

FCC Should Adopt NFL's "Rooney Rule"

By Eric J. Shoars, Ph.D.

History of the Rooney Rule

One of the most talked about stories leading up to the National Football League's Super Bowl XLI was the fact that Chicago Bears head coach Lovie Smith and Indianapolis Colts head coach Tony Dungy were the first black head coaches to appear in the Super Bowl.

In the history of the NFL, there have only been ten black head coaches – Fritz Pollard (four teams in the 1920s), Art Shell (Oakland Raiders), Ray Rhodes (Philadelphia Eagles), Tony Dungy (Indianapolis Colts), Lovie Smith (Chicago Bears), Marvin Lewis (Cincinnati Bengals), Romeo Crennel (Cleveland Browns), Herman Edwards (New York Jets and Kansas City Chiefs), Dennis Green (Minnesota Vikings and Arizona Cardinals), Mike Tomlin (Pittsburgh Steelers) and one head coach of Mexican heritage – Tom Flores (Oakland Raiders). Both Smith and Dungy have credited the NFL's "Rooney Rule" for increasing opportunities for blacks to be head coaches in the league.

The "Rooney Rule" was instituted in 2002 by the rule's namesake, Pittsburgh Steelers owner Dan Rooney, who was the chairman of the NFL's diversity committee. The Rooney Rule requires that every NFL team interview at least one minority candidate for any head coaching vacancy.

Since the Rooney Rule was implemented, one team – the Detroit Lions – hired a head coach in 2003 (Steve Mariucci) without interviewing a minority candidate. The Lions organization was fined \$200,000 by the National Football League as a result.

Lovie Smith observed that not only did the Rooney Rule provide the means for his hiring, it sped up the process for other black coaches to achieve head coaching positions. "I would like to think owners would hire the best coach," Smith said during a January 29th press conference in Miami, "but I am here because of the Rooney Rule. I definitely think we need to keep it in place."

In an era where diversity has been given a lot of lip service, we should look at other industries, such as radio and television, and consider whether or not instituting the Rooney Rule would speed up the process for minorities to be hired for executive positions. Consolidation in broadcasting has decreased the number of upper level category positions and further slowed the ascent of women and minorities to those positions. For those reasons, the FCC should take a page from the NFL's playbook and institute a Rooney Rule for broadcasters.

Job scarcity

Head coaching positions in the NFL are scarce since there are only a total of 32 head coaching jobs. However, the NFL's Rooney Rule pertains to those jobs only and not front office positions. A Rooney Rule for broadcasters should go further than that. Current EEO regulations for broadcasters specify that radio and television stations must actively recruit minorities to fill positions but do not specify how many candidates, if any, need to be interviewed in filling executive position vacancies.

Current EEO guidelines for broadcasters state that active recruiting for full-time positions must be done, including a variety of outreach activities. Many of these full-time positions are entry-level or mid-level jobs. For “upper level category” positions, a listing of each of those openings must be included in a job bank or newsletter of media trade groups whose membership includes substantial participation of women and minorities. Again, recruiting is stressed but not the actual interviewing of those women and minorities applying for the open upper level category positions.

I believe there should be a Rooney Rule for broadcasters that pertains to positions including market managers, vice-presidents, CFOs, COOs, and CEOs. If the FCC were to adopt the Rooney Rule, broadcasters would be required to interview at least one minority candidate (female or ethnic minority) for open upper level category positions. Those groups (corporate and private) that did not interview at least one female or ethnic minority candidate for open upper level category jobs would be subject to sanctions determined by the FCC.

The Rooney Rule is not an automatic cure-all to level the playing field for minorities in the NFL, nor would it be for broadcasting. It does; however, accelerate the process by which minorities are interviewed and, potentially, hired. It’s not enough to have a pool of candidates for open positions but candidates actually being interviewed

Three things would result for the minorities being interviewed under broadcasting’s Rooney Rule: 1) minorities would hone their interviewing skills for upper level category positions; 2) minorities might actually impress the interview committee and get offered the job and; 3) broadcasting’s upper level category positions would start to reflect the diversity we’ve been encouraging our listeners and viewers to embrace.

The NFL is basking in the glow of the plaudits it’s receiving for this forward-thinking initiative. Wouldn’t radio and television also benefit from the same accolades afforded the National Football League by adopting a Rooney Rule for broadcasters?

Practice What We Preach

Broadcast television stations, cable television stations, and radio stations feature programs, communicate news stories, and air public service announcements, encouraging their viewers and listeners to celebrate and embrace diversity. Broadcasters should step up to the plate at the highest levels and practice what they preach over their airwaves.

We are at a point where a new approach needs to and should be taken by the FCC. The FCC’s Advisory Committee for Diversity in the Digital Age’s mission is to make recommendations to the Federal Communications Commission policies and practices that will further enhance the ability of minorities and women to participate in telecommunications and related industries.

I believe the FCC’s Advisory Committee for Diversity in the Digital Age should seriously study the NFL’s Rooney Rule, consider how it would be adapted for broadcasters, and make the necessary recommendations to the FCC as to how it would be implemented, monitored, and enforced.

By nature, I favor initiatives by the individual broadcast groups themselves (corporately and privately owned) to handle this type of an issue. However, there has been slow progress for women and minorities in our industry in achieving upper level category positions. I believe women and minorities have waited long enough for the same opportunities many in our industry take for granted. We as broadcasters are shortchanging ourselves by denying opportunities to some of our best and brightest people for upper level category positions because of their gender or color of their skin.

As the NFL has learned, some of its most successful coaches right now are ones who would not have been hired save for the Rooney Rule. We as broadcasters would be wise to live the lesson provided to us by the National Football League.

And may the best people be hired for broadcasting's upper level category positions.

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