

Matt Tiano, Ben Starr

Discrimination Against African American Coaches in the NFL

Introduction

As of 2002, NFL teams had only five African American coaches who had coached a team for a full season. In 2002, only two of 32 NFL coaches were African American. This indicates that African Americans are underrepresented among NFL coaches. Furthermore, it seems as though black head coaches must meet higher standards to keep their coveted jobs. Madden examines the relationship between African American NFL coaches and white coaches by collecting win-loss and playoff records in “Differences in the Success of NFL Coaches by Race, 1990-2002” (2004). The analysis determines if discrimination does indeed occur among NFL head coaches. This analysis is beneficial for an era in which the media has painted a portrait of a league in which discrimination is a thing of the past. When Lovie Smith and Tony Dungy met in the Super Bowl two years ago, the discussion surrounded the fact that history was made because “two black coaches were meeting in the Super Bowl for the first time.” However, Madden investigates whether African American head coaches experience more pressure to keep their jobs, given similar levels of success, in terms of win-loss and playoff records, to white head coaches.

How data was collected

The Washington D.C. law firm of Mehri & Skalet PLLC compiled a database of every team and coach between 1986-2001. The database included the team's and coach's win-loss record, as well as if the team made the playoffs and how they did in the playoffs. The 2002 performance records supplemented this data, as well as salary data from 1986-2001. This included coaches that were in their jobs for a full season. Overall records, first-season records and the final-season records for coaches who leave involuntarily were examined. Madden examined the effect of race on being fired after controlling for the team's regular-season record as well as the length of time the coach had been with the team. Playoff records were examined, as well as the records for white coaches and for African American coaches in their first year of coaching, controlling for the team's record under a different coach in the prior season. Last, Madden examines overall records while controlling for league payroll averages.

Testable hypotheses

Madden attempted to test whether it is harder for an African American to gain and keep a head-coaching job in the NFL. In doing so he tried to cover as many confounding variables as possible. Therefore he tested whether race had an impact on regular season record, the likelihood of making the playoffs based on race, the comparative records in the first season of African American coaches and White coaches, and the likelihood of a coach getting fired based on race.

Results

The overall winning percentage of African American head coaches during the period was higher than that of White coaches. African American coaches averaged 9.1 wins, while White coaches averaged only 8 wins. This is a statistically significant difference. There was a coefficient of 1.536 and a t-ratio of 7.73 on African Americans winning in the regular season. In addition to having a higher winning percentage on average, all of the African American coaches have made the playoffs.

Not only have all of the African American coaches made the playoffs, but they do so with a 69% chance. On the other hand, White coaches made the playoffs only 40% of the time. This was a very statistically significant difference. However, once in the playoffs there is a coefficient of -0.406 and a t-ratio of -2.04 so it is very significant.

In the first year of coaching African American coaches won 9.6 games on average, while new White coaches only won 7.1 games. In addition new African American coaches made the playoffs 71% of the time, while their White counterparts only made the playoffs 23% of the time. While these statistics are both statistically significant they do not cover all of the variables. When controlling for how teams performed in the previous year African American coaches still won an average of 1.9 games, which is a statistically significant figure as well. In addition, there was a probably 0.01 that this result was not due to race.

Finally Madden discussed the likelihood of an African American coach getting fired in comparison to a White coach getting fired. In their final season of coaching, African American coaches won 6.8 games and made the playoffs 20% of the time. On the other hand, White coaches won only 5.6 games and made the playoffs only 7% of the time. These are both very statistically significant results. However, controlling for race,

games won, making the playoffs, wins in the playoffs, and total years with the team; an African American coach has a coefficient of 0.942 and a t-ratio of 2.36, which is significant. So, according to race an African American coach is more likely to be fired.

Discussion

The most telling statistic of discrimination is that of the likelihood of an African American coach being fired controlling for all other factors. That coupled with the fact that all of the statistics indicate that African American coaches perform better, indicates that African American coaches must perform better to maintain their jobs.

Analysis of methodology

Madden uses appropriate measures to determine if discrimination exists among African American NFL head coaches. Win-loss records and whether or not a team was a playoff-bound team are both quantifiable measures of success. Madden controls for necessary factors, taking into account that NFL teams frequently experience shifts in coaching personnel, which can have an effect on team records. However, Madden's methodology does not include a way to control for a situation in which a coach, African American or white, inherits a team in the trenches of the NFL. While the author does control for the prior-season record under a different coach, it is not unlikely for a coach to be hired to turn around a team after several dismal seasons. Further, it is likely that players on the inherited team will be "leftovers" from the previous coaching staff, and for the newly hired coach to instantly turn around his new team is unlikely.