

**PRO FOOTBALL**

Diverse Representation for Players, Without Regulation

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PHOENIX — With attention focused on the N.F.L. over the last few weeks, one of the more intriguing concepts to emerge was a suggestion that there should be an initiative for players, especially those in the league's black majority, to consider African-Americans as they pick agents and lawyers.

Such an effort would be along the lines of the so-called Rooney Rule, which was instituted in 2003 and which requires N.F.L. teams to interview minority candidates for head coaching and senior football operations positions.

In practical terms, a similar push for players would be less a rule than a suggestion, perhaps initiated by the N.F.L. players' union, the N.C.A.A. office and college athletics departments. The idea would be to expose young pro-bound athletes and their families to a universe of lawyers and agents that might be beyond those recommended by coaches.

Here is the troubling question: In a league in which roughly 70 percent of the players are African-American, why would you even need an initiative to persuade them to consider African-American representation?

The reasons are multilayered and have to do with quality, trust, familiarity and, perhaps in some cases, a mentality of questioning the ability of African-American agents.

"A friend of mine in the business once told me that some of our own people think that the white man's ice is colder," said Deryk Gilmore, an agent with Priority Sports and Entertainment who is African-American.

For 21-year-olds, the process of choosing an agent can be overwhelming, especially when intensified by financial need.

"There are a lot of players who may come from a one-parent home, who do not have a lot of support," Gilmore said. "And a lot of times decisions are made by the family, and that decision is based not necessarily on who is the best agent but who is going to give us the most amount of money right now."

For an agency with substantial resources, extending credit or writing a check to a family

for, say, \$200,000 is a small price to pay in exchange for signing a high-profile client.

Bill Duffy, the president and chief executive of BDA Sports Management, a large black-owned agency, said many black athletes “would want to have a black agent if they knew that there were enough out there who were really qualified.”

Duffy said he was “having a feeding frenzy right now,” adding, “I’m getting so many players, black, white, because I’m in the system.”

Chicago Bears cornerback Charles Tillman chose his agency, Select Sports Group, when he broke into the N.F.L. He interviewed white and black agents.

“I don’t care about race,” Tillman, who was picked in the second round of the 2003 N.F.L. draft, said. “I wanted someone to represent me who would do the right job.”

Tillman said he was turned off when one African-American agent played the black card, telling him, “I’m a brother; I can do some things that the white man can’t do.”

“What I saw at the time,” Tillman said, “was that money wasn’t black or white; it was green.”

Since then, Jay Z’s Roc Nation has gotten into the business; LeBron James has signed with the Klutch Sports Group, founded by his close friend Rich Paul; and Raymond Brothers has built an impressive agency.

As he stood along radio row on Saturday, Arizona Cardinals linebacker Lorenzo Alexander said he was pragmatic when it came to selecting an agent.

“I’m trying to get the best guy, black or white,” he said. “If I’m trying to find who has the best leverage for me, I’m going to go wherever that may be — who has the most power, who has the most relationships.”

He added, “A young black guy may be awesome, but if he doesn’t have the connections and the relationships needed for me to leverage myself, then I can’t go with him.”

Alexander said aspiring African-American agents might have to work with a larger agency to establish a track record.

“You build credibility, you build relationships, so people know who you are,” Alexander said, “and then you can step away and say, ‘I’ve got the experience now; give me a shot.’”

Still, what is the difference between teams’ being required at least to interview minority candidates for coaching positions and players’ being encouraged to interview minority candidates for representation?

“I don’t see that there is difference,” said Jim Tanner, the founder and president of Tandem Sports & Entertainment. “People should just naturally do it, whether it’s a team interviewing candidates or a player interviewing agents. They should just naturally make sure that they pick from a diverse pool of candidates.”

And that pool should include more African-Americans.

“There should be 10 dudes like me,” Duffy said. “I’m not smarter than these cats. I’m not more educated. As a matter of fact, I just have an undergraduate degree; there are guys who

have an M.B.A. or law school degree.

“But those guys would have to be hired by somebody like me or by one of these large white agencies, and they are not getting those jobs.”

The reality is that between the N.F.L. and the N.B.A., there are certainly enough athletes to support 10 Duffys, and many more. But is there the consciousness?

The reaction of athletes over the last few months to the killings of young African-Americans in Staten Island, Cleveland and Ferguson, Mo., was encouraging. It was as if the deaths had reminded the athletes that no matter how much they were compensated or what sort of celebrity they attained, outside the arena, without their helmets or jerseys, they could not escape their blackness.

In truth, whether black athletes select black representation — and help build a black presence in the business — is a matter of awareness, not rules. Just as unions did not coordinate demonstrations by players, they should not have to play a role in encouraging their members to widen their searches for agents.

Tanner, who also serves as my lawyer, said, “This is a matter of black athletes looking in the mirror and saying, As I conduct my business, am I giving opportunities to people who look like me, or at least sitting down at the table with them to evaluate their experience and expertise and ability to guide me through my career?”

Challenging the deeply entrenched paradigm of black labor and white wealth will require the commitment, the courage and the determination that theatrical audiences witnessed in the critically acclaimed film “Selma.”

There are no troopers on horses with clubs and guns. But the longstanding status quo is protected by coaches and agents, supplemented by large numbers of African-American players, who stand shoulder to shoulder preventing young black agents from crossing the bridge.

“This is a tough business,” Duffy said. “This stuff is crazy. You’ve got to be wired a certain way. You can’t be some Joe Official, blue-collar, Ivy League brother.”

He added, “You’ve got to have some street, or you won’t survive in this business.”

A deviation from that model would mean a shift of consciousness. For African-American players, this season, with its challenges, may have signified the beginning.

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