

Opportunity on the Road to Success

By Logan Underwood

In the sea of society, many drift under the influence of powerful undercurrents of reality. People are shaped by the colour of our skin, the places we grew up, and the wealth of our parents. These factors have a profound impact on the direction in which people travel in their lives. The currents that control our lives are powerful because they pull the strings that define our paths. They change the scenery and the obstacles by putting some individuals on a pedestal while putting others on a much more challenging journey. Societal norms of nepotism and connections disproportionately place minorities at a disadvantage from their white colleagues as they are promoted.

In 2003 the National Football League (NFL) instituted the Rooney Rule, which required one minority to be interviewed during the head coach hiring process (Carroll, 2018). The rule was put in action to make the number of minority coaches more representative of a sport that's players were 69.0% African American (Lapchick, 2019). As the most recent season coaching hiring season concluded, it became clear that the number of minority coaches with jobs would decrease significantly.

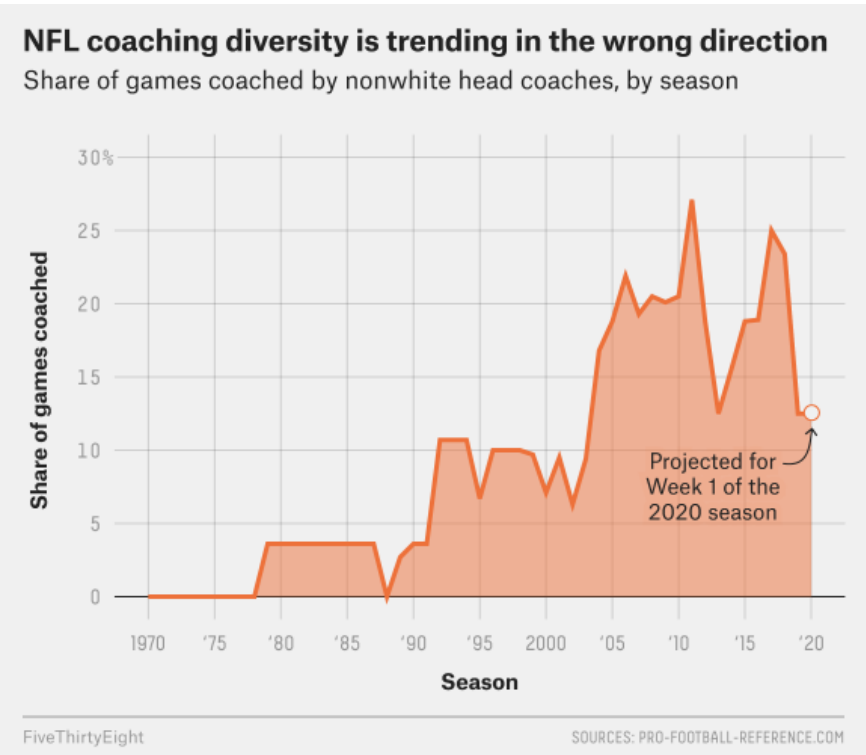


Figure 1 (Payne, 2019)

In the 2020 season, it will be the second season that 12.5% of coaches will be of colour. It is the lowest two-season stretch since the Rooney Rule was adopted in two thousand three (Lapchick, 2019). The 2019 season was important in determining the schematic direction of the league's coaches. Coaches Marvin Lewis, Todd Bowles, Steven Wilks, and Vance Joseph, who were all African American, were fired. In the NFL's most recent season, one minority coach Ron Rivera was fired. The trend shines a light on the growing disparities in the front offices and coaching staffs of the 32 NFL teams (Lapchick, 2019).

In response to the rising tide of race disparities in coaching the NFL has proposed a new rule that would incentivize hiring minority coaches by improving draft position. The rule has been met with criticism by many that claim it combats racism with more racism. Anthony Lynn, who is one of the three African American Coaches, was critical of the rule: "Sometimes you can do the wrong thing while trying to do the right thing" (Florio, 2020). In the NFL's desperation move to change the direction of the leagues hiring practices it has brought forward many questions of how they should support minority coaches. The current Rooney Rule is not doing enough the offset the challenges that minorities face and incentivizing the hiring by improving draft stock flies in the face of the competitive spirit of the NFL. The policies the NFL has enacted up until this point aren't effective because it doesn't solve the root problem with disparities of race in coaching.

In the last 2 years, we have seen the explosion of two extremely successful coaching schemes. Kyle Shanahan, who coaches the San Francisco Fourty-Niners, had an extremely successful first year on the job going to the NFL's championship, the Super Bowl. However, the story of Kyle Shanahan's rise to become one of the most successful head coaches in the NFL before the age of 40 is filled with examples of nepotism and name recognition. Kyle's father was an extremely successful NFL coach which allowed him to secure a job as a wide receiver's coach younger than the vast majority of other competition (Bacon, 2020). Kyle Shanahan rose the ranks and following his record-breaking season as the Atlanta Falcons offensive coordinator he was hired as coach of the San Francisco Fourty-Niners. Kyle Shanahan used his name to gain an edge on his fellow coaches and took full advantage. It is hard to predict where he'd be without the aid of his father's name, but it unlikely he would have been given the same opportunities. Likewise, Sean McVay's rise to prominence follows an eerily similar trajectory. McVay was jumped low-level work and was hired as an assistant

under coach Jon Gruden who was a family friend (Bacon, 2020). As he rose the ranks he took advantage of his opportunities and was hired as coach of the Los Angeles Rams. In his second year as coach of the team, he led his team to the Super Bowl. The two coaches deserve the majority of their success because of their unique strategy that fueled their rapid ascension. They have been extremely successful in their endeavors, and they deserve to be heralded as the great football minds that they are. However, their successes are an example of how nepotism and connections can be critical in one's rise to the notoriety required to be considered as a coach.

The natural job progression to NFL coach is very methodical. The majority of NFL head coaches were promoted from offensive or defensive coordinator. When someone has the connections that upset the natural movements it can lead to line cutting that gives a disproportional disadvantage to coaches of colour. 33.6% of NFL assistants are people of colour which is nearly three times more than the share of visible minority NFL head coaches (Lapchick, 2019). The pipeline to NFL coach is filled with a far more representative sample, but the further you look up the coaching trajectory the whiter it gets (Bacon 2020). White people are given more chances than people of colour. The politics of NFL coaching works against them because our society is designed to give value to favours and connections. These connections and favours are disproportionately given to white people which in turn leads to leaving many qualified and hardworking people of colour behind. In an unchecked world where connections, status, and the name means something coaches of colour will face more challenges than the average white coach. The story of minority misrepresentation is written on the walls far before they reach the four walls of an interview room. The NFL must enact policies to curb nepotism and give a more equal playing field for all coaches who have higher aspirations. The NFL must find a way to give

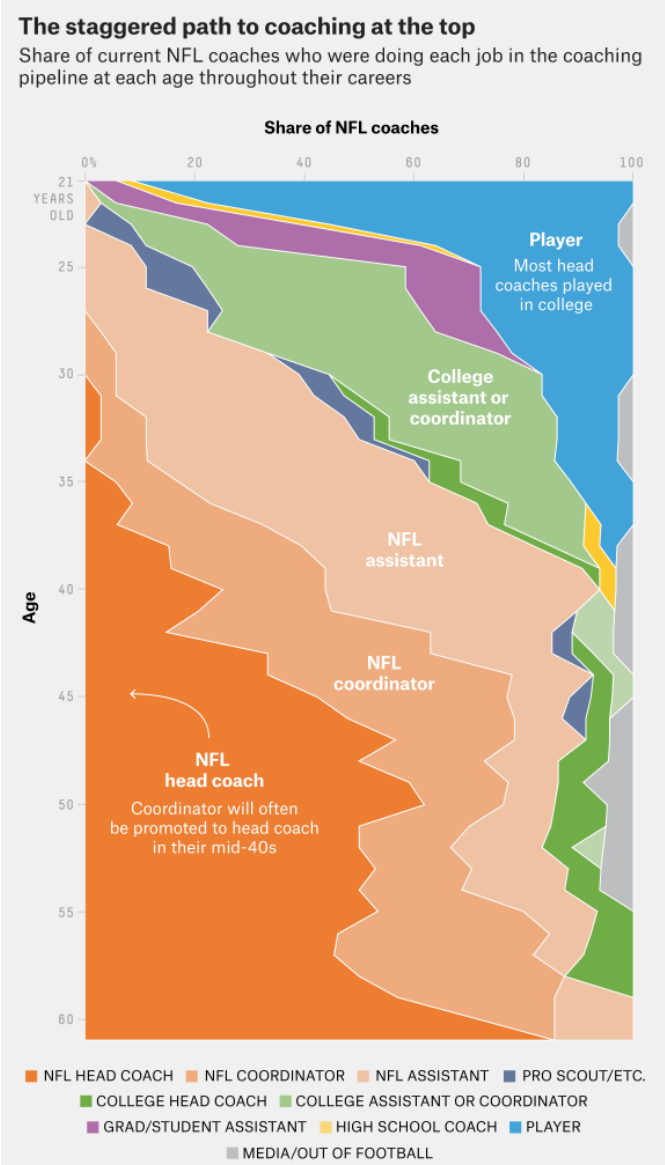


Figure 2 (Bacon, 2020)

coaches of colour a comparably similar opportunity to rise the ranks to reach the upper echelons of coaching roles in the league. The NFL must understand the reality of the culture that has been built underneath their noses that gives an unequal playing field to their pipeline of future coaches.

The NFL is a microcosm of societal issues that plague many countries around the world. The NFL field is a miniature cutthroat economy that exhibits many of the same racial disparities we see in leadership of fortune 500 companies (The Wall Street Journal, 2019). Society must stare their faults directly in the face to be aware of the true nature of our culture pushing certain individuals higher than it does others. Without intervention people of colour are put at a disadvantage because they don't receive the same benefits that connections and nepotism provide for white people.

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