components to lowered NFL attendance. Researchers Nicholas Masafumi Watanabe and George B. Cunningham concluded that “having a higher level of implicit bias in a market leads to a decline in consumer interest in attending games.” Additionally, the impact of the protests and riots reduced the negative effects of implicit bias on attendance while markets with lower levels of implicit bias had greater declines in attendance during these times. Throughout my observations, I never considered this aspect to be a crucial component to the lack of attendance at games or to the implementation of new rules. With that being said, the lack of attendance at NFL games can greatly influence the idea of

implementing new rules or regulations to hire minority coaches from the league commissioners' standpoint.

### **Conclusion**

All of this evidence entails that the Rooney Rule is in place to distract fans from the racial bias that the NFL has put on minorities at the top-tier coaching positions. It makes it seem like the owners and league commissioner are making strides to further diversify the league as a whole when that is not the case. The league has been dominated by minority players for many years. However, they are still having difficulty being able to manage or own teams as a whole. Overall, I have identified that the NFL has been using different tactics or strategies to undermine what they want the league to look like and has been for its entirety from a business standpoint.

These observations helped confirm some of my generalizations about the NFL and regarding its hiring practices of coaches, especially at top-tier positions. Despite enforcing the Rooney Rule, there are a few loopholes around it so the hiring of minority coaches stays relatively stagnant and has no real upside.

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### Recommended Citation

Malone, B. (2021). The underlying truth about the National Football League. *Made in Millersville Journal*, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.mimjournal.com/paper-39>