

The Complete History of the African American Quarterbacks in the National Football League (NFL) – Part 1

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History has shown that the journey of the African American QB was not an easy one, but when given the opportunity these men thrived in a system that was sometimes stacked against them. African American quarterbacks are now in 2005, no longer an anomaly. There has even been debate that Warren Moon with his gaudy statistics and winning ways in the Canadian Football League and National Football League has the credentials to be the first full time African American quarterback inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame, which will create an interest in this topic. African American Quarterbacks in their history have been shunned, converted to other positions, fought for inclusion, stereotyped and chased opportunities in other leagues, but they have persevered to go from an unwanted oddity to flourishing leaders.

Early Years (1890's – 1946)

The first mention of African Americans playing football was in a College Football game played on November 23, 1892 (Thanksgiving) between historically black colleges Biddle (Later Johnson C. Smith) and Livingstone. The game was won by Biddle by a score of 4-0. After the historic game many African Americans continued to play during this era for historically black colleges and predominantly white universities.

In the early days of pro football the African American professional football player was just another player in a renegade sport. African American football players along with whites and native Americans were just trying to survive in an era when baseball, boxing, and college football reigned superior on the American Landscape. The pro game was considered barbaric and illegal, because it lacked structure, a fan base, and the prestige of College Football. Teams were loosely organized around Factories/Colleges/ Athletic Clubs, Featured players that jumped around from team to team, Sporadic to Little Pay, Fraught with fighting, and Had college players play under assumed names.

In the pre-NFL days African American players from colleges and schools were recruited to play, with usually a promise for job during the week. These players included: Halfback **Charles W. Follis** (Wooster) Shelby Athletic Club 1902-06, who is known to be the first black professional football player, Halfback **Henry McDonald** (Canandaigua Academy), who played for the Rochester Jeffersons from 1911-1917, and Halfback **Charles (Doc) Baker**, who did not attend college, but played for the Akron Indians from 1906-08 and 1911.

One of best "Signal Callers" of this time was **Frederick (Fritz) Pollard** a back from Brown (Class of 1918). Pollard was born on January 27, 1894 in Rogers Park, Illinois and even standing only 5'9 and weighing 165 pounds, he ran with a hard slashing style that defied his size. At Brown as a freshman in 1915, Pollard led his team to the Rose Bowl against Washington State, becoming the first African-American to play in the Rose Bowl. In his senior year he was named to Walter Camp's All- American first team, the first African American in the backfield.

Professionally he played in the American Professional Football Association (Precursor to NFL) for seven years for Akron (1919-1921, 1925-26), Milwaukee (1922), Hammond (1923, 1925) and Providence (1926). Even though Pollard faced discriminatory tactics by fans and opposing players, including the racially insensitive song "Bye Bye Blackbird" and dressing away from his teammates, he continued to prosper as he did in college. He led the Akron Pros to the championship in 1920, attaining All League status and was lauded along with Jim Thorpe as the major gate attractions.

Later on he was the first African American head coach in the NFL (Hammond) and is credited on the Fritz Pollard website (www.fritzpollard.com) and by the Pro Football Hall of Fame as the first African American quarterback, playing the position and taking direct snaps from center for the Hammond Pros in a couple of games in 1923. (1) He was elected to the College Hall of Fame (1954, 1st African American) and was finally inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2005 almost 80 years after his playing days were over. He died in 1986 at the age of 92 and was a true pioneer of the game and left a lasting legacy for future African American Quarterbacks and players.

Also during this period African Americans were playing quarterback in the college game. One of the first documented African American quarterbacks was **Wilmeth Sidat-Singh** of Syracuse. He played quarterback in 1937 and 1938. Sidat-Singh was known for having a strong and accurate

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throwing arm. Teams sometimes after learning that Syracuse had a black player refused to let Sidat-Singh play. One of these teams was Maryland, which refused to let Sidat-Singh play in 1937 and won the game, but in October of 1938 Sidat-Singh would not be denied leading Syracuse to a 53-0 victory.

The NFL did not have black players from 1934 to 1946. When the league no longer signed black players due to a "Gentleman's Agreement" to keep the league like pro baseball, "All White". This was an unfortunate shameful spot in the NFL's history. During this time African American players formed their own teams and played against each other and in some interracial exhibition games. One of the more famous teams was the New York Brown Bombers backed by Joe Louis and coached and managed by Fritz Pollard. Pollard also coached and managed the Chicago Black Hawks football team during this time.

Modern Era Years (1946 -1969)

By 1946 after the signing of Jackie Robinson in Major League Baseball, the NFL also decided to integrate the league again. Even with African American players returning, the league was still very slow to embrace African Americans at the so called "Thinking Positions" (quarterback, center, and middle linebacker), because of "backward" stereotypes.

In 1953, seven years after the modern color barrier was broken, backup Chicago Bears QB **Willie Thrower** became the first African-American to play quarterback in an NFL game on October 18, 1953 against the San Francisco 49ers. He played under center and received the snap directly, making him a true *modern* T-formation quarterback. Thrower a native of New Kensington, PA, had already been the first African American Quarterback in the Big 10 conference, playing for Michigan State from 1950 to 1952, helping them win the National Championship in 1952. In his historical game, Thrower went 3 for 8 for 27 yards in a 35 to 28 loss. What was unfortunate about the game was George Blanda, who had struggled before Thrower was inserted was reinserted into the game at the 5 yard line to complete a drive Thrower had started.

After his debut against the 49ers, Thrower never appeared in another NFL game. Before the next season Thrower, who made the Bears team in 1953 as basically a "walk-on" was cut before the 1954 season. Thrower wanting to play quarterback and without any other takers in the NFL decided to go to the Canadian Football League, playing for the Winnipeg Blue Bombers and semi pro in Toronto for four years before injuries shortened his career. He retired at age 27.

His feat of a black man playing quarterback was considered such an oddity for the time that "Ripley's Believe It or Not" featured him in a story. Thrower had a good outlook on his brief time at quarterback in the NFL and told *The Valley News Dispatch* of Tarentum, Pa., before he passed away in 2002. "I look at it like this: I was like the Jackie Robinson of football. A Black quarterback was unheard of before I hit the pros,"

Around the same time period **George Taliaferro**, a single-wing tailback from Indiana University started two games as a T-formation quarterback for the Baltimore Colts in 1953. He only got the chance to play quarterback, because of a rash of injuries to the three other QB's on the roster and the coach relenting. Taliaferro took the snap from center in a "Shotgun" fashion and had to decide to pass or run very quickly. (2) Taliaferro was a big strong runner. At Indiana he was known for his excellent play on the field and gaining access for African American students to campus and public facilities during the mid 1940's. He led Indiana to the Big 10 championship in 1945. After a stellar career at Indiana, he was the first African American picked in the NFL Draft by the Chicago Bears in the thirteenth round of the 1949 draft, but elected to sign with the Los Angeles Dons of the AAFC. He played with the Dons in 1949; New York Yanks 1950-51; Dallas Texans 1952; Baltimore Colts 1953-54; Philadelphia Eagles 1955. He was selected to the Pro Bowl in 1951, 1952, and 1953.

The next Quarterback to get an opportunity to play was **Charlie "Choo Choo" Brackins** in 1955 for the Green Bay Packers. Drafted in the 16th round of the 1955 NFL Draft by the Packers out of Prairie View A&M, where he was a four-year starter and led his team to 33 victories in 37 games. He was a big tall passer at 6'2 and 205 Lbs. Brackins became the third (3) black quarterback to play in an NFL game when he played in the closing minutes for the Green Bay Packers in a blowout game against Cleveland on October 23, 1955. Green Bay won the game 41-10 and Brackins had two incompletions.

The Packers placed him on waivers later in the season after he had broken curfew before a game in Chicago and other unnamed problems. His career only lasted seven games and the game mentioned earlier was his only appearance. After the "Violations", Brackins never got a chance to return to the NFL. He had tryouts, mostly as a Defensive Back, but never caught on again and injured his knee leaving the game. He died of cancer in 1990 at the age of 58.

There was another drought of African American Quarterbacks again after Brackins. This seemed to be a calculated move by NFL owners, who lived by the "One Strike and Out" rule at the time, especially when it meant putting your coaching career in jeopardy for a black quarterback.

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Unfortunately all African American quarterbacks were lumped into the "problem" category or the "Should be converted to another position" category, because of long held racial bias formed by many southern trained coaches. College quarterbacks who excelled at this time, but did not receive a chance included: **Sherman Lewis** of Michigan State, **Mel Myers** of Illinois, **Wilbur Hollis** of Iowa (QB of 1960 Big 10 Co-Champions), **Jimmy Raye** also of Michigan State (converted by Philadelphia Eagles to Defensive Back), **Sandy Stephens** of Minnesota, and others.

Stephens was the first African American starting quarterback to win a national championship in 1960. He finished 4th in the Heisman Trophy balloting in 1961 and was drafted by Cleveland (NFL) in 2nd Round and NY Titans (AAFC) in 5th Round, but he never played because he was never offered the chance to play quarterback. He went to the Canadian football League (CFL) and played with Montreal in 1962 leading the Alouettes to the Grey Cup Finals. He later signed with the Kansas City Chiefs as a fullback, but never got to play quarterback and retired in 1968. Sandy Stephens died on June 6, 2000 at age 59.

In 1968 the plight and drought of African American quarterbacks seemed like it was going to change with the drafting of Tennessee State quarterback **Eldridge Dickey** by the Oakland Raiders in the 1st Round with the 25th overall pick. Dickey became the first African-American quarterback selected in the first round by an AFL or NFL team. The American Football League (AFL) having been established for only 8 years was considered to be more open-minded toward black players.

Dickey played from 1965 to 1968 at Tennessee State, setting many Black College records. He led his team to bowl berths in 1965 & 1966 and was known for having a strong arm and the ability to make plays on the move. Dickey believed that he was going to be the first African American Quarterback to play and maybe start on a regular basis.

However the Raiders decided that Dickey would play Wide Receiver first and be allowed to practice with the quarterbacks in training camp. Dickey was paid a higher salary to accept the position change and did so hoping for an opportunity to play quarterback. In training camp he performed very well and by some accounts outplayed Ken Stabler also drafted in 1968 in the 2nd Round from Alabama. After training camp Dickey was moved back to wide receiver permanently. He played in 11 games in 1968 finishing with 1 catch for 34 yards.

Dickey hung around on injured reserve and as backup WR with the Raiders for a couple of years and in the 1971 season he finished with 4 catches for 78 yards and 1 touchdown. He never got the opportunity to play QB in the AFL/NFL and left the league after the 1971 season. Dickey later became a minister and died May 22, 2000 after suffering a stroke.

Instead of Dickey making an impact on pro football in 1968 there was another African American quarterback that broke through that year. **Marlin Briscoe** from University of Omaha was drafted in the 14th Round by the Denver Broncos (AFL) in the same draft as Dickey. Briscoe had been a two-sport star (basketball and football) in the Omaha area in both high school and college. Though he was small at 5'11, 185 lbs, Briscoe could more than get the job done as a quarterback. He was well schooled in the position by his uncle Bob Rose a youth coach in the Omaha region. He finished his senior year of college with 2,283 yards passing and was named a NAIA All-American in 1967. He was nicknamed the "Magician" in college for the way he magically got away from defenders to make plays on the move.

When Briscoe was signed by the Broncos, they asked him to come in as Defensive Back. Briscoe had been warned that pro football was still not ready for a black quarterback and he had already experienced similar treatment in High School where he had to play running back to get on the field. His college coach Al Caniglia knew Briscoe wanted to play quarterback and advised him to have his contract stipulate that in training camp he be given a three day tryout at the position. When he arrived at training camp there were eight quarterbacks and Briscoe was listed last on the depth chart. During the beginning of training camp, Briscoe dazzled at the position, but was moved to the defensive backfield after his three day tryout.

Briscoe, wanting a chance to make the team, accepted the move, but fate snuck in to help him. Starter Steve Tensi broke his collarbone and backup Joe DiVito was unproductive. Briscoe finally got his chance in the 3rd game of the season against the Boston Patriots. He entered the game with the Broncos trailing 20-7 and almost helped them pull out a victory in a 20-17 loss, scoring a touchdown running the ball.

After his showing Head Coach Lou Saban reluctantly named him the starter and he became the first African American Quarterback to start for a team. He ended up playing in 11 games, 7 of which he started. He finished with a Broncos rookie record of 1,589 yards passing and 14 TD's, plus 308 yards rushing. Some of Briscoe's records stood until John Elway came along in 1983. The next season when Briscoe arrived, he was informed by Saban that he was no longer a quarterback and was cut without an explanation.

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Needing an opportunity, Briscoe almost signed with the British Columbia Lions (CFL). Instead he was picked up by the Buffalo Bills as an "athlete." The Bills were already set at quarterback with Tom Flores and Jack Kemp. Additionally they already had an African American quarterback in 1969 draftee James Harris, so Briscoe was moved to wide receiver. Briscoe practiced at quarterback only when the others were injured and strictly played wide receiver. He later developed into a quality receiver, playing three seasons for the Bills and earning Pro Bowl honors for the 1970 season, finishing with 57 catches for 1036 yards and 8 touchdowns.

After leaving Buffalo, Briscoe continued to play WR with the great Miami Dolphins teams of the early 1970's including the 1972 perfect 17-0 team. He continued to play until 1976, playing with Detroit, San Diego and ending his career with the New England Patriots. Unfortunately Briscoe never got to achieve success at the quarterback position after a good rookie season in 1968. He later beat drug addiction and now counsels and coaches children in the Los Angeles area.

Building Years (1970 – 1980)

With the merger of the NFL and AFL in 1969 and the influence of new commissioner Pete Rozelle the NFL seemed ready to move forward. The merger led to a large television contract for the league, making it an "American Institution". Also with pro football taking a lead from the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's, there was an emergence in the league of more successful leading African American players. African American players were now more established, rebelling and speaking out against longstanding stereotypes of black players. This was different than in the 1950's and 1960's when they had to keep quiet to conform and survive. African Americans were starring on both offense and defense at practically every position except Center, Punter, Kicker and most importantly Quarterback.

In the college game, African American Quarterbacks were succeeding and now at predominantly white universities where blacks usually had been blocked from playing quarterback. These quarterbacks included: **Donnie Little**, University of Texas, **Dennis Franklin**, University of Michigan, **JC Watts & Thomas Lott**, Oklahoma, **Condredge Holloway**, Tennessee (1st Black QB in SEC), **Jimmy Jones**, USC (QB of National Champions in 1971), **Gene Washington**, Stanford, and others.

Another African American College Quarterback of this time that deserves to be mentioned is University of Toledo (OH) Quarterback **Chuck Ealey**. Ealey (5'11, 195 lbs) from 1969 to 1970 was undefeated as Toledo's QB, going 35-0 and leading his team to victory in the Tangerine Bowl and finishing 8th in Heisman Trophy Balloting. He still holds the NCCA Record for winning percentage and winning streaks. Ealey unfortunately was overlooked by the NFL and went undrafted in the 1972 NFL Draft. He went to the CFL and won a Grey Cup in his rookie season with Hamilton and then played six more years before retiring.

One of the pioneering professional African American starting quarterbacks of the '70's was the aforementioned **James Harris**. Harris came on the AFL/NFL scene in 1969 when he was drafted out of Grambling in the 8th Round of the 1969 AFL Draft by the Buffalo Bills. Harris played at Grambling from 1966-68 and as a senior, he passed for 1,972 yards and 21 touchdowns. In three years as Grambling's starting quarterback, he led the Tigers to a 24-5-1 record. He also had set numerous school and historically black college records in his collegiate career.

Harris, nicknamed "Shack", was different from past black quarterbacks in that he was a "Pocket Passer" with comparable size of Joe Namath at 6'4 and weighing 210 pounds. He also had bad knees, which affected his mobility and forced him to be a pure passer. Teams knew in picking him there was little chance of converting him to "Black" positions (WR, DB, or TE).

Harris was forewarned by his legendary college coach Eddie Robinson of the pitfalls of a black man playing quarterback in professional football. He pointed to the examples of how coaches and personnel men had treated Eldridge Dickey and Marlin Briscoe. Harris was undaunted and wanted to play quarterback at the next level. After being drafted by the Bills, he was glad to follow in the footsteps of his trailblazer teammate Marlin Briscoe, who was a receiver on the team at the time. Harris battled injuries and languished on the Bills bench behind Jack Kemp and Tom Flores appearing in only 18 games from 1969 to 1971.

It was after the 1971 season that new Bills coach Lou Saban determined that Harris was not a pro quarterback and cut him. Harris with no takers did not play in the 1972 season. Before the 1973 season Chuck Knox of Los Angeles Rams gave Harris the chance to return to the NFL as a backup QB. By 1974, Harris was the starting quarterback for the Rams and the team was winning. He was the first African American to start a NFL Playoff game, leading the Rams into the NFC Championship where they lost to the Vikings. He was named the first African American quarterback to the Pro Bowl for the 1974 season, where he was named the MVP of the game. His numbers for the 1974 season were 106 Completion on 198 attempts for 1544 yards and 11 TD's in only 11 games.

He continued to be the Rams starter through 1976 and then went to the San Diego Chargers in 1977, where he started and then was a backup until 1980. Harris was the first African American Quarterback to experience lengthy success as a starter in both the regular season and playoffs.

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Injuries and discrimination marked portions of Harris' 12-year career, but he served as a mentor and role model for future African American quarterbacks. Harris later became a trailblazer for African Americans in a front office role. He was instrumental in putting together the 2000 Super Bowl Champion Baltimore Ravens team and was named General Manager/Head of Personnel for the Jacksonville Jaguars in 2003.

Another pioneering African American quarterback in the '70's was "**Jefferson Street**" **Joe Gilliam** who followed Eldridge Dickey's path at Tennessee State University. Gilliam played from 1969 to 1971 at TSU, breaking every major record at the school and other historically black college records. He was known to be one of the most popular players in Tennessee history and gained his nickname, because he was said to have his name called all along Jefferson Street, which was the main road in Nashville, Tennessee. Gilliam was a Black College All American in 1970 and 1971.

He was an 11th-round draft pick by the Steelers in the 1972 NFL Draft. He became a starter in 1974 when some players including Quarterback Terry Bradshaw went on strike. When all of the players returned, Gilliam kept the starting job through six games with a record of 4-1-1. He however faltered and Bradshaw returned to lead the Steelers to a Super Bowl victory.

Gilliam had his struggles on and off the field which led to his unfortunate history of drug abuse. Gilliam played very little for the Steelers in the 1975 season and was cut in the off-season. He was signed for a brief period by the New Orleans Saints in 1976, but was cut for disciplinary reasons.

Gilliam could not beat his drug demons and even an attempt to revive his career with the Washington Federals of the USFL failed. He was homeless for a little while and even pawned his Super Bowl rings to pay for drugs, but recovered with the help of his father. He later got back his Super Bowl rings and started a football camp for children at Tennessee State, which included drug counseling. Sadly he died of a sudden heart attack in December of 2000.

Even though Gilliam and Harris were performing at a high level, the NFL still had long held drastic misconceptions about the leadership and intelligence of African American quarterbacks.

One of the best quarterbacks in college at the time was **Warren Moon** of the University of Washington. Moon had grown up in Southern California and experienced some racism, but on the larger part was viewed as just another player. Blessed with a rifle for an arm, Moon always knew quarterback was the position that he wanted to play. He began to excel at the position in youth football and it continued in High School. Unable to gain interest from larger schools, he went to Pasadena Junior College to prove he was a passer. After proving himself at the junior college, he accepted a scholarship to Washington, because they did not ask him to switch positions and he was going to get the chance to play quarterback. Other PAC 10 schools including USC and UCLA were looking at him to play other positions. Moon went on to have a stellar career at Washington, leading them to victory in the nationally televised 1978 Rose Bowl.

Even though Moon had excelled, he went undrafted in the 1978 NFL Draft and signed with the Edmonton Eskimos of the CFL. Moon again showed that he was a true talent and led the Eskimos to five Grey Cups. He passed for 21,228 yards and 144 TD's in just six seasons in the CFL. Finally in 1984 with his stock never higher, the Houston Oilers decided to sign him to a free agent contract.

The ironic thing from the signing was that there were still coaches and personnel men that still believed Moon wasn't good enough for the NFL. Moon led the Oilers to the playoffs seven straight years, operating their "Run and Shoot" offense to near perfection.

After leaving the Oilers, Moon enjoyed success playing for the Minnesota Vikings, Seattle Seahawks and Kansas City Chiefs. When he retired in 2000 at the age of 44, Moon had thrown for more than 49,000 yards 391 touchdowns in the NFL. Moon was selected to nine Pro Bowls and only Dan Marino, Fran Tarkenton and John Elway lead him in some statistics. Only Marino and Elway have completed more passes and have more yards in NFL history. He finished with more completions, passing yards, and touchdowns than anyone if you combine his CFL and NFL numbers (70,553 yards and 435 touchdowns).

Other African American quarterbacks in the NFL at this time who played mostly in backup roles included: **John "JJ" Jones** from Fisk (New York Jets 1975), **John Walton** from Elizabeth City (Philadelphia Eagles 1976 – 1979), **Parnell Dickinson** from Mississippi Valley State (Tampa Bay Buccaneers 1976), **Carlos Brown** (Green Bay 1975 – 1976), **Vince Evans** from USC (Chicago 1978–1983) and **Dave Mays** from Texas Southern (Cleveland Browns 1976- 1977 and Buffalo Bills 1978).

(To be continued)