

Applying the Rooney Rule to College Sports: Civil Rights Improvement or Impediment?

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Throughout the history of sports, expressions of racism and other forms of prejudice have been unconsciously maintained in its culture, and it has taken the involvement of individuals or organizations to propose innovative policies that promote exposure-based methods in order to dismantle deeply-rooted ideological beliefs (Collins, 2007). In December 2002, the National Football League (NFL) and its member clubs took such a move by implementing “a comprehensive program to promote diversity in their coaching and front office ranks based upon recommendations of the NFL Committee on Workplace Diversity” (NFL, 2002). This committee, chaired by Pittsburgh Steelers owner Dan Rooney, in part sought to have all teams commit to interviewing at least one minority candidate for head coaching positions, enhance management training and development programs for minorities, and creating a plan for more effectively addressing career development and diversity for all front office and business operations positions (NFL, 2002).

One policy dictated by the NFL Committee on Workplace Diversity requires that “any club seeking to hire a head coach must interview one or more minority applicants for the position - the one exception would occur when a club has made a prior contractual commitment to promote a member of its own staff and no additional interviewing takes place” (Nichols, 2008; Judge, 2003). This policy, more commonly called The Rooney Rule, has been attributed to many of the successes of today’s minority coaches. The influx in minority employment in the NFL is why many demand a similar rule be enforced in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) due to perceived issues of racial inequality in employment (Gordon, 2008).

However, spreading the Rooney Rule may be detrimental to the goals of civil rights progression. As such, a major point of contention that the application of the Rooney Rule during the hiring process constitutes interviewing a candidate solely because of adhering to the rule and not based on their credentials. In addition, there is a perceived belittlement of previous successes; an implication that race is a form of impediment; and questions as to whether the Rooney Rule violates Title VII of employment law (Nichols, 2008).

The goal of this presentation is to examine the pros and cons of applying a modified Rooney Rule to NCAA-sponsored college athletic programs. Discussions will focus on the inclusion of minority applicants in the interview pool for coaching and athletic administration positions, and whether the NCAA should mandate their own version of the Rooney Rule by requiring member institutions to interview a specific number of minority applicants.