

****Equal opportunity in US sport: The working and effectiveness of the Rooney Rule****

Article. Duru, J. (2025). Forward Progress: The Rooney Rule and Its Post-SFFA Relevance. *Harvard Journal of Sport and Entertainment Law*, 16, 181-233

Link. ["Forward Progress: The Rooney Rule and Its Post-SFFA Relevance" by N. Jeremi Duru](#)

Aim. For decades, the National Football League (NFL) in the United States has grappled with a lack of diversity in leadership positions, particularly among head coaches. The ‘Rooney Rule’, introduced in the US in 2003, aimed to address this by requiring NFL teams to interview at least one candidate of color for coaching roles. This research examines the history of this rule, its effectiveness, and whether it can withstand legal challenges following a Supreme Court decision that limited affirmative action in college admissions. The broader goal is to understand how to promote equal opportunity in employment, particularly in a high-profile industry like professional sports.

Methods. A variety of methods was used to study this issue. These include historical analysis of the NFL’s integration, legal analysis of the Rooney Rule and related court cases (including a lawsuit brought by former coach Brian Flores), and examination of NFL policies and reports. The study also considers the legal framework of the ‘Disparate Impact Rule’, which allows companies to use practices that promote diversity even if they have some unintentional differences in hiring rates.

Key findings. The NFL was initially segregated, excluding Black players until 1946. While integration occurred, Black players faced limitations and discrimination. The Rooney Rule initially appeared to increase diversity, but evidence suggests some teams treated interviews as a formality, going through the motions without genuine consideration of candidates of color. Despite these shortcomings, legal experts generally believe the Rooney Rule is likely to remain legal because it focuses on ensuring interview opportunities, not guaranteeing hiring outcomes. The Disparate Impact Rule also remains a viable legal tool for companies to promote diversity. Maintaining policies like the Rooney Rule is seen as important for promoting equal opportunity and addressing historical inequities.

Limitations. The study primarily relied on publicly available information and legal documents, which may not capture the full picture of behind-the-scenes decision-making. Some of the research focuses specifically on head coaching and general manager positions, and doesn’t explore diversity at other levels within NFL organizations. The legal landscape is also constantly evolving, meaning interpretations of relevant laws could change in the future.