

## **Barriers to Advancement:**

### **The Value of Black Coaches as Recruiters in SEC Football**

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*Black coaches comprise nearly half of all Southeastern Conference (SEC) assistant football coaches. However, during the 2021 college football season all 14 SEC head coaches were White. Racial tasking occurs when racially different individuals have the same title or rank but are assigned different job responsibilities. Given that successful recruiting is crucial to winning college football games, this study sought to determine whether Black SEC assistant coaches are tasked with different recruiting responsibilities than White coaches. This study's findings reveal Black assistant coaches are disproportionately tasked with recruiting four- and five-star Black recruits, the proverbial lifeblood of college football success. As a result of disproportionately being tasked with recruiting responsibilities, Black SEC assistant football coaches experience disparate outcomes, failing to achieve coordinator and head coaching status. This study offers evidence that in the SEC racial tasking is a form of institutional racialization that inhibits the sustained coaching ascension and success of Black assistant football coaches.*

*Keywords: FBS football, Southeastern Conference, racial tasking, coaching, critical race theory, institutional logics*

**D**uring the 2020 college football season, there were a record number of minority head coaches ( $n = 14$  of 65; 22%) in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I, Power-5 “autonomy” conferences (NCAA, 2021b). Since 2016 the number of minority<sup>1</sup> head coaches in Power-5 football has increased by five percent ( $n = 11$  of 65; 17%). In 2020, 54% ( $n = 272$ ) of assistant coaches in Power-5 football identified as a minority, an increase of five percent since 2016 (NCAA, 2021b). While each coach’s career path is unique, possible causes for the proportionally lower number of minority Power-5 head coaches is an area of research that has received significant attention (Bopp et al., 2019; Cunningham & Sagas, 2005; Harrison et al., 2009; Singer et al., 2010; Turick & Bopp, 2016).

In many ways, the adage “climbing the corporate ladder” describes a Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) football head coach’s career trajectory. In most cases, a head coach progresses from an entry level “assistant coach” position to an upper-level management “head coach” position (Barnett, 2019). Most coaches initially serve as a graduate assistant coach completing a graduate degree while coaching. The next rung on the “corporate” ladder is typically a job as a full-time assistant or “position” coach. Position coaches are responsible for coaching a specific group of players (e.g., running backs, wide receivers, linebackers) as well as recruiting future position players (Kulha, 2013). Position coaches recruit position players they will coach, as well as players from designated geographic recruiting regions (Horne, 2013). Position coaches are also tasked with forming relationships with high school coaches and “...developing pipelines to local high schools” (Horne, 2013, para. 4).

After serving as a position coach, a coach may be promoted to the job of “coordinator.” Coordinators serve as de facto “head” coaches of one of three “phases”: offense, defense, or special teams (Johnson, 2019; Kilgore, 2019). Serving as a coordinator is quite often a stepping-stone to being hired as a head coach (Barnett, 2019). Given this traditional trajectory, within Power-5 conference football there are fewer minority head coaches (22% in 2020) than would be expected based upon the percent of minority position coaches (54% in 2020).

In an attempt to explain this dichotomy, theorists have identified several barriers that inhibit Black assistant coaches’ advancement to coordinator and/or head coach. Cunningham and Sagas (2005) found athletic administrators tend to hire coaches who resemble themselves. Interestingly, in 2020, the percentage of White male Power-5 head football coaches (79%) was exactly the same as the percentage of White male Power-5 athletic directors (NCAA, 2021b). In addition, since most Power-5 football head coaches are White, most “successful” head coaches are also White, which Turick and Bopp (2016) contend perpetuates the hiring of White head coaches.

Extending the work of Turick and Bopp (2016), this study examined the underrepresentation of minority head coaches in Power-5 football and sought to uncover differences in the distribution of recruiting responsibilities between Black and White assistant coaches on Power-5 football coaching staffs. Given that athletic administrators inordinately value “leadership” when making head coach hiring decisions, a trait ascribed – by default – to offensive or defensive coordinators (Turick & Bopp, 2016), this study sought to answer the following research questions:

In the Southeastern Conference (SEC),

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this study, minority is defined as any coach identifying as a non-White individual.

- RQ 1: Are Black SEC assistant football coaches disproportionately tasked with recruiting responsibilities?
- RQ 2: Are Black SEC assistant football coaches disproportionately tasked with recruiting Black football recruits?
- RQ 3: Are Black SEC assistant football coaches disproportionately tasked with recruiting five- and four-star football recruits ?
- RQ 4: Are Black SEC assistant football coaches disproportionately tasked with recruiting specific football position groups?

## Literature Review

### *Desegregation of SEC Football*

College football in the *South* is as culturally engrained as any regional institution. Hall of Fame football coach Marino Casem described Southern football as “a religion, and Saturday is the Holy Day” (Hall, 2013, para. 4). The ever-present racial tensions associated with desegregation efforts in the South are entwined with the history of SEC football, which resisted integration until 1966. By 1959, every major sports league in the United States had integrated. Twelve years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, by which time most all prominent college athletics conferences had integrated (Kirk, 2014; Oriard, 1991), the University of Kentucky was the first SEC school to begin recruiting Black football players, signing two Black recruits in 1966 (White, 2010). The following season, one of those Kentucky recruits – Nate Northington – was the first Black SEC football player (Bembry, 2017). The University of Florida began recruiting Black football players in 1968, sending mailers to high school football coaches across the state announcing they would begin “recruiting athletes regardless of race...to recruit the best athletes possible from the state” (White, 2010, p. 486). However, Florida also instituted admissions testing for Black recruits. A Florida assistant coach reported that despite distributing the admissions tests beforehand, no Black players met the “scholastic requirements” for admission to the University (White, 2010).

Hill (2004) noted that in the South the cultural prestige and power a head football coach holds is amplified. Given the history of slavery and racial tension in the South, it is not surprising the SEC was the last major college athletics conference to hire a Black head football coach; Mississippi State University hired Sylvester Croom in 2003 (Longman & Glier, 2003; Zenor, 2003). Since 2000, there have been 63 SEC head football coaches. Including Croom, only 5 (8%) have been Black <sup>2</sup>(O’Gara, 2020). Ten of the conference’s 14 football programs have never employed a Black head coach. While it has been over 30-years (1990) since Louisiana State University hired John Mitchell as the first Black defensive coordinator in the SEC, coordinator positions are still predominantly held by White coaches (Alabama Sports Hall of Fame, n.d.). In 2017, Larry Scott became the first Black offensive coordinator in the 121-year history of University of Tennessee football (Potkey, 2017). Subsequently it was reported then head football

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<sup>2</sup> Sylvester Croom (Mississippi State University), Joker Phillips (University of Kentucky), James Franklin (Vanderbilt University), Kevin Sumlin (Texas A&M University), and Derek Mason (Vanderbilt University).

coach “Butch” Jones promoted Scott from tight ends coach to offensive coordinator in order to retain him, since Scott had a reputation as an *ace* recruiter and was highly sought after by other programs (Climer, 2017). In 2020, the University of Florida hired its first Black offensive coordinator when head coach Dan Mullen promoted Brian Johnson from quarterbacks’ coach (O’Gara, 2020). The promotion, however, was primarily an increase in *title* and not responsibility as Mullen maintained his role as the offensive play caller. Given Johnson’s reputation as a *top* recruiter (Nettuno, 2020), his promotion to offensive coordinator was also widely viewed as reflecting his value as a recruiter. In January 2021, Johnson moved on to the NFL as quarterbacks’ coach for the Philadelphia Eagles (Erby, 2021). In 2008, Auburn University notably hired Gene Chizik – who possessed a record as head coach of five wins and 19 losses (.208 winning percentage) – after interviewing the presumed favored candidate, Turner Gill, for the position of head football coach. Gill, a Black man, was presumably passed over for the job due to his marriage to a White woman (Bennett, 2008; Schlabach, 2008). Although SEC football is a predominantly Black sport in terms of both number of players and coaches, football programs in the SEC appear to have reservations about employing Black coaches in leadership positions.

### *Critical Race Theory*

Several sport management scholars have called for greater use of critical paradigms (Frisby, 2005; Hylton, 2010; 2012; Singer, 2005), specifically critical race theory (CRT), to examine ways to promote anti-racism in sport (Hylton, 2010; Singer, 2005). While sport management literature is often stratified across multiple subfields (e.g., sport finance, sport marketing, etc.), CRT can link these subfields to address the issue of race within sport management (Hylton, 2010, 2012; Singer, 2005). Failing to do so, we perpetuate societal norms that seek to express *color-blindness* (i.e., the belief that race is immaterial [Annamma et al., 2017; Gotanda, 1991]) and devalue sport management research involving race (Singer, 2005). Accordingly, examining the intersection of race, coaching responsibilities, and opportunities for career advancement has potential implications across the multiple subfields that comprise sport management as an academic discipline.

Using critical race theory (CRT) to examine Power-5 college football recruiting acknowledges the *intercentricity* of race and racism in United States institutions and structures (Bell, 1992, 1995; DeCuir & Dixon, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lawrence, 1995), and may reveal a view of Whiteness as a property (Harris, 1995). Applying critical race theory, several scholars have found NCAA governance reflects racialized practices (Agyemang & DeLorme, 2010; Cheeks, 2016; Hawkins, 2010; Hextrum, 2019). For example, NCAA admission standards have disproportionately affected athletes seeking enrollment at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). As Cheeks (2016) noted, some Black college athlete applicants are academically underprepared compared to their White counterparts. While in 2022 the NCAA voted to remove standardized test scores in determining initial athlete eligibility, broad NCAA admission standards have historically inhibited some Black college athletes’ ability to enroll, let alone complete an undergraduate degree (Cheeks, 2016).

In addition, critical race theory recognizes the intersectionality of race and racism with identities that are targeted, minoritized, disenfranchised, and oppressed (Cheeks, 2016; Crenshaw, 1988) and the principle of *interest convergence* (Bell, 1980; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Many CRT scholars have critiqued the myth of colorblindness (Crenshaw, 1988; 1995; DeCuir & Dixon, 2004), and the limitations of abstract liberalism/neo-liberalism (Bimper, 2015) of

which a coaching-interview mandate – such as *the Rooney Rule*<sup>3</sup>– is a sport-specific, practical example. The Rooney Rule perpetuates ideas of a colorblind meritocracy, ostensibly providing equal opportunities for minority candidates, while not addressing historical, cultural, and political factors that influence interviewers' decision-making (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; DeCuir & Dixon, 2004) and result in unequal outcomes. In such instances, through the use of *tolerant* language, members of the privileged racial group rationalize their decisions within a context that normalizes a non-diverse leadership setting (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Bopp et al., 2019). In the context of coaching hirings, Bopp et al. (2019) noted the “targeted” hiring of Black coaches in specific coaching positions may actually be in the best interest of White head coaches, given the high number of Black college football players who interact with Black assistant coaches.

### *Interest Convergence*

Across much of the country, enforcing the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was (and still may be) untenable, given that a predominantly White society was deeply entrenched in a culture of overt and covert segregation. In the wake of resistance to school integration throughout the Southeastern United States, critical race theorist and Civil Rights litigator Derrick Bell filed over 300 desegregation cases across the region. Bell's experience working to ensure enforcement of *Brown v. Board of Education* in the Southeast led him to theorize why desegregation had been met with such resistance. One concept was *interest convergence*, in which Bell theorized that racial equality is only permitted by a racial majority when such equality serves the racial majority's interests, or fulfills their needs (Bell, 1980, 1992, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Milner, 2008; Milner et al., 2013). In the case of the United States, equality will only be pursued by the White majority, when such equality aligns with their interests, wants, and needs (Bell, 1980, 1992, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Interest convergence also challenges the dominant view that racial reform in the United States is the result of an empathetic and morally grounded commitment to social justice by Whites and Blacks. Bell (2004) contends racial reform occurs only when Whites recognize it benefits them. As Lopez (2003) noted, “...racism always remains firmly in place...but social progress advances at the pace that White people determine is reasonable and judicious” (p. 84). While Black “organizers” can leverage interest convergence, ultimately, the racial majority decides which reforms are implemented. Given that interest convergence and, more broadly, critical race theory provide context for the United States' history of resistance to desegregation, both are frequently found in the education-reform academic literature (Castagno & Lee, 2007; DeCuir & Dixon, 2004; Milner, 2008; Milner et al., 2013; Zion & Blanchett, 2011).

In addition to investigating higher-education, critical race scholars have examined the overall institution of college athletics (e.g., Cooper et al., 2017; Hawkins, 2010; Hawkins, 2017; Keaton & Cooper, 2022; McCormick & McCormick, 2012) and the disproportionate outcomes that Black stakeholders experience relative to commodification and exploitative practices. Others have specifically investigated the hiring and career longevity of football coaches (Cunningham, 2010; Cunningham & Sagas, 2005; Harrison et al., 2009; Sagas & Cunningham, 2006; Singer et al., 2010; Turick & Bopp, 2016), *racial tasking* (Bopp & Sagas, 2014; Bopp et al., 2019; Turick,

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<sup>3</sup> Implemented in 2003 by the NFL, the Rooney Rule mandates that organizations must interview at least one “diverse” candidate before making a hiring decision regarding a head coach, general manager, or certain other front office positions (NFL, 2018). The National Association for Coaching Equity and Development has asked that the NCAA adopt the Eddie Robinson Rule, a proposal similar in practice to the Rooney Rule (Medcalf, 2016).

2018), and academic success among Black college athletes (Donnor, 2005; Harper, 2009). Each of these works contribute to the theoretical underpinnings of the presence of institutional racialization in collegiate athletics. Former NCAA executive director, Walter Byers, codified the disparate experiences of Black and White stakeholders and participants in the NCAA by equating collegiate athletics to the “neo-plantation” (Byers & Hammer, 1995). However, other than Hawkins (2010), critical race theory has not been utilized as a framework for a study specifically analyzing recruiting in college athletics.

### *Racial Stacking and Racial Tasking*

*Racial stacking* occurs in sport when athletes are segregated based on social assumptions of perceived abilities associated with their racial identity (Loy & McElvogue, 1970). Historically, racial stacking was prevalent in football where segregation occurred by position based on socially constructed views of athletes’ perceived intelligence and athleticism (Hawkins, 2002; Loy & McElvogue, 1970; Perchot et al., 2015; Pitts & Yost, 2013). In football, racial stacking was notable at the quarterback position, where heightened awareness and overall intelligence are crucial attributes. Quarterbacks are viewed as the “most prepared” or cerebral players, who must know the assignments and roles of the other ten offensive players (Kissel, 2013). Until very recently, most quarterbacks have been White. Conversely, Black players have historically been *stacked* at what are known as “skill positions” (e.g., running back, wide receiver, and defensive back) where athleticism is considered a valuable trait (Hawkins, 2002; Pitts & Yost, 2013; Schneider & Eitzen, 1986; Siler, 2019). While most commonly analyzed in football, racial stacking has also been examined in other sports as well. At many levels of competition, men’s and women’s basketball players have been racially segregated positionally with the point guard position historically viewed as a “White” position (Berghorn, et al., 1988; Perchot et al., 2016). In women’s volleyball, the “setter” position has historically been a position in which Black athletes are underrepresented (Eitzen & Furst, 1989). In all three positions (i.e., quarterback, point guard, and setter) leadership and intelligence are highly valued. Across sports, Black athletes typically predominate (e.g., stack) in positions where strength, speed, and athleticism are valued more than mental acuity and leadership. Such stacking perpetuates narratives that Black athletes possess inadequate leadership and intelligence relative to their White counterparts.

In 2002, Hawkins reported an increase in Black athletes at the quarterback position in college football from the 1970s to 2000. However, this increase in Black quarterbacks was attributed to changes in the skills required at the quarterback position rather than racial progress. As college football tactics and strategy changed (e.g., coaches calling plays from the sidelines, quarterbacks running the ball more), mobile or “athletic” quarterbacks became more valued. Stereotypically, Black athletes (stacked in the running back position) were perceived as possessing “athleticism.” While the percentage of Black quarterbacks has continued to increase in college and professional football, broadly speaking, the *tasks* Black and White quarterbacks are expected to complete are different (Bopp & Sagas, 2014). Black quarterbacks often run more and throw less than their White counterparts, while many White quarterbacks are described as traditional “pocket passers” who run only as a last resort (Bopp & Sagas, 2014). A schematic emphasis on utilizing Black quarterbacks’ athleticism to run rather than pass effectively tasks Black quarterbacks as “skill” players playing the quarterback position, marginalizing the traditional demands of playing the position. Bopp et al. (2019) note that tasking Black quarterbacks to run more often “has the potential to hinder Black quarterbacks’ analytical approach to understanding the game, increase their risk of injury, as well as limit the

development of their throwing skills” (p. 9). Each of these hindrances may serve to devalue Black college quarterbacks and negatively affect their “professional” opportunities (underdeveloped understanding of the game and throwing skills) and their longevity (increased injury risk) compared to their White counterparts.

In college football, coaches are racially tasked as well. While each “assistant” coach has a similar generic title, a coaching hierarchy among assistant coaches is defined by the specific role(s) each performs (Turick, 2018; Turick & Bopp, 2016). Turick (2018) noted that in addition to on-field football roles, Black assistant coaches are more often tasked with recruiting players and monitoring them once they are enrolled as students. Tasking Black assistant coaches with additional and disparate roles likely disproportionately inhibits their opportunities for advancement (Cunningham & Bopp, 2010), because they are primarily viewed by head coaches and athletic directors as recruiters and “babysitters,” and not leaders capable of successfully managing all aspects of a football program (Turick & Bopp, 2016). As Black and White “assistant” coaches assume differing roles, the tasking of Black assistant coaches with recruiting related duties may serve the interests of White head coaches and coordinators, given the importance of recruiting to program success (e.g., winning games and generating revenue).

### *Institutional Logic Theory*

Within an institutional field, institutional members learn and recreate accepted behaviors, practices, and ideologies that serve to justify institutional policies and practices (Jepperson, 1991). This process culminates in the development of what is termed an institutional logic (Southall & Nagel, 2008). Institutions require a collective effort among actors to maintain and, if necessary, adapt the dominant logic (Barley & Tolbert, 1997). The dominant institutional logic of Power-5 college football and men’s basketball has been defined as *jock capitalism* (Southall & Nagel, 2009), in which Power-5 athletic departments seek to maximize revenue within a hyper-commercialized institutional field. Within the Power-5 college sport institutional field, Corr et al. (2020) found that official recruiting visits communicate an institutional logic that emphasizes athletics over academics (Corr et al., 2020).

In the context of college football recruiting responsibilities, successful recruiting correlates to winning football games and winning football games correlates to revenue generation (Caro, 2012). Within a culture that values winning above all else (Santomier et al., 1980; Southall et al., 2005), Power-5 football programs seek to replicate an athletics-focused institutional logic. Since Black coaches are often tasked with more recruiting responsibilities than White coaches (Turick & Bopp, 2016), and successful recruiting is pivotal to winning football games (Caro, 2012), athletic administrators and head coaches may, unconsciously, maintain an institutional status quo valuing minority coaches more as recruiters than on-field assistant coaches (Turick & Bopp, 2016). Such maintenance is consistent with Battilana (2011) who found that institutional actors rarely seek to deviate from dominant institutional ideologies. Given that head coaches are more likely to either hire assistant coaches who look similar to them (Cunningham & Sagas, 2005) or who perform a specific institutionally-prescribed role, the dominant institutional logic tends to remain constant.

## Methodology

### Research Setting

The SEC was chosen as the research setting based on previous work (Corr et al., 2020; Glier, 2012) and because it has the highest percentage of both Black football coaches (50% in 2020) and players (57% in 2020) among Power-5 conferences (NCAA, 2021b). Due to a January 2018 NCAA rule change that allows for 11 full-time football coaches (up from 10)<sup>4</sup>, an FBS football coaching staff typically consists of one head coach, two coordinators, eight position coaches, and four graduate assistants, for a total of 15 coaches (Johnson, 2017). Due to this expansion of coaching staffs, overall recruiting success was based off 2019, 2020, and 2021 recruiting classes.

### Data

**Recruiting Data.** Recruiting rankings were determined based on *247Sports*, a subsidiary of *CBS Sports*. *247Sports* is recognized as a recruiting-industry leader in determining recruiting rankings for high school football recruits (*247Sports*, 2012). Utilizing a composite ranking system, *247Sports* calculates recruiting rankings based on the average of multiple widely recognized recruiting services (e.g., ESPN and Scout). Regardless of the subjective nature of recruiting rankings, the correlation between number of stars (i.e., five-star, four-star, etc.) and number of suitors (i.e., scholarship offers) makes signing a higher rated recruit a useful means of determining a coach's recruiting success. Additionally, Elmasry (2017) and Kercheval (2016) have found a positive correlation between signing five- and four-star players and winning national championships in Power-5 football.

A number of variables on SEC coaches were calculated using *247Sports* data. The *primary recruiter* is the coach primarily responsible for a recruit signing with a particular program. Knowing which coach was the primary recruiter for each recruit is pivotal to answering each research question. The total number of recruits for which a coach served as the primary recruiter was collected to examine a coach's *recruiting load*. Each recruit's position, hometown, high school, race, and star-rating was gathered, along with information on the total number of football programs that had extended an offer of admission, number of official visits taken, and number of football programs officially visited. As previously mentioned, recruiting rankings are an imperfect system but these variables are as "objective" as possible.

**Biographical Coach Data.** Extensive biographical data on each coach was gathered from athletic department websites and media guides. *Title*, *position*, and *secondary title* were used to develop coaches' groups. *Title* had three sub-categories: head coach, coordinator, or assistant coach. The variable *position* identified a coach's position group. *Secondary title* identified any additional coaching title(s) (e.g., run game coordinator, associate head coach). Previous coaching experience and any prior coaching positions were gathered for all coaches in the sample. Relationships among coaches on each staff were examined to determine if certain assistant coaches had been consistently hired to work for specific coordinators or head coaches.

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<sup>4</sup> Upon passing an annual NCAA recruiting exam, all 15 coaches are permitted to coach current athletes and recruit prospective athletes (NCAA, 2017). The 2018 rule change allowed head coaches to hire an additional position coach or coordinator.



Given that over the course of their careers many SEC coaches have worked for multiple football programs within the conference (e.g., Will Muschamp at Auburn University, Louisiana State University, University of Florida, University of South Carolina, and University of Georgia) (Levine, 2015), personal and/or professional relationships may limit the opportunities for coaches outside the SEC to be employed within the conference.

### *Analysis*

Much of the data are descriptive in nature and individual mean scores of particular variables will be used to illustrate recruiting-related differences. Since it is theorized Black assistant football coaches' increased recruiting responsibility negatively affects their opportunities for advancement (Turick, 2018, Turick & Bopp, 2016), analyses were conducted to determine if recruiting responsibility differed by ethnicity. Cross tabulations and chi-square tests were used to compare whether differences existed between variables. Tests of statistical significance ( $p \leq .05$ ) and relevance are reported as well.

### *Positionality*

A member of the research team has first-hand college football recruiting work experience. While firsthand knowledge of recruiting practices and operations is valuable in conducting research, measures were taken to avoid confirmation bias (Pannucci & Wilkins, 2010). Collecting data beginning with the 2019 recruiting class, ensured no participation in the recruiting process for any recruit in the study.<sup>5</sup> While we acknowledge that a member of the research team has worked for and has personal relationships with coaches in this dataset, none of the data were subjective in nature and no internal bias is present in the dataset.

### *Limitations*

While the primary recruiter variable on *247Sports* is essential to answering this study's research questions, a confluence of several factors contribute to a recruit's enrollment decision. Knowledge of which coach was primarily responsible for recruiting specific recruits is valuable but acknowledging the variety of factors that contribute to a recruit's enrollment decision is worth noting. As *247Sports* is a media property operated by affiliates of *CBSSports*, the accuracy of the primary recruiter as listed by *247Sports* is also subject to question and serves as a potential limitation within the data collected and analyzed in the findings. Furthermore, the impact of the transfer portal on the dynamics of college football recruiting is noteworthy. Whereas programs have traditionally relied on high school recruits to fill their signing classes, the transfer portal and the freedom of mobility among college football players has had an effect on the recruiting process and is worth mentioning given the framework of this study.

In addition, identification of the racial characteristics of coaches and recruits is subject to question given the inability to consult with each individual regarding their racial identity. Accordingly, while the initial sample consisted of 910 observations, analysis was conducted on only 898 unique observations to ensure an analysis that solely included Black and White coaches and recruits. While phenotypical observation is established within the greater field of academia

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<sup>5</sup> The 2019 recruiting class signed in either the Early Signing Period in December 2018, or on National Signing Day in February 2019.

as an acceptable methodological approach for racial identification (Twine, 2000; Zuberi et al., 2015), limitations still exist relative the socially constructed and learned characteristics of the observer and identifier are worth noting.

## Findings

### *Racial Composition of Coaches*

The total number of SEC football coaches (2018-2021) was ( $n = 378$ ). During this time period, Vanderbilt University head football coach Derek Mason was the only Black head coach in the SEC; Mason was fired during the 2020-2021 season (Schlabach, 2020). Coordinators accounted for 18% of coaches ( $n = 67$ ), of whom nearly 75% ( $n = 50$ ) were White. Racial composition of coaches is depicted in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Racial Composition of Coaches*

Coach title	Black coach		White coach	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Head Coach	2	7.1	26	92.9
Coordinator	17	25.4	50	74.6
Offensive Coordinator	6	17.1	29	82.9
Defensive Coordinator	11	34.4	21	65.7
Position Coach	112	53.3	98	46.7
Graduate Assistant (GA)	30	41.1	43	58.9
Offensive GA	9	27.3	24	72.7
Defensive GA	21	61.8	13	38.2

### *Racial Composition of Recruits*

A total of 898 recruits were examined in this study. Black recruits accounted for 83.6% of the total ( $n = 751$ ), while 16.4% ( $n = 147$ ) of recruits identified as White. SEC programs signed ( $n = 60$ ) five-star recruits from 2018-2021. Of these five-star recruits, 54 were Black (90%) and 6 were White (10%). Four-star recruits accounted for the largest number of recruits ( $n = 418$ ), of which 91.4% were Black ( $n = 382$ ) and 8.6% were White ( $n = 36$ ). Of the 42 White recruits rated as a five- or four-star, 38% were quarterbacks. Of the 436 Black recruits rated as a five- or four-star, only ( $n = 15$ ) 3.4% played the quarterback position. Three-star recruits represented 44.2% of all recruits in the study ( $n = 397$ ), with 78.8% ( $n = 313$ ) identified as Black, while 21.2% ( $n = 84$ ) White. Table 2 summarizes recruits' racial identity.

Table 2  
*Racial Composition of Recruits*

Recruits	Black recruits		White recruits	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Total recruits	751	83.6	147	16.4
Five-Stars	54	90.0	6	10.0
Four-Stars	382	91.4	36	8.6
Three-Stars	313	78.8	84	21.2

### *Recruiting Responsibility*

A cross tabulation was conducted to examine the relationship between a recruiting coach's racial identity and the race of a recruited player. The results indicate that Black recruiting coaches more frequently recruited Black players ( $n = 432$ , 57.5%) than did White recruiting coaches ( $n = 319$ , 42.5%). Conversely, White recruiting coaches recruited White players ( $n = 105$ , 71.4%) more frequently than Black recruiting coaches ( $n = 42$ , 28.6%).

Table 3  
*Relationship of Recruiting Coach's Race and Recruited Player's Race*

Race of recruiting coach	Black recruited player		White recruited player	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Black recruiting coach	432	57.5	42	28.6
White recruiting coach	319	42.5	105	71.4

Upon completion of the cross tabulation, a chi-square test was conducted to examine the relationship between the race of the recruiting coach and the race of the recruit. The results indicate a statistically significant relationship between the race of the recruiting coach and race of the recruited player  $X^2(9, N = 898) = 93.04, p < .001$ .

**Star-Rating.** To analyze the relationship between the race of the recruiting coach and recruit's *star-rating* (e.g., five-star), the distribution of overall star-rating of recruits relative to the race of the recruiting coach was analyzed. Table 4 demonstrates the star-rating distribution for Black and White recruiting coaches.

Table 4  
*Comparison of Recruited Player Star Ratings by Recruiting Coach's Race*

Race of recruiting coach	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Black recruiting coach	474	3.59	0.69
White recruiting coach	424	3.46	0.90

Based on the difference in means between star-rating for Black and White recruiting coaches, a Welch Two Sample t-test was run. The results were significant when examining the relationship between star-rating and race of the recruiting coach,  $t(793) = 2.42$ ,  $p = .016$ . While the results were statistically significant, it is worth noting the statistical difference between star-rating for Black ( $M = 3.59$ ) and White ( $M = 3.46$ ) recruiting coaches is nearly negligible in practice.

*Position-Specific Recruiting.* To examine the relationship between the race of the recruiting coach and recruited player position, a cross tabulation was conducted. Analysis indicated Black recruiting coaches recruited running backs, wide receivers, defense linemen, and defensive backs more frequently than White recruiting coaches. White recruiting coaches recruited quarterbacks and offensive linemen more frequently than Black recruiting coaches. The complete results of the crosstabulation are presented in Table 5.

Table 5  
*Relationship of Recruited Player's Position and Recruiting Coach's Race*

Position	Black recruiting coach		White recruiting coach	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Athlete	14	58.3	10	41.7
Defensive back	107	69.5	47	30.5
Defensive line	112	62.2	68	37.8
Linebacker	46	45.5	55	54.5
Offensive line	46	30.3	106	69.7
Quarterback	13	24.1	41	75.9
Running back	42	65.6	22	34.4
Special teams	5	31.2	11	68.8
Tight end	12	35.3	22	64.7
Wide receiver	77	64.7	42	35.3

Upon completion of the cross tabulation, a chi-square test was conducted to examine the relationship between race of the recruiting coach and position of the recruited player. The results indicate a statistically significant relationship between race of the recruiting coach and position of the recruited player  $X^2(9, N = 898) = 93.04$ ,  $p < .001$ . Based on the statistical significance of the chi-square test, post-hoc tests were run to identify which positions are statistically significantly related to the race of the recruiting coach. Results indicate that defensive backs ( $p < .001$ ), quarterbacks ( $p < .001$ ), and offensive linemen ( $p < .001$ ) are positions significantly related to the race of the recruiting coach.

## Discussion

This study's results reveal racial tasking in recruiting responsibilities of SEC football coaching staffs and indicate interest convergence among predominantly White head coaches and coordinators and Black position coaches. Black coaches were found to be tasked with greater recruiting responsibilities than White coaches. Specifically, while Black coaches comprised 47% of all coordinators and position coaches, they were responsible for signing 57.5% of Black recruits while White coaches were responsible for signing over 71% of White recruits. Furthermore, Black coaches were responsible for signing higher rated recruits according to *247Sports* recruiting rankings. Accordingly, this study's findings offer evidence of conscious deployment of Black coaches to recruit Black Power-5 football players (Branch, 2011; Byers & Hammer, 1995; Hawkins, 2010; Southall & Weiler, 2014). While Black and White coaches sign a, relatively, similar number of recruits, Black coaches are relied upon to secure predominantly Black recruits and higher rated recruits. Given the population of Power-5 football players is composed of majority Black athletes and the established relationship between recruiting and success (i.e., *winning*) in college football, Black coaches serve an invaluable position in their role as recruiters (i.e., the securers of the *top* Black recruits). As Byers & Hammer (1995) noted, in the Power-5 "neo-plantation" system, Black assistant football coaches are more likely to serve as the primary recruiter, overseer, and supervisor of Black football recruits.

This study provides clear evidence that Black coaches are racially tasked as *recruiters*. This finding extends previous literature examining the disparate roles that Black and White football coaches occupy within big-time college football (Cunningham, 2010; Harrison et al., 2009; Singer et al., 2010; Turick, 2018; Turick & Bopp, 2016). The acceptance of racially tasking Black coaches with recruiting-oriented roles exemplifies the institutional logic of *jock capitalism* (Southall & Nagel, 2009). Black coaches are purposefully tasked as recruiters who secure predominately Black football talent. This role disproportionately limits their opportunities for advancement within the coaching profession (Hruby, 2020; Turick & Bopp, 2016). By disproportionately tasking Black assistant coaches as recruiters, predominately White head coaches and coordinators perpetuate a Power-5 institutional logic that tasks Black assistant coaches with the responsibility of securing football talent. The perpetuation of this recruiting logic serves as a *glass ceiling* for Black assistant coaches (Hill, 2004).

A notable finding during data collection was that coordinators tended to hire one or more assistant coach from a previous coaching staff. A similar trend exists among head coaching hirings. This trend represents career advancement for all coaches involved (e.g., A coordinator who becomes a head coach tends to hire a fellow assistant coach as a coordinator). A similar trend exists at other hierarchical levels within coaching staffs (e.g., Assistant coaches who are hired to be coordinators typically hire former graduate assistants as assistant coaches). At each hierarchical level, this hiring pattern exists. Advancement of one coach positively correlates with the advancement of fellow coaches. Within this migration pattern, coaches are often connected by race. Promoted White coaches tend to *bring along* other White coaches. A similar pattern exists among Black coaches and is consistent with previous literature (Cunningham & Sagas, 2005). While not entirely surprising, the phenomenon illustrates disparate opportunities for advancement in coaching ranks among Power-5 college football programs. White coaches are hired more often than Black coaches for positions of authority as coordinators and head coaches. These trends disproportionately negatively affect advancement opportunities for Black coaches.

This study revealed that often a precursor to becoming an assistant coach was being a graduate assistant coach. Per NCAA rules, since there are only four graduate assistant positions on each coaching staff, they are extremely coveted positions (American Football Coaches

Association [AFCA], 2020). Interestingly, this study's graduate assistant positions tended to be held by former quarterbacks. In fact, 25% of graduate assistant coaches were former college quarterbacks. In addition, the racial composition of college football quarterbacks reveals there are more White quarterbacks than Black (Siler, 2019). In the context of recruiting, all 11 of the White quarterbacks rated as a five- or four-star in this study were recruited by a White coach. Of the 9 Black quarterbacks rated as a five- or four-star, four were recruited by a Black coach and 5 were recruited by a White coach.

This study revealed that 11 of the 13 graduate assistant coaches who were former college quarterbacks were White. Since graduate assistant coaches are more likely to be former quarterbacks, and quarterbacks are traditionally White, Black coaching candidates may have difficulty gaining entry into the coaching profession.

## Conclusion and Future Research

This study provides evidence of converging interests among Black and White football coaches in the SEC. Predominantly White head coaches and coordinators benefit from racially tasked Black position coaches who are predominantly responsible for recruiting Black football recruits. Accordingly, predominantly White SEC head coaches and coordinators who seek to maximize their program's recruiting success may have converging interests with Black position coaches seeking employment in the SEC. Such findings would support previous research (Turick & Bopp, 2016) while providing a deeper understanding of the interests and motivations of both Black and White coaches. Future research would be valuable in expanding our understanding of interest convergence in the college football coaching hiring process.

While conversations surrounding equity in coaching hirings are commonplace, they are typically situated in providing equal opportunity for coaches to interview for positions of advancement (e.g., The Rooney Rule). However, this study's findings reveal systemically discriminatory practices in college football coaching hirings that disproportionately inhibit opportunities for advancement of Black assistant football coaches in the SEC. While opportunities to interview for promotions may be "quantitatively" *equal*, this study's findings illustrate the importance of examining whether opportunities for advancement are truly equitable.

An examination of the intersection of race, coaching rank, and opportunities for career advancement has potential implications within the broader field of sport management. From a practical standpoint, sport is something *we* can "understand" while discussing race and confronting racial issues within American society. However, separating sport and race devalues our understanding of both and compartmentalizes issues that transcend sport. Examining racialized practices in college football calls attention to racialized practices in other societal settings. Given the geographic locations from which many top football recruits migrate, an examination of recruits' and recruiters' hometowns may provide additional revelatory information. In addition, further examination of interest convergence in opportunities for coaching advancement may uncover additional racialized elements in college football hiring decisions.

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