



**The Glass Ceiling of African American Assistant Football Coaches**

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## **Abstract**

African American assistant football coaches in college and the National Football League (NFL) alike face a gauntlet of challenges in their quests to become head coaches. Much of the systematic exclusion of qualified African American head coaching candidates stems from archaic and baseless biases. In 2018, 49.2 percent of college football players at the Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) level – the highest classification of college football – were African American. During that same season, only 37.63% of the assistant coaches, 14.72% of the coordinators, and 8.53% of the head coaches were African American.

NFL officials have begrudgingly recognized this issue and enacted policies to mandate minority interviews and consideration for open roles. However, these policies have been weakened by teams that “game” the system with sham interviews with no serious consideration given to African American candidates.

My original research on 62 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I FBS College football teams showed an undeniable connection between playing quarterback and becoming a head coach. 30.6% of the head coaches in the study played quarterback – an overwhelming majority. It remains to be seen if the unprecedented success of African American quarterbacks in recent NFL seasons will spark a change in the coaching racial landscape for years to come.

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Lastly, I must thank my parents, grandparents, and wife for colluding together over the better part of the past three years to collectively ask me every single day how this project was coming. We're going to have to find something else to talk about.

## **Introduction**

Since the first intercollegiate football game, played between Princeton and Rutgers in 1869, college football has made significant strides in its integration and treatment of African Americans. The University of Alabama, which has the most claimed college football national championships of any current major college football team (17), did not field a single African American player until 1971 (John Mitchell). In the 2018-2019 season, the University of Alabama lined up with 77 African American players, including 19 out of 22 starters for the first game of the season. The first African American assistant coach at Alabama was not hired until 1973 (also John Mitchell), and after 137 seasons of intercollegiate football, Alabama still has never had an African American head coach.

Since African Americans have been allowed to participate in football, the sport has experienced extreme racial stacking by position. Stacking is a phenomenon that occurs when there are positions on the field that are nearly exclusively played by certain races. Assistant football coaches most frequently coach the position that they played. This leads to a parallel stacking phenomenon among the coaching ranks. In order to examine the racial discrepancy in coaching, I have researched all head and assistant football coaches that 62 Division 1 FBS football programs employed during the 2017 season. This research included detailed profiles on 616 total coaches. The information included in these profiles were, title, race, playing history, and career timeline. This massive undertaking was

done to closely examine who is and is not getting opportunities for career advancement and why.

In 2017, every team was allowed to employ a head coach and 9 assistants. While every team could use their own discretion to assign their coaches positions on the field to coach, for the purpose of the research I grouped the coaches into the following categories: Head Coach, Offensive Coordinator, Quarterbacks Coach, Offensive Line Coach, Running Backs Coach, Wide Receivers Coach, Tight Ends Coach, Defensive Coordinator, Defensive Line Coach, Linebackers Coach, Defensive Backs Coach, and Special Teams Coordinator. There is nearly always overlap of responsibilities by a few individuals on a staff. For example, an offensive coordinator often also serves as the quarterbacks coach. It is for that reason that 10 coaches can fill the responsibilities of 13 jobs.

There has been a historic dearth of African Americans at the quarterback position. In their article, *"An Amazing Specimen": NFL Draft Experts' Evaluations of Black Quarterbacks*, Matthew Bigler and Judson Jeffries (2008) write: "...the lack of Black NFL quarterbacks is a direct result of the low numbers of Black college quarterbacks in general"(p. 124). The issue concerning the historic exclusion of African American players from the quarterback position as a stand-alone topic is both important and relevant. However, in this paper I will examine how this phenomenon is contributing to limiting the upward mobility of African American assistant coaches. According to my research on 2017 FBS coaches, the majority of head coaches played quarterback. Before they became head coaches, most of these

head coaches were offensive coordinators. As my research indicates, most offensive coordinators played and now coach quarterback. Limiting the quarterback position to white players for the majority of football's history, has subsequently limited who the viable head coaching candidates are.

Just as African American players have been limited to decentralized roles on the field, many African American assistant coaches have been limited to roles that minimize their schematic contribution. These roles rely more heavily on recruiting and player relationships. As we will discuss in Chapter Three, Trevor Bopp and George B. Cunningham discuss how the media perpetuate this in press releases after a coach is hired in their 2010 study *Race Ideology Perpetuated: Media Representations of Newly Hired Football Coaches*. Regardless of a coach's role, the media is more likely to emphasize an African American coach's contributions to recruiting efforts, and less likely to recognize their schematic ability.

Another issue that African Americans assistant coaches face is the lack of African American university athletic directors and NFL owners and general Managers. The majority of these individuals in hiring positions have been historically reluctant to hire minority candidates even after specific policies have been enacted to mandate interviews for these candidates. As Cyrus Mehri and Johnnie Cochran proved in their 2002 study, *Black Coaches in the NFL: Superior Performance, Inferior Opportunities*, African American coaches have not only been as successful as their white counterparts, but often better. Regardless of studies like this, university athletic directors and team executives continue to drag their feet

when it comes to hiring qualified African American assistant coaches as head coaches

As a player, I never had an African American coach. Once I entered the college coaching ranks I started to see patterns in the positions African Americans coached, how the media portrayed these coaches, and the subsequent opportunities for career advancement they were afforded. Conversations with my coaching colleagues also helped shaped my perspective on the challenges African American coaches face. I have been coaching on the offensive staff at Duke University for six seasons and previously served in smaller capacities at smaller programs for four seasons. During my time as a coach I have gained an inside perspective on how programs are run, how jobs are filled, and what it takes to get head coaching opportunities. This study was an attempt to qualify challenges of my coworkers and validate my own observations and suspicions.

While the NFL has enacted policies like the Rooney Rule and the Bill Walsh Minority Coaching Fellowship to combat the lack of African Americans in head coaching positions, these policies have been poorly enforced and have experienced varying degrees of success. The most promising sign for impending change may be the unprecedented success of African American quarterbacks in the NFL in recent seasons. This success could lead to a rise in African American players playing quarterback, strengthening the resumes of the next generation of African American football coaches.

## **Methods**

To validate my suspicions on the perceived disadvantages that African American assistant coaches face in their career paths I conducted my own original research on coaching career progression. I studied 62 NCAA FBS Division I teams and their coaching staffs. To track career progression most effectively, I charted the jobs and tenures of each member of the staff held for the duration of their coaching career. My goals were both micro and macro-level. In addition to basic relevant biographical info (race, position played, NFL experience), I wanted to chart every coach's specific job function each year of their career and to also construct every coach's "resume" to see who exactly was getting each job.

Tracking down the career progression information on all head and assistant coaches was a tedious and time consuming task. Most universities mention where a coach has been in the past on that coach's biography page on the university's athletic website. This information was rarely detailed enough to construct a comprehensive data set. Instead of gleaning what I could from the biography pages, I found that the university's football media guides were more helpful.

Most universities produce a football media guide every season. In addition to schedule information, player rosters, and statistics, most media guides devote a page or two to each coach and include a career history table that charts each coach's career progression. However, there were some issues that I ran into while mining the media guides for this information. First, not every school releases their media guide to the public. There were times I had to find a media guide from a coach's two

or three previous jobs before their current one and work backwards from there. Also, most schools that do release their media guides to the public, only archive the past few seasons. It was often challenging in finding media guides from more than five years ago. Lastly, there is no universal governing body to determine how specific a coach's career history table needs to be. This led to varying degrees of detail from media guide to media guide. For example, some media guides would list each coach's specific job function for every season while others would simply say that a coach was an "Assistant." To combat this and accumulate as much useful data as possible, I frequently had to hunt for two or three media guides per individual coach to corroborate certain information. In rare cases, information was unavailable and I had to move on without it.

By the time I had completed my research, I had built a mini "profile" for each coach in the study. I used these profiles to identify common background threads among coaches and relevant patterns in hiring practices. The specific trends I looked at were:

- Race
- Experience (offense or defense)
- Position played
- NFL playing experience
- If the coach had ever gotten an "Assistant/Associate Head Coach" title
- How many years before becoming a head coach for the first time  
(head coaches only)

- If the coach was the sole coordinator or a co-coordinator  
(coordinators only)
- What percentage of a coach's career did they spend coaching that  
particular position (position coaches only)

I examined each of these trends for all coaches collectively, then just among white coaches, then just among African American coaches.

## **Chapter One: The Racial Divide**

A major college football program is an entity unlike any other on a college campus. These programs command a roster of athletes and a support staff unmatched both in number and cost by any other on campus athletic program. Modern programs routinely have at least 100 student athletes with an innumerable amount of coaching and support staff members. For example, in their 2019 Media Guide, the University of Alabama lists 120 players on its roster (including THREE people each assigned the jersey #20), along with a head coach, 10 assistant coaches, and 77 members of support staff. The support staff members' titles range from Quality Control Analyst, to Equipment Manager, to Team Dentist.

The primary focus of this chapter is on the population and demographics of athletes and coaching staff members. For the purposes of this paper, it is important to understand the hierarchy of how most programs structure their staffs. There is always a head coach at the top of a program's hierarchy. The school's athletic director is in charge of hiring the head coach; this decision's outcome will often secure or threaten the athletic director's job. The head coach is responsible for hiring the rest of his staff. Beneath the head coach, there are coordinators. Most teams have an offensive coordinator, a defensive coordinator, and a special teams coordinator. It is not uncommon to name "co-offensive or co-defensive coordinators" as well. These coordinators are responsible for everything that happens on their respective sides of the ball. Beneath the coordinators are the remaining assistant coaches, each generally in charge of coaching a specific position.

In most cases, the coordinators are responsible for coaching a position as well but this is not necessarily universal. In addition to naming coordinators, most head coaches have the freedom to add something that we will call, “non coordinator titles” onto an assistant. These titles are most commonly “Assistant Head Coach” or “Associate Head Coach.” From my experience working in college football, these titles carry very little to no additional real responsibility. Head coaches primarily use these titles to give assistant coaches salary increases so as not to lose them to a bigger, richer program.

The NCAA Center for Diversity Research (<http://www.ncaa.org/about/resources/research/diversity-research>) compiles and provides statistical information regarding certain demographic characteristics of various groups within their member institutions and conferences. This information pertains to the populations of student athletes, coaches, administrators, conference personnel broken down by racial and gender specific parameters. This information can be used to track statistical trends going back to 2008.

One tool on the NCAA Center for Diversity Research’s website is the NCAA Demographics Database. This database allows a user to sort data by year, sport, title, subdivision, division, and conference. The website also displays this data visually with tables that can be manipulated with parameters selected by the user. According to NCAA Demographics Database there were 994 assistant coaching positions available among the 129 Division I FBS college football programs in 2018 (the most recent available year). Of these 994 assistant coaching positions, 522 of

them were held by white coaches. This comes out to 52.5%, a large majority considering that the next most represented population is African American coaches at 37.6% (374 total).

The database also shows data on offensive and defensive coordinators.<sup>1</sup> The majority of coordinators in this particular year – and every other year ever – were white. 231 of the 299 positions were held by white coaches, equaling 77.3% compared to 14.7% of these positions that belonged to African American coaches.

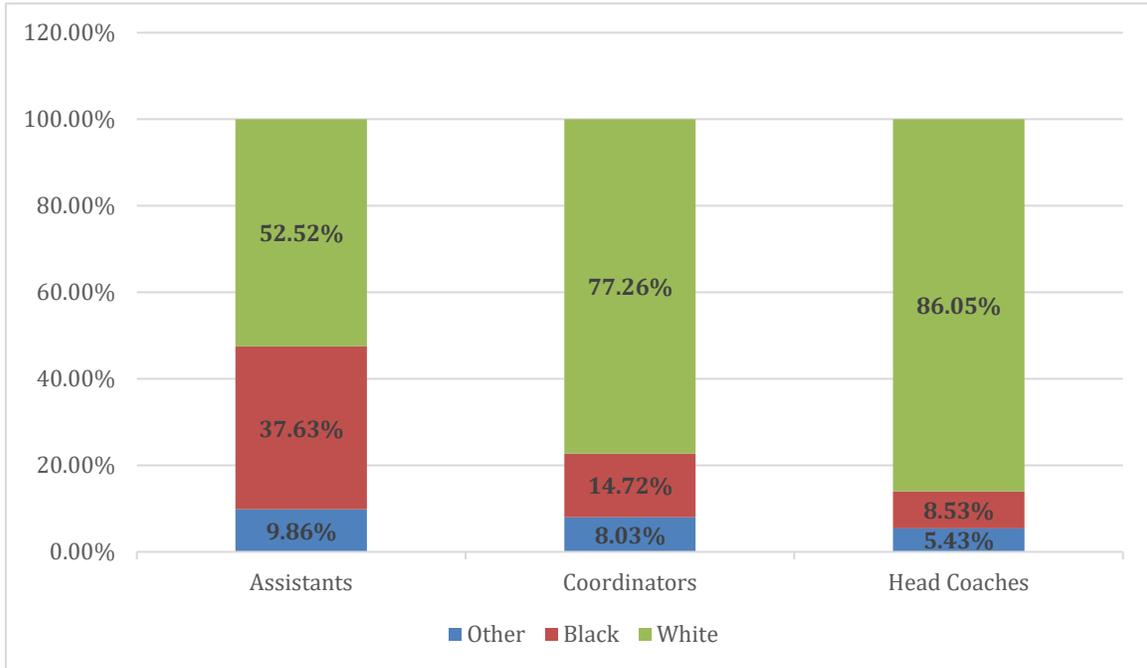
The next data set we need to look at is for the head coaching positions in 2018. Out of the 129 Division I FBS college football programs, 110 of them were led by a white head coach. That comes out to 85% of programs, an overwhelming majority considering the next best is African American coaches at only 9%.

This data displayed graphically looks like this:

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<sup>1</sup> Although it is a crucial part of the game there is no data on Special Teams Coordinators. Not every team has one, some divide the work amongst the staff.

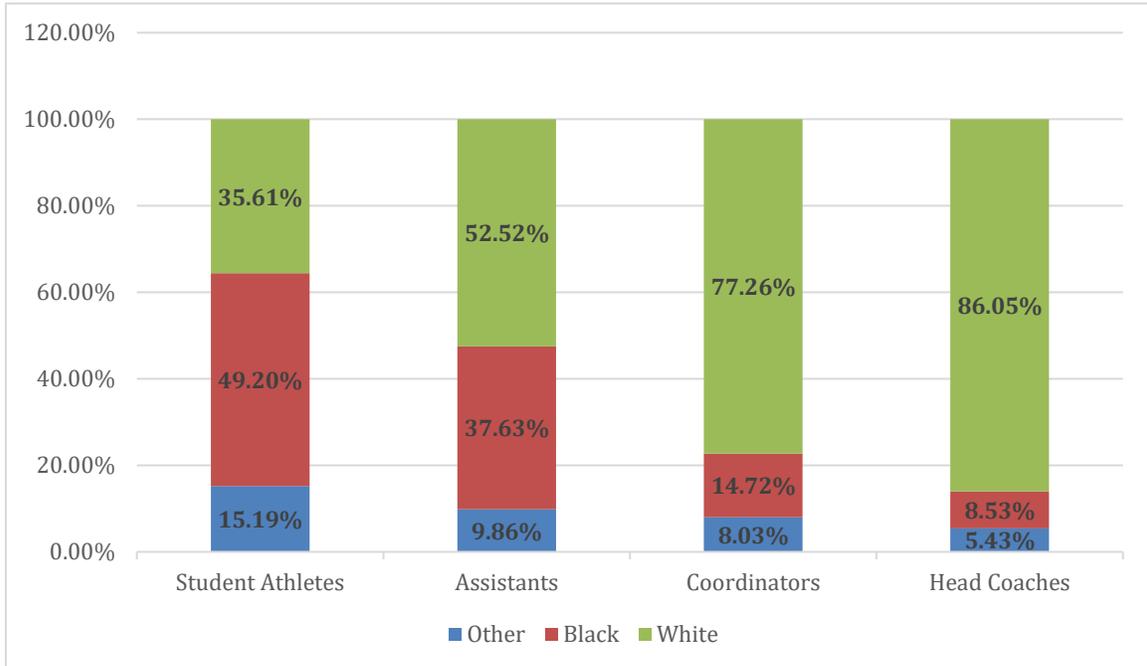
**Chart 1: 2018 Division I FBS Coaching Positions by Race**



The most striking thing to see about this data when it is displayed graphically, is that it is clear to see how every coaching position gets whiter and whiter as it climbs further and further up the hierarchy. But all of this data is just data without perspective.

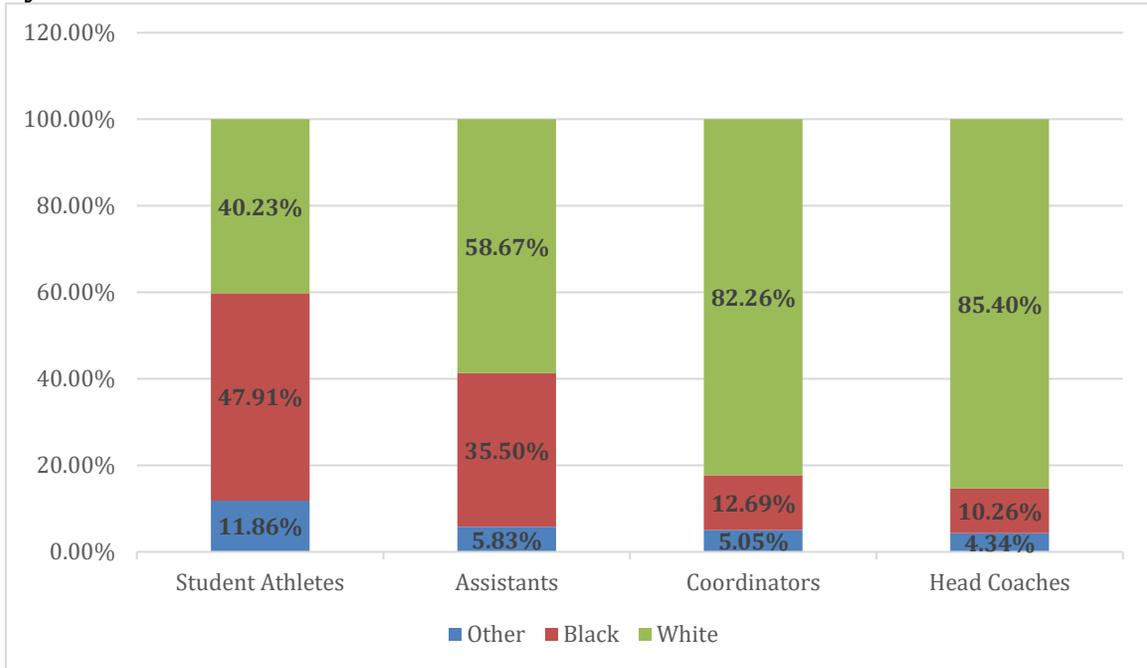
The perspective that matters most is the racial breakdown of football playing student athletes held against the racial breakdown of these coaches:

**Chart 2: 2018 Division I FBS Football Student Athletes & Coaching Positions by Race**



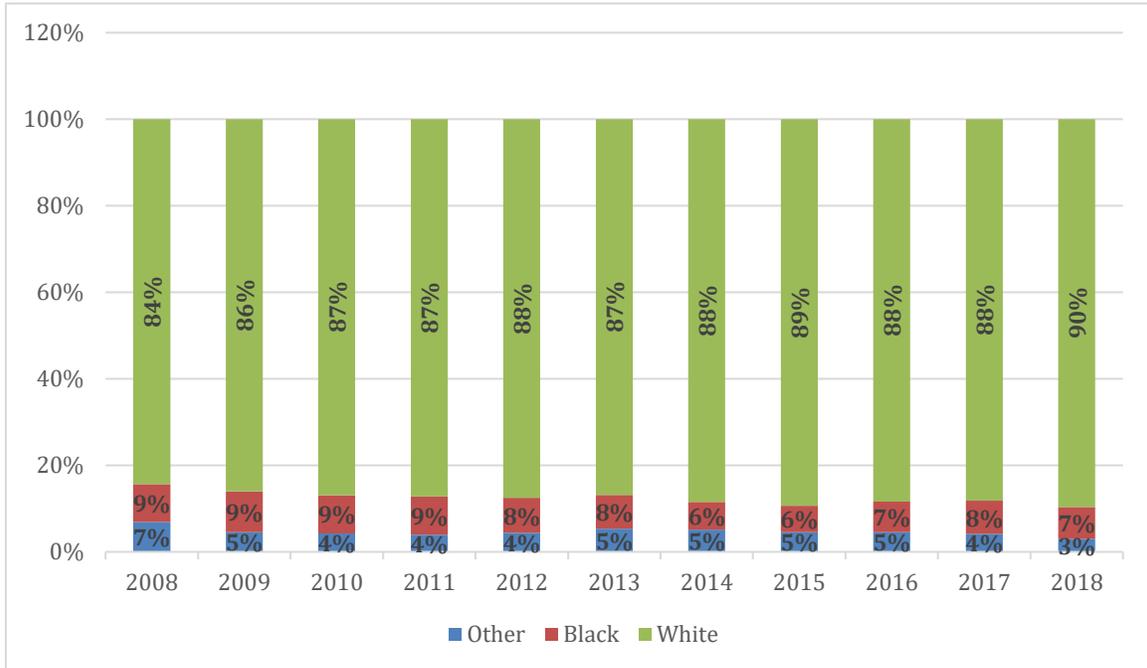
This was not a unique problem to the 2018 college football season. Since integration there has been a major demographic discrepancy between the participants and the coaches at the Division I FBS level. Although the problem extends much farther back, here is the cumulative data displayed in aggregate since 2008 (the earliest the NCAA Demographics Database goes):

**Chart 3: 2008-18 Division I FBS Football Student Athletes & Coaching Positions by Race**



It is hard to look at this data set graphically and ignore the fact that there has been a systemic exclusion from high-ranking coaching positions in place for a very long time. If we examine the racial breakdown of athletic directors, the ones tasked with filling these high-ranking coaching positions, the results should hardly be surprising:

**Chart 4: 2008-18 Division I FBS Athletic Directors**



The athletic director's job of hiring a head football coach is as high stakes of a decision as he or she will make during their tenure. This graph shows homogeneity of the population making these decisions.

The NFL is experiencing a similar discrepancy. When the 2018 season kicked off, there were 7 African American NFL head coaches – tied for the most ever, matching 2011 and 2017. There is no NFL player racial population breakdown available to the public, but if we assume it is similar to Division I FBS football (the closest available example in talent and structure), a league with 32 teams and only 21.8% of Head Coaches being African American was hardly an accurate representation of the player population. Unfortunately 5 of the 7 African American NFL head coaches were fired either during or directly following that season. Only one African American head coach was hired to fill an opening that offseason, bringing the grand total to 3 African American NFL head coaches to start the 2019 season. An NFL team's general manager is responsible for hiring the head coach and an NFL team's owner hires the general manager. Ozzie Newsome's retirement, as general manager of the Baltimore Ravens, following the 2018 season, brought the total of African American NFL general managers to one. There are currently no African American majority owners of any NFL franchises.

Long before I was aware of the NCAA for Diversity Research or the NCAA Demographics Database, I had known that there was a problem from my own lived experiences as a coach in Division I FBS college football. Scottie Montgomery, an African American offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach hired me at Duke

University in 2014. Scottie would go on to become the head coach at East Carolina University in 2016, and I was fully aware of how rare of an opportunity that was. Unfortunately, Scottie was fired from East Carolina after 3 seasons.

## **Chapter Two: What It Takes to Become a Head Coach**

My perspective from working in college football led me to compile my own research on diversity in Division I FBS college football. I researched the career paths of every coach from 62 Division I FBS programs (the first 62 alphabetically) during the 2017 season. The task of gleaning information for every coach on every staff in the country was as daunting and tedious of a goal as I have ever embarked on. The information was mined from university media guides – some readily available, but most not – over the course of three years. It is for that reason, I decided 62 programs would be enough to give an accurate representation. My goal was to track more than just which races of people were tasked with what jobs. I felt that diving deeper into a coach’s entire career path – including playing experience – would help paint a clearer picture of the systemic exclusion that I had already suspected. I examined the following data pertaining to each coach’s career path: Did they play college football? What position did they play? Did they play professionally in the NFL? Does this coach carry any “non coordinator titles?” And finally, if the coach was a head coach, how long did it take before they became a head coach at the Division I FBS level for the first time?

My research studying the 616 coaches in 2017 shows that all but 48 coaches played college football (92.2%). This shows that simply participating in college football as a player, more than any other factor, is the most important resume item that somebody could do if they aspired to become a Division I FBS coach. If this is

the case, then the question remains: Why do the demographics differ so greatly between the populations of players and coaches?

As I mentioned earlier, my 2017 study shows that 92.2% of Division I FBS coaches played football collegiately. If we break this down by race, we see that of the 391 white coaches, 90.3% of them played collegiately compared to 96.1% of the 207 African American coaches. So already there is a difference in the barriers of entry into to the coaching game. Without a credible playing experience it is hard for a white player to become a coach, but if you are an African American coach that did not play college football the margins are even slimmer. In my 2017 study, I examined 4 white head coaches that did not play college football, something that every single African American head coach had to have on his resume. This was just one of many instances where my 2017 research illustrated how much harder it is for an African American coach to get hired than it is for a white coach.

While playing in the NFL is by no means a requirement to coach at the Division I FBS level, it most certainly helps one's candidacy. According to my 2017 study, 17.7% of all coaches that I studied played at least one season of NFL football. There is however, another disparity when we examine the respective resumes of white and African American coaches. Only 8.4% of the white coaches had NFL playing experience while 34.8% of African American coaches had NFL playing experience. Of the white head coaches included in the study, only 6.5% played in the NFL, compared to 75% of African American head coaches.

In my 2017 study, I found that on average, among the group of 62 current head coaches included, it took 19.03 years from their first season as an assistant to land one's first Division I FBS head coaching job. If you happened to be a white head coach examined during this study, it only took an average of 18.8 years of following orders before being allowed to give them. African American head coaches had to wait an average of 22.5 years before being given a chance to run a program. This means that African American head coaching candidates – who are more likely to have played college football *and* played in the NFL – still have to wait longer than their white counterparts to become a head coach.

What other factors contribute to an assistant becoming a head coach? We have already established that an ideal candidate will have participated in college football as a player, served as an assistant for a long time, and while not a requirement, have experience in the NFL. If we examine the head coaches included in my 2017 study certain similarities become evident. As we have discussed, having experience as a college football player is vital, but equally as important is the specific position that an individual played while in college:

**Chart 5: Head Coaches Positions Played (All Races)**

<b>Position Played</b>	<b># of Head Coaches</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Quarterback	19	30.6%
Running Back	2	3.2%
Tight End	0	0%
Wide Receiver	7	11.3%
Offensive Line	0	0%
Defensive Line	5	8.1%
Linebacker	8	12.9%
Defensive Back	11	17.7%
Specialist	0	0%
Multiple	6	9.7%
None or N/A	4	6.5%

The obvious place to start is the number of head coaches that played quarterback. The “Multiple” position refers to head coaches that played multiple positions during their time as a student athlete. It is important to note that 3 of the coaches that were scored under the multiple category had quarterback in their playing repertoire, so the number of head coaches that played quarterback is actually higher.

Next, if we examine the breakdown of what side of the ball these coaches played on we see that offense has a 28 to 24 edge over defense. Offensive emphasis is currently more attractive as opposed to defensive emphasis in terms of hiring a head coach.<sup>2</sup> This is further proven if we examine whether the majority of time each of these head coaches spent working as an assistant was on offense or defense:

**Chart 6: Head Coaches Positions Coached (All Races)**

<b>Side of the Ball Coached</b>	<b># of Head Coaches</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Offense	35	56.5%
Defense	21	33.9%
Both	6	9.7%

This table plainly states that assistants with offensive backgrounds are much more likely than those with defensive backgrounds to be considered for a head coaching vacancy. Of the 62 head coaches in the study, 37 were coaching on offense

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<sup>2</sup> Four out of five NFL head coaching vacancies this offseason (2020) were filled by coaches with credible offensive coaching and playing experience.

immediately before they were hired as a head coach for the first time. If you were interested in becoming a head coach, your best bet would be to become an offensive coordinator first.

There were 70 offensive coordinators included in my 2017 study. An offensive coordinator is tasked with managing the entire offensive staff, making personnel decisions relating to all offensive players, overseeing the offensive gameplan each week, and most importantly calling offensive plays on gameday. Offensive coordinators are not required to coach any one of the 5 offensive positions but most coach the quarterbacks (38 out of 70 – 54.3% of offensive coordinators in my 2017 study coached the quarterbacks). When we examine what positions these coaches played the trend of quarterback continues:

**Chart 7: Offensive Coordinators Positions Played (All Races)**

<b>Position Played</b>	<b># of Offensive Coordinators</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Quarterback	28	40.0%
Running Back	2	2.9%
Tight End	3	4.3%
Wide Receiver	9	12.9%
Offensive Line	13	18.6%
Defensive Line	1	1.4%
Linebacker	0	0.0%
Defensive Back	6	8.6%
Specialist	0	0%
Multiple	1	1.4%
None or N/A	7	10.0%

If the head coaching positions are filled with former quarterbacks, it should come as no surprise that the offensive coordinator positions are even less diluted with positions other than quarterback.

As I mentioned in the introduction, the quarterback position has a deep and controversial tie to race. For the entire history of modern football as we know it African American athletes have been systematically steered away from the

quarterback position. I will fully discuss the reasons and effects of this phenomenon as it pertains to coaching in the next chapter, but it is important to understand that there is some relevant racial context that pertains to the inclusivity of the quarterback position when studying these trends. Earlier in this chapter we mentioned how vital it is for a coach to have participated in college football as a player. Now as we look at how an individual's position can affect their career trajectory, it is more and more clear how beneficial it is to play quarterback – a position with a long history of African American suppression.

Every offseason there is a hiring cycle in both college football and the NFL. University athletic directors and NFL team owners and general managers alike will dismiss their current head coaches in search for new leadership. At the time of this publication there have been 22 head coaching changes at the Division I FBS level this offseason. Of these 22, 16 were filled by offensive minded coaches. The NFL is no different, 4 out of the 5 head coaching changes went to candidates with backgrounds coaching on offense. This nationwide fascination with offense and scoring is not a new trend – nor is the connection with offensive coaching and quarterback playing experience. When we study this trend we start to unpack the reasons behind the systemic limitations that African Americans have in their pursuit of head coaching opportunities.

Year after year the number of African American coaches hired during this period reflect that of a systemic exclusion. The NFL currently only has 3 African American head coaches and zero African American head coaches were hired for any

of the 5 vacancies this offseason. This offseason, Kansas City Chiefs Offensive Coordinator, Eric Bieniemy, was not hired for any vacancy despite numerous rumors of his potential candidacy with basically every team that had an opening. Eric Bieniemy not only produced a top 5 scoring offense for the second year in a row, but also is responsible for Quarterback Patrick Mahomes' meteoric rise from a perceived 'gimick college system quarterback'<sup>3</sup> to NFL MVP. The individual's hired instead of Bieniemy:

- Matt Rhule, white – successful college head coach.
- Kevin Stefanski, white – was the offensive Coordinator for the Minnesota Vikings whose scoring output ranked 3 spots lower than Bieniemy's Kansas City Chiefs' offense.
- Mike McCarthy, white – sat out last season after being fired as the Head Coach of the Green Bay Packers for his failure to lead the team to the playoffs. The Green Bay Packers went on to post the second best record in the NFL the very next year.
- Joe Judge – white, former quarterback and a career support staffer who has been the Special Teams Coordinator of the New England Patriots for the past 4 seasons.

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<sup>3</sup> Patrick Mahomes played collegiately at Texas Tech University. Texas Tech has an established track record of yielding quarterbacks with gaudy passing statistics and limited NFL success.

- Ron Rivera – Hispanic, hired 28 days after being fired as Carolina Panthers Head Coach for failing to lead the team to the playoffs 3 out of the past 4 seasons.

While it is unfair to judge these newly hired coaches' successes before they have coached a single game with their new teams, it is easy to see why Bieniemy, with his very legitimate resume has reason to be frustrated – frustration he took out by conducting a 51 point dismantling of the Houston Texans' defense in their second-round playoff game on January 12<sup>th</sup>. However, as a player, Bieniemy was a running back – not a quarterback – at the University of Colorado. This is part of the reason why he has been denied the opportunity to become a head coach, making him the most recent example in a long line of deserving African American coaches caught in an inexplicable phenomenon of antiquated biases and subconscious exclusions.

Examples of the same systemic exclusion are rampant in college football. Recently, one must look no further than Greensboro, North Carolina – home of the North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University (North Carolina A&T) football team. Head Coach, Sam Washington has a combined 2 year record of 19-5 after posting seasons of 10-2 and 9-3 while averaging 30.1 and 35.7 points per game respectively. In each of his two seasons at North Carolina A&T he has coached in and won the Celebration Bowl – widely recognized as the National Championship of all Historically Black College and University football.

North Carolina A&T is a Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) school, which is a tier lower than FBS. FCS schools have fewer scholarships, worse facilities,

and are less funded than their FBS counterparts. FBS schools regularly add FCS schools to their schedules. There is mutual benefit to this as the FBS school will most likely score an easy win early in the season to help build confidence before they enter their much tougher conference schedule. In return, the FCS school receives a sizeable check from the FBS school. This check is a major funding source for a FCS school's athletic department. In 2018, Coach Sam Washington's first season, East Carolina University (an FBS school) paid North Carolina A&T \$330,000 to drive 150 miles to Greenville. North Carolina A&T took the check and proceeded to beat East Carolina University in front of their own fans 28-23.

Sam Washington has not been publicly linked to any jobs at the FBS level despite his success as an FCS coach against FBS opponents. Coach Washington beat East Carolina University in 2018 and was the Defensive Coordinator at North Carolina A&T for their victories over their FBS opponents in 2013, 2016, and 2017. To paint the picture of how notable of an accomplishment that is, historical context is needed. In the past three seasons FBS schools have a record of 259-19 against FCS schools. It is rare for an FCS team to beat an FBS team. North Carolina A&T has beaten 4 FBS schools since 2013 – a feat that is virtually unheard of. The fact that FBS athletic directors consistently ignore a candidate like Sam Washington with proven success against their counterparts while coaching undermanned and understaffed teams is equally unfathomable.

Matt Rhule (white), spent three seasons as the Head Coach at Baylor University. After his first two seasons and compiling a combined record of 8-17, he

turned down the head coaching position of the NFL's Indianapolis Colts. Rhule coached one more season at Baylor University before accepting the head coaching job of the NFL's Carolina Panthers. One would certainly hope that year three of Sam Washington's tenure at the helm of North Carolina A&T's football program brings him an opportunity commensurate with his accomplishments. My guess is that it will not.

Yes, Sam Washington is an African American Head Coach – but he also coaches at North Carolina A&T, a historically black university that competes in the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference against other historically black universities. Also, Sam Washington played defense and has spent his entire career coaching defense. These factors have limited his and many others' successes. But what about North Carolina A&T's offensive coordinator? Surely, the team's quarterback coach and man responsible for back to back seasons averaging over 30 points per game should be on track for advancement. These accomplishments notwithstanding, as of 2020, it appears that the team's playcaller, Chris Barnette, will serve at least another year at the same post at North Carolina A&T.

The responsibility for the systemic exclusion of highly qualified African American candidates from head coaching positions rests upon the shoulders of Division I FBS athletic directors and NFL owners and general managers. In Chapter 1 I discussed the lack of diversity among Division I FBS athletic directors and NFL general managers. These individuals in hiring positions have proven time and time again that they are only comfortable hiring people that look exactly like them and

rarely take a chance on somebody else. This offseason, David Tepper, owner of the NFL's Carolina Panthers, hired Matt Rhule to be their head coach. In Max Henson's article, *Why Matt Rhule? David Tepper Explains*, he has a revealing quote from Tepper on why he hired Rhule: "He dresses like (expletive) and sweats all over himself. He dresses like me, so I have to love the guy,' Tepper said with a laugh. 'I was a short-order cook, he was a short-order cook. Nobody gave him anything, nobody gave me anything'" (<https://www.panthers.com/news/why-matt-rhule-david-tepper-explains>). Matt Rhule reminded Tepper of himself. Tepper's perception of Rhule as a poor dresser reminded him of himself and was somehow segued into Tepper's view of Rhule as a self-made man.

### Chapter Three: A Game of Segregation

In their 2014 study, published in *The Journal of Sport Management*, *Racial Tasking and the College Quarterback: Redefining the Stacking Phenomenon*, Trevor Bopp and Michael Sagas describe a phenomenon that they call “racial tasking.”<sup>4</sup> As they explain, racial tasking occurs when “the tasks athletes are asked to perform are dependent upon the athlete’s race and vary despite occupying the same playing position” (Bopp & Sagas, p. 140). Bopp and Sagas were describing this phenomenon within the context of African American and white college quarterbacks. Bopp and Sagas studied the differences in the roles African American quarterbacks and white quarterbacks were asked to execute from one another even though they play the same position. This section will show why the phenomenon of racial tasking is occurring in coaching as well.

In order to understand how racial tasking is happening in coaching, it is important to understand how a coaching staff functions. On a Division I FBS college football coaching staff the head coach, coordinators, and assistant coaches have two primary job functions: contribute to the weekly gameplan and overall scheme and recruit future potential student athletes. From my own observations, many assistant coaches display proclivities to aid in one of these areas more than the other.

Assistants who consistently contribute schematic ideas and philosophies to the

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<sup>4</sup> From Bopp, Trevor, and Michael Sagas. “Racial Tasking and the College Quarterback: Redefining the Stacking Phenomenon.” *Journal of Sport Management*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2014, pp. 136–142., doi:10.1123/jsm.2012-0296.

gameplan often get promoted to coordinators. Offensive and defensive coordinators who display a consistent ability to score points or prevent scoring, become a head coach. It is rare for an assistant coach to get hired as a head coach without first serving as a coordinator, and more recently, as an offensive coordinator.

The yearlong burden of recruiting future student athletes is shared across the entire coaching staff, but because coordinators are ultimately responsible for the gameplan and scheme, they often have a lesser role in recruiting efforts than the other assistants on the staff. While every coach is ultimately responsible for the success or failures of their own position (recruiting elite personnel is vital to this) in my time as a college football coach, I have seen assistant coaches get hired because of their reputation for being elite recruiters rather than their schematic knowledge or coaching ability. Elite recruiters have the ability to relate to potential student athletes and their families to convince them to come to their university rather than a competing university. While this is an invaluable trait in an assistant coach, it has no bearing on an assistant becoming a coordinator. A coach becomes a coordinator solely through an advanced understanding of strategic football schemes. Unlike assistant coaches who display an aptitude for scheme finding advancement as a coordinator, assistant coaches who are elite recruiters have no clear path to becoming a head coach without demonstrating the same schematic aptitude.

Although Trevor Bopp did not coin the term “racial tasking” until his 2014 study with Michael Sagas, he was certainly aware that it was occurring in college coaching. In his 2010 study, *Race Ideology Perpetuated: Media Representations of*

*Newly Hired Football Coaches* co-authored with George B. Cunningham, he examines athletic department media press releases on coaching hires prior to the 2008 season.<sup>5</sup> One of the research questions they addressed was: How do the media frame the contributions the newly hired African Americans and white coaches are expected to make for the team? The two studied 191 coaching hires at the Division I FBS level (120 white coaches, 68 African American coaches, and 3 classified as other) and the media press releases that accompanied them. They broke the content analysis of the media releases down to 10 themes:

- Coaching Ability (i.e. technical expertise the coach is bringing to the team)
- Coaching Experience (i.e. years of experience the coach has)
- Playing Experience (i.e. the degree to which a coach's playing experience in college or professionally will contribute to the team)
- Recruiting (i.e. the coach's ability to attract future potential student athletes)
- Relate (i.e. the degree to which a coach could relate to the players on the team)
- Fit (i.e. the degree to which a coach would "fit in" with the other members of the coaching staff)
- Personal (i.e. the unique personal characteristics of the coach, such as his integrity)

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<sup>5</sup> From Cunningham, George B., and Trevor Bopp. "Race Ideology Perpetuated: Media Representations of Newly Hired Football Coaches." *Journal of Sports Media*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2010, pp. 1-19., doi:10.1353/jsm.0.0048.

- Network – Head Coach (i.e. the previous connections and affiliation the coach had with the Head Coach)
- Network – Experience (i.e. the previous connections and affiliations the coach had with influential others in the coaching industry)
- Network – Alum (i.e. the previous experiences the coach had with the particular university, most oftentimes as a player)

Bopp and Cunningham put a table together for how often these themes were mentioned for white coaches and African American coaches in the media releases directly following the hire (see Table 1):

Themes like Coaching Ability and Coaching Experience were more likely to appear in releases about white coaches than in the media releases about their African American counterparts. These two themes are particularly important for the media to reinforce a bias for white coaches, as Bopp and Cunningham write:

...both coaching ability and coaching experience were collectively linked to what organizational psychologists refer to as human capital, or the knowledge, skills, abilities, and work-related experiences one possesses (Becker, 1993; Nordhaug, 1993). These forms of codified and tacit knowledge are important because they are very difficult to imitate and are closely linked with various indicators of career success, including promotions (Hitt, Bierman, Shimizu & Kochhar, 2001; Sagas & Cunningham, 2004). (Bopp & Cunningham p. 13)

When these media releases reinforce racial tropes that Bopp and Sagas wrote about in their 2014 study on the racial tasking of college quarterbacks:

African American athletes were portrayed to owe their successes to an innate physical ability while their White counterparts were portrayed to have earned their achievements through hard work, intelligence, and strong leadership behaviors. (Bopp & Sagas p. 137)

These undertones are proven further when examining what the media wrote about

African American assistants:

On the other hand, the media releases were more likely to emphasize the African American's *recruiting ability* and capacity to *relate* to the players than they were to emphasize those qualities for White coaches...To be sure, both of these functions are important; however, that they are more likely to appear in African American's releases than in white's reinforces a common perception among African American coaches—that they are hired to help in recruiting and to “monitor” the African American athletes on the team (Brown, 2002). (Bopp & Cunningham p. 13)

**Chart 8: Racial Differences in the Coach’s Contributions to the Staff<sup>6</sup>**

Theme:	African American		White	
	#	%	#	%
Coaching Ability				
Not Mentioned	14	22.6	6	6.3
Mentioned	48	77.4	89	93.7
Coaching Experience				
Not Mentioned	25	40.3	16	16.8
Mentioned	37	59.7	79	83.2
Playing Experience				
Not Mentioned	50	80.6	78	82.1
Mentioned	12	19.4	17	17.9
Recruiting				
Not Mentioned	33	53.2	64	67.4
Mentioned	29	46.8	31	32.6
Relate				
Not Mentioned	49	79.0	86	90.5
Mentioned	13	21.0	9	9.5
Fit				
Not Mentioned	52	83.9	75	78.9
Mentioned	10	16.1	20	21.1
Personal				
Not Mentioned	42	67.7	56	58.9
Mentioned	20	32.3	39	41.1
Network – Head Coach				
Not Mentioned	49	79.0	69	72.6
Mentioned	13	21.0	26	27.4
Network - Experience				
Not Mentioned	50	80.6	77	81.1
Mentioned	12	19.4	18	18.9
Network - Alum				
Not Mentioned	50	80.6	77	81.1
Mentioned	12	19.4	18	18.9

<sup>6</sup> Adapted from Race Ideology Perpetuated: Media Representations of Newly Hired Football Coaches.” *Journal of Sports Media*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2010, pp. 1–19., doi:10.1353/jsm.0.0048.

African American coaches who are pigeonholed in roles of recruiting and player relating-ability – decidedly outside of the realms of coaching ability and coaching experience – are stuck on a continuous loop of decentralized coaching roles. These African American assistants are thus excluded from ever gaining the necessary experience to become a head coach. As Bopp and Cunningham note in their conclusion:

Collectively, these findings suggest that Whites continue to be over-represented as coaches, especially in power positions (i.e., coordinator), and are depicted in ways that reproduce and reinforce their social power in the sport context. (Bopp & Cunningham p. 15)

The self-perpetuating nature of tagging African American coaches as experts of decentralized skills will forever keep them in decentralized roles. Perhaps it was an unintended finding from their study but Bopp and Cunningham also noted that in general following the 2007 season, a white assistant coach was 76% more likely to get hired for any role than an African American coach (Bopp & Cunningham p. 8).

Another major contributing factor to the marginalization of African American coaches is a phenomenon called “stacking.” As JR Woodward wrote in his 2004 submission to the *Sociology of Sport Journal*, titled *Professional Football Scouts: An Investigation of Racial Stacking*:<sup>7</sup>

Racial stacking is the over- or underrepresentation of players of certain races in particular positions in team sports (Coakley, 1998). For example, Quarterbacks in football and catchers in baseball have traditionally been White, whereas Black players are more often found playing in the outfield in

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<sup>7</sup> From Woodward, J. R. “Professional Football Scouts: An Investigation of Racial Stacking.” *Sociology of Sport Journal*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2004, pp. 356–375., doi:10.1123/ssj.21.4.356.

baseball and as running backs or wide receivers in football. (Woodward p. 137)

In *Racial Tasking and the College Quarterback: Redefining the Stacking Phenomenon*,

Trevor Bopp and Michael Sagas define stacking as:

...a manner in which such racial hierarchies are manifested on the field of play. Stacking is the segregation and designation of athletes to certain positions as a result of assumptions made concerning a link between athletic ability and race; leading to the overrepresentation of minorities in some playing positions and the underrepresentation in others (Sack, Singh, & Thiel, 2005). (Bopp & Sagas p. 136)

No matter whose definition you use, the common understanding is that stacking is an issue of racial diversity by position.

As Bopp and Sagas write, this over representation of African Americans in decentralized positions has major long-term negative consequences for these same participants if they ever aspire to become a head coach:

In football, African Americans have historically been relegated to peripheral positions such as running back, wide receiver, and defensive back while being largely ignored for the most central position in all of sport: the Quarterback (Anderson, 1993; Finch, McDowell, & Sagas, 2010; Hawkins, 2002; Smith et al., 2012; Woodward, 2004). It is the Quarterback position that has traditionally been the pathway to a head coaching position, and as such, played a crucial role in the development of athletes for coaching careers. (Bopp & Sagas p. 136)

They later reinforce: "Anderson (1993) found that the more central a playing position (e.g., Quarterback), as well as a coaching position, the greater chance that player or coach had at becoming a head coach" (Bopp & Sagas p. 137). There are many factors that lead to stacking. Woodward writes:

Madison and Landers (1976), in a study of college and professional football players, also tested Loy and McElvogue's findings and concluded that African

American athletes felt pressure (probably from coaches, in their opinion) to move to peripheral rather than central positions. The authors felt that existing stereotypes lead coaches to move players from central to peripheral positions. (Woodward p. 358)

Coaches have historically pressured African American athletes into moving to decentralized roles so as not to upset the established bias that African American players lacked the mental capacity and intelligence that these positions required.

Stacking can be self selective and subconscious as well, according to Woodward:

Role models in particular can be influential to a youth trying to decide on a sport or a position within a sport to pursue. There are few African American role models in swimming, or in baseball as catchers, or as kickers in football, etc. Therefore, role modeling, particularly as more and more African American athletes are marketed through television, might have an impact on what positions young athletes choose at the beginning of their football careers (McPherson; Eitzen & Sanford, 1975; Olsen, 1968; Coakley, 1998). (Woodward p. 358)

In this scenario, young African American athletes self select themselves out of opportunities before a coach even has to do it for them. However, self selection does not always have to be subconscious as Woodward writes:

...an African American Quarterback at the high school level, realizing that the chances of playing Quarterback in college are slim (although improving recently), and are even more slim at the professional level, might decide on his own to put his talents to use in a different position—a position more consistent with prevailing stereotypes. (Woodward p. 359)

In both of these scenarios current discrimination is irrelevant as the stacking is self-perpetuating as it becomes a logical response to past discrimination.

The irony of the current state of affairs is that not only have there never been more African American quarterbacks than in today's game (still relatively low to the

total amount of African American players), but it has never been more universally acceptable for an African American athlete to play quarterback. The three consensus finalists for the 2020 NFL's Most Valuable Player award, Lamar Jackson, Russell Wilson, and Patrick Mahomes, are all African American quarterbacks. However the needle has hardly shifted for African Americans trying to become a head coach. Where playing this position used to be a clear path to an eventual position as a head coach, it seems the rules have changed. As Bopp and Sagas wrote: "It can be argued that the role of Quarterback has become more multidimensional; with an increased emphasis placed on running the ball over passing (Berri & Simmons, 2009, Buffington, 2005; Hawkins, 2002)" (Bopp & Sagas p. 136). They continue:

Thus, what is currently being taught and learned at the Quarterback position may no longer detail the preparation necessary for a head coaching position; at least not for African American Quarterbacks whose skill sets and cognitive abilities at the position may be limited as a result. (Bopp & Sagas p. 136)

While the number of African Americans playing centralized positions in 2020 has increased, the number of African Americans coaching centralized positions like quarterback and offensive line has not.

The other research question Bopp and Cunningham studied in *Race Ideology Perpetuated: Media Representations of Newly Hired Football Coaches* addresses the stacking of African American coaches in decentralized positions on the staff: What are the roles for which African American and White football coaches are hired? In order to address this question, Bopp and Cunningham studied which races were hired for centralized positions (offensive or defensive coordinator) rather than

general assistant positions. They further broke down the general assistant positions into two categories: High Concentration of African American players (they defined High Concentration of African American positions as running back, wide receiver, and defensive back) and Low Concentration of African Americans players (they defined Low Concentration of African Americans positions as quarterback, offensive and defensive line, linebackers, and special teams) (see Table 2):

**Chart 9: Racial Differences for the Positions for which Coaches Were Hired<sup>8</sup>**

Position	African American		White	
	#	%	#	%
Coordinator	14	20.6	52	43.4
Coaching HCAA	30	44.1	24	20.0
Coaching LCAA	24	35.3	44	36.7

Their data indicates that for this hiring period (after the 2007 season) whites were more likely to be hired as coordinators while African Americans were more likely to be hired to coach an HCAA position. It is important to note that not only were whites more likely to be coordinators, but their percentage was more than double. The same can be said about African American coaches coaching High Concentration of African American positions. From this data set it is easy to see how African American coaches are affected by stacking and how this phenomenon sticks these coaches in decentralized positions. This stymies an African American coach's progress toward becoming a head coach by limiting their ability to work with the more centralized positions needed to build one's resume.

<sup>8</sup> Adapted from Race Ideology Perpetuated: Media Representations of Newly Hired Football Coaches." *Journal of Sports Media*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2010, pp. 1–19., doi:10.1353/jsm.0.0048.

## Chapter Four: Where are We Now?

The Rooney Rule is a NFL affirmative action policy meant to encourage minority consideration for open coaching positions. The rule is commonly misunderstood as a quota for minority coaches on a particular staff, when in fact it only mandates that minority coaches must be interviewed for open positions. Named after Dan Rooney, former owner of the Pittsburgh Steelers and champion for league diversity, the Rooney Rule was instituted in response to a 2002 study, *Black Coaches in the NFL: Superior Performance, Inferior Opportunities*, by attorneys Cyrus Mehri and Johnnie Cochran.<sup>9</sup> The study was prompted by the firings of two African American NFL head coaches: Tony Dungy (first head coach with a winning record to be fired) and Dennis Green (posted his first losing season in ten years). Mehri and Cochran's study focused on a fifteen year period (1987-2001) and found that:

- African American head coaches won 1.1 more games per season than their white counterparts.
- African American head coaches led their teams to the playoffs 67% of the time (compared to white coaches who led their teams to the playoffs 39% of the time).
- African American head coaches averaged 2.7 more wins in their first season as head coach than their white counterparts

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<sup>9</sup> From Cochran, Johnnie L, and Cyrus Mehri. *Black Coaches in the NFL: Superior Performance, Inferior Opportunities*. www.findjustice.com, 2002, pp. 1-78, *Black Coaches in the NFL: Superior Performance, Inferior Opportunities*.

- African American head coaches averaged 1.3 more wins in their final season before being terminated than their white counterparts.
- African American head coaches inherited their teams with an average of 7.4 wins per season and, during their tenures, increased the average wins for their teams to 9.1 per season.

In response to this study and outcry by players, coaches, and media members, the NFL enacted the Rooney Rule in 2003.

The Rooney Rule has done very little to change the current diversity landscape in the NFL. In 2020 there are three African American head coaches – just as many as there were in 2003 when the Rooney Rule was first adopted. Unfortunately, the most common result of the Rooney Rule has been scores of sham interviews with minority “candidates.” These are interviews that are done purely to show compliance for the Rooney Rule – not to give minority candidates a legitimate shot at a job. Longtime African American NFL assistant coach, Ted Cottrell was interviewed repeatedly for Rooney Rule compliance. In a 2003 Associated Press interview he said: “If a team talks to you, that doesn't mean it is an interview,” Cottrell further explains, “I've had seven (teams) talk to me, and four of them have been what I call legitimate interviews, and three of them have been bullcrap sessions. Excuse my language about that, but that is how I feel about it.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> From Press, Associated. “Cottrell Wraps up Second Meeting with Niners.” *ESPN*, ESPN Internet Ventures, 25 Mar. 2003, [www.espn.com/nfl/news/2003/0205/1504675.html](http://www.espn.com/nfl/news/2003/0205/1504675.html).

The last seventeen years has proven that without a quota it is impossible to mandate that NFL team owners hold legitimate head coaching job interviews with real stakes, rather than sham interviews to comply with the Rooney Rule. However, in professional football progress has been creeping up from the bottom. I have seen more and more staff assistant, analyst, and quality control roles are filled by African Americans every year. These are entry level coaching positions with a relatively low impact on the overall performance of the team compared to the full time position coaches. It is unclear if my observed surge in African American entry level coaches is merely a public relations appeasement tactic or an earnest effort to give African American coaches a fair shot.

The most promising initiative the NFL currently offers is the Bill Walsh Minority Coaching Fellowship. This initiative selects a minority former player, high school coach, or college coach to intern with a team for a season. As of 2015 the program boasted a strong NFL coaching alumni including: 3 head coaches, 5 coordinators, and over 50 assistants.

The NFL has long had a monopoly stake in professional football viewership in the United States. While there have been attempts to rival the NFL with alternative professional leagues, these attempts have been largely short lived and universally unsuccessful. The XFL is the latest manifestation of an alternative brand of professional football, determined to set itself apart from the NFL. 2020 marks the XFL's first season back (the XFL has been on hiatus since 2001). The league will field 8 teams – 3 of which are coached by African American head coaches. While it

should be applauded that the XFL has managed to match the NFL's number of African American head coaches with only a quarter of the teams, simply staying alive will be a significant challenge. History is against the XFL as its first iteration folded after one season in 2001. More recently the Alliance of American Football filed for Chapter 7 bankruptcy midway through its inaugural 2019 season. Only time will tell if the XFL can not only sustain itself but also set the tone for a diverse era of head coaches in professional football.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, the most common resume thread that head coaches have is playing experience at quarterback. There is reason to be optimistic about the future of African American coaches because of the current prevalence of African American starting quarterbacks. During the 2020 NFL season, twelve African American quarterbacks started at least one game for their respective teams. While this is a major step in the right direction, there have been other seasons with 10+ African American starting quarterbacks. The most promising part of this era is the dominant play – not just the prevalence of African American quarterbacks. Never before 2020 has there been four African American quarterbacks participating in the Pro Bowl (post season NFL all-star game), an African American quarterback voted unanimously as the league's most valuable player, and a different African American quarterback leading his team to a Super Bowl victory. Hopefully the normalization of African American quarterbacks will contribute to the necessary change needed for African American football coaches to be legitimately considered for head coaching positions.

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- 2012 Texas Christian University Football Media Guide
- 2012 University of Arkansas Football Media Guide
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- 2012 University of Georgia Football Media Guide
- 2012 University of Houston Football Media Guide
- 2012 University of Maine Football Media Guide
- 2012 University of Mississippi Football Media Guide
- 2012 University of Tennessee at Chattanooga Football Media Guide
- 2012 University of Texas at San Antonio Football Media Guide
- 2013 Arkansas State University Football Media Guide
- 2013 Ball State University Football Media Guide
- 2013 Georgia Institute of Technology Football Media Guide

- 2013 James Madison University Football Media Guide
- 2013 Lamar University Football Media Guide
- 2013 Miami University Football Media Guide
- 2013 San Jose State University Football Media Guide
- 2013 University of Arkansas Football Media Guide
- 2013 Youngstown State University Football Media Guide
- 2014 Eastern Michigan University Football Media Guide
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- 2014 Southern Illinois University Football Media Guide
- 2014 Texas Christian University Football Media Guide
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- 2014 University of Tulsa Football Media Guide
- 2014 Wayne State University Football Media Guide
- 2015 East Carolina University Football Media Guide
- 2015 East Carolina University Football Media Guide
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- 2015 University of California, Davis Football Media Guide
- 2015 University of California, Los Angeles Football Media Guide
- 2015 University of Minnesota Football Media Guide
- 2015 University of Oregon Football Media Guide

- 2015 University of Texas at El Paso Football Media Guide
- 2015 West Virginia University Football Media Guide
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- 2016 Bowling Green State University Football Media Guide
- 2016 Charleston Southern University Football Media Guide
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- 2016 Ohio University Football Media Guide
- 2016 Oklahoma State University Football Media Guide
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- 2017 Bowling Green State University Football Media Guide
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- 2017 Clemson University Football Media Guide
- 2017 Coastal Carolina University Football Media Guide
- 2017 East Carolina University Football Media Guide
- 2017 Eastern Michigan University Football Media Guide
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- 2017 Florida State University Football Media Guide
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- 2017 Georgia State University Football Media Guide
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- 2017 Iowa State University Football Media Guide
- 2017 Kansas State University Football Media Guide
- 2017 Kansas University Football Media Guide

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- 2017 United States Military Academy Football Media Guide
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- 2017 University of Alabama Football Media Guide
- 2017 University of Arizona Football Media Guide
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- 2017 University of California at Berkeley Football Media Guide
- 2017 University of California, Los Angeles Football Media Guide
- 2017 University of Cincinnati Football Media Guide
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- 2017 University of Memphis Football Media Guide
- 2017 University of Miami Football Media Guide
- 2017 University of Michigan Football Media Guide
- 2017 University of North Carolina at Charlotte Football Media Guide