

Black coaches no longer rarity in football

TAMPA, Fla. (AP) — A small group gathered for a closed-door meeting at NFL headquarters two years ago in December, as it had regularly since 2003. The topic: identifying minority candidates for coaching jobs.

The session was led, as always, by Steelers owner Dan Rooney. The hottest name during the discussions — Mike Tomlin.

Soon after, Tomlin was hired as Pittsburgh's coach.

It was a classic case of the "Rooney Rule" in action, even if it wasn't intended that way.

And on Sunday, Tomlin did deliver the ultimate reward to Rooney: a Super Bowl championship won by a Black coach for a team owner whose very name has become synonymous with diversity hiring.

The Rooney Rule requires any team with a head coaching vacancy to interview at least one minority candidate. Tomlin is one of 11 Black coaches hired in the NFL since the rule has been in place, finally addressing an embarrassing lack of diversity in America's most popular sports league. There were two in 2002.

Tomlin credits his hiring to the Rooney Rule.

"I have no question it helped me get this job," Tomlin said this week.

"Anything that brings a group of people an opportunity is a policy worth having. But I also thought that eventually I'd get an opportunity, Rooney Rule or not."

The rule was born after two lawyers, Cyrus Mehri and the late Johnnie Cochran Jr., threatened to sue the NFL in October 2002 if it didn't open up more opportunities for minorities. Then-commissioner Paul Tagliabue, who had been pushing minority hiring for the 13 years he had been in office, immediately appointed Rooney to head a committee on the subject.

He was the perfect choice — a humble man who cares deeply about his team, the game and the people involved with it.

Now 76, Rooney eats daily in the cafeteria at the Steelers' facility with the rest of the team's employees — from players to secretaries.

Politically, he's to the left of most of the NFL's conservative owners. He endorsed Barack Obama during the Pennsylvania Democratic Primary last April and cam-

paigned for him and with him, notably in Steelers strongholds in western Pennsylvania and West Virginia.

At the Super Bowl, he kept a low profile, preferring to talk to Pittsburgh reporters and others he knows. On media day, he walked the field, slightly hunched, wearing a windbreaker and brown pants with suspenders, a phalanx of cameras trailing him.

The son of the Steelers founder Art Rooney, he's more comfortable working out of the public eye, as he did when Tagliabue put him on the diversity committee. Two months after his group got the assignment, they came up with the rule.

"It wasn't as easy to get done as some people now seem to think it was," Rooney said.

"A lot of people thought the league was meddling in team business. We got comments like, 'Why should you be involved in telling us who to hire?'"

But it has undeniably had an impact.

During the second half of this season, after Mike Singletary got the San Francisco 49ers job, there were seven Black coaches — an all-time high.

There are six now, with vacancies in Kansas City and Oakland yet to be filled.

The current group includes Raheem Morris, who at just 32 was picked this month to lead the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

While the NFL hasn't achieved the coaching diversity of other sports leagues — the NBA has had double-digit numbers of Black coaches for a decade, Major League Baseball has nine Black, Hispanic or Asian managers for 30 teams — the Rooney Rule seems to have inspired minority hires not only on the sidelines but in the front offices.

The rule does not apply to top executive hires, but the number of Black general managers has increased from one in 2002 to five now. Just as important is the success of minority coaches and GMs: five of the six teams in the last three Super Bowls have had either Black coaches or general managers.

The group includes Tomlin and general manager Rod Graves of the Arizona Cardinals, who played the Steelers on Sunday; Jerry Reese, general manager of the New York Giants, who beat New England last year;

recently retired Colts coach Tony Dungy; and Lovie Smith of Chicago. In 2007, the latter two were the first Black coaches in a Super Bowl.

"To me, that's remarkable," Mehri said this week. "To go from a situation two decades ago when the only minorities in the NFL were on the field to having people of color in the forefront of all but one of the Super Bowl teams is the kind of progress we've never thought we'd get so quickly."

Mehri, a Washington-based civil rights lawyer, has gone from being an outsider to an insider under the Rooney Rule.

Another participant is John Wooten, a guard for Cleveland and Washington from 1959-69 and chairman of the Fritz Pollard Alliance, an organization named after the man who in 1921 became the NFL's first Black head coach.

Pollard was a player-coach in an era where many teams were pickup squads

that changed from week to week. He was an exception, however. By the 1930s, the NFL wouldn't even sign Black players, a practice that lasted until 1946, a year before Jackie Robinson integrated baseball.

Wooten and Hall of Fame linebacker Harry Carson, the Pollard Alliance's executive director, are among the participants in those annual December meetings. They help league officials keep track of potential minority candidates.

Rooney plays down his role as a pioneer in race relations — just as he plays down the role of the Rooney Rule in the hiring of Tomlin.

He said he chose Tomlin as only the third Steelers coach in nearly 40 years without considering his race. He had heard of him during the league office meetings and also got a strong recommendation from Dungy, who played and coached for the Steelers and hired Tomlin when he was in Tampa.

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