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Cyrus Mehri and the National Football League's Rooney Rule (2021)

The National Football League in 2021

Each winter, Cyrus Mehri's attention turned to the National Football League (NFL). Mehri, an attorney, had for years worked with the NFL to prioritize diversity when new head coaches were hired. After the 2020 season, he noted that seven of the 32 teams had hired new head coaches. He also noted that Eric Bieniemy, offensive coordinator of the Kansas City Chiefs, reportedly interviewed for all seven open positions but was hired for none.¹ Barring an unforeseen turn of events, Bieniemy would not become a head coach in 2021.

Bieniemy was widely viewed as an especially strong candidate for a head coach job. Over the previous three seasons, Bieniemy twice led the NFL's top-ranked offense and twice helped Kansas City reach the NFL's championship game—the Super Bowl.² The star quarterback in Bieniemy's offense, Patrick Mahomes, was named the NFL's Most Valuable Player (MVP) in 2018 and Super Bowl MVP in 2020. Head Coach Andy Reid stated, "I know he'd be a great head coach. I know that."³

Many NFL insiders and observers thought it inexplicable that no NFL franchise hired Bieniemy, a former NFL player with 15 years of NFL coaching experience, to be their head coach. Pittsburgh Steelers Head Coach Mike Tomlin described the situation as a "real head-scratcher," further stating that "every offensive coordinator Andy Reid has had in the last 20 years got a head job ... Now, Andy has the best offense he's ever had and [Bieniemy] can't get a job?"⁴ Sports journalist Jason Reid noted that "the two coaches who previously held the Chiefs' offensive coordinator position under Reid, Doug Pederson and Matt Nagy, respectively, quickly moved on to become head coaches."⁵ Kurt Streeter of the *New York Times* went further, bluntly characterizing the passing over of Bieniemy as "shameful" for the NFL.⁶

Bieniemy was not alone. The offensive coordinator of the team that beat Kansas City to win the 2021 Super Bowl, Byron Leftwich, was not even interviewed for any of the seven open head coach positions. Yet, in addition to helping Tampa Bay win the Super Bowl, Leftwich had coached two different quarterbacks—Jameis Winston and Tom Brady—to record-setting seasons.

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