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Campaign Needed for Minority Candidates for Football Coach

By [WILLIAM C. RHODEN](#)

Like most of you, I've been riveted by the presidential race and actually struck by the fact — as I recently told my 90-year-old father — that in our respective lifetimes, an African-American or a woman may be elected president of the United States.

Think about it: a woman or an African-American in the White House before we get a black head football coach at the [University of Alabama](#). Not just Alabama, but at most of the hundred other so-called big-time college football powers.

Either being the head football coach at a football factory is a lot harder job than we thought, or being president is a lot easier.

In either case, it's a bizarre dichotomy. Why such a divide?

"It's been said that it's hard because of the donor base," said Warde Manuel, the athletic director at the University at Buffalo. "The reality is that donors want a coach who can win — that's what everybody wants.

"It's just an excuse, an excuse that we have to chip away at by providing opportunity for coaches to interview to show that they can produce a winning program."

Intercollegiate athletics, which at its worst can epitomize an old boys network, desperately needs its own Rooney Rule and needs a rule with teeth.

Last month, the association of Division I-A athletic directors adopted a minority interviewing measure they hope will diversify the search if not the actual hiring of minority candidates. The policy says that any Division I-A football program with a head-coaching vacancy should interview at least one minority candidate. The agreement was sent to athletic directors at the 120 colleges that play top-tier college football.

Floyd Keith, executive director of the Black Coaches and Administrators, said: “The best thing I can say about this is that it’s a start for the athletic directors. It’s not a touchdown, but for the first time since I’ve been involved in this whole process, they are taking ownership.”

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This new interviewing measure outlines acceptable standards pertaining to diversity in interviewing and hiring practices. The only standard should be access: access to interviews, access to the process.

“I’m proud of the fact that the association decided to include this as their standards,” said Manuel, who played football at Michigan and was an assistant athletic director there. “We should have an open interview section and it should be inclusive, it should be a thoughtful process and it should include a minority candidate.”

Invariably the first response concerning those mandatory interviews is that most of them will be shams.

Manuel said he felt that his interview was seen by some as part of that sham. In 2005, he met with a 12-member search committee at Buffalo and was so impressive that the search stopped almost immediately and he was hired. Last year, after the [Pittsburgh Steelers](#) hired Mike Tomlin as their coach, some team officials conceded that he wasn’t their first — or second — choice going in, but that he was so impressive during his interview that they had to hire him.

“Open the process up and you might be surprised at what you find,” Manuel said. “A measure like this, a rule like the Rooney Rule, opens these guys’ minds to different candidates; and it may turn out that the best candidate is a minority.”

In 2002, the N.F.L., in response to increasing frustration among minorities and under threat of litigation, formulated the Rooney Rule, named after the Pittsburgh Steelers’ owner, Dan Rooney. The rule requires N.F.L. teams to interview minority candidates for a head-coaching opportunity. Violating teams can be and have been fined.

This new college measure suggests that athletic directors interviewing candidates for head football coach should — not must, but should — include one or more minority candidates.

Unlike the Rooney Rule, which carries punishment for noncompliance, the college agreement is essentially voluntary. There is no punishment for noncompliance.

It’s significant that the measure was pushed by the athletic directors, not by the presidents —

who should have taken the lead on this years ago — nor by the [N.C.A.A.](#) Two years ago, the Fritz Pollard Alliance, formed to promote diversity in hiring at all levels of coaching in the N.F.L., asked [Myles Brand](#), the N.C.A.A. president, to consider imposing a Rooney Rule in the N.C.A.A.

Brand, citing “considerable differences” between the N.C.A.A and a professional football team, said the organization could never impose such a rule on its membership. The N.F.L. was a major sports league, Brand wrote, while intercollegiate athletics — as well as institutional autonomy — were wholly embedded in its member colleges and universities.

“That is why the implementation of mandatory head coaching interviewing guidelines that require diverse candidate slates for N.C.A.A. member institutions is not appropriate for the college environment,” he said.

All I know is that during the last cycle of hiring, there were 28 openings for head football coaches in Division I; four minorities were hired.

It’s like running for president. Only harder.

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