

Fired Miami Dolphins coach sues NFL, alleging racist hiring

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By LARRY NEUMEISTER

FILE - Miami Dolphins head coach Brian Flores, center, talks to down judge David Oliver (24) during the first half of an NFL football game against the New Orleans Saints Monday, Dec. 27, 2021, in New Orleans. Fired Miami Dolphins Coach Brian Flores sued the NFL and three of its teams Tuesday, Feb. 1, 2022 saying racist hiring practices by the league have left it racially segregated and managed like a plantation. (AP Photo/Butch Dill, File)

NEW YORK (AP) — Fired Miami Dolphins coach Brian Flores sued the NFL and three teams on Tuesday over alleged racist hiring practices for coaches and general managers, saying the league remains “rife with racism” even as it publicly condemns it.

The lawsuit, filed in Manhattan federal court, said the hypocrisy was on display with the chilly treatment Flores received from the Dolphins after he refused to accept a \$100,000-a-game offer from the club his first season to “tank” so it could secure the top draft pick.

The lawsuit sought class-action status and unspecified damages from the league, the Dolphins, the Denver Broncos and the New York Giants, along with unidentified individuals.

Flores, 40, was fired last month by Miami after leading the Dolphins to a 24-25 record over three years. They went 9-8 in their second straight winning season, but failed to make the playoffs during his tenure.

In a statement released by the lawyers representing him, Flores said: “God has gifted me with a special talent to coach the game of football, but the need for change is bigger than my personal goals.”

“In making the decision to file the class action complaint today, I understand that I may be risking coaching the game that I love and that has done so much for my family and me. My sincere hope is that by standing up against systemic racism in the NFL, others will join me to ensure that positive change is made for generations to come,” he said.

In a statement, the NFL said it will defend “against these claims, which are without merit.”

It added: “The NFL and our clubs are deeply committed to ensuring equitable employment practices and continue to make progress in providing equitable opportunities throughout our organizations. Diversity is core to everything we do, and there are few issues on which our

clubs and our internal leadership team spend more time.”

The lawsuit alleges that the league has discriminated against Flores and other Black coaches for racial reasons, denying them positions as head coaches, offensive and defensive coordinators and quarterbacks coaches, as well as general managers.

According to the lawsuit, Miami Dolphins owner Stephen Ross told Flores he would pay him \$100,000 for every loss during the coach’s first season because he wanted the club to “tank” so it could get the draft’s top pick.

The lawsuit alleged that Ross then pressured Flores to recruit a prominent quarterback in violation of the league’s tampering rules. When Flores refused, he was cast as the “angry Black man” who is difficult to work with and was derided until he was fired, the suit said.

The Dolphins issued a statement, saying: “We vehemently deny any allegations of racial discrimination and are proud of the diversity and inclusion throughout our organization. The implication that we acted in a manner inconsistent with the integrity of the game is incorrect. We will be withholding further comment on the lawsuit at this time.”

The lawsuit said the firing of Flores was typical for Black coaches who are not given the latitude other coaches receive to succeed. It noted that Flores led the Dolphins to back-to-back winning seasons for the first time since 2003.

Last week, the Giants disclosed to third parties that they had decided to hire Brian Daboll as their new coach even when they had not yet had their scheduled meeting with Flores, the lawsuit said.

“Mr. Flores was deceptively led to believe he actually had a chance at this job,” the lawsuit said, adding that he had to endure a dinner with the Giants’ new general manager knowing that the team had already selected Daboll.

The lawsuit also cited a message Flores received three days before his scheduled Giants interview from New England Patriots coach Bill Belichick, which at first told Flores he’d heard that Flores was “their guy.” But the lawsuit said Belichick apologized and corrected himself, saying he’d misread the text and now realized Daboll was chosen.

A message left with the Patriots was not immediately returned.

In a statement, the Giants said: “We are pleased and confident with the process that resulted in the hiring of Brian Daboll. We interviewed an impressive and diverse group of candidates. The fact of the matter is, Brian Flores was in the conversation to be our head coach until the eleventh hour. Ultimately, we hired the individual we felt was most qualified to be our next head coach.”

Patriots safety Devin McCourty, who played for Flores and shares a Twitter account with his twin brother Jason, tweeted that Flores was “pivotal in my career and love that I can support him for calling out what we all already know.”

The lawsuit also claimed Flores was forced to undergo a “sham interview” with the Broncos in 2019, when then-Broncos general manager John Elway, President Joe Ellis and others showed up an hour later for his interview.

“They looked completely disheveled, and it was obvious that they had been drinking heavily the night before,” the lawsuit said. “It was clear from the substance of the interview that Mr. Flores was interviewed only because of the Rooney Rule.”

In a statement, the Broncos said the allegations were “blatantly false.”

The club said its over three-hour interview with Flores began promptly on Jan. 5, 2019, at a hotel in Providence, Rhode Island.

“Pages of detailed notes, analysis and evaluations from our interview demonstrate the depth of our conversation and sincere interest in Mr. Flores as a head coaching candidate,” the Broncos said. “Our process was thorough and fair to determine the most qualified candidate for our head coaching position. The Broncos will vigorously defend the integrity and values of our organization — and its employees — from such baseless and disparaging claims.”

According to the lawsuit, Flores’ treatment by the Giants and Broncos was typical of how the “Rooney Rule” has been administered for the last two decades.

The rule, named after former Pittsburgh Steelers owner Dan Rooney while he was chairman of the NFL’s diversity committee, was created to give more minority candidates opportunities to become a head coach and reward teams who develop them.

In 2020, the NFL amended the Rooney Rule to stipulate teams must interview at least two minority candidates not associated with their own team for a head coaching vacancy. Also, one minority candidate has to be interviewed for coordinator positions as well as high-ranking positions in the front office, including the general-manager role.

“In certain critical ways, the NFL is racially segregated and is managed much like a plantation,” the lawsuit said.

“Its 32 owners — none of whom are Black — profit substantially from the labor of NFL players, 70% of whom are Black. The owners watch the games from atop NFL stadiums in their luxury boxes, while their majority-Black workforce put their bodies on the line every Sunday, taking vicious hits and suffering debilitating injuries to their bodies and their brains while the NFL and its owners reap billions of dollars,” it added.

According to the lawsuit, only one of the NFL's 32 teams employs a Black head coach, only four of them employ a Black offensive coordinator and only 11 employ a Black defensive coordinator.

The lengthy lawsuit discusses the history of race in the league, from the slow acceptance of Black quarterbacks to the treatment that Colin Kaepernick endured when he kneeled during the national anthem to protest racial injustice.

Two lawyers, Douglas H. Wigdor and John Elefterakis, said in a statement that it was a privilege to file the lawsuit on behalf of Flores at the start of Black History Month.

“This case seeks to level the playing field in the hope that future owners and coaches will be representative of the athletes who are playing this great game,” they said. “We fully expect coaches and players of all races to support Brian as he embarks on his journey to create positive change.”