

The Rooney Rule, Race and the N.F.L.

Compelling Question: To what extent do the Brian Flores lawsuit, the Rooney Rule, and other historical issues reveal racial discrimination in the N.F.L.?

Grade Level		Time	Standards/Competencies	
K-2	3-5	60 Minutes	Common Core Anchor: Reading: R1, R2 Writing: W1, W7 Speaking & Listening: SL1, SL2, SL3 Language: L4, L5, L6	SEL: Self-Awareness Social Awareness Relationship Skills Responsible Decision-Making
7-8	HS			



Web Related Connections

Lessons

- [Athletes and Activism](#)
- [Believe in Something: Nike, Kaepernick and Social Change](#)
- [Game Changer: Kyle Korver Speaks Truth on Privilege](#)
- [Major League Baseball and the Negro League: Correcting an Injustice](#)
- [What is the Soul Cap and Why was it Rejected for Olympic Use?](#)

Other Resources

- [Helping Students Make Sense of News Stories about Bias and Injustice](#)
- [Race Talk: Engaging Young People in Conversations about Race and Racism](#)
- [Sports and Social Justice](#)

Key Words

- | | |
|----------------|------------|
| blackball | lamented |
| class action | lawsuit |
| compensation | legitimate |
| compliance | ostracized |
| de facto | prominent |
| defamed | rebuke |
| defendants | retention |
| discrimination | sham |
| disingenuous | stigma |
| diversity | tampering |
| equitable | terminated |

LESSON OVERVIEW

In February 2022, former N.F.L. (National Football League) Miami Dolphins Head Coach Brian Flores filed a class action lawsuit against the N.F.L. and three of its teams—the Miami Dolphins, Denver Broncos, and New York Giants. The lawsuit alleges racial discrimination and violations of federal employment law and contends that Flores’ interviews were a sham intended only to fulfill the “Rooney Rule” (described below). The lawsuit and Flores’ allegations prompted a national conversation about the history and current practices in the N.F.L. that illustrate and perpetuate bias, discrimination and racism.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to learn about the Brian Flores lawsuit against the N.F.L., explore their own thoughts and feelings about diversity, equity and racism in the N.F.L., and consider and delineate solutions to some of the issues.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will learn about Brian Flores’ lawsuit.
- Students will reflect on some historical information regarding bias, discrimination and racism in the N.F.L.
- Students will consider possible strategies to address these inequities and then analyze the implementation of these strategies.

MATERIALS & PREPARATION

- (Optional) Prior to conducting this lesson, have students listen to “The Rule at the Center of the N.F.L. Discrimination Lawsuit” podcast which explores the Rooney Rule (*The New York Times*, February 14, 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/02/14/podcasts/the-daily/brian-flores-nfl-rooney-rule.html)
- [Background Information on the Brian Flores’ Lawsuit and the Rooney Rule](#)
- Here I Stand statement signs (prepared in advance): “Strongly Agree,” “Agree,” “In between/not sure,” “Disagree,” and “Strongly Disagree”
- “Former Dolphins coach Brian Flores sues NFL and its teams, alleging racial discrimination” (*The Washington Post*, February 1, 2022, www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2022/02/01/brian-flores-lawsuit-nfl-discrimination). one copy for each student

- Solutions Strategy Worksheet (one copy for each student)

PROCEDURES



Information Sharing

1. Begin the lesson by asking students: Have you heard anything in the news about the N.F.L., diversity and racism? What have you heard? What do you know?
2. Explain that the N.F.L. has been in the news because in February 2022, former Miami Dolphins Head Coach Brian Flores filed a class-action lawsuit against the N.F.L. and three of its teams, alleging racial discrimination.
3. Share some or all the [background information on the Brian Flores' lawsuit and the Rooney Rule](#) and explain that students will learn more by reading an article later in the lesson.
4. After sharing this information, engage students in a brief discussion by asking: *What did you learn that you didn't know before? What do you notice? What do you wonder?*

Here I Stand Activity

1. Explain to students that in the “Here I Stand” activity, they will explore their thoughts and feelings about these issues. Explain that they will listen to statements and decide to what extent they agree or disagree with the statement. Then, based on their opinion about each statement, they will position themselves along an imaginary line, depending upon how strongly they agree or disagree with the statement.
2. Select a large open space and indicate the position of an imaginary line with the farthest right point representing a STRONGLY AGREE response and the farthest left point a STRONGLY DISAGREE response. In between these two positions, indicate AGREE, IN BETWEEN/NOT SURE, AND DISAGREE along the continuum. Create signs with these words and hang them up on the wall.

Note: If you are doing this activity online or in a space that is unable to accommodate students moving around, conduct a poll instead, with students raising hands or using a digital poll like Google forms, [Mentimeter](#) or a poll included in your learning platform.]
3. Read each statement below, requesting students to take a few minutes to decide where they stand in the continuum. Then, have them move silently to that place and observe where others choose to stand. After students have chosen their spots, have them spend 2–3 minutes talking amongst themselves about why they are situated there. Then, spend a few minutes with someone from each part of the room sharing their thoughts with the class. Use this process for each of the statements.
 - I've noticed that there's a lack of diversity (very few people of color) among N.F.L. management.
 - Just because there is a lack of diversity doesn't mean there is bias or racism.
 - It is easy and clear to see when bias and discrimination are taking place.
 - The Rooney Rule is a good policy and should continue.
 - Brian Flores was right to file a lawsuit.
 - The N.F.L. should do more to make sure that there are more people of color in management and ownership positions.
4. Lead a whole group discussion using the following questions.
 - Was it easy or difficult to decide where to stand? Were some statements easier to decide and some more difficult?
 - How did it feel when most people had the same response as you? How about when most people were standing somewhere else?
 - What did you learn about yourself? What did you learn about others?
 - Was there anything said that changed or challenged your previous thinking?

- Have you shifted your opinion during or after the activity? Please explain.
- What did you learn from this activity?



Reading Activity

1. Distribute the article "[Former Dolphins coach Brian Flores sues NFL and its teams, alleging racial discrimination](#)" to each student. Provide 10-15 minutes for students to read it silently or read aloud together with students taking turns reading.
2. After reading, engage students in a discussion by asking some or all the following questions.
 - What happened with Brian Flores?
 - What are some of the big ideas discussed in this article?
 - What quotes, phrases or concepts jumped out at you?
 - Why is Brian Flores calling the interview process a 'sham'?
 - Do you think Brian Flores has a strong case to be made? Why or why not?
 - What in the article challenged your thinking?
 - What is your main takeaway after reading this article?
 - What thoughts do you have about what can be done about bias, discrimination and racism in the N.F.L.?



Solutions and Strategies Activity

1. Ask students: *What do you think the N.F.L. should do to address bias, discrimination and racism?* Spend 5-10 minutes brainstorming possible ideas and solutions. Organize and group the strategies by theme.

Note: You may want to use this *Rolling Stone* article "['Number One Is Black Ownership.' Brian Flores on How to Fix the NFL's Diversity Problem](#)" and share some of the proposed solutions in the article including: increase Black ownership, enforce hiring practices, include players in the hiring process, and more.
2. After brainstorming, select 4-6 ideas or actions that students will spend time exploring in more depth. Allow students to participate in the group/action that they are most interested in.
3. Have students work in small groups (based on which strategy they are most interested in) to flesh out some of the details of their strategy. As part of their exploration, they can conduct additional online research to learn more about the proposed strategy or to find data or research that would support the strategy.
4. Using the [Solutions Strategy Worksheet](#), have students answer the following questions about their group's strategy.
 - What is the strategy?
 - What's the goal for the strategy? What outcomes do you hope to achieve?
 - Who are the people and stakeholders who need to be involved in this strategy?
 - What will be needed to encourage or convince stakeholders to use this strategy? How will it be enforced?
 - What anticipated challenges or barriers might this strategy face? Please explain.
 - What else is needed to make this strategy a reality?
5. After students have completed their worksheet and conducted necessary research, have each group present their strategy to the class—either creating a PowerPoint presentation, giving a speech, creating an infographic or writing an essay to share.

Closing

Have students share a new insight or a big takeaway they have gotten from this lesson.

ADDITIONAL READING

- “A timeline of Colin Kaepernick’s protests against police brutality, four years after they began” (*The Washington Post*, August 26, 2020)
- “Brian Flores may have legal precedents with NFL’s long racist history, present misery” (Touchdown Wire, February 8, 2022)
- “Brian Flores sues NFL, three teams as former Miami Dolphins coach alleges racism in hiring practices” (ESPN, February 1, 2022)
- “Civil Rights Leaders Trying to End Rooney Rule” (Fan Nation, February 8, 2022)
- “Former Dolphins head coach Brian Flores on his lawsuit alleging race discrimination at NFL” (CBS News, February 2, 2022)
- “How to Change the NFL’s Racist Hiring Practices” (*The Nation*, January 20, 2022)
- “NFL’s first Black coach Fritz Pollard hired in 1921: ‘It’s ironic. Not much has changed’” (*Indy Star*, February 10, 2022)
- “‘Number One Is Black Ownership.’ Brian Flores on How to Fix the NFL’s Diversity Problem” (*Rolling Stone*, February 13, 2022)
- “Occupational Mobility Patterns in the National Football League” (May 2019)
- “The N.F.L.’s Race Problem” (*The New York Times*, February 3, 2022)

Common Core Standards

CONTENT AREA/STANDARD
Reading
R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
R2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
Writing
W1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
W7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
Speaking & Listening
SL1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
SL2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.
SL3: Evaluate a speaker’s point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

Language
L4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.
L5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.
L6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

CASEL’s SEL Competencies

COMPETENCIES
Self-Awareness: The abilities to understand one’s own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts.
Social Awareness: The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, & contexts.
Relationship Skills: The abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups.
Responsible Decision-Making: The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations.

Background Information on the Brian Flores' Lawsuit and the Rooney Rule

- On February 1, 2022, former Miami Dolphins Head Coach Brian Flores filed a class-action lawsuit against the N.F.L. and three of its teams—the Miami Dolphins, Denver Broncos, and New York Giants. The lawsuit alleges racism and discrimination, violations of federal employment law and that Flores' interviews for a Head Coach position were a sham (not genuine or real) intended only to fulfill the "Rooney Rule." (Note that on February 19, 2022, Brian Flores took a position with the Pittsburgh Steelers. It is not a Head Coach position and Flores' lawsuit will proceed.)
- The "Rooney Rule" was adopted by the N.F.L. in 2003, which means it's been in effect for almost twenty years. The policy promotes diverse leadership among N.F.L. teams, ensuring that promising candidates of color have the opportunity to be considered for management positions. The N.F.L. adopted the Rooney Rule based on recommendations from the league's Workplace Diversity Committee. It was named after then Chairman of the committee, Dan Rooney, the late owner of the Pittsburgh Steelers.
- The committee's initial focus was on the historically low number of people of color in head coaching positions. The policy originally required every team with a head coaching vacancy to interview at least one or more candidates of color before making a new hire. In 2021, the N.F.L. approved changes requiring every team to interview at least two external candidates of color for open head coaching positions and at least one external candidate of color for a coordinator job.
- Over the years, the Rooney Rule has expanded to include a greater number of positions across N.F.L. clubs. In 2009, the policy was amended to include general manager jobs and equivalent front-office positions, requiring each team to interview a minimum of two external candidates. Through hiring best practices, the Rooney Rule aims to increase the number of people of color hired in head coach, general manager, and executive positions. This diversity enriches the game and creates a more effective, quality organization from top to bottom.
- The "Rooney Rule" has been adopted by and is currently used by many corporations and other organizations. (You can learn more about the Rooney Rule [here](#).)
- Currently, about 70% of N.F.L. players are Black, yet the N.F.L. currently has only one Black head coach. That is two fewer Black coaches than when the Rooney Rule was established in 2003.
- Out of a total of 500 head coaches in N.F.L.'s history, only 24 (4.8%) have been Black.
- Amid Brian Flores' lawsuit, several leaders of national Civil Rights organizations (Urban League, National Action Network, National Coalition on Black Civic Participation, NAACP and the National African American Clergy Network) met with N.F.L. Commissioner Roger Goodell to discuss Brian Flores' lawsuit, the Rooney Rule and allegations of racism. Several expressed dissatisfaction with the Rooney Rule.

Mark Morial, CEO of the National Urban League, said:

"However well-intentioned, the effect of the Rooney Rule has been for team decision-makers to regard interviews with candidates of color as an extraneous step, rather than an integral part of the hiring process."

Derrick Johnson, President and CEO of the NAACP said:

"It's simply not enough for the League to declare its good intentions. This is a long-standing crisis that must be confronted with diligence and rigor."

- Over the years, there have been a variety of other issues involving allegations of racism in the N.F.L. including but not limited to: (1) the historical lack of Black players who are quarterbacks - these are central positions, also considered to be the “positions of intelligence;” (2) the fact that there are no Black team owners in the N.F.L.; and (3) the “blackballing” of Colin Kaepernick, a Black N.F.L. quarterback who in 2016 “took a knee” at the start of NFL games to protest police brutality and racial injustice. (Colin Kaepernick became a free agent after the season and remained unsigned, which numerous analysts and observers have attributed to his taking a stand against racial injustice. In addition, in the wake of the Kaepernick protest, owners ruled that players could no longer kneel during the anthem without being subject to a penalty and gave them the choice of remaining in the locker room during the anthem.)

5. What anticipated challenges or barriers might this strategy face? Please explain.

6. What else is needed to make this strategy a reality?