

with a foreword by **TONY DUNGY**

ADVANCING THE BALL

*Race, Reformation, and the Quest for Equal
Coaching Opportunity in the NFL*

N. JEREMI DURU

ADVANCING THE BALL

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To Kanayo and Anikwe for Your Love and Laughter
To Mellissa for the Bicycle Card and
so Much More
And to My Parents, and the Rest of My
Wonderful Family, for Believing in Me

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FOREWORD

Tony Dungy

I CAN STILL REMEMBER the first National Football League game I ever saw in person. The Detroit Lions were playing a preseason game at home against the Cleveland Browns in the late summer of 1964. My dad took me to the game and, although it was nearly fifty years ago and I was only eight years old at the time, there are some things I remember like yesterday. I remember going to the ticket window and my dad deciding to pay four dollars to sit in the upper deck rather than six dollars to sit downstairs. I also remember that although we lived in Michigan and were definitely Lions fans, there was something about the Cleveland Browns that was special to my dad—there was some reason he wanted me to see the Browns.

I knew the Browns had a very good team that season—in fact, they would go on to win the NFL Championship Game (before it was called the Super Bowl). I knew he wanted me to see Jim Brown, the Cleveland running back he considered the best player to ever play the game. And I knew he wanted me to see Paul Warfield, the Browns' rookie receiver, who had been an All-American at Ohio State. He

told me those things on the way to the game. But what he didn't explain at the time was why he and so many other African American dads were Cleveland Browns fans. I would find out much later in life that it was because of their history—because of their first coach, Paul Brown, and his willingness to sign black players when no one else would.

Paul Brown was a legendary high school coach in Ohio who went on to coach at Ohio State University and then, in 1946, became the coach of the Cleveland Browns. Brown had coached many great African American players at Massillon Washington High School and at Ohio State and made no apologies for playing to win. He didn't see anything wrong with signing and playing blacks if they were the best players at their position. When the Browns joined the NFL in 1950, that attitude gave them an advantage over the rest of the League, and they dominated the decade of the 1950s, playing in six straight championship games and winning the title three times.

I didn't know all that in 1964 as an eight-year-old watching the Browns play a preseason game. I just saw some African American players on both teams and at that point began dreaming of playing pro football. Those dreams, and my dad's encouragement, helped me to achieve that goal of playing in the NFL. In 1977 I made the Pittsburgh Steelers team as a free agent, and our second game of my rookie season was played in Cleveland against the Browns. My mom and dad drove down from Michigan for the game, and I couldn't help but think back to that night in Detroit with my dad thirteen years earlier. Before the warm-ups I went over and sat on the Browns bench, just to sit where Jim Brown would have. As fate would have it, we had two defensive backs get hurt during the game and I ended up playing cornerback for one series and covering . . . *Paul Warfield!*

While I had dreamed of playing in the NFL, I *never* dreamed of coaching in the NFL. It didn't seem to be a realistic goal at the time. Although in 1921 an African American named Fritz Pollard became a player/coach for the Akron Pros (which played in the league that would become the NFL), it was decided several years later that whatever jobs were available in professional football should go to whites.

Pollard and the League's other African Americans were forced out, and the NFL did not reintegrate until 1946. In the years following reintegration, NFL teams took note of the Browns' success with African American players, but unfortunately, that didn't carry over to the coaching ranks or the front office. Despite the fact that the NFL had seen many championship teams that featured African American players and America's professional baseball and basketball leagues had teams led by African American coaches, it would take forty-three years from the NFL's on-field reintegration for the League to see an African American head coach. Why did it take so long? In reality, there was simply a lack of opportunity. When I came into the NFL as a player there were no African American head coaches and only a handful of assistant coaches. There were no role models, no success stories. Most African Americans at that time felt if they wanted a career in coaching, it would have to be at the college level, not in the NFL.

When I was hired by Chuck Noll as an assistant coach for the Steelers in 1981 there were still fewer than a dozen minority assistant coaches in the League. George Young, the general manager of the New York Giants, told me that if I wanted to have a future in coaching I needed to shave my beard. He felt I didn't "look like a coach." George was a friend of mine, and he wasn't insulting me. He was trying to be helpful. He didn't know it, but his words really laid out the problem the NFL had been facing for years. There was a stereotype of what an NFL coach "looked like," and even if I shaved, I (and the other African American assistant coaches) still wouldn't fit the perception of what owners were looking for in their coaches.

Those perceptions would be slow to change, but several factors would help in that change. One was the work of people such as Al Davis and Dan Rooney, owners who felt that diversity was important for the League and who not only stated it but also acted upon it. Another was the entry into the League of a new wave of ownership—people who came into the NFL from the business world and who looked at human resource issues differently. And two huge factors were the formation of the Fritz Pollard Alliance, a group made up of

minority coaches and front office personnel in the NFL, and the passage of the “Rooney Rule,” which requires NFL teams to interview at least one minority candidate for head coaching and upper-level front office positions. The Fritz Pollard Alliance and the Rooney Rule created opportunity, and when given the opportunity, African Americans responded with successes. While there were no teams coached by African Americans in the first forty Super Bowls, the most recent four Super Bowls have featured four African American head coaches.

In January 2007 the Indianapolis Colts won Super Bowl XLI, making me the first African American to coach a team to a Super Bowl victory. Our opponents that night, the Chicago Bears, were coached by Lovie Smith, another African American. Many people saw that as a historic moment for the National Football League, and I was certainly proud to be part of that history.

I am very thankful that I was one of the people who benefited from the work of so many in this battle for diversity. I think you’ll see through *Advancing the Ball* that because of the efforts of the Fritz Pollard Alliance, the NFL, and many determined individuals, while we are not finished in the journey to equal opportunity in the NFL, we have come a long way since that summer night in 1964 when the prospect of an eight-year-old African American boy becoming an NFL head coach seemed an impossibility.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I COULD NOT HAVE WRITTEN THIS BOOK without the assistance and support of so many. I am deeply grateful to you all. Although I am concerned I may neglect to recognize one or more individuals who were crucial to this project (in which case I beg forgiveness), I must name names.

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In addition, I must thank my library liaison, Noa Kaumeheiwa, who seems capable of finding a copy of any newspaper article published at any time anywhere on earth. Thanks also to my younger brother, Chika Duru, who has developed into an excellent and exacting lawyer and who, despite the grueling hours of a second-year law firm associate, helped scrutinize both my original proposal and my final manuscript for typos.

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Although I mentioned my family in the dedication at the beginning of this book, I cannot close these acknowledgments without another mention. From those who raised me to those I now raise, your love and support mean the world to me. I am truly blessed.

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INTRODUCTION

ON FEBRUARY 2, 2007, two days before the National Football League's Super Bowl XLI, the game's opposing head coaches, Tony Dungy and Lovie Smith, posed together with the trophy the winning coach would hoist after the contest. The event should not have been particularly notable, but it was. Both coaches were African American, and that fact was as much a story as the game itself. Head coaching in the NFL had long been a whites-only business, and just a few years earlier such a matchup had been unthinkable. In 2002, however, two lawyers, Cyrus Mehri and Johnnie L. Cochran Jr., together with a few grizzled NFL veterans, launched a movement to expand head coaching opportunities that would profoundly change the League and, arguably, the nation.

Neither Mehri nor Cochran was involved in the NFL or its operations when they decided to challenge the League's employment practices. They knew as much about the League's inner workings as everyday fans, which is essentially what they were. Both loved the sport, and each spent his fair share of Sunday afternoons and Monday