

FIVE FORGOTTEN TRAIL-BLAZERS

By Bob Gill

Today, with young fans around the NFL wearing replica jerseys of Donovan McNabb, Daunte Culpepper and Kordell Stewart, it's hard to believe there was ever a question about whether black quarterbacks could make it in pro football. But until the 1970s, black signal-callers were the rarest species in the gridiron menagerie.

Moreover, pro football's few trail-blazing black quarterbacks from the 1950s and '60s have been generally overlooked in favor of a rather insignificant figure who played only a single NFL game.

Willie Thrower is usually cited as the answer to a trivia question: Who was the first black quarterback in the NFL? But that's more than he legitimately deserves. A product of Michigan State, he had no impact at all in the professional ranks (although he admittedly had a great name for a QB). He attempted only eight passes for the Bears in 1953, completed just three, and then disappeared.

Thrower was the first black college player signed specifically as a T-formation quarterback, and that's where the myth of his historical importance originated. But at the time he joined the Bears, another black player had already been seeing service at quarterback in the NFL for two years, and thus deserves the distinction that has mistakenly gone to Thrower.

George Taliaferro, a 1948 All-American at Indiana, began his pro career in 1949 with the Los Angeles Dons, who selected him in the first round of the AAFC draft. The Dons used the single-wing on offense, and Taliaferro split time at tailback with veteran star Glenn Dobbs. He made an impressive debut, rushing for 472 yards and throwing for 790. After the NFL-AAFC merger, he wound up with the New York Yanks, where he played halfback in the T-formation while George Ratterman held the quarterback job.

The Yanks had a surprisingly good team in 1950. They led their division with a 6-1 record before fading to a 7-5 finish. But Ratterman defected to Canada during the offseason, and the Yanks fell on hard times in his absence, winning just one game in 1951. Four players divided the passing chores that year (including Ratterman, who flopped north of the border and returned in midseason), and one of them was Taliaferro, who completed 13 of 33 passes for 251 yards and a touchdown.

A year later the struggling franchise moved to Dallas. With Ratterman now in Cleveland, backing up Otto Graham, the renamed "Texans" again used a revolving door at quarterback, and again Taliaferro was included. He threw 63 passes, completing just 16, and also spent enough time at halfback to lead the team in rushing with 415 yards.

Over those two years, then, Taliaferro had thrown 96 passes – all this before Willie Thrower even joined the Bears. In 1953, the year of Thrower's sole appearance in the NFL, Taliaferro found himself with the Baltimore Colts, in their first year of existence. Again he split his time between quarterback and halfback, tossing 55 passes without much success but rushing for 479 yards. He hung on for two more years, but played little after that.

Still, in a seven-year pro career, Taliaferro rushed for more than 2,200 yards, averaging 4.6 yards per carry, and caught 95 passes for 1,300 more. He returned kickoffs for another 2,000 yards, and ran a punt back for a touchdown in his rookie year. More to the point in terms of this discussion, he threw 284 passes, completing 92 for 1,633 yards and 10 touchdowns – and became, in fact if not in reputation, the NFL's first black quarterback.

Six years after Taliaferro bowed out, the Cleveland Browns chose a black QB named Sandy Stephens in the second round of the 1962 draft. He went even higher in the AFL draft, where he was the New York Titans' first-round pick. Although Stephens had been a consensus All-American at Minnesota, he had completed just under one-third of his passes in college, and there was talk of moving him to running back or defensive back in the pros.

But he wanted to play quarterback, and the Montreal Alouettes were willing to give him that opportunity, so he cast his lot with the Canadian Football League.

Stephens had a pretty good rookie year, hitting almost 48 percent of his 228 passes for 1,542 yards, second-most in the Eastern Conference, and 11 touchdowns, and gaining 398 yards on the ground. More important, at least for our purposes, he became the first black quarterback to play a full season as a starter in professional football.

But he lost his job early in the 1963 season, and the Alouettes shipped him to Toronto, where he split time with Canadian legend Jackie Parker. Although Stephens' passing stats weren't too bad – he threw for 1,281 yards and 11 more touchdowns – his sophomore season turned out to be his last.

Three years later and 1,500 miles to the south, the Texas Football League was born. The TFL was one of the top minor leagues of the period, and its highest-scoring offense in that inaugural season belonged to the Pasadena Pistols, a team based in a suburb of Houston and led by a strong-armed black quarterback named Charlie Green.

Green was a product of Texas Southern, a historically black school in Houston. In four years there he completed 191 of 470 passes for 3,407 yards and 28 touchdowns, and in 1962, as a senior, he was named the Southwestern Athletic Conference's all-star quarterback. It's not clear whether he played any postgraduate football over the next few years, but when he joined Pasadena in 1966 he quickly demonstrated that he hadn't lost his touch.

Green led the Texas League in passing in 1966, throwing for 2,209 yards and 24 touchdowns, and earned a spot on the league's all-star team as the Pistols missed a trip to the championship game by the slim margin of a tie-breaker. A year later he was even more prolific; going into the season finale he had piled up 3,133 yards and 32 touchdowns through the air. No yardage totals are available for the last game, but Green threw three more TD passes, giving him a season total of 35. Defensive shortcomings limited the Pistols to an 8-6 record, but again Green was named to the all-league team.

The Pistols moved to Beaumont in 1968, but immediately ran into bad luck in their new home. Green was hurt in a preseason game and hardly played at all as the renamed Golden Vikings limped through a 2-10 season that turned out to be the swan song for the franchise – and for its star passer.

Nonetheless, Green's accomplishments in 1966 and '67 had already earned him a place in history as pro football's first truly successful black quarterback.

In 1968, while Green's career was ending with a whimper in Beaumont, a rookie named Marlin Briscoe won a starting job with the Denver Broncos and became the first black QB to play regularly for a full season in a major league, though not technically in the NFL. (Denver, remember, was still in the AFL at the time.) He didn't set the league on fire, but he passed for 1,589 yards and also ran for 308, averaging 7.5 yards per carry.

It was a good start, but Briscoe never got a chance to develop as a quarterback. In the offseason he was traded to Buffalo, where Jack Kemp was ensconced as the starter. Taking advantage of the mobility Briscoe had displayed as a scrambler in Denver, the Bills moved him to wide receiver, and he did pretty well, catching 32 passes for 532 yards. A year later, with strong-armed rookie Dennis Shaw replacing Kemp, Briscoe hauled in 57 passes for 1,036 yards and was named to every all-AFC team.

He followed that with another good season in Buffalo, before the Bills shipped him to the Dolphins. Briscoe arrived in Miami just in time to play with the undefeated 1972 team, splitting time with Howard Twilley at the "other" wide receiver spot, opposite Paul Warfield. In 1973 he led the Dolphins in receptions as they rolled to a second straight championship.

Briscoe spent one more season in Miami, then bounced from San Diego to Detroit to New England before calling it quits after the 1976 season. By that time most people had forgotten his earlier pioneering role as a black quarterback. He finished his career with 224 receptions – oddly enough, exactly the same as the number of passes he threw back in his rookie season.

A year after Briscoe made history in Denver, Johnnie Walton, a black quarterback from tiny Elizabeth City State in North Carolina, joined the Indianapolis Capitols of the Continental Football League. He started the season as a backup to the incumbent, Frank Stavroff, but took over as the starter after a few weeks and led the Caps to six wins in their last seven games, finishing second in the CoFL in passing and winning the league's MVP award.

In the playoffs, Walton passed for 204 yards and two touchdowns and ran for another score as Indianapolis upset the defending champs, the Orlando Panthers. Two weeks later he threw for 217 yards and two more TDs as the Caps edged the San Antonio Toros 44-38 in overtime to win the championship in the final game of the CoFL.

Walton hung around the fringes of the NFL for years afterward – a couple of years on the Rams' taxi squad, a few more as a backup with the Eagles – and played pretty well as a starter in the World Football League in 1975 and the USFL in 1983 and '84, but he never equaled that first magical season, when he became the first black quarterback to lead a team to a championship in the professional ranks.

By the time Walton finally hung up his cleats, a lot of things had changed in the world of pro football. The sight of black signal-callers crouched over center became less of an oddity during the 1970s, as the NFL welcomed the likes of Joe Gilliam, James Harris and Doug Williams. All of them are fairly well remembered today as pioneers, as they should be.

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It's too bad the same kind of recognition has eluded five other genuine trail-blazers: George Taliaferro, Sandy Stephens, Charlie Green, Johnnie Walton and Marlin Briscoe.
