



# Advancing the Ball: Race, Reformation, and the Quest for Equal Coaching Opportunity in the NFL by N. Jeremi Duru

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## **ADVANCING THE BALL: RACE, REFORMATION, AND THE QUEST FOR EQUAL COACHING OPPORTUNITY IN THE NFL**

Book written by N. Jeremi Duru  
[Oxford University Press, 2011]  
224 Pages  
ISBN: 978-0-19-973600-3

Super Bowl XLI featured a matchup deemed unthinkable only a few years earlier, a contest between two teams led by African American coaches. In his book, *Advancing The Ball*, author N. Jeremi Duru chronicles the work of a determined group of individuals who transformed the National Football League (NFL) from a league that lagged behind America's other premier professional sports leagues to the industry leader in equal opportunity matters and the foreground of modern racial politics in the new millennium.<sup>1</sup>

Duru first hypothesizes how a league consisting of 60% African American players in 1989 came to employ only white head coaches. The first theory noted by Duru combines centuries old suppositions and the game's complex nature.<sup>2</sup> Stereotypes of intellectual inferiority amongst African Americans, dating back to slavery, presupposed that African Americans lacked the intellect to succeed in a sport that requires its head coaches to be intellectual and adept strategists, motivators, and personnel managers.<sup>3</sup> The second theory lays blame on an "old-boy" network that thrives in the NFL's conservative culture. This network resulted in the cyclical hiring process in which friends hired friends and, at worst, friends of friends.<sup>4</sup>

Marvin Lewis, Art Shell, and Tony Dungy are cited examples of the "old-boy" network that led to inferior opportunities despite superior performances by African American head coaches. Lewis compiled impeccable credentials as an assistant coach over the years without receiving a head coaching opportunity. He coordinated the Baltimore Ravens defense in 2000 that won the Super Bowl and is considered

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1. N. JEREMI DURU, *ADVANCING THE BALL: RACE, REFORMATION, AND THE QUEST FOR EQUAL COACHING OPPORTUNITY IN THE NFL* (2011).

2. *Id.* at 3.

3. *Id.*

4. *Id.* at 4.

one of best defenses in NFL history.<sup>5</sup> Shell, despite achieving success during his five-plus years in charge of the Los Angeles Raiders with a record of 54-38 was ignored as a head coaching candidate for years after the team terminated him<sup>6</sup>. Meanwhile, former head coaches Mike Shanahan, Bruce Coslet, and Joe Bugel, none of whom ever compiled a winning record as head coach but all of whom were white, landed subsequent head coaching positions.<sup>7</sup>

The difficulties faced by African American coaches are most evident with the firing of Dungy by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. When Dungy inherited the perennial losers in 1996, the team only had three winning seasons in its history and failed to reach the playoffs during the previous fourteen seasons.<sup>8</sup> Dungy immediately turned the team around, leading the Bucs to the playoffs in only his second season. Two years later, the Bucs nearly made the Super Bowl, losing in the NFC Championship. After two more seasons featuring playoff appearances, the Buccaneers fired Dungy.<sup>9</sup> Many football commentators, insiders, and fans believed Dungy accomplished the impossible in turning around a moribund franchise. The manner in which Dungy resurrected the Buccaneers was equally impressive. Dungy won with integrity and class, never cursing and rarely raising his voice. He insisted that his players aspire to be more than good athletes, but good men.<sup>10</sup> According to Duru, the end of the Dungy's tenure in Tampa Bay instigated the beginning of the equal opportunity movement for aspiring African American head coaches in the NFL.

After establishing the league's history of discrimination, Duru spends the remaining chapters of the book examining the progression of what would eventually become the Rooney Rule.<sup>11</sup> It begins with Cyrus Mehri discovering Dungy's firing while reading the paper on the morning of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday. Mehri, a Cornell Law graduate, targeted "second generation" discrimination in the workplace, representing employees in racial discrimination suits against their employers. He believed that this subconscious form of discrimination affected America more deeply than most people knew or were willing to admit. Mehri's statistical analysis supported his be-

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5. *Id.* at 6.

6. *Id.* at 19.

7. *Id.* at 35.

8. *Id.* at 12.

9. *Id.*

10. *Id.*

11. Established by the NFL in 2003, the Rooney Rule requires NFL teams to interview minority candidates for head coaching and high-ranking football operation opportunities.

lief that racial bias was alive and thriving in the NFL, however, he did not want to attempt to tackle the league on his own.

Mehri turned to the late Johnnie Cochran to assist his case against the NFL. Duru's treatment of the infamous Cochran represents the book's biggest strength. While chronicling the campaign to end racial discrimination in the NFL, Duru weaves historical anecdotes and in-depth biographies of his subjects into the book, making the story more compelling as it unravels. Rather than limit his introduction of Cochran to the O.J. Simpson trial, Duru describes his ties to slavery, his dogged persistence in pro-bono work, and his fair-sided approach to race.<sup>12</sup> For example, he describes Cochran's decision to represent a white man nearly beaten to death in retaliation for the Rodney King beating as opposed to the two black defendants in the case whom community members implored him to represent.

The two outsiders took their case to the NFL, which proved willing to listen. Mehri suggested what appeared to be a simple resolution; when seeking new head coaches, each team must interview at least one minority for the position. Mehri based his proposals on previous cases in which he witnessed court-mandated candidate pools work to great effect in diversifying upper-level management. The reason for their success was simple: when corporate executives discussed an area of common interest with regard to a candidate of a different race, preconceptions and biases often weakened and the interview became more meaningful than the executive initially imagined.<sup>13</sup>

The NFL dispersed Mehri's plan to league owners, but was not prepared to take immediate action. However, Pittsburgh Steelers team owner Dan Rooney saw an important issue that needed to be addressed; he took the ball and ran with it – hence the title of Duru's seminal book, *Advancing The Ball*. Because the league's respective teams made the hiring decisions, Rooney believed they should take responsibility for addressing Mehri's report. He pushed for a unanimous agreement, and not only did he get it, but his initiative earned him the rule's namesake, the Rooney Rule.

The Dallas Cowboys and the Detroit Lions immediately tested the rule. Cowboy owner Jerry Jones courted Bill Parcells for two weeks and only allowed Dennis Green a thirty-minute phone interview. The Detroit Lions' desire to hire Steve Mariucci was no secret and, as a result, minority candidates refused to be the "token" interview as Dennis Green had been with the Cowboys. Therefore, the Lion's gen-

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12. *Supra*, note 1 at 28.

13. *Id.* at 70.

eral manager at the time abandoned his search for an interviewee of color, a clear violation of the Rooney rule.

As dedicated as Mehri and Cochran were to securing equal opportunity for coaches in the NFL, as outsiders they knew the fight was not truly theirs, the coaches had to engage in the battle themselves, even if it meant losing their jobs. The book reaches its climax at the NFL combine in February 2003, where Mehri attempted to galvanize the individuals he hoped to help. Duru describes the setting as appropriate, given that the athletes, primarily African Americans, are strictly scrutinized mostly by white males. He aptly compares the NFL's annual "meat market" to a slave block at its worst, and as an example of the league's power dynamics at its best.<sup>14</sup>

From the combine emerged the Fritz Pollard Alliance (FPA), named after one of the league's first African American players and its first African American coach, Fritz Pollard.<sup>15</sup> Pollard was so often under siege as a player that he kicked his feet in front of him when rising from the ground to guard against cheap shots. In the following months, the FPA lobbied for a stronger Rooney Rule, and in July 2003, the NFL announced it was fining the Detroit Lions \$200,000 for failing to adhere to the duties of the rule. With the fine came a warning, the next violation by any team would trigger a \$500,000 fine.

Duru does a fantastic job chronicling discrimination in the NFL and connecting the issue with the broader struggle to end discrimination in today's society. With efficient storytelling, Duru recognizes the behind the scenes determination and effort that made the Rooney Rule possible. The book is an uplifting account that provides a blue print for effecting change. Although the book ends with Tony Dungy and the Indianapolis Colts' 2007 Super Bowl victory over Lovie Smith and the Chicago Bears, the story of the Rooney Rule and its success continues. Twenty-two percent of the league's current coaches are minorities, up from six percent when the Rooney Rule was implemented. The ends continue to justify the means described in *Advancing The Ball*.

*Sean O'Connell\**

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14. The "meat market" is a reference to the NFL's annual scouting combine where amateur athletes compete and participate in various activities for the various NFL teams.

15. The Fritz Pollard Alliance (FPA) promotes minority hiring throughout the NFL. Additional information on the FPA is available at [fritzpollard.org](http://fritzpollard.org).

\* Sean O'Connell is a J.D. candidate at DePaul College of Law, 2012. He is the Symposium Editor for the DePaul Journal of Sports Law and Contemporary Problems, a position he has held for two years.