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President of the NCAA

To Rooney or Not to Rooney

The first African-American head football coach in what today is the NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) — the 119 institutions that compete in the annual postseason bowl games — was hired in 1979. In the 30 years since, a grand total of 27 African-Americans have been head coaches in the subdivision if you don't count those at Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

This fall, there will be seven coaches of color among the 119 schools in the subdivision.

Frankly, the lack of progress in minority hiring is a disgrace.

Over the last few years, there has been a concerted effort to expand the number of black head coaches. One of the approaches has been to get more diversity into the interviewing process. And there has been increasing pressure to install “the Rooney Rule” in college football — which mandates interviews for minority candidates when there are head coach vacancies in the NFL — as a means to that end.

Currently, the state of Oregon is considering legislation that will do just that for colleges and universities in the Beaver state.

Helping lead the effort for greater diversity and inclusion in intercollegiate athletics is NCAA Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion Charlotte Westerhaus. I recently asked her to comment on the Rooney Rule and its application to college football.

Here are her thoughts:

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Controversy and national debate surrounding what to do about the small number of head coaches of color within Division I FBS has recently been reignited due to a proposed bill in the state of Oregon which would require intercollegiate athletic departments to interview minorities for all open coaching and athletic administrative positions.

Expanding opportunities within the interviewing process is a key and good practice. From the NCAA's perspective, this is hardly a new revelation. Time and time again, NCAA President Myles Brand has assertively and publicly called on NCAA member institutions to expand the search process and interview candidates of color for all leadership positions because diversity and inclusion is essential to the NCAA's end-sum success.

The stark reality is that the numbers of NCAA head football coaches of color is indefensibly low. Moreover, the lack of opportunity, diversity and inclusion within the ranks of head coaching has been going on for far too long.

However, as shameful as the present situation is, the NCAA should not allow itself to be pushed into a course of policy action that may at best give false hope to the deserving and more significantly, misplace the focus of needed solutions which will significantly change the present drought of diversity.

Many in the general public view professional football and intercollegiate football as being virtually one and the same within a context that the game of football binds both as a singular sporting event. Thus, it is understandable that some civil rights advocates call for the NCAA membership to support the proposed Oregon bill and to do even more by implementing the NFL's "Rooney Rule."

If you hold the notion that NFL football and NCAA football are one and the same, you are just plain wrong. The NCAA is not the NFL. The NCAA is not a league. Rather, it is a non-profit and voluntary association and thus, cannot influence campus hiring practices. Moreover, the NCAA is not a state like Oregon, nor is it a state-entity responsible for regulating and legislating policy for a citizenry of constituents.

The NCAA does not hire football coaches or coaches of any collegiate sport. Athletic directors who work for NCAA member institutions are responsible for interviewing and hiring.

Now that I have set forth key and relevant differences between the NCAA and NFL, I also want to emphasize that equal opportunity, diversity and inclusion are core values within the NCAA. As an African American woman, I openly acknowledge that I have benefited from affirmative opportunities to compete for professional talents based on what I brought to the table - my talents and ability to get the job done better than any other candidate. Not being interviewed or considered for employment because of one's race, gender, creed, color, sexual orientation, age, disability, and religion is wrong.

However, mandatory interviews of minority candidates will not eradicate the practice and stigma of tokenism. The only thing worse than not being hired due to one's race or ethnicity is being considered for a position solely because this individual represents diversity within a mandatory interview process. This is a belittling practice and no wants, needs or should be used as token.

Dedicated social change agents and pundits who urge the NCAA to adopt the "Rooney Rule" may be unaware of another important reality - more candidates of color are being interviewed for head coaching positions than ever before. The fact of the matter is that 27 candidates of color were interviewed for 22 vacancies at the Division I level last fall. These numbers far exceed the number of mandated head coaching interviews of minorities conducted by the NFL.

If the focus remains squarely on diversity-related interviews, the NCAA could now accurately proclaim that it already reached the shores of the "Rooney Rule" promise land. Not only did

Division I FBS institutions support the notion of increasing the numbers of minorities interviewed, they did it voluntarily for virtually every head football coaching opening. No wonder the most recent Black Coaches and Administrators Hiring Report Card recently awarded the highest number of “A” grades for interviewing since the inception of the report five years ago.

I am aware that supporters of the “Rooney Rule” point to the end-results - more African Americans than ever before are head coaches within the NFL. Therefore, they conclude that the same result will occur in the NCAA if it adopted a similar tactic.

Let’s keep our eye on a key point as we examine this assertion. The “Rooney Rule” is an interviewing rule. More candidates than ever before were interviewed last fall without a interview mandate similar to the “Rooney Rule” and without the possibility of sanctions for noncompliance. What was the end result? Only four African Americans were hired as head football coaches of color in Division I FBS. This simply is not good enough.

The NCAA is not opposed to equal opportunity within the interview process. But what is needed now is an end to side-stepping the crux of the hiring dilemma. Interviewing is not hiring. What is needed is more hires of head football coaches of color, not mandated interviews and the continued perpetuation of false hope.