


FOOTBALL

# White interviewees had 3x better odds of being hired as NFL head coaches, new data show

By Sarah Blaskey and Rosmery Izaguirre  
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Then-Miami Dolphins head coach Brian Flores looks from the sidelines during the fourth quarter of an NFL football game against the Houston Texans at Hard Rock Stadium on Sunday, Nov. 7, 2021, in Miami Gardens. Photo by Chris O'Rourke/USA Today Sports. Email: dsantiago@miamiherald.com



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With the league facing searing criticism over its lack of diversity in the top coaching ranks, two NFL teams this past week chose men of color as head coaches: Mike McDaniel, hired by the Miami Dolphins, and Lovie Smith, picked to lead the Houston Texans.

The moves took some heat off the league as it headed toward the biggest day in sports: Super Bowl Sunday.

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But the recent hires weren't enough to change the overall trend.

The chances of landing an NFL head coaching position were three times better for white candidates compared to their non-white counterparts — even after including the most recent hires and controlling for age, number of opportunities, previous coaching position and years of experience in the league.

That's according to a new statistical analysis by Alexis Piquero, chair of the sociology department at the University of Miami, using [data compiled by the Miami Herald](#) on all interviewees for NFL head coaching positions filled since the beginning of 2015.

interview to fulfill a league-imposed requirement, at least two external minority candidates be interviewed had already filled the position, but simply hadn't and

In his 58-page complaint, Flores claimed his experience alleged widespread racial bias in the NFL, especially retaining Black head coaches.

FEWER BLACK COACHES HIRED THAN WOULD BE EXPECTED WITH EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

A statistical model run by professor Alexis Piquero from the University of Miami show that fewer Black head coaches were hired since 2015 than would be expected given the pool of candidates. This disparity in expected vs. actual outcomes is statistically significant, meaning it can't be explained by random chance.

Actual number      What the number should be, according to the model

BLACK COACHES

Hired

8  
18

Not hired

59  
49

COACHES WHO ARE NOT BLACK

Hired

48  
38


Not hired

93  
103

Pearson  $\chi^2 = 11.2771, p < .05$   
Data were compiled by the Herald on all candidates for head coaching positions filled each year since 2015. In this analysis, interviewees were counted once per annual hiring cycle. For example, if a coach interviewed for head coaching jobs in two different years, he would be counted twice. If he interviewed for two jobs in the same year, he would be counted only once.

Chart: Sarah Blaskey • Source: [Miami Herald NFL hiring data](#)

While all minority head coaching candidates were significantly less likely to be hired than white candidates, Piquero’s analysis showed Black candidates fared particularly badly.



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Black interviewees had around one-fourth the chance of landing a head coaching position compared to everyone else, the analysis showed. That remained true even after factoring in many of the factors that might influence one coach might be hired over another — like different coaching backgrounds and playing experience, age, how many interviews they had, and whether they had previous coaching experience.

each annual hiring cycle and whether the candidate was an offensive or defensive coordinator or a head coach the previous season.

“There’s something here that’s not a cause for pause; it’s a cause for concern,” Piquero said.

The trends shown in the Herald’s data suggest what happened to Flores was more than a mere “blip” in an otherwise fair and merit-based hiring process, Piquero said.

“It’s an eight-year pattern. That’s impervious. That’s more than a blip,” he said.

The NFL did not respond to the Herald’s request for comment.



Dr. Alexis Piquero, chair of the sociology department at the University of Miami *COURTESY*

Last week, [the Herald published an analysis](#) of the most recent three years of interviewing data, which showed disparities in hiring. Since then, amid the fallout from Flores’ lawsuit, McDaniel and Smith were hired. The Herald updated its data to include those recent hires and added five more years of historical data, allowing for Piquero’s more robust, statistical analysis.

The recent hires did not reverse the entrenched pattern Piquero found.

There have been 56 openings for head coaching positions since 2015, data show. In total, 121 individuals interviewed

every three interviews was conducted with a Black candidate. But only eight Black candidates were hired in that time period — 14% of total head coach hires.

Based on the number of Black candidates in the running for these jobs, the expected number hired would be twice that, Piquero's analysis showed.

## See the raw data

All seven Black coaches hired between 2015 and 2021 have subsequently been fired, most after losing seasons.

Anthony Lynn was the only coach fired with an overall winning record. The Los Angeles Chargers went 7-9 in Lynn's final season as head coach, although the team won its final three games that season. Still, Chargers owner Dean Spanos said Lynn's performance had "[fallen short of expectations](#)" and fired him in January 2021.

David Culley was fired by the Texans over "[philosophical differences](#)" after just one season marred by the absence of the team's three-time Pro Bowl quarterback, Deshaun Watson, amid allegations of sexual assault by multiple women. (The Texans ended the season 4-13.) And Flores, who inherited a team that was painful in its ineptitude, was fired despite rallying the Dolphins to eight victories in their last nine games last season. It was the second year in a row the team had an overall winning record.





Former Houston Texans head coach David Culley, left, talks with kicker Joey Slye before an NFL football game against the Cleveland Browns, Sunday, Sept. 19, 2021, in Cleveland. (AP Photo/Ron Schwane) Ron Schwane AP

Looking at win-loss record alone can be misleading, said Kenneth Shropshire, a consultant for the NFL and professor at Arizona State who heads the Global Sport Institute.

Although most coaches are hired to take over bad teams, Black coaches often aren't given enough time to turn things around before they are fired, Shropshire said. And sometimes they were fired despite achieving success.

"Look at the success [Flores] had and was about to have," Shropshire said. "He got fired with a winning record. Lovie Smith got fired [from the Chicago Bears] with a winning record."

Smith went 10-6 in his final year with the Bears, 2012. Only once since then have the Bears bested that mark.

As it stands now, with no openings left to fill, the NFL has two openings. Two of them are Black. (Dolphins' hire Mike McDaniel, a white American, has responded to questions about whether he identifies "as a human being." As such, he is not Black for the purposes of the Herald's analysis.)

“The numbers are still woeful,” said Derek Sells, managing partner at the Cochran Firm, named after its founder, Johnnie L. Cochran Jr., who was a driving force behind the implementation of the NFL’s “Rooney Rule” in 2003, requiring employers to interview at least one minority candidate for head coaching positions. The number was later increased to two. While the rule seemed like a step in the right direction to him at the time, Sells said the lack of progress revealed the ineffectiveness of the Rooney Rule, which he referred to as “window dressing.”

The chance to interview has not resulted in a proportionate number of Black hires in recent years, data show.

“Despite the fact that Black NFL coaches have done extremely well as compared to white coaches, they do not get the same opportunity, they’re not treated the same, and they’re more likely to be fired despite their success,” Sells said.



Kansas City Chiefs offensive coordinator Eric Bieniemy *Star file photo*

Some attempt to explain the disparity in hiring by suggesting the problem stems from a lack of qualified Black candidates, Sells said. .  
were often the most experienced coaches in each po

And while the NFL has recently shown a preference for making offensive coordinators into head coaches — disadvantaging Black coaches who are more prevalent among defensive coordinators — even that was not enough to explain the disparity, Piquero's analysis showed.

Offensive Coordinator Eric Bieniemy, who helped the Kansas City Chiefs win the 2019 Super Bowl, has interviewed for more head coaching jobs than any other coach since 2015 — 14 in total — and has yet to be chosen.

Bieniemy, who is 52, is around the same age as the average head coaching hire from recent years, data show. And he had more years of NFL experience — based on the sum of his years playing and coaching in the league — than of any of the other candidates in at least three cases, data show. (One of those three jobs went to another Black coach.)

“Coaches that have had any success on any objective level — such as a consistent pattern of winning games, or getting into the playoffs, or a consistent pattern of putting a team on the field that is competing for a championship — there’s always some type of subjective reason why they just can’t get us [Black people] where they want to be,” Sells said.

“Attitude” and “ability to inspire in the locker room” were among the most common subjective reasons Sells hears cited.





Lovie Smith, newly hired head coach of the Houston Texans, was coaching the Illinois Fighting Illini in 2019. Holly Hart AP

In 2020, the [NFL considered a plan to grant incentives](#) — like compensatory draft picks — for teams that hired minority candidates to fill head coaching vacancies. Amid pushback, the NFL diversity committee modified the plan, which was then adopted, to instead grant third-round draft picks to teams that lose minority assistant coaches when they become head coaches or general managers, and theoretically encourage teams to develop more minority coaches.

Historically, progress in the NFL has come less from the promise of carrot, Sells said, than from the threat of the stick.

“It took a lawsuit, brought by Brian Flores, to get two African-American coaches hired within just days of him filing that suit,” he said “There needs to be a remedy that allows for punishment if a qualified coach of color is denied the opportunity to coach.”

But even if a proportional number of black head coaches were hired, it would not solve the problem. In the last eight years would be Black, despite Black players making up 70% of the league. This also points to a pipeline problem, Piquero said. Black players are not on the path to head coaching positions.

“We always got to think about a path forward when we see something like this,” Piquero said. “There’s a problem. How do we fix the problem?”

One step, he said, would be getting more young Black coaches en route to becoming offensive coordinators, either through mentorship programs or incentives. Shropshire of ASU said interventions should begin even earlier, when future coaches are players choosing what position to go out for.

“Be a quarterback,” Shropshire said. The path from there, he said, is clearest.

“Be a quarterback coach. Be an offensive coordinator. Be a head coach,” he said.

*Miami Herald staff writer Nicholas Nehamas contributed to this report.*

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