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The Evolution of Black Quarterbacks

Evan Brown
ebrownt7@gmail.com

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THE EVOLUTION OF BLACK QUARTERBACKS

by

Evan Brown

B.A., Southern Illinois University, 2013

A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Science

Department of Mass Communications and Media Arts
in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

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Approved by:
Katherine Frith, Chair

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Three years ago history was made in the National Football League during week one of the 2013 season. An NFL record nine African American quarterbacks started for their prospective teams during the opening week of 2013. These quarterbacks included the Carolina Panthers' Cam Newton, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers' Josh Freeman, Robert Griffin III of the Washington Redskins, Colin Kaepernick of the San Francisco 49ers, the Buffalo Bills' EJ Manuel, Terrelle Pryor of the Oakland Raiders, the New York Jets' Geno Smith, Michael Vick of the Philadelphia Eagles, and Russell Wilson of the Seattle Seahawks.

In an article published by ESPN Sep. 12, 2013, when asked if setting an NFL record in quarterbacks to start week one is a thing to celebrate, Cam Newton said the nine are just quarterbacks like every other quarterback in the NFL. "You don't have a bar mitzvah just because you are a starting African American quarterback in this league," Newton said. "I'm fans of everybody. I just can't say I just root for Michael Vick, RG III, Russell Wilson, Colin Kaepernick and those guys." Cam Newton may be right, the African-Americans who started at quarterback week one of the 2013 NFL season is quarterbacks just like any other quarterback in the league, but this record is a cause for celebration, considering the fact that dating back to when the NFL was established, no one would have ever imagined one African-American quarterback starting in the NFL, let alone almost 30 percent of the teams in the NFL starting a black quarterback week one of the 2013 NFL season.

CHAPTER 2

The Perception of Black Quarterbacks

Although there is a decrease in starting African American quarterbacks in this year's season, eight black quarterbacks are still a high number compared to previous statistics. It was very uncommon to see a black starting quarterback decades ago than it is today. In the book, "Third and Mile: The Trials and Triumph of the Black Quarterback," Stephen A. Smith, a former sports journalist and talk show host and now co-host of the ESPN debate program "First Take" said regarding African Americans not getting the chance to play quarterback in the NFL, "The fact is, you had a lot of people who questioned the intellectual capacity of the black quarterback. His ability to lead. The willingness of others to follow him. All those things came to play." The perception was that the black athlete was inferior intellectually. And we all know that in the game of football, you have to be an intellectual to play the quarterback position. Wilburn Hollis, a former quarterback for the University of Iowa from 1959-1961 said, "I felt it when I was trying out for professional football. You had to be two times better than whites—four times better if you were trying to be a quarterback. There was just no way you were going to walk into an NFL camp and be a black quarterback unless you were three or four times better than what you were facing."

The reason being is that African Americans at the time were considered not smart enough to play the quarterback position. A quarterback is known to be the leader of the football team and usually the brightest person on the football field. The quarterback has to know every play in the playbook to perfection. He has to read defenses, and is usually an extension to the head coach. Throughout the decades, it was said that black players didn't have the mental capacity to play

this position. An African American player wouldn't be able to obtain the playbook as well as a white player. He wouldn't be able to decipher defenses like a white player could. All a black player was good for was his athletic ability, which was why a person would typically see a black player succeed at a position predicated on speed, not brains. Black players were thrust into the running back, wide receiver and defensive back positions and flourished at these positions because of their speed and quickness. Throughout time these positions were what a majority of African American football players grew accustomed to.

CHAPTER 3

BLACK ADVERSITIES

In an excerpt taken from a 2005 article from the *Sociology of Sport Journal* titled “Contesting Race on Sundays: Making Meaning out of the Rise in the Number of Black Quarterbacks,” the article stated that despite a recent reduction in the idea of racial difference in sports media, the bulk of research findings show evidence of racism in sports coverage. The article said the racism often takes the form of African American males being presented as “natural athletes” with superior physical skills, especially when compared to Whites. White male athletes are often presented as being hard workers, superior leaders, more team oriented, and more mentally astute than their Black counterparts. Also, from the years 1983-1998, Black players never made up more than nine percent of the total number of quarterbacks in the NFL, despite the fact that African-Americans comprised more than two-thirds of the league’s total population over those same years. Although the numbers may be eye-popping, the nine percent total number of quarterbacks in the NFL is not because quarterbacks never found success at the position. Every college football season, several African-American collegiate quarterbacks obtain a substantial amount of success in college; the amount of success that would typically catapult someone into the first round of the NFL draft. However, these collegiate quarterbacks were usually given minimal professional opportunities, which include many who were asked to change positions upon entering the NFL or chose to find success in the less renowned Canadian Football League.

One player who was forced to change his position coming out of college in order to sustain a successful career in the NFL was former head coach Tony Dungy, who played quarterback at the University of Minnesota. Dungy went undrafted and signed as a free agent by

the Pittsburgh Steelers to play defensive back. “The scouts said I wasn’t good enough to play quarterback (in the pros), so I ended up going to Pittsburgh to play defense,” Dungy said in an excerpt from the book “Third and Mile.” “As I watched the guys who were playing quarterback, I saw a lot who weren’t very good. It took me about a year to come to the conclusion that I could have played quarterback.” Regarding quarterbacks having to settle to play in the Canadian Football League because the NFL wouldn’t give them a chance, Dungy said one player that came to mind was Chuck Ealey who he considered his hero. Ealey won the Grey Cup his first season with the Hamilton Tiger-Cats.

Ealey said he could have been drafted but he decided to go to Canada to fulfill his dreams of being a professional quarterback. “I could have gotten drafted, but I made it clear (to pro scouts) I wanted to go as a quarterback,” Ealey said. “Based on my winning record. I expected to have the opportunity. But when I didn’t get it, I moved on. I was disappointed, but it wasn’t earth-shattering. I can’t say every team in NFL refused to draft me because I was black. I can’t say every team required me to be 6’2” and 220 pounds. But every team in the NFL wanted someone who can lead and be a winner. I went through three years of university football on teams that didn’t lose a game. Didn’t at least deserve a try?”

Before a 17-year career in the National Football League, Warren Moon, who is considered one of the best African American quarterbacks in history decided after not getting drafted into the NFL, despite leading the Washington Huskies to a Rose Bowl victory, to instead play in the Canadian Football League. Moon spent six years in the CFL with the Edmonton Eskimos and took the Eskimos to five consecutive Grey Cup championships. After an impressive six-years stint in the CFL, the NFL finally took notice and over a period of 17 years, Moon played quarterback for the Houston Oilers, Minnesota Vikings, Seattle Seahawks and Kansas

City Chiefs and passed for more than 70,000 yards along the way combined in both professional leagues. Moon is a member of the Canadian Football Hall of Fame and became the first African-American quarterback to be inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. In his Pro Football Hall of Fame speech, Moon said the conversation of him being the first black quarterback to be inducted into the Hall of Fame is a touchy subject. "A lot has been said about me as being the first African-American quarterback into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. It's a subject that I'm very uncomfortable about sometimes, only because I only wanted to be judged as a quarterback."

Despite standing 6 foot and 3 inches, weighing 220 pounds during his professional football career, coming out of college Moon was often told he did not have the necessary size and skills to be a quarterback in the NFL. Moon is an example of the adversity African-American quarterbacks had to overcome to play in the greatest football league of them all, even though they possessed the necessary skills to not have been able to succeed in the National Football League even be a question.

CHAPTER 4

RACISM

A few years after Moon's retirement, another quarterback had to overcome a different type of adversity. Donovan McNabb was selected second overall in the 1999 NFL Draft by the Philadelphia Eagles and became one of the best quarterbacks in the NFL during the decade of the 21st century. During his time with Eagles, McNabb led Philadelphia to four consecutive NFC East Championship, five NFC Championship games and one Super Bowl appearance. In 2004, McNabb became the first quarterback in NFL history to throw for more than 30 touchdowns and fewer than 10 interceptions in a season. He is the leader in virtually every Philadelphia Eagle quarterback statistical category and was the first African-American quarterback ever to sign a \$100 million contract.

It's safe to say McNabb had a good run in his NFL career and was one of the best to play the position during his time on the field. One talk show host didn't think so. Rush Limbaugh is a conservative radio talk show host and a political commentator. In 2003, after McNabb already went to three consecutive pro bowls, two consecutive NFC Championships and already finished runner-up in the Most Valuable Player voting in his first full season as a starter, Limbaugh had strong words for McNabb. "Sorry to say this, I don't think he's been that good from the get-go," Limbaugh said on ESPN's 'Sunday NFL Countdown.' "I think what we've had here is a little social concern in the NFL. The media has been very desirous that a black quarterback does well. There is little hope invested in McNabb, and he got a lot of credit for his performance of his team that he didn't deserve. The defense carried this team."

Although Limbaugh has the right to formulate his opinion, ESPN didn't agree with the racial overtones that came with his opinion and let it be known that the company did not feel the same way. In a 2003 ESPN article titled "Limbaugh's comments touch off controversy" ESPN stated that the comments were inappropriate. "Although Mr. Limbaugh stated that his comments had 'no racist intent whatsoever,' we have communicated to Mr. Limbaugh that his comments were insensitive and inappropriate. Throughout his career, he has been consistent in his criticism of the media's coverage of a myriad of issues." McNabb said he thought the race conversation dealing with black quarterbacks was over. It's sad that you've got to go to skin color," McNabb said. "I thought we were through with that whole deal."

In the book "A level Playing Field: African American Athletes and the Republic of Sports," the book states that Limbaugh is right, the media was desirous for a black quarterback to do well and there was hope that McNabb was that quarterback, but who wouldn't be? "So far no black quarterback has been able to dominate a league in which the majority of the players are black. To pretend that many of us didn't want McNabb to be the best quarterback in the NFL is absurd. To say that we shouldn't root for a quarterback to win because he is black is every bit as nonessential as to say that we shouldn't have rooted for Jackie Robinson to succeed because he was black." The book compared rooting for a black quarterback to rooting for a black quarterback to succeed because of the color of his skin is much like the reasoning that many whites use in explaining why they feel President Barack Obama must succeed because being black in such a leadership position would be beneficial, socially and culturally, for the country just as they believe his failure would be disastrous for race relations in the country.

This goes to show from the beginning of football, all the way to the turn of the 20th century, African-American quarterbacks and African-Americans in society in general has always

been a topic of discussion. Still, the likes of Warren Moon and Donovan McNabb would have never come along if it wasn't for the black quarterbacks before them that paved a way. In the periodical "The African American Quarterback: A New Era Emerges," it was said that during the early 1920s. Fritz Pollard became the first African-American to play the quarterback position. Pollard, who was a Brown University graduate and the first black player to play in the Rose Bowl in 1916 was a player/coach between 1922-1924 for the Akron Pros of the American Professional Football Association, the team in which he played for. Pollard was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 1954 and the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2005. Steven Towns, one of Pollard's grandsons, gave the acceptance speech when Pollard was included into the NFL Hall of Fame in 2005. In an excerpt from the book "Third and Mile," Pollard recalled the racism Pollard had to endure as he played the sport he loved. "He had to roll on his back with his cleats up after he got tackled to protect himself from the piling-on. He remembered being chased into the stands by opposing players. He'd run out of bounds and they kept after him. He had to be escorted from the field because the crowd would throw things at him. He couldn't eat with his team. Because of the times, there wasn't a whole lot he could do. He just had to put up with it.

CHAPTER 5

BREAKING BARRIERS

Thirty-one years after Pollard broke the color barrier for African-Americans at the quarterback position, Michigan State's Willie Thrower came along to pass for the Chicago Bears. Between 1933 and 1946, black players were completely banned from the NFL. Thrower was finally given a chance to play and his professional debut was Oct. 18, 1953 when legendary Bears coach George Halas put Thrower in the game after being dissatisfied with starting quarterback Blanda's performance. After Thrower led the Bears down the field, Halas put Blanda back in to cap the drive off. Fans thought Blanda was hurt, in "Third and Mile." Blanda recalled otherwise. "I don't remember getting hurt. I think they decided to put Willie in to see what he could do. Back then, quarterbacks weren't as schooled as they are today. Most of us had been left halfbacks. We learned how to play as we went along. Willie did well. The only reason I can see why he didn't finish the drive is because maybe he didn't know the offense that well. We were getting near the goal line, and the coaching staff didn't want to risk anything. "

Although Thrower was taken out of the game before getting the ball into the end zone, his insertion made him the first African-American player to complete a pass in the NFL. However, less than a month later, he was placed on waivers and released from the team. Although his career was cut short because of the discrimination black athletes had to endure at the time, Thrower still made a lasting impact on African-American quarterbacks that came after him. During Moon's Pro Football Hall of Fame acceptance speech, Moon thanked Thrower, among others, for giving him inspiration during a time when African-Americans played the quarterback position in the NFL.

15 years later, history was made again. In 1968, his rookie season, Marlin Briscoe of the Denver Broncos was inserted at quarterback during a game against the Boston Patriots after a season-ending injury to starter Steve Tensi. On his second drive, Briscoe orchestrated an 80-yard touchdown drive. He started the next game of the season making him the first African-American quarterback to start an AFL game. That season, Briscoe threw for 14 touchdowns, still a Bronco rookie record. Although Briscoe did not play quarterback the following season, Briscoe still had a very impressive career. Briscoe signed with the Buffalo Bills where he was converted into a receiver and led Buffalo in catches in the three seasons he was there. After the AFL-NFL merger, Briscoe went on to win a pair of Super Bowls and led the 1972 undefeated Miami Dolphins with four touchdowns and four receptions. In “Third in Mile” Briscoe looked back at when it all started. “The offense hadn’t scored a touchdown since Tensi went down. The fans and the media started saying, “Well, why don’t you let Briscoe Play? The fans and the media pressured (Coach) Saban. That’s how it all started.”

In 1988, an African-American quarterback finally reached the promoted land of leading his team to a Super Bowl victory. That quarterback was Doug Williams. Williams led the Washington Redskins to win Super Bowl XXII. Williams completed 18-29 passes for 340 yards, four touchdowns and was named Super Bowl MVP. Williams said in “Third and Mile” that when he ran onto the field for Super Bowl XXII all he could think of was the black quarterbacks who paved the way for him. “Running out onto the field Super Bowl Sunday was one of the greatest feelings ever. When they called my name, I thought about the guys that came before me, the James Harris and the Joe Gilliam.”

Although Williams said stepping on the field Super Bowl Sunday, made him think about all of the quarterbacks that came before him, winning Super Bowl XXII paved the way for many

quarterbacks after him like Donovan McNabb, Steve McNair, Dante Culpepper, and a young Michael Vick. In “Third and Mile” Michael Vick recalled watching the game as a child. “I was seven years old. I’d just started watching football. I was a big Elway fan. “I’d never seen a black quarterback before. When I saw Doug Williams beat Denver, I was like Damn, he’s throwing the ball—touchdown passes!—just running the offense. I told myself, Dude, he’s doing his thing. He’s really handling his business.”

In 1999, Vick became the first African-American quarterback picked first overall in the NFL draft. In his career, Vick is most known for being a scrambler, a cliché for African-American quarterbacks. In “Third and Mile” Vick said he could be the pocket passer most coaches desire, but instead he chose to do his own thing. “I can go into a game, sit in the pocket, do everything I’m supposed to do, complete seventy percent of my passes. I’m accurate, everything is straight drop-back—five-step, seven-step—and they praise me. I come back the next week and do the same thing, but we lose, then they say I’m not accurate, I can’t throw from the pocket... That’s what made me say the hell with it. I’m not trying to please nobody else. I just got to do what I can do, control what I can control.”

In the book “A Level Playing Field,” the book stated that Movie Director Oliver Stone made a movie called “Any Given Sunday” featuring a scrambling quarterback, an aging white quarterback, and a white coach, a cast that is all too familiar to a number of black quarterbacks who played in the NFL. The book states that the movie concerns the black male’s ability to lead, and on another level it concerns an African-American not only just taking a job away from a white, but taking a job that is defined as a white job. The book also states that two questions from the view of the issue pertaining to the African-American quarterback arise. Can a black successfully play in the way that the position needs to be played? And should he?

CHAPTER 6

LOOKING AT THE EVOLUTION

Throughout the years, from the pioneers who endured racism, discriminations, and hardships like Fritz Pollard, and Willie Thrower, to players such as Doug Williams, Randall Cunningham, and Warren Moon, to quarterbacks such as Donovan McNabb, Dante Culpepper and Steve McNair, to the new generation of African-American quarterbacks like Cam Newton, Russell Wilson, Colin Kaepernick, and Robert Griffin III, it is safe to say that a black player can successfully play the quarterback position. An article published on Sep. 29, 2013 by the New York Times, the newspaper went so far as to say that there is now a “Golden Era” of the black quarterback. In the article “N.F.L. Protects the Pocket as Black Quarterbacks Transcend It,” the article discussed the nine black quarterbacks to start week one of the NFL season and how shortly after a previous article from the New York Times discussing the matter was released, that number was shrunk to one with the benching of Tampa Bay Buccaneers quarterback Josh Freeman. Dungy said in the article that the benching would have been controversial a decade ago. “Is this racially motivated? If he were white, would they be sticking with him longer? Would they have gotten more weapons around him? Now Dungy thinks that benching is more about politics and less about race. “I think the Freeman case is really just a case of Football 101. New coach comes in, he didn’t draft Freeman, he doesn’t like some things about him; maybe he isn’t his guy and he prefers to start out with his guy.”

The fact that nine African American quarterbacks being able to start week one of the 2013 NFL season and the fact that one of the most renowned black names in the NFL thinks that race is not factoring into the decision making of starting or benching a black quarterback means

that the black quarterback has made significant strides in the NFL, but some players think there is still a long way to go, including McNabb. “I personally don’t feel that we’ve turned the corner,” said McNabb in “Third and Mile.” “People may recognize the success of the black quarterback, but do they accept it? They’re always trying to find the deeper reasons for why we succeed—is it because we’re good at what we do or because the people around us are good at what they do?” Nowadays, African American quarterbacks receive equal media coverage, although they are still described differently. After analyzing previous Sports Illustrated magazine articles I’ve noticed how media differentiate black and white quarterbacks. From the diction writer’s use, to the chosen pictures, black quarterbacks seemed to be described differently from white quarterbacks. In the August 4, 2014 Sports Illustrated magazine, it covers stories on both black and white quarterbacks. Drew Brees (white quarterback) is described as being a supportive and encouraging player. Robert Griffin III is portrayed as being athletic. It shows a picture of him jumping extremely high in the air showing how buoyant he was feeling. Griffin is also described as being fast as lightning while escaping the pocket and running with the ball. Regardless of how many people accept the black quarterback or not, what matters is that the tag of not being intellectual enough to play the position, or not being able to lead a football team is finally off of the black quarterback and the only reason for a black quarterback not being given a chance to succeed in the NFL is based off performance, not race. Looking at the evolution of the black quarterback and also through media, it has made so many strides since the pioneers who made a way for them, and they will continue to do so.

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VITA

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University

Evan B. Brown

Ebrownent7@gmail.com

Southern Illinois University Carbondale
Bachelor of Arts, Radio/TV, December 2013

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