

Does The NFL Have Any Business Telling Black Players To Stop Saying The N-Word?

BuzzFeed gathered an online panel of five writers to debate whether the recent proposal to ban the n-word makes any sense or has a chance.

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We had five writers — Joel Anderson and Justin Carissimo of BuzzFeed, Ta-Nehisi Coates of The Atlantic, Monique Jones of The Baltimore Sun, and Greg Lee of the South Florida Sun-Sentinel — join in an email roundtable discussion Tuesday about the Fritz Pollard Alliance’s proposal to institute a rule that would penalize NFL players for using the n-word on the field. The panel exchanged emails for a couple of hours, and this is the result. Writers were free to use “n-word” or “nigger” in their post according to their preference.

Joel Anderson: Dear Greg, Monique, Ta-Nehisi and Justin:

If not for the Fritz Pollard Alliance, it’s not a stretch to suggest Mike Tomlin, Marvin Lewis, Lovie Smith, and Jim Caldwell might have spent much of their NFL careers waiting for opportunities

that would never come.

History is instructive here.

It was little more than 11 years ago when the late Johnnie Cochran and civil rights attorney Cyrus Mehri threatened to file a class-action discrimination lawsuit against the NFL if it didn't improve its dismal record for interviewing and hiring black front-office candidates. At that point, the NFL had only five black head coaches in the history of the league. Five. By 2002.

A month later, then-NFL Commissioner Paul Tagliabue announced that he was forming a committee to address the league's hiring practices. Two months later, the league announced what's more commonly referred to as the Rooney Rule, which requires NFL teams to interview minority candidates for head coaching and senior football operation jobs.

A few months later, the Fritz Pollard Alliance was formed to monitor the NFL's hiring practices and promote and mentor NFL minority coaches, scouts, and front-office personnel. And it's clear that, to some extent, they have the ear of the NFL and its top decision-makers and they've been influential in bringing about a number of important changes within the league.

Which brings us to this latest bit of news, which is the alliance's [proposal to institute a rule that would penalize NFL employees for using the n-word](#).

It's tough to know how seriously the NFL will take the advice of the Fritz Pollard Alliance here. But given its history of cooperation with the group and in the wake of high-profile incidents involving the use of the racial slur, including [the bullying scandal with the Miami](#)

[Dolphins](#), it's clear this proposal will receive at least nominal consideration. At the minimum, it's been good for generating headlines and, um, online conversations. Consider that ESPN's *Outside the Lines* [aired an hourlong special](#) on this very topic Sunday. An hour!

So Greg, let's start with you. Is this a worthwhile effort?

I can't wait to see where you take this conversation.

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Pittsburgh Steelers head coach Mike Tomlin.

Greg Lee: I would say the league is making a mistake if they want to eliminate the n-word. It is a can of worms that cannot be opened when they have an NFL franchise with a derogatory name such as the Washington Redskins. I think when you start with n-word, then they have to consider eliminating other ethnic slurs.

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Monique Jones: First, thanks for including me in the discussion.

The proposal is one that I believe would be fairly difficult to enforce. How do you know who said [the racial slur]? I think a policy is a good place to start, but to make this a rule that could directly impact the game, is [overly] ambitious.

It is a term that some believe they have a right to use, while others use it as a way to harm. It needs to be addressed, and this sort of discussion is a good place to do so.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Hey, guys. Thanks for having me.

Unlike my friends here, I support the NFL banning the word “nigger.” As someone with a deep concern about racism, I’ve been disturbed to see African-Americans employing slurs directed at them. It is almost as if some black people believe they have the same right to irony as other humans. This cannot stand. History shows that there is only one way to fight racism — by policing the language of its victims.

Video available at: <http://youtube.com/watch?v=xWnGqrHAVBg>.

Justin Carrisimo: I really think the NFL players will be able to adapt to this. It’ll make the game more professional, and make the league more progressive. I just wish the potential rule could be expanded upon, and put into a bigger context. Why not ban all racial slurs? I think you have to start somewhere, and I feel like blacks have done all they can to desensitize the word. But the NFL has the perfect opportunity to protect all of their players.

Joel: I might agree with Ta-Nehisi’s and Justin’s, ahem, take, if only for the wonderful opportunity to see referees explain the penalty over the public address system. “We have an unsportsmanlike penalty for...” and so on and so forth.

And woe unto the first white player who gets hit with a yellow flag for that call. The odds probably favor Richie Incognito on this one.

But let's get real: No white guy is going to get hit with that penalty. You know why? Lots of niggers play linebacker and defensive end and offensive tackle. In a league where about 70% of the players are black, they're already unofficially policing the usage of the word.

So we know whom the rule was intended for: black players who use the term casually amongst themselves. The NFL wants to police the language of black players and presumably fight racism (?) by cracking down on language rather than address more serious and more important structural issues within the league. Keep in mind: This is only a year after the Roger Goodell [found the league's hiring practices "disappointing"](#) because no NFL team hired a black candidate for any of its 15 open head coaching and general manager positions.

So, like, you'd think they would have more important things to deal with than dudes playing [the dozens](#) in the locker room. Don't you, Greg?

Greg: The NFL has a very big platform to elevate civility and create a more welcoming workplace environment.

However, I don't think this effort is fully baked. The league is just reacting to bad press. Let's look at the bounty scandal: The league quickly punished the Saints because of pending concussion lawsuits from former players. The league acted swiftly in its best interest so it could minimize financial liabilities in court.

I look at the Dolphins' controversy in the same light. The league wants to seem like it is getting ahead of the issue and responding quickly to take this issue out of the public spotlight.

I would like the league to take more time to consider measures to professionalize the workplace in the NFL. This will give time to educate players in a sport who are taught to kill or be killed.

Banning the n-word is important, but banning all slurs is important. But this can't be done in a vacuum. But this starts with education. It starts with personal responsibility.

I just don't know how you can enforce speech on the football field.

Monique: But is policing language the job of the NFL? We are responsible for our language. Pittsburgh Steelers safety Ryan Clark told ESPN that he believes most of the players he hears using the term are not using it in a hateful way.

We are now a part of a society that sees a difference between "nigga" and "nigger." When I hear someone saying "nigga," it doesn't hold the same venom of being called "nigger."

If you want to do away with players using it, you're going to have to start at a place that goes beyond the field.

It is up to teams to set the code, for coaches to enforce the expectation and players to establish the rules of the locker room. You have 53 men on an active roster, plus practice squad players and others on injured reserve. The leaders of that locker room determine what is and isn't acceptable.

I don't have a problem banning the usage of racial slurs. I just don't know how you penalize a team for a player using it on a field surrounded by thousands of screaming fans and a blaring PA system.

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Pittsburgh Steelers free safety Ryan Clark.

Ta-Nehisi: I'm sorry. I was laying on the sarcasm kind of thick. Mostly because I think the fact that this is even a debate is ridiculous. Only when it comes to the language of black people do we suddenly decide that word can be characterized without context. It's a theory of language that destroys communication. Only in our present age could we consider attacking the way black players vocalize and interpret America's history of racism, as some sort of blow against actual racism.

I strongly suspect that the Fritz Pollard folks believe that if they can stop black people from saying nigger, they might then be able to stop white people. Right. Because white people have generally taken their cues from black people when devising their insults.

Greg: I think the Fritz Pollard folks are also attempting to step out of its rep as only advocates for black coaches and black executives in the NFL.

I mean let's just get rid of all dozens talk on the field. Let's take out all of the "your mama" jokes. We know how some of those lines end. Just look at the Ted Wells report. It's degrading to women.

The Fritz Pollard folks have a hard enough time getting black folks hired in high-profile NFL jobs, and now they want to influence chats on the field. I would like for the FP folks to focus on diversifying ownership.

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NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, Carolina Panthers owner Jerry Richardson, Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones, Denver Broncos owner Pat Bowlen, NFL negotiator Bob Batterman, Green Bay Packers President Mark Murphy, and NFL Executive Vice President and general counsel Jeff Pash.

Justin: The NFL and Fritz Pollard have every right to establish the field as a place of professional sporting environment by completely eradicating unprofessional words from on-field dialect. Call your teammates “nigga” in the locker room, via text, or at home. Consider two teams facing off as a meeting between two companies. No derogatory slurs, period.

If you don't do anything to end derogatory words being used negatively, it won't end. Think about what outlawing slurs will do for the league's future. A larger push to finally change the Redskins' name? A place that takes a stand against anti-gay lobbyists? End racial slurs, homophobia, bullying. Set a higher standard.

Monique: So the proposal is to make a statement? If that's the case, I can think of many other things the NFL can do to make a statement.

Setting the trend isn't a bad move. Others can follow, but I would rather see a trend that continues the push for minorities to be in positions of power within the NFL.

Everyone wants to have a discussion about the n-word, but my

biggest problem with this is that it seems black people are the only ones participating in the discussion. (Full disclosure: I don't know the racial makeup of everyone in this discussion.)

If you want a discussion about the use of the n-word, we need the people who are using it. We need to include the people who have been hurt by it. We need to include the people who just don't know what is "allowed" anymore. That is a true discussion.

Joel: (Full disclosure: We all black).

Anyway, I think Greg's post gets at one of my biggest problems with this proposal.

The FPA routinely catches hell and has had varying degrees of success holding NFL execs and front-office types accountable for their failures in diversifying leadership. It is to their credit that they even bother trying to hold billionaires accountable. God knows, few — if any other — institutions in the U.S. are remotely successful at doing the same.

But, like, the punishment for running afoul of the Rooney Rule is laughable; the Lions were assessed a \$200K fine in 2003, which is pocket change for an NFL franchise. That's practice squad money.

So, with that in mind, the FPA has floated a proposal whose enforcement will ultimately fall on the league's most vulnerable and least powerful class. We know that the NFL can use its power to move and make change among the players. But what about the Boss Hogs?

It's just odd to me. I think TNC is right: There's probably a part of the FPA that thinks if the league's black players stop saying nigger, then white people will too. Or that racial slurs will no longer be a part of the NFL workplace. OK. Cool.

Sure, maybe Santana Moss won't call anyone "nigga" again. But what's stopping [Redskins owner] Daniel Snyder from making money off a racial slur with its own troubling history?

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Washington Redskins owner Dan Snyder.

Joel: To bring this full circle, we first started hearing about the Fritz Pollard Alliance and the Rooney Rule more than a decade ago. The Rooney family, of course, has been the majority owner and operator of the Pittsburgh Steelers for 80 years. And the league's hiring initiative was named after them because of their commitment to giving black people prominent roles throughout their organization. In fact, the Steelers' current head coach is a black one — Mike Tomlin. So the Rooneys have some credibility here, no?

Anyway, the other night on ESPN's unfortunate special, Steelers defensive back Ryan Clark [revealed](#) that Steelers Chairman Dan Rooney made it known last season that he didn't want to hear "nigger" said or spoken or played in the locker room anymore.

Clark said: "Mr. Rooney actually talked to [veteran cornerback] Ike Taylor about it this season. Ike and Mr. Rooney have a very good relationship. He told Ike, 'I don't want you guys using that word.'"

Did that make you uncomfortable? Like, visualizing the scene makes me wince. Older white guy comes over, probably with finger wagging, at the younger black player that he, um, “owns.” The dynamics are weird here. But they tell us a lot about why this conversation has the sort of prominence and endurance that more important ones don’t.

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