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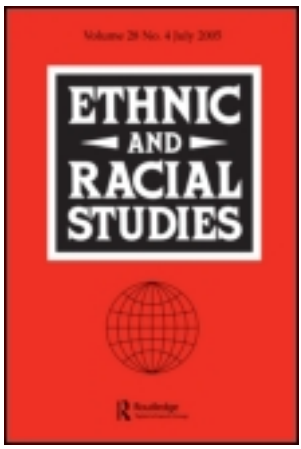


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# DISCUSSION ARTICLE

# Why aren't there more black football managers?

Ellis Cashmore and Jamie Cleland

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**Abstract**

The number of black and minority ethnic (BME) managers in English professional association football, or soccer, has been stable for nearly ten years: there are usually between two and four (out of a possible ninety two). Yet black players regularly make up more than a quarter of professional club squads. The reasons for this apparent under-representation are explored among 1,000 football fans, including players and ex-players, both white and BME. Opinions were solicited via an online research platform www.topfan.co.uk, designed and executed by the authors. The findings indicate 56 per cent of respondents believe racism operates at the executive levels of football, i.e. the boardroom. While some accuse club owners and directors of deliberate discrimination, most suspect a form of unwitting or institutional racism in which assumptions about black people's capacities are not analysed and challenged and so continue to circulate. Among the possible remedies to this is the American National Football League's Rooney Rule, which mandates BME candidates' inclusion on shortlists for senior coaching positions. A third of participants in the research approved of this type of initiative. While black managers are scarce when compared to the number of black players in professional football, their presence is actually an accurate reflection of their number in the total British population. So is the dearth of black managers an under-representation?

**Keywords:** Association football; black managers; institutional racism; Rooney Rule; sports.

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**When you are black, you get one chance**

'There's numerous white managers who have failed but their name always crops up on a short list and they get given jobs. When you are black, you get one chance and if you mess up that's it – you don't get another job for a long time.' The speaker could have been talking about practically any sphere of society: industry, commerce, education, perhaps. In fact, he was commenting on association football management.

England has ninety two professional league football clubs playing across four leagues. At any one time, they employ between 2,800 and 3,000 full-time players, between 20 and 25 per cent of whom are black and minority ethnic (BME), the vast majority of African background or descent. On 5 April 2011, former player Paul Ince left his managerial position at the club Notts County, effectively halving the number of black managers employed in English professional football. The only black manager was Chris Powell, a former player who remained in charge at Charlton Athletic.

It could plausibly be argued that this apparent aberrance is either untypical or temporary. After all, club managers lose their jobs and are replaced by others about eighty five times per year (this is an average since 2002), suggesting an extraordinarily fluid job market. Yet, amid the fluidity, there has been a constant: black managers are a scarcity. Why? In spring 2011, we launched an online investigation to air possible reasons and explore possible methods of change, not in the opinion of the authors, but in those of the people who habitually watch, discuss, and, in myriad ways, engage with a pursuit that is started as a sport, but has become a staple of popular culture in England and beyond.

For the first 110 years of its existence, the landscape of football was as changeless as its rules: minor variations did little to damage its dominant features. From 1863 when the Football Association (FA) was formed, football was a game played and followed by white working-class men, mostly though not exclusively from industrial cities. Players' earnings were limited by a maximum wage that ensured they earned roughly the same as well-paid factory employees. In 1961, the then fledgling players' trade union, the Professional Footballers' Association (PFA), negotiated an end to the salary cap and set in train a series of developments that, combined with the maturing influence of television, led to the rise of what we might call a football plutocracy, an elite group of extravagantly well-paid and devoutly-admired players.

Amid this change, the global power balance shifted. Western European and South American nations lost the hegemonic position they had held for most of the century as Africa, Australasia, and

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the United States emerged. Insularity gave way to globalism: migration across football nations became commonplace, at first between European countries and later between all football-playing territories. Zimbabwean Peter Ndlovu, who moved to Coventry City in 1991, and Tony Yeboah, a Ghanaian who transferred to Leeds United in 1995, were among the first of a wave of African nationals who moved to England. By the time of their arrival, indigenous black players, though at first made to feel like uninvited guests at a whites-only party, had become parts of a diverse cultural make-up, though Asian players were – indeed still are – conspicuous by their absence.

Much of football was in flux in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Even the ownership of clubs, long a mainstay of local businessmen, became more varied. In the 1990s, women such as Delia Smith and Karren Brady occupied major shareholding and executive positions. Foreign nationals, such as Egyptian Mohamed Al Fayed and Russian Roman Abramovich bought entire clubs. The cultural mix of managers changed too: Arsène Wenger, from France, and Claudio Ranieri, from Italy, were among the many managers and coaches from outside England to take positions at English clubs. When in 1995 Ruud Gullit, born in Amsterdam, his parents from Dutch Surinam, took charge at Chelsea, he was conspicuous, if not for being one of the few black managers employed at the time, for being the only manager to sport dreadlocks!

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## We are athletic, but can we think?

Britain's first black football manager was Tony Collins, who managed Rochdale for seven years from 1960. Since then, there have typically been between one and three black managers employed at any one time.

On the other hand, black players have been a substantial presence in English football since the late 1970s when players such as the French Guyana-born Cyrille Regis, Garth Crooks, born in Stoke-on-Trent in the English Midlands, and Viv Anderson, who went on to become the first black person to play for the English national team, started to appear at professional clubs. Their presence, while welcomed by many, was met by racial abuse from many sections of England's fandom, at that stage well populated by neo-Nazi skinheads, the National Front, and other far right groups.

Given an active professional football career typically finishes when a player is in his early thirties, it might reasonably be expected that the first generation of black players would have retired in the late 1980s, or early 1990s. Career choices are usually limited: players are qualified for little other than soccer-related jobs. Managerial positions offer careers to most ex-players, though the previously mentioned Crooks opted for the media. Anderson managed

Barnsley briefly in 1993–94. Regis became a coach. Other players, such as Brendon Batson, took administrative positions in football. But the majority drifted away from the sport.

By 2003, at a time when 20 per cent of players were black, there were five black former players in professional management and the same number in coaching positions; they included the French Sudanese Jean Tigana (who had played in the French leagues), and Nottingham-born Keith Alexander who managed several lower league clubs from 1993 until his death in 2010. Regis, who had by then resigned his coaching job to become a football agent, together with Crooks, John Barnes, Paul Elliott, and Luther Blissett – all prominent ex-players – became part of a group allied to the PFA. The group was concerned with the lack of black managers and coaches at British professional clubs. Many had the required qualifications and had completed all the necessary coaching courses but were not being given the opportunities to work in professional football.

Regis alluded to the source of the problem: 'The real power is within management jobs, where you are dictating policy, commanding players and dealing with budgets. There are still questions being asked about black British managers and whether or not they will be able to deal with all this and produce the goods. . . . I think a number of chairmen are still hesitant about appointing a black manager' (Chaudhary 2003).

It was a judiciously worded but piercing appraisal that prompted more questions than it answered. What exactly were the doubts about black candidates' ability to command, budget, and dictate policy? Why precisely were chairmen 'hesitant', by which we presume he meant ambivalent, uncertain, or perhaps just reluctant? The response was inaudible, but, in spite of that, enlightening. Gullit and Tigana left their managerial positions, leaving England's Premier League bereft of black managers. Chris Hughton and Paul Ince were among the black former players who moved in and out of management, though overall there was a reduction in the number of black managers. In 2011, eight years almost to the day after Regis' declaration, there was only one black manager.

John Barnes, a former player who managed Celtic, the Jamaican national team, and Tranmere Rovers, identified the source of the obstacle: 'The stereotype of a black man is that he is a good athlete, therefore, he should be able to run fast, box, sprint, play rugby, play football, we are athletic but can we think?' (Marshall 2004).

It was an ironic observation, considering stereotypes had obstructed black players. In 1991, the Crystal Palace chair Ron Noades, offered an insight into his thinking: 'The black players at this club lend the side a lot of skill and flair, but you also need white players in there to balance things up and give the team some brains and some common sense' (White 2003). Since the 1970s, when it featured black player

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Vince Hilaire, Palace had a reputation as an enlightened club, and included Ian Wright and Mark Bright in its FA Cup final side of 1990.

Noades may or may not have been representative of club owners or directors; in fact, by 1991, he was probably an anachronism. His views were probably a fair reflection of thinking a decade before. When he sold his interest in the club in 1998, the final vestige of this style of racist thinking probably disappeared. It may well have been replaced with a different, though no less pernicious style of thinking. A participant in our research responded to the shortage of black managers with a question: 'Are they good enough? I honestly think black managers are in short supply due to the lack of qualifications. I have absolutely no problem with black managers at all, but *have they got what it takes*? Maybe we will never know'.

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## Too quick to play the race card

'What today social agents might take as given, as supposedly natural conditions of the social, were socially composed by the relatively powerful over the backs of the relatively powerless, how, far from natural, they became naturalized, cemented and retained in place by a mix of design, default, ongoing social labour, habitus and carelessness', writes David Theo Goldberg (2009, p. 1280). Ideas about black athletes have become, to use Goldberg's resonant phrase, 'naturalized, cemented and retained in place'.

Blacks' achievements on the football field, basketball court, boxing ring, tennis court, golf course, and athletics track have supplied evidence of what some still presume is a natural advantage. Despite repeated refutations of a theory popularized in the 1970s by Martin Kane, the belief in the natural sporting superiority of black people has a commonsense appeal, especially now that black athletes have risen in sports such as tennis and golf that have traditionally been prohibitively expensive (Kane 1971). Jon Entine (2000) is an exponent of the natural ability thesis, but challenges have come from Harry Edwards (1973), John Hoberman (1997), and David Wiggins (2006). One of the present authors has also summarized the debate (see Cashmore 2010, pp. 232–57).

The present dearth of qualified black people in managerial positions in English football raises the suspicion of – to invoke Goldberg again – a mix of design and default. The default part is easier to understand: a pre-selected option adopted by an owner or board of directors almost automatically, or without too much critical thought. Clubs are conservative organizations and favour stability and continuity – at least ostensibly: the rate at which they fire managers suggests they choose inappropriate means for achieving these.

How much design is there in the decision to exclude black personnel – often highly qualified – from senior management positions? Football

is, as one respondent to our online survey claimed, 'an industry where the dice are clearly loaded'. He was among the 56 per cent of participants who believed there was racism in sport's 'political machinations', as one respondent put it. After all, as another pointed out, 'Football reflects wider society'.

'I did think that Ruud Gullit would be the start of a change in attitudes,' one fan reflected, 'but it was not to be. As for doing something about it, this is difficult – you can't force a chairman to appoint a black manager can you?'

Most suspected there was less design in the decision-making and more habitual processes at work; what one participant described as 'Entrenched, unconscious, casual racism based on stereotypes and the fact that there haven't been many [black people] at the top level'.

Complementing this, another fan stated: 'The boards have very few ethnic minorities within them and are more likely to be the issue rather than the players or backroom staff. I think the structural issues around the FA and leagues are the big problem. It's an old boys' club with little understanding about the fans and [it is] unlikely to bring in people from outside their peer group'.

Another participant was less accusatory: 'I don't believe it is overtly racist. I believe that chairmen when appointing coaches/managers like to take the tried and tested route and in England that means mostly white former players'.

While few use the term, many fans allude to *institutional racism* – in which people do not consciously discriminate against minorities, but fail to challenge old assumptions and stereotypes, meaning a pattern of operations continues – and its relevance in football management. One respondent condensed the views of many: 'People appoint people like themselves. White chairmen appoint white, male managers. The cycle is not easily broken'.

The comment makes the cycle seem quite logical in the sense that it is characterized by what seems clear, sound reasoning. 'Team owners and general managers, as businesspeople, prefer to hire candidates who are similar to coaches who have already achieved success or are similar to coaches they have known personally and admired', writes Douglas Putnam (1999, p. 27), highlighting a reason why owners and general managers in American sport have failed to appoint more black people.

'Consequently,' adds Putnam, they 'often pass over qualified blacks and hire whites with whom they are familiar . . . and to conform to their long-held ideal about what a successful coach should be' (1999, p. 27).

This is sport's equivalent of what Alvin W. Gouldner once called the 'Rebecca Myth', after Daphne du Maurer's famous novel. In the book *Rebecca* and Alfred Hitchcock's 1940 film of the same name, a young woman marries an English aristocrat, but, after moving into his mansion, meets an unwelcoming housekeeper, Mrs Danvers, who both idealizes and

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idolizes the late mistress of the mansion, Rebecca. Entranced by the thought of the dead Rebecca, Mrs Danvers makes her new mistress' life a misery.

In his *Wildcat Strike: A Study in Worker-Management Relations*, first published in 1954, Gouldner transposes this to an industrial setting and shows how the succession of personnel in management can be impeded by a priori expectations. 'The successor may fail to show the old lieutenants proper deference, willfully or through ignorance of their expectations, but in either event making them dissatisfied', writes Gouldner (1965, p. 158). They resist the new boss as a 'legitimate heir' to the position once held by someone they knew and trusted and withhold legitimacy unless he conforms to their ideal (Gouldner's study was an all-male affair).

Perhaps this helps clarify why owners and chairs fail to hire more blacks in senior positions: because they have what Putnam calls a 'subliminal perception'. Consciously or unconsciously, they desire to appoint someone who resembles a past manager/coach, who has brought success to their organization. Someone like Brian Clough, Bill Shankly, or Alex Ferguson – all white. This creates special difficulties for aspiring managers or coaches from BME backgrounds who need to convince prospective employers of their capabilities, but may also need their approval as someone who resembles a successful predecessor.

Colin King (2004) uses a similar approach to explain the paucity of black managers, coaches, or administrators in British soccer. Black ex-players wishing to make the transition are forced to perform to standards, that is 'play the white man', in order to gain admission. A participant in the research advanced a variant of this argument: 'Black managers obviously have a different culture and the chairman conducting the interviews will see little, if anything at all, in their black candidate'.

Another participant distinguished between playing and managerial positions: 'Whereas players are recruited on meritocratic grounds, the same doesn't yet apply to managers, who are more often recruited because they "look right"; partly the Rebecca effect, and partly a result of chairmen – typically older, white men – looking for somebody who reflects their own idea of what a successful managerial appointment should be'.

But 44 per cent of our participants maintained that the role of racism could be exaggerated. 'Are doors of future employment opportunities being closed on the basis of their appearance, or on the basis of their previous work credentials and success rate?' asked one participant rhetorically. 'I think we're sometimes too quick to play the race card.'

The 'race card' is typically 'used to explain away racial meanings in the midst of melodramatic challenges to colorblindness', according to David J. Leonard (2004, p. 290). One of our participants concurred: 'There isn't necessarily a problem with racism among boards etc. but a tendency to follow a pattern and appoint established managers recognized by the media etc. who, at this time, *happen to be white*'.

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## Method

www.topfan.co.uk was the domain site of an online research platform where participants could express their views on, among other issues, the Cyrille Regis comment quoted earlier in this article and other pertinent contributions to our understanding of the under-representation of black managers. For example, another question was:

> In 2009, the late Keith Alexander (Britain's first black coach) said: *'There's no question in my mind that there is racism at the top level. There are no black people at the FA, the Football League, the Premier League'*. Is there racism at the top?

A hyperlink took participants to a 2009 newspaper article containing the quotation, which is from Speck (2009).

An anonymous online survey had the virtue of protecting the identity of the participants if they so wished (many volunteered their email addresses and asked to be kept informed of developments) and afforded them secrecy. Given the nature of the subject area, any other form of research may have been impracticable and unreliable. The prospect of, for instance, approaching fans on their way to a game and asking, 'would you mind answering a few questions on the scarcity of black managers in professional football?' would have yielded little relevant material. Other methods of gathering data would have been similarly ineffective or inefficient.

Online research, on the other hand, offered a way of affording participants anonymity and flexibility: they could choose to complete the questionnaire on whatever computer or other device they wished, in privacy or in public, whenever they wanted. There was no motivation to lie, or to repeat the survey, as no prizes were offered.

This method did not suffer from the kind of sampling error that can bias more traditional sampling: participation was completely voluntary and confidential. It was self-selecting. The only possible bias would be a skew toward those with access to the internet. We believed this was an acceptable bias in the circumstances. To elicit the necessary data, both authors engaged in club fans' forums across the United Kingdom (from the Premier League down to non-league). A large number of forum editors were formally contacted by email and in those forums where permission was granted (over fifty), a paragraph about the research and a link directing fans to complete the survey was included. As the research was anonymous, at the end of the survey the participants were reminded that by clicking submit they were consenting for their views to be used in the research.

In analysing the data, two approaches were taken. Firstly, a quantitative approach was adopted to obtain a frequency of responses in each category. Secondly, the open-ended question which asked the participants for their thoughts on the lack of black managers was inductively analysed through a manual form of content analysis to identify 'patterns and processes, commonalities and differences' across the responses (Miles and Huberman 1984, p. 9).

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**Until you force something**

Even allowing for the absence of wilful discrimination or purposive attempts to typecast, the results are unequivocal: blacks' involvement in football effectively concludes at the end of their active playing career. Most participants believed this would not change drastically. Presented with evidence that four years ago (in 2007) there were only two black managers (out of ninety two league clubs) and invited to predict how many there would be in 2015, the majority (68 per cent) forecast between three and eight, in other words, roughly a statistical reflection of their size in the British population. The next most popular conjecture was 'same as today' (18 per cent). Of those participants who imagined there would be significant changes, 12 per cent saw the number of black managers leaping to between nine and nineteen, while 2 per cent believed that, within four years, there would be twenty or more black managers, meaning that management would mirror playing staff proportions.

Perhaps surprising – given the popular image of football enthusiasts – is the support for reform. A third of all participants (and over half BMEs), presumably inured to a multicultural sport, urged interventions. The National Football League (NFL) in the USA offers a framework in its Rooney Rule. This stipulates that league clubs shortlist at least one ethnic minority candidate when they are recruiting for senior coaching jobs (the equivalent of association's manager). Its origins are instructive. At the start of the 2002 season, 70 per cent of league players were African-American, yet there were only two black head coaches among the thirty two league clubs. Embarrassed by this, the NFL, having tried other initiatives, implemented the Rooney Rule, named after Dan Rooney, the owner of Pittsburgh Steelers who helped fashion the policy.

In 2011, nine years after its inception, N. Jeremi Duru (2011a) assessed its impact: 'The past four Super Bowls featured four head coaches of color, two of the past five NFL Coach of the Year Award recipients are head coaches of color, and [clubs had recently appointed] six head coaches of color'. At the time of writing (April 2011), eight out of thirty two NFL head coaches are African American.

Those participants who opposed any reform in football did so vigorously, with a representative response being: 'The Rooney Rule is a complete joke – enforcing people to shortlist a minority person is as bad as eliminating someone because they are a minority, the shortlist should consist of the best people for the job'.

Similar objections were raised against the British Labour Party's policy of constituting all-women shortlists for half of its winnable seats in the 1997 General Election. Women had comprised only 10 per cent

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of MPs across all parties in the previous ten years. The policy resulted in 100 elected females for the Labour government. Moreover, the United Kingdom's Equality Act 2010 was passed into law in April 2011, making it possible for employers faced with two or more candidates of equal merit to appoint or promote a candidate from a minority group (ethnicity, gender, age, etc.), provided that the employer has a reasonable belief that that minority group is under-represented in its workforce. Known as 'positive action', this was a diluted version of American affirmative action, or positive discrimination. In other words, the kind of partiality or preferential treatment posited by the Rooney Rule is neither unfamiliar nor unlawful in the UK.

Despite reservations ('it is tokenistic and fails to challenge the fundamental issues at the heart of the problem'; 'The problem with having a quota system is that any black manager who is appointed then has to carry the burden of being in a minority group in football'), a solid minority were convinced: 'Until you force something like the Rooney Rule, the situation will not change. The US is now seeing the success of diversifying upper management'.

In March 2011, the PFA's Chief Executive Gordon Taylor supported in principle the adoption of a Rooney-style policy (Taylor 2011). It was a somewhat belated endorsement from Taylor, who had eight years earlier observed:

> While black players have integrated on the pitch, they have not been able to make progress as coaches and managers and there is no doubt there are not enough of them working within the game. . . . We want to create a talented pool of black coaches and managers who have completed all their coaching courses, we want to see more of them within the game. Black players have made a tremendous contribution on the pitch, now it is time for them to be given the chance to do it off it (Chaudhary 2003).

One participant, himself a black ex-player who had previously managed a Football League club, was not convinced the Rooney Rule would yield the same kind of results as the NFL, but believed it would rid football of any remnants of old stereotypes: '[With a Rooney-style policy] you couldn't possibly say that you haven't tried to be as open as possible. . . . There's no guarantees about appointing managers'. In other words, his impulse was to remove any suspicion of racist practices.

## It's an old boys' club

People do their calculations in different ways and reach different conclusions. For example, one respondent offered this thought: 'Given

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the great number of black players, theoretically football should have a greater percentage of [black] managers, compared with other jobs and industries'. Another participant arrived at a slightly different position: 'Football reflects society in that there aren't as many black people at the top of professions in general as there should be for a more equal reflection of society'.

In the occupational sector of football, the percentage of black managers among the ninety two professional clubs over the 2007–11 period has been between 1.00 and 3.26 per cent, while black personnel have formed 20–25 per cent of the total playing staff. In this context, black managers are inadequately represented. In the wider context, however, black managers reflect the number of black people rather accurately and several participants noticed this, one pointing out that the low number of black football managers is 'way above the "representative percentage" of black people in the basically overwhelmingly white population with small Asian enclaves'.

The pronouncement may be flawed in detail ('small Asian enclaves') but captures the view of many: the BME of Britain, according to the 2001 UK Census was estimated to be 7.9 per cent of the total population. Even allowing for the increasingly blurred boundaries of ethnic affiliation, in a later survey, people of African descent or background were estimated to constitute 2.7 per cent of the total population of England and Wales (Office for National Statistics 2010).

'The number of black managers is almost in direct proportion to the percentage of black people in the UK population', concluded one of our participants, prompting a related question, though one not germane to this study: 'Why are there no Asians in football any where?' Other scholars, such as Daniel Burdsey (2009) and Jas Bains and Sanjiev Johal (1998) have offered detailed explanations of this.

One participant challenged the epistemology of the research: 'This study is taking into account the proportion of black coaches compared to the UK's black population. What it doesn't consider is the educational levels of different ethnic groups, which draws back to wider socio-economic factors. Football qualifications are not enough – educational and cultural levels are relevant as well and any socio-economical study will show that white people tend to have had better educational and cultural opportunities than black people'.

The comment contrives to make two legitimate points. First are the relative educational levels: black underachievement, especially among males, remains a persistent feature of British society, even in the twenty-first century (in Department for Education and Skills 2007). Second, and much more relevant for present purposes, white people, contends the participant, have 'better educational and cultural opportunities'. Presuming the comment refers to society at large, the point is well taken: whites can take advantages of opportunities that

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blacks often cannot. 'It's an old boys' club', remarked one participant, echoing the views of several others. 'It consists of likeminded middle-aged-to-old, white men.'

In sharp distinction, an equal number of other participants agreed essentially with this blunt appraisal: 'I think chairmen will appoint successful managers whether they are black or white'.

As authors of a Discussion Article, we feel no obligation to form conclusions: our purpose is to prompt debate. Are black people genuinely under-represented in football management, or should we accept their relatively small numbers as accurate reflections of their numbers in the general population? Is there racism, albeit institutional racism, at the higher echelons of Britain's national sport, or is merit the only criterion on which boards and owners base their judgements? Is football management effectively a microcosm of society, offering BME workers an entrance, but imposing limits to their achievement? Our participants are divided. Over half suspect racism is preventing the advancement of black personnel, while the others retain faith in the meritocracy of association football.

The substantial number supporting Rooney Rule-style interventions suggests an appetite for change, though the two-thirds that were sceptical of such reform are sure that some sort of 'meritocratic balance' will prevail. But the two-thirds who accepted that management succession was affected by football's version of the Rebecca Myth implicitly suggested that the sport is far from a meritocracy where people are selected solely on the basis of their qualifications, experience, and ability. Could a Rooney-style regulation work in English soccer? 'It can work anywhere', according to Duru (2011b). But, the kind of statistical data compiled by Cochran Jr and Mehri (2002) and which persuaded the NFL would be inconclusive in English football, where there is a far less egalitarian ethos and a tiny elite dominate uninterruptedly. Managerial records frequently depend on the club's resources and, unlike in the NFL, these are unevenly distributed. In spite of this, there is a growing recognition that changes need to be initiated rather than hoped for.

A final discussion point concerns ownership: it might reasonably be argued that, were there more black owners of professional clubs, this would open doors. There are currently no black directors of English clubs. Most clubs lose money, though not all of the order of Manchester City and Chelsea, which in 2010 lost £121 million and £71 million respectively. It seems black people, even those of considerable means, are guided away from football club ownership by rational economic motives.

Association football has, in recent years, morphed into an industry, specifically an entertainment industry. If it were a circus, black players

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would be part of its main attraction: like lions, perhaps, but rarely lion tamers and never ringmasters.

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