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Andrew J. Howard
Gettysburg College

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History of Black Quarterbacks in the NFL

Abstract

The current paper discusses the evolution of African-American football players, specifically those at the Quarterback position. Moreover, it describes the initial lack of diversity on the field driven by a number of external factors. I will look to analyze the cause to this unbalance and determine whether or not the historical stereotypes labeled on black men and faulty media coverage has factored into the decisions of owners, coaches, and scouts regarding the quarterback position.

Keywords

Sports, African American, Football, Black Culture, BLM

Disciplines

African American Studies | Race and Ethnicity | Sports Studies

Comments

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Andrew Howard

History of Black Quarterbacks in the NFL

The quarterback, informally known as the “signal caller”, is the most important position in modern American football. Traditionally, the quarterback is considered the leader of the team; and their successes and failures typically have a significant impact on the fortunes of their team. Consequently, the quarterback is among the most glorified, scrutinized, and highest-paid positions in team sports today. Regardless to whether or not they are labelled as the team “captain”, the starting quarterback is normally the de facto team leader and a well-respected player on and off the field. Since the inauguration of the National Football League, African American athletes have been historically challenged in landing and retaining quarterback roles at the professional level due to a variety of factors. While the NFL has become exponentially diverse since its establishment, today the quarterback position remains disproportionate. In 2018, African Americans consisted of over 70% of the NFL, yet only 17% of quarterbacks in the NFL are black. This paper will look to analyze the cause to this unbalance and determine whether or not the historical stereotypes labeled on black men and faulty media coverage has factored into the decisions of owners, coaches, and scouts regarding the quarterback position.

In the age of Social Darwinism, science, in particular, gave immense dissemination to a belief that associated dark skin with might and strength, instinctual behavior, and intellectual inferiority (Dennis, 1995). This scientific perspective, which has since then been negated, allows these mistaken dispositions to become mainstream to society. Despite the fact that these racial ideologies were implemented

centuries ago, to some extent, they still manage to help form the beliefs of many people today, particularly those of white descent. Part of the reason for persistence in racial stereotyping is due to media projection. The way African Americans have been negatively publicized by the media in the past has had an immense impact on the race as a whole, specifically black athletes playing the quarterback position. It is reasonable to believe that football owners, coaches, and scouts have previously been manipulated by the media and social injustices regarding racial stereotypes when evaluating black quarterbacks.

Stereotyping African Americans has long been a favorite American avocation. Complicit in the stereotyping of African Americans has been the media. In part, because of the manner in which the print and electronic media frame them as some non-blacks, especially whites have unflattering opinions on minorities. Unfortunately, it appears that black men receive the majority of disparaging coverage when African Americans are the subject of inquiry. Nightly news telecasts as well as television programs such as COPS and Live PD, often disproportionately display black males as the perpetrators of criminal activity involving drug trafficking and an assortment of other violent crimes. Also, even though the majority of welfare recipients have historically been white, for many, African Americans are perceived as welfare's primary beneficiaries. In addition, even though people of all races have benefited immensely from affirmative action programs, again for many, African Americans continue to be the face of affirmative action. While African Americans are as disparate and diverse as any white community, historically the media has portrayed African Americans in a manner that is not comparable with reality.

Historically, media framing in sports is also mainstream. Although sports may be objective, the media is still required to relay interesting information to the public as a form of entertainment. Coakley et al. (2011) stated that viewers of sports media may not fully comprehend the notion that the images and stories we see and hear have been organized to intensify the dramatics and underline racial ideologies and logics in our society (as cited in Biber et al., 2015). This type of manipulation continues to remain prevalent and was demonstrated in the media's response to Colin Kaepernick's protest, in search for dispute. The overarching goal of Kaepernick's protest against police brutality has caused great controversy over the past few years. Poor media framing has caused society to overlook the true meaning of Kaepernick's protest, labeling him as a rebel. Since then, he has not been considered by any professional teams, regardless of his exceptional talent. Kaepernick also lost his sponsorship deal with Nike, showing the lack of support he has been given throughout the athletic community in respect to his protest. If such a protest were to be introduced by a white athlete, critics argue there would most likely be contrasting results. There is no shortage of evidence showing the exceedingly racist double standards our society applies for black men in America. One example of this could be applied to the past of two NFL quarterbacks, Michael Vick and Ben Roethlisberger. Roethlisberger, a white quarterback for the Pittsburgh Steelers, has been accused of sexual assault multiple times, however, has since then been able to keep his contract and remains as one of the highest paid players in the league. On the other hand, Michael Vick, a former talented black quarterback, pleaded guilty to dog-fighting charges, and served nearly two years in federal prison. Since his arrest, he has been characterized as a remorseless monster and never regained the same popularity

he obtained when he was a star of the league. Time and time again white athletes get multiple chances despite committing some of the most brutal crimes, something not comparable with black athletes (Sherouse, 2017). Moreover, the way media frames events, people, and places is often premeditated and well documented; they do so by deciding what events to cover, whether to highlight or downplay them and what to say about them. It is important to consider these deliberate techniques used by the media in order to explain the history of black quarterbacks in the NFL.

For as much as the NFL has done to become more racially inclusive, much of that progress has been reflected on rosters rather than on those who commentate and analyze the games. According to The Guardian (2019), of the 251 national and regional NFL broadcasters for the 2018 season, only 19% of them were black. Even though black players consist of over two thirds of the player body, former black players make up less than a third of the public broadcast. Additionally, white broadcasters have struggled in the past in describing the league's black players without falling back on ugly stereotypes. It is obvious that sports media can provoke many generalizations about black athletes, a relatively easy task considering sports media coverage consists of an overwhelming number of white men (Lapchick and Sherrod, 2011). One image that the media often portray black athletes as is of brute strength, violence, and low mental ability. One explanation for why there are discrepancies in the way the media depicts athletes is the self-categorization theory. According to Steffens et al., (2018), social categorization influences people's perception of others and the development of self-identity. Self-identity with one's own ethnic group may show a connection for why white reporters and commentators may use racial biases when describing black athletes

without even knowing it. A more diverse group of NFL reporters would help reduce the number of racial stereotypes labeled towards black athletes in society. In doing so, black athletes will receive unbiased reports in the media, thus allowing more coaches and owners to consider black quarterbacks throughout the recruiting process.

Additionally, of the 32 NFL teams today, only two of the head coaches are black, while only two team owners are of color, none from African descent. The lack of minority figures off the field in the football community could explain the disproportionate number of black quarterbacks in the league's history. It was not until 2011, when Shahid Kahn purchased ownership of the Jacksonville Jaguars, becoming the first non-white NFL owner. For ninety-one years NFL team owners were exclusively wealthy white men. With such an extensive history of white ownership and coaching, it is no surprise there has been a lack of black quarterbacks in the league. This could be traced back to stereotypes that have, over time, shaped the idea of what a quarterback is, and should be like. As I previously mentioned, coaches and executives believe that the quarterback needs need to be a leader and the most intelligent athlete on the field. Not by mistake, these are the traits often ascribed to only white athletes. According to Gill and Brajer (2012), all football prospects take an intelligence test called the *Wonderlic*, which helps executives evaluate players prior to the draft, historically coaches and owners often disregard the scores of black athletes, which is evidence that intelligence is a less expected trait for them. This long history of racial profiling of black athletes has been a pivotal cause for such a lack of racial diversity at the quarterback position.

The history of black quarterbacks in professional football is complicated. In 1920, Frederick Douglass "Fritz" Pollard became the first black player in professional football

history and helped the Akron Pros win the championship in the NFL's inaugural season. However, the Pros ran a single-wing offense, a predominantly run-style offense, since at the time the forward pass was practically outlawed, so Pollard barely resembles the modern quarterback position. Beginning in 1934, there was a ten-year informal ban on black athletes, largely advocated by Washington Redskins owner George Marshall. It was not until 1953, when back-up Chicago Bears quarterback, Willie Thrower, became the first "true" African American to play quarterback in the NFL, when he took snaps against the San Francisco 49ers. That same year George Taliaferro, a quarterback from Indiana University started in two games for the Indianapolis Colts. His opportunity to play came when the team suffered injuries to two other quarterbacks who were above Taliaferro in the depth chart. The next African American with the opportunity to stand under center was Charlie "Choo Choo" Brackins for the Green Bay Packers. The 16th round draft pick played in the final minutes of a lopsided game against the Cleveland Browns on October 23, 1955 but was later released from the team for violating team policy (Bigler, 2008). Regardless of the fact that a few black quarterbacks snuck into the league, their inability to retain their position on the team continued to limit the recognition of black quarterbacks in the league.

In the following decade it appeared as though black quarterbacks were on the brink of success. In 1968, the Oakland Raiders drafted Eldridge Dickey in the first round with the 25th overall pick. Dickey became the first African American quarterback to be selected in the first round by a professional team. Dickey also had hopes of becoming the first ever black quarterback to start on a regular basis, however this dream was never transpired. Instead, Marlin Briscoe has been glorified as the first black

quarterback to have a significant impact on a team's performance as he started seven games for the Denver Broncos in 1968, as he finished the season with 1,589 passing yards and 14 touchdowns. Briscoe would go on to have solid career, however, not as a quarterback, as he was given an ultimatum, either switch to positions or leave the team (Biscoe and Schaller, 2002). The following season in 1969, the Buffalo Bills drafted James Harris from Grambling State University in the 8th round and the Los Angeles Rams drafted John Walton out of Elizabeth City State University. Walton, a perpetual backup hardly saw any action during his ten-year tenure in the NFL (Briscoe and Schaller, 2002). As of this point in the league's history, coaches and owners have yet to trust black athletes with the starting quarterback role and to lead their team.

The early 2000s marked a true turning point in the history of black quarterbacks in the NFL. In 2002, Michael Vick became the first ever number-one overall pick as a black quarterback. The Virginia Tech dual-threat athlete went on to become one of, if not the greatest black quarterback to ever play in the NFL. I believe his ability to both run and pass has changed the image owners and coaches have on the idea of starting a black quarterback. Similarly, in 2007, JaMarcus Russell became only the second black quarterback selected as the overall number-one pick. The success that Vick and Russell had during their careers had a monumental impact on today's game, as more black athletes have been influenced to mimic their playing style, a style that has recently become very appealing to coaches and scouts today.

Although at this point in time there were higher hopes for black athletes to pursue the quarterback position, there were still some obstacles to overcome. Even with the sudden increase in drafted black quarterbacks, most coaches and team scouts were still

not sold on having a black quarterback lead their team (Bigler, 2008). Draft experts and scouts continued to describe black quarterbacks in ways that perpetuate racial stereotypes, lowering their chances of being drafted and shadowing their potential. Even today, coaches and scouts rate black quarterbacks higher in the areas of physical abilities and lower in the areas of cognitive abilities, in agreement with the foregoing racial stereotypes. These same ratings are still being displayed today by football commentators and analysts. A study conducted by Billings (2004), analyzed 162 hours of transcripts of televised college and NFL games during the fall of 2002. Billings recognized that sports commentators often acceded to certain stereotypes associated with white and black athletes. Blacks were often labeled as being exceptionally athletic, while obtaining low levels of poise and cognitive ability. Given the varied careers and opportunities given to African American quarterbacks thus far, one could argue that NFL owners, general managers, and coaches were still still uninterested in changing their recruiting philosophies.

In the past, NFL executives, scouts, and coaches have blamed the shortage of black quarterbacks on the fact that black college quarterbacks lacked the capabilities necessary to succeed at the professional level. Other critics stated that playing in a pro-style system rather than in a college-suited offense would greatly enhance black athletes' chances of playing the quarterback position in the NFL. Others say the dearth of black NFL quarterbacks is a direct result of the low number of black college quarterbacks in general. This could be explained by self-selection of the athletes themselves, as young people tend to choose positions played by those they praise or admire (Ferrucci and Tandoc, 2018). Since very few African American youths tend to

see quarterbacks they can relate to, they may have previously avoided the position entirely.

African Americans who have played quarterback in college or the NFL claim that the principle rationale for the lack of black quarterbacks is racism, not necessarily by the organizations but their fans. While some fans are satisfied with a winning record, others may be concerned by the diversity of the team. This claim can be supported by a number of examples of hatred towards black athletes throughout history. In the 1970s, coach John Robinson, at the University of Southern California, said he and quarterback Vince Evans received threats from white fans and students who were infuriated that the team would start a black quarterback. Doug Williams, a quarterback for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, experienced similar antagonism in the late 1970s. At the end of his original contract, Williams refused to re-sign with the team unless executives agreed to pay him more money. This story was released to the public, another example of the media searching for reactions. Shortly after, Williams received hate mail from fans who believed he should have been grateful that he was the forty-third highest paid quarterback in the league. According to Williams and Hunter (1990), one particular message Williams received was especially disrespectful and racist, as it contained a watermelon and a note that read, "Throw this nigger". More troubling than the fans, black athletes are convinced that behind closed doors, some coaches and team owners question whether black athletes are smart enough to successively comprehend NFL offenses. When team officials are considering a black quarterback, red flags often come down to a few things: "Can't read defenses, can't grasp the terminology" (Finney, 2001,

p.1). This underlines the clear stigma continuously put on black quarterbacks, something some coaches and owners have yet to overcome.

According to Hawkins (2002), sports have been classified as an indicator of racial progress. It is often suggested that race relations in the United States has improved immensely when we view the percentages of blacks on professional and collegiate athletic teams. In the last 40 years, not only have the total number of African American football players increased, but more blacks are now playing positions that have conventionally been reserved for white than ever before. No sport is more evident of this than football, and no position is a better indicator of the country's racial progress, or lack thereof, than the quarterback. No other position on the football field is expected to demonstrate as much leadership, intelligence and poise than that of the quarterback, traits that contradict the prevailing point of view regarding black mentality. Despite the increased number of blacks on collegiate and professional football teams, the current number of black quarterbacks listed on NFL rosters is still relatively small. However, black quarterback such as Michael Vick, Donovan McNabb, Steve McNair, and Vince Young have helped revolutionizing the success of black quarterbacks today.

Within the past decade, there have been multiple black quarterbacks that have been drafted in the first round, leading teams to Super Bowl victories, and some have even been named the most valuable player in the entire league. From 2013-2016, four straight black quarterbacks led their team to the Super Bowl. In 2019, two teams drafted black rookie quarterbacks: Dwayne Haskins (Washington) and number-one overall pick Kyler Murray (Arizona). Maybe, just maybe the tide has finally turned, as more and more teams are beginning to appreciate black athletes as quarterbacks. In 2019, there

were nine black starting quarterbacks on the opening week of the season such as Russell Wilson, Dak Prescott, Cam Newton, Patrick Mahomes, and Lamar Jackson to name a few. This could quite possibly mean that NFL coaches and scouts are finally understanding the positive outcomes that come with starting black quarterbacks, while ignoring the stereotypes that have negatively influenced the last two generations of coaches and professional scouts.

Although there has been an immense increase in consideration for black quarterbacks over the past two decades, there is still room for improvement. Black athletes have had to overcome many obstacles throughout the history of the league. Racial stereotypes put forth centuries ago continue to factor into the decisions made by unknowingly biased white owners and coaches, and reporters. Until there is equal representation of racial groups on and off the field, there is no certainty to when black quarterbacks will receive unbiased evaluations and media content. As the nine black starting quarterbacks in the league wrap up this season, hopefully both their mental and physical abilities will persuade coaches and owners to evaluate all incoming players by their true talents, rather than the complexion of their skin.

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