

**A Study of Racial Differences
in the
Records of NFL Coaches, 1986-2001**

**by
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September 30, 2002

I have analyzed the regular season win records of black and white coaches in the National Football League between 1986 and 2001. I have examined the proportion of teams making the playoffs coached by both black coaches and white coaches. I have examined these outcomes by stage of career and for teams that hire black coaches. I find that, by any measure used, black coaches were more successful than white coaches.

I. Basis for Study

There are relatively few black coaches in the National Football League. Between the 1986 and the 2001 seasons, 86 whites, but only 5 African Americans, coached an NFL team for at least a full season. African Americans accounted for a little more than 5% of these coaches, a percentage that is less than half their share of the U.S. population, but that is a far smaller share of their percentage of participants in professional football. For example, Northeastern University's Center for the Study of Sport in Society *2001 Racial and Gender Report Card* indicates that 28% of NFL assistant coaches and 67% of NFL players are African American.

Why are the numbers of black NFL coaches so small? African Americans may be underrepresented in the “pipeline” (the particular set of jobs that NFL coaches usually have preceding their appointments as coaches). The pipeline may not be the only explanation, however, for the underrepresentation of blacks among NFL coaches. Blacks may also be underrepresented because, when in the pipeline, they must also meet higher standards than whites in order to be selected as head coaches. In this study, I examine whether NFL teams effectively “require” that blacks be better than whites in order to be appointed as a coach and to continue coaching once appointed.

For coaching, unlike most other jobs, there is an objective record of performance. Coaches are responsible for making teams successful and success is readily measured in terms of win-loss records and advancement to the playoffs. If race does not affect which of the potential coaches in the pipeline are selected to be an NFL head coach, then there should be no difference by race in the win-loss or playoff records of black coaches and white coaches. We can tell whether NFL teams “require” that black coaches be better than white coaches in order to obtain and to keep their positions, then, by comparing the win-loss and playoff records of white and black coaches.

The law firm of Mehri & Skalet PLLC compiled a database that included the win-loss records, and whether the team made the playoffs, for every NFL team and coach between 1986 and 2001. I used those data to compute the win-loss records and whether the team was in the playoffs for each year for all coaches who were in their jobs for a full season. I combined the win-loss records and the proportion of team-seasons in the playoffs for black coaches and for white coaches. I examined the overall records, the first season record, and the final season record for coaches who left involuntarily. I also examined the records for white coaches and for black coaches for the teams who have had black coaches.

In each and every one of these comparisons, black coaches have a stronger record than white coaches. The regular season wins and the playoff advantages of black

coaches occur at all stages of their coaching careers. Black coaches have to perform better in their initial season and they are still performing better in their last season with the team, when they are forced to leave their jobs. This result is consistent with NFL teams “requiring” that black coaches be better than whites in order to obtain and to keep their positions. I explain and illustrate each of these comparisons below.

II. Overall Season Records

Based on the 27 full seasons coached by 5 black coaches and the 426 full seasons coached by 86 white coaches between 1986 and 2001, black coaches averaged 9.1 wins and white coaches averaged 8 wins, a racial difference of 1.1 wins. These win records by race are illustrated on Chart 1, with the first set of bars.

This racial difference in wins is particularly important in a league that is balanced in strength. For example, during this time period over sixty percent of teams with exactly nine wins made the playoffs, but less than ten percent of those with eight wins did so. Because African American coaches had more wins, it is not surprising that there is a substantial racial gap in the probability of making the playoffs. Two-thirds of the teams coached by African American coaches made the playoffs, but only 39 percent of those with white coaches did. These playoff records by race are illustrated on Chart 2, with the first set of bars.

III. Season Records for First Season

The win advantage of black coaches is even greater for their first full season on the job. Based on the first full seasons coached by 6 African American coaches and by 94 white coaches,¹ African American coaches averaged 9.5 wins versus an average of only 6.8 wins for white coaches in their first year, a racial difference of 2.7 wins. These win records for the first year of coaching, by race of coach, are illustrated on Chart 1, with the second set of bars.

Sixty-six percent of first year black coaches made the playoffs, but only 20 percent of white coaches did. These playoff records for first year coaches, by race of coach, are illustrated on Chart 2, with the second set of bars.

IV. Season Records for Seasons of Forced Departure

African American coaches who were forced to leave their jobs also were winning more games than white coaches when they were forced to leave. The 5 African American coaches who were forced to leave after completing a full season with their teams, between 1986 and 2001, had an average of 6.8 wins while the 65 white coaches in a similar situation had 5.5 wins, a racial difference of 1.3 wins. These win records for the (involuntarily) final year of coaching, by race of coach, are illustrated on Chart 1, with the third set of bars.

¹ There are more black and white coaches (e.g., 6 and 94) with a first season than there are total coaches (e.g., 5 and 86) because some coaches coach for more than one team and hence have more than one first year with a team.

Twenty percent of these black coaches made the playoffs in the season that they were terminated, but only eight percent of white coaches did. These playoff records for final year coaches, by race of coach, are illustrated on Chart 2, with the third set of bars.

V. Season Records for Teams Who Have Had a Black Coach

One potential explanation for the stronger performance of black coaches by all measures could be that the stronger teams hire African American coaches, and the weaker teams hire white coaches. A simple way to consider team quality is to examine the win-loss records of white and black coaches only for the six teams (Green Bay Packers, Minnesota Vikings, New York Jets, Oakland Raiders, Philadelphia Eagles, and Tampa Bay Buccaneers) that have hired black coaches. Chart 3 illustrates the season wins for white coaches who preceded the black coaches (7.4) (the top bar on the chart), for black coaches (9.1) (the middle bar on the chart), and for those white coaches who followed the black coaches (8.9) (the bottom bar on the chart) for these six teams. Once again, black coaches for these six teams had more wins than the white coaches who preceded them and more wins than the white coaches who succeeded them.

VI. Conclusions

The uniformity of the results of comparing regular season wins and playoff records for white and black coaches in various ways is striking. No matter how we look at success, black coaches are performing better.² These data are consistent with blacks having to be better coaches than whites in order to get a job as a head coach in the NFL. The small number of black coaches is likely not to be just a “pipeline” problem. The black coach candidates in the pipeline seem to be held to a higher standard by the teams in the National Football League.

² The small number of black coaches hired by NFL teams makes it difficult to conduct more formal statistical analyses of racial differences. While many of the racial differences reported here are strong enough that a statistical test dismisses chance or random variation as the reason for racial differences, in the end, there are simply too few black coaches for more formal statistical analyses to be appropriate.

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Janice F. Madden is Professor of Sociology, Real Estate, and Regional Science at the University of Pennsylvania. She came to Penn in 1972 after completing her Ph.D. in economics at Duke University. She served as Vice Provost for Graduate Education, Penn's chief officer for graduate education, from 1991-99. She is currently Director of the Alice Paul Research Center and the Women's Studies program at Penn. Dr. Madden's research dealing with the effects of race and gender on employment outcomes has been published in a variety of prominent economics and social science journals. She has written four books: The Economics of Sex Discrimination (1972, reprinted 1975); Post-Industrial Philadelphia (1990); Work, Wages, and Poverty (1991); and Changes in Income and Inequality within U.S. Metropolitan Areas (2000). Her research has been supported by the National Science Foundation, the National Institute of Mental Health, the Brookings Institution, and other federal agencies and foundations. As a consultant at Econsult Corporation, she has been retained as an expert in labor economics and statistics by both plaintiffs and defendants in discrimination litigation involving race, age, and gender. These cases have involved complex statistical analyses involving thousands of employees, including the recently settled racial discrimination allegations against The Coca-Cola Company and against the Federal Deposit Insurance Company.

Chart 1
Average Wins Per Full Season for NFL Coaches, by Race and Stage of Career, 1986-2001

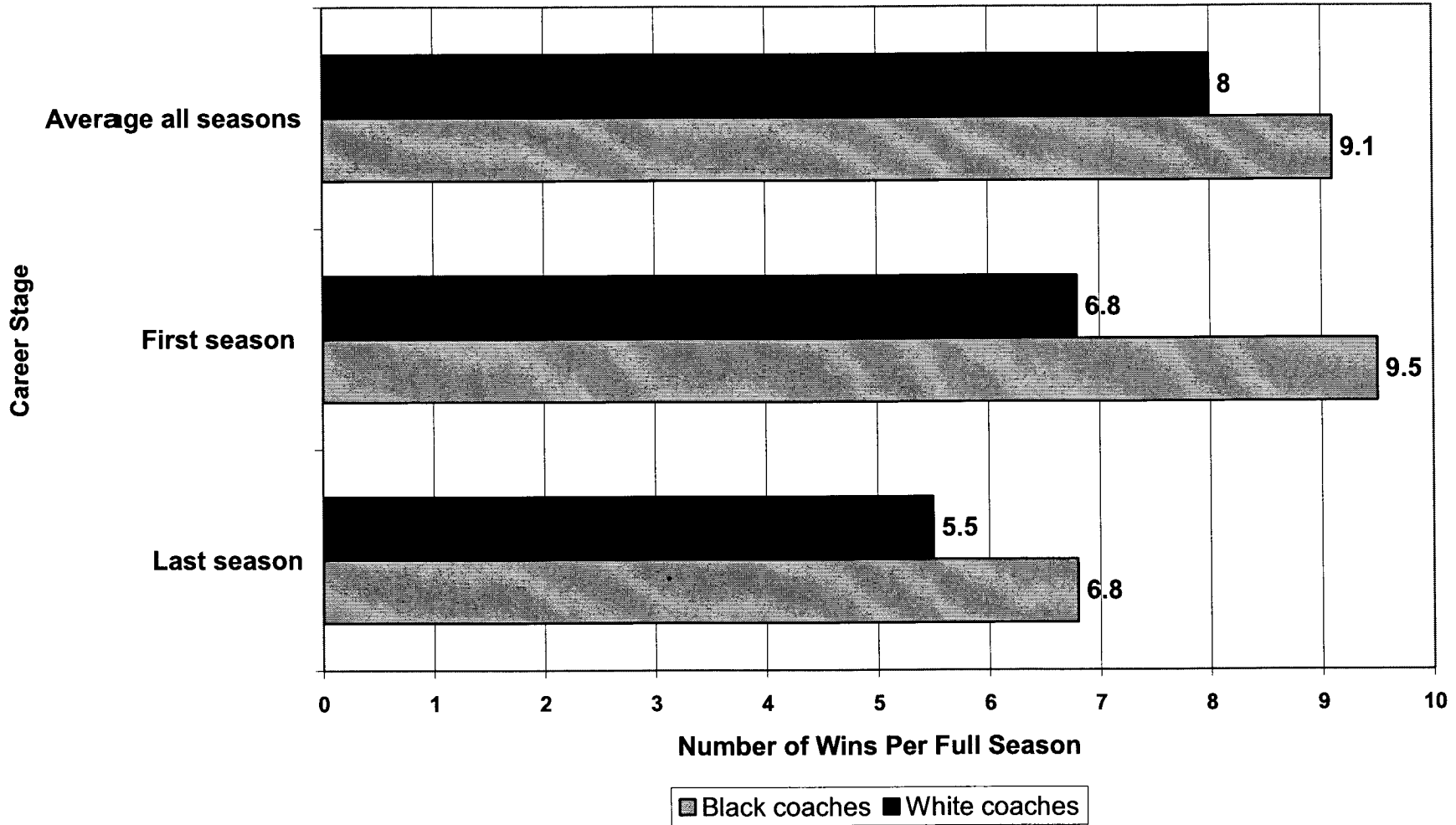


Chart 2
Proportion of NFL Coaches in Playoffs, by Race and Stage of Career, 1986-2001

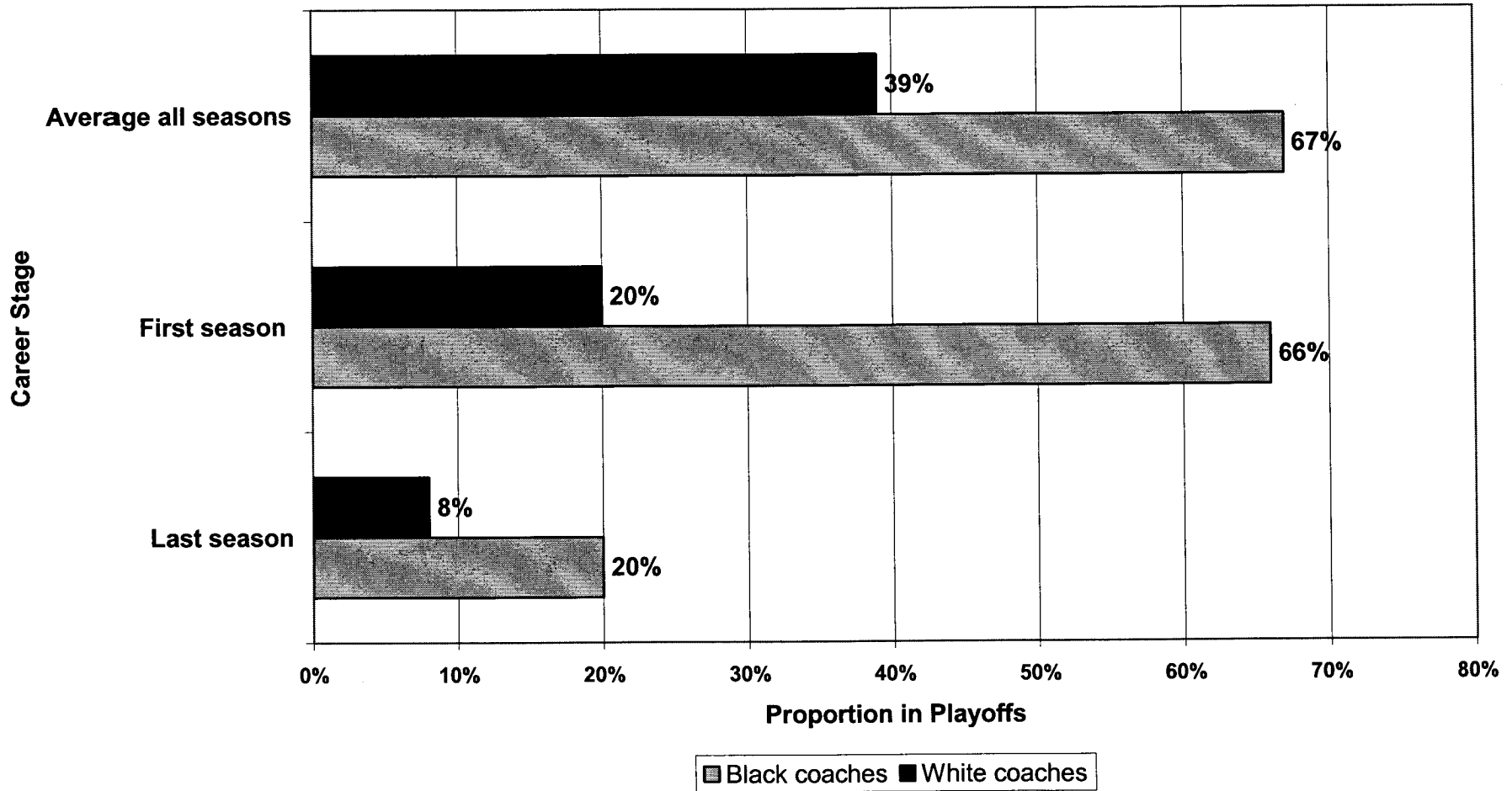


Chart 3
Average Total Wins in a Full Season by Race of Coach, NFL Teams with Black Coaches, 1986-2001

