

The Black Quarterback

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The paper addresses a number of questions arising from the history of the African-American quarterback from the 1940s to the most recent N.F.L. draft. Subsequently, the authors present a brief analysis of the cultural significance of the Black quarterback.

The original draft was written almost a year ago, at the beginning of the 1989-1990 football season. We knew that we could not draw any final conclusions prior to the 1990 National Football League draft. With some trepidation, we scanned the sports pages on the morning of Monday, April 23rd and were stunned to see our thesis confirmed. Equally striking was the silence that followed. As a result, a number of important questions present themselves. How significant is the surge of collegiate Black quarterbacks? Does it imply finally a real shift in attitudes and perception on the part of the white coaches, players, owners and fans? Essentially, what do the recent developments in college and professional football mean to the Black quarterbacks, their communities, and to the white football establishment?

This paper, then, challenges not only team owners, coaches and scouts but also commentators, players and fans to recognize, analyze and confront the near exclusion of African-Americans from the position of professional quarterback.

Quarterbacks enjoy one of the most favored positions in United States athletics. In professional football, quarterbacks hold extremely lucrative contracts and exceptional access to careers as coaches, and to postfootball positions of leadership in business and politics. The quarterback is also a cultural icon. Since the inception of the sport, the organized white football establishment in the United States has reserved almost exclusively the position of quarterback with all of its attendant privileges and glory for white athletes.

Over the past three years a number of African-Americans appear to have broken through the barriers in both college and professional football. Yet the most recent N.F.L. draft saw two African-American Heisman candidates overlooked although 20 quarterbacks were selected.

Three waves of collegiate quarterback superstars have surged on to the national scene in 1966, 1974, and most recently during the late 1980s. In each case, the N.F.L. either pushed the aspiring Black quarterbacks into less central positions, or out of the N.F.L. and into alternative, less prestigious leagues (e.g. the Canadian League, or the World Football Federation).

A redefinition of the athletic and cultural meaning of the position has coincided with the increasing visibility of African-American quarterbacks. Faced with Black quarterbacks, coaches and sports commentators are trying to deemphasize the cerebral, leadership qualities historically ascribed to quarterbacks, and have introduced the language of "great athleticism." (It is important to reiterate at this point, that there is no evidence that Black quarterbacks are playing any less a cerebral or leadership role on the field than white quarterbacks ever did.)

Despite the persistent white resistance, the significance of the achievements of Andre Ware, Tony Rice, Randall Cunningham, Doug Williams et al. to the athletes and their own communities can not be dismissed.

Yet one vexing question persists: When will the N.F.L. acknowledge and welcome into its ranks the growing number of outstanding African-American quarterbacks?