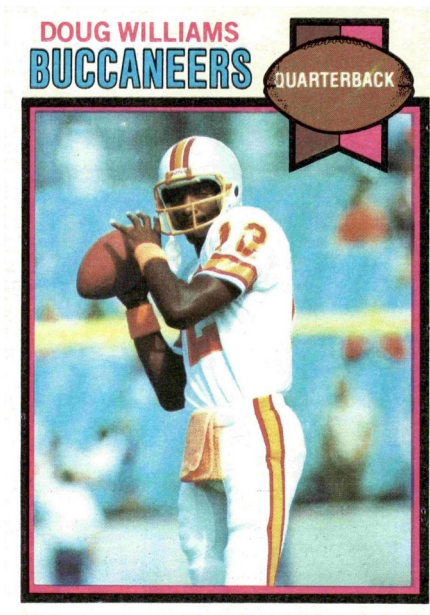


## Doug Williams

This article was written by Tommy Phillips.

It was the second quarter of Super Bowl XXII. The Washington Redskins trailed the Denver Broncos 10-0, and no team had ever come back from down 10 points to win a Super Bowl. The 1987 NFL MVP John Elway stood on the Broncos sideline, with the chance of putting the Redskins away. Meanwhile Washington quarterback Doug Williams was in excruciating pain, having injured his knee in the first quarter. Surely the Redskins were doomed to a Super Bowl loss.

But by halftime, the Redskins were up 35-10, Williams was ensured of being named Super Bowl MVP, and he knew he would become the first black quarterback to win a Super Bowl.



Douglas Lee Williams was born on August 9, 1955 in Zachary, Louisiana, the sixth of eight siblings. The Williams family struggled to make ends meet in an area where racism was rampant. The Ku Klux Klan burned crosses every week on the outskirts of Williams' hometown. Williams went to Chaneyville High School, which was technically integrated. In practice, though, most of the white families sent their kids to private schools, which made Chaneyville de facto segregated.<sup>1</sup>



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But Williams carved out a career for himself even through such hatred. A Little League and Pony League pitcher, Williams grew up as a baseball player, but switched to football in his high school years. Williams wanted to play quarterback, but was forced into playing at linebacker his first two years at Chaneyville. In what would prove to be prophetic, Williams got his chance at starting at quarterback thanks to an ankle injury to the starter, and he would not let this opportunity slip away. After two good years, including an 1,800-yard, 22-touchdown senior season, Williams received a scholarship to Grambling under legendary head coach Eddie Robinson.<sup>ii</sup>

The 6'4", 220-pound Williams was slotted as a third-stringer, but quickly moved up in his freshman year of 1974 when the starting quarterback Joe Comaux broke his wrist, and backup Terry Brown was ineffective.<sup>iii</sup> Williams lit the college world on fire, pushing the Grambling Tigers to a 35-5 record in his four seasons. In 1977, his senior season, Williams had the most touchdown passes in the country (38) and the most passing yards (3,286). He was named an All-American and finished fourth in the Heisman Trophy voting, an award that had never been won by a HBCU player before. He finished with 8,411 passing yards and 93 touchdown passes, both NCAA records.<sup>iv</sup>

Williams was drafted 17<sup>th</sup> overall by the woebegone Tampa Bay Buccaneers in 1978. The Bucs came into the 1978 season with but two victories in two seasons to their name. Williams doubled that in the 10 games that he started, throwing for 1,170 yards and seven touchdowns. He finished third in the Offensive Rookie of the Year voting.<sup>v</sup>

Williams was just getting started. In 1979, he started all 16 games for the Buccaneers, throwing for just shy of 2,500 yards and 18 touchdowns. The Bucs started out 5-0, looking like one of the best teams in the league. Even after a two-game losing streak, the Bucs rebounded with four wins in five games to reach 9-3, including a 12-10 victory at Minnesota where Williams threw for a season-high 267 yards.<sup>vi</sup>

But the first-place Buccaneers fell on hard times down the stretch. They lost three consecutive games to drop to 9-6 and were in grave danger of missing the playoffs. Williams threw nine interceptions in consecutive losses to the Chicago Bears and the San Francisco 49ers. After the game, 49ers quarterback Steve DeBerg mentioned that perhaps Williams was throwing the ball too hard. So bad were things for the Bucs that head coach John McKay benched Williams late in the 49ers loss and replaced him with backup Mike Rae.<sup>vii</sup>

With the NFC Central title on the line in Week 16 against the Kansas City Chiefs, Tampa Stadium got hit by monsoon-like conditions. Neither team scored a touchdown in the entire game due to the heavy rain and mud. But Williams led two important drives in the



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fourth quarter, including one that ended with a Neil O'Donoghue field goal to give Tampa Bay the only points of the game in a 3-0 victory.<sup>viii</sup>

As NFC Central champions, the Buccaneers received a first-round bye, and their opponent in the divisional round would be the Philadelphia Eagles, in Tampa. Williams threw for 132 yards and one touchdown to tight end Jimmie Giles, the one that held up as the winning score in a 24-17 win. But even so, national sportswriter Mike Lupica felt it necessary to say that Williams “became a quarterback” by winning this game, as if he wasn’t one already.<sup>ix</sup> Even if Lupica meant well, it was insulting to Williams, who had been a quarterback since high school.

The Buccaneers got to host the NFC Championship Game against the Los Angeles Rams, but things didn’t go well for the Bucs. Williams was knocked out of the game in the third quarter after being hit in the arm. It was just as well; the Los Angeles defense had held him to just two completions on 13 passes for 12 yards. The Bucs lost, 9-0, sending the Rams to their first Super Bowl appearance. Meanwhile, the Rams joined in the chorus of doubters on Williams’ career. “Doug Williams is not a very good quarterback,” L.A. defensive end Fred Dryer said. To which, Williams took the high road by responding, “If that’s what he wants to say, that’s his business.”<sup>x</sup>

If Williams was not a very good quarterback, then how did he put up the numbers he did between 1980 and 1982? Williams threw for nearly 3,400 yards in 1980 and a career-high 20 touchdowns. That season, he also ran for 370 yards and four touchdowns, while completing 254 of 521 passes, all career highs.<sup>xi</sup> However, the Bucs stumbled to a 5-10-1 finish.

In 1981, Williams and his team both experienced success together, as he threw for a career-high 3,563 yards, and ended up only one touchdown shy of his total in 1980. Williams ran for another four touchdowns, as the Buccaneers went 9-7 and won the NFC Central by one game over the Detroit Lions and the Green Bay Packers.

But the divisional playoff game at Irving, Texas proved to be a disaster for Williams. Only 10 of his 29 passes reached a Buccaneer’s arms, gaining 187 yards. The Cowboys intercepted Williams four times, picked up four sacks, and forced two intentional grounding penalties. The seven-and-a-half point favorite Cowboys put up 38 on the Bucs, who failed to score a point. At least defensive back Dennis Thurman had some positive things to say about Williams. “He may take a lot of criticism and flack in Tampa Bay, but the guys on this team respect him,” he said. “Williams is going to be a good NFL quarterback.”<sup>xii</sup>



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Williams' best yards-per-game season came in 1982, when the NFL players' strike wiped out seven games. Williams threw for over 2,000 yards in that brief nine-game schedule, averaging over 230 yards per game. He also posted his best completion percentage as a Buccaneer with 53.4%, a big improvement on his earlier seasons.<sup>xiii</sup>

But things did not start out well for the Bucs in 1982, as they went 0-2 before the strike, then lost the first game after the strike. But Williams got hot and led the Bucs to five wins in their last six games, including a 26-23 overtime victory over Chicago to clinch the #7 seed in the NFC for the Super Bowl Tournament.

Williams was nursing a pulled hamstring and an injured knee by the time the Buccaneers faced Dallas in the first round of the Super Bowl Tournament. It showed on the stat sheet, as he went 8-for-28 for 113 yards and one touchdown, throwing three interceptions in the Bucs' 30-17 loss. As usual, Williams was blamed for his team's loss, with writer Jerry Greene saying that Williams' "inconsistency" had "knocked the Bucs out of the playoffs in three of the last four years."<sup>xiv</sup> Never mind that it was Williams who got the Bucs that far.

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<sup>i</sup> Doug Williams and Bruce Hunter, *Quarterblack: Shattering the NFL Myth*, Chicago: Bonus Books, Inc., 1990, 59-66.

<sup>ii</sup> Williams and Hunter, *Quarterblack*, 67-74.

<sup>iii</sup> Williams and Hunter, *Quarterblack*, 74-77.

<sup>iv</sup> National Football Foundation, "Doug Williams (2001) - Hall of Fame," Accessed July 31, 2025, [https://footballfoundation.org/hof\\_search.aspx?hof=2007](https://footballfoundation.org/hof_search.aspx?hof=2007).

<sup>v</sup> Pro-Football-Reference, "Doug Williams Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College," Accessed July 31, 2025, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/W/WillDo01.htm>.

<sup>vi</sup> Pro-Football-Reference. "Tampa Bay Buccaneers at Minnesota Vikings - October 28<sup>th</sup>, 1979," Accessed Aug. 1, 2025, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/boxscores/197910280min.htm>.

<sup>vii</sup> Frank Klein, "Doug Williams' Sour Streak Leaves Bucs in QB Quandary," *Tampa Times*, Dec. 10, 1979, 23.

<sup>viii</sup> Tom Shafer, "Signed, Sealed and Delivered," *Florida Today*, Dec. 17, 1979, 17.

<sup>ix</sup> Mike Lupica, "The Day Williams Became a QB," *Daily News*, Dec. 30, 1979, 247.

<sup>x</sup> Dave Anderson, "Only Time Can Heal the Buccaneers' Wounds," *Miami News*, Jan. 7, 1980, 38.

<sup>xi</sup> "Doug Williams," JT-SW.com, Accessed Aug. 1, 2025, <https://www.jt-sw.com/football/pro/players.nsf/ID/05910019>.

<sup>xii</sup> Associated Press, "The Bucs Stop Here, Thanks to the Cowboys' Front Four," *Daily Ties-Advocate*, Jan. 3, 1982, 29, 32.

<sup>xiii</sup> Pro-Football-Reference, "Doug Williams Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College," Accessed July 31, 2025, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/W/WillDo01.htm>.

<sup>xiv</sup> Jerry Greene, "Bucs Should Have Put in Golsteyn," *Orlando Sentinel*, Jan. 10, 1983, 21.



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It wasn't just the media who were down on Williams, it was also his own owner. The notorious skinflint Buccaneers owner Hugh Culverhouse paid Williams \$125,000 in 1982, not even ranking in the top 40 amongst NFL quarterbacks in salary.<sup>xv</sup> Culverhouse then offered Williams just \$425,000 to come back in 1983; Williams had hoped for \$600,000. With no resolution to the argument, and many racial slurs thrown at him by the Florida fans, Williams left Tampa Bay.<sup>xvi</sup>

During that period of time, Williams experienced the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. He got married in 1982 to Janice Goss, a woman he had met as a freshman at Grambling. Then, in January of 1983, they had a daughter, Ashley Monique. But not even three months later, Janice was discovered to have a brain tumor. She died just over a week after the discovery, not making it to her first wedding anniversary.<sup>xvii</sup>

The NFL did not oblige in helping Williams recover. In humiliating fashion, no NFL team wanted him. It was an awfully bad look for the league, as Williams was in the top ten in passing yards in 1982. But Williams eventually found a suitor. In August 1983, he signed with the United States Football League's Oklahoma Outlaws. The Outlaws were willing to offer him more than Tampa had, so Williams jumped to the upstart league.<sup>xviii</sup>

In Williams' first game as an Outlaw in the spring of 1984, he threw the game-winning 12-yard touchdown pass to running back Derek Hughes in a monsoon.<sup>xix</sup> Williams went on to throw for over 3,000 yards that season, alongside 15 touchdown passes, and three touchdown runs. But he struggled with accuracy, throwing 21 interceptions and completing less than half of his passes.<sup>xx</sup> The Outlaws finished the season 6-12 and missed the playoffs.

The USFL was chaotic during its short existence, and the Outlaws moved to Arizona for Williams' second season there.<sup>xxi</sup> Despite over 3,600 yards by Williams, the Outlaws still

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<sup>xv</sup> Jill Lieber, "Well-Armed Pioneer," *Sports Illustrated*, Feb. 1, 1988, <https://vault.si.com/vault/1988/02/01/well-armed-pioneer-playing-in-the-super-bowl-is-just-one-more-challenge-for-the-skins-doug-williams>.

<sup>xvi</sup> Dave Sell, "Quarterback Doug Williams Has Put Troubles Behind Him," *Roanoke Times*, Aug. 16, 1986, 7.

<sup>xvii</sup> Lieber, "Well-Armed Pioneer," *Sports Illustrated*.

<sup>xviii</sup> Associated Press, "Williams Jumps from Bucs to USFL's Oklahoma Outlaws," *Great Falls Tribune*, Aug. 10, 1983, 26.

<sup>xix</sup> Associated Press, "Rozier to Get Chance to Prove Self on Dry Turf," *Times-News*, Mar. 3, 1984, 13.

<sup>xx</sup> "1984 USFL Statistics," USFLSite.com, Accessed Aug. 1, 2025, <https://www.usflsite.com/84stats.php>.

<sup>xxi</sup> Bob Moran, "Outlaws to Play Breakers Today in Season Opener," *Arizona Daily Star*, Feb. 24, 1985, 43.





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finished just 8-10 and did not make the playoffs. The USFL disbanded in 1986, leaving Williams without a team.

Washington Redskins head coach Joe Gibbs, who was the offensive coordinator in Tampa back in 1978, brought in Williams to be backup to Jay Schroeder. Gibbs praised Williams for his feats in Tampa. "He's big and he's got a heck of an arm," he said. "And he's taken a team to the NFC Championship Game and won a division."<sup>xxii</sup>

But Williams was used very sparingly in 1986, getting into only one game, and throwing just one pass all season, which fell incomplete. Worse was the humiliation he faced in the 1986 NFC Championship Game. Schroeder was injured by the ferocious New York Giants defense, and Williams was sent out onto the field. However, Schroeder waved him off the field and refused to let him play. If Schroeder thought he could do better than Williams, he was gravely mistaken, as the Redskins never scored a point in their 17-0 loss to the eventual Super Bowl champion Giants.

Williams found a woman named Lisa Robinson at a rap video shoot that the Redskins were doing in 1986. The two of them fell in love, and Lisa became pregnant, but lost the baby in a miscarriage. She and Williams got married, but Doug noticed several problems in the weeks to come. In what Doug judged to be a money-related issue, Lisa left him after being married five months. Yet again, someone had let Williams down.

Things hadn't improved on the field for Williams for most of the 1987 regular season, even though the Redskins made the playoffs. He only got to start two games, both of which the Redskins lost. Worse, he was sent back to the bench after injuring his back in a practice on Thanksgiving Day, and Schroeder took over the rest of the way.<sup>xxiii</sup>

But on New Year's 1988, Gibbs changed his mind yet again. He chose to replace Schroeder with Williams going into the divisional round of the NFC playoffs. And this time, Williams didn't let the opportunity pass him by. He threw for 207 yards and a touchdown against Chicago, converting on seven third downs, and throwing but one interception.<sup>xxiv</sup> The Redskins won at Soldier Field, 21-17, moving on to the NFC Championship Game. That game, they'd shockingly host, thanks to the biggest upset of the eighties, 8-7 Minnesota beating 13-2 San Francisco.

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<sup>xxii</sup> Dave Sell, "Quarterback Doug Williams Has Put Troubles Behind Him," *Roanoke Times*, Aug. 16, 1986, 8.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Christine Brennan, "Skins Switch QBs - Again," *Citizens' Voice*, Jan. 1, 1988, 85.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Gary Nuhn, "Doug Williams Reintroduces Himself to NFL," *Dayton Daily News*, Jan. 11, 1988, 13.



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In the NFC Championship Game, Williams threw for 119 yards and two touchdowns, and the Redskins escaped with a 17-10 victory in the final seconds when Minnesota was driving and came up just short of scoring. Williams had earned the right to become the first black quarterback to start a Super Bowl.

In the days leading up to Super Bowl XXII against the Denver Broncos, Williams faced scrutiny here and there from reporters and columnists who were naïve at best and hypocritical at worst. But Williams took the high road. “It’s been blown out of proportion,” Williams said about his historical feat. “It just so happens that I’m playing for the Redskins in the Super Bowl, and I’m black. I know it’s going to mean a lot to some people in America, but we all have to put it in perspective.”<sup>xxv</sup>

Super Bowl weekend could not have started worse for Williams. First on Saturday, he had a toothache and had to have a root canal.<sup>xxvi</sup> Then, on Sunday, his offense went three-and-out off the top, and Broncos quarterback John Elway threw the fastest touchdown pass in Super Bowl history. After just one first down, the Redskins punted again, and the Broncos got a field goal to go up by 10. They may have gone up for more when Ricky Sanders fumbled on the kickoff return, but got lucky when a Washington player came up with the ball.

Late in the first quarter, Williams got sacked and hyperextended his knee. This led to two bizarre twists. The first was Williams refusing to come out of the game for Schroeder, which was the opposite of what happened a year ago at the Meadowlands. The other was that since Williams was suffering in pain, the officials seemed to be distracted and ignored the fact that Williams had fumbled the ball and that Denver had recovered. Washington remained down 10-0 entering the second quarter.

Williams came back on the field and began to dominate. His first pass of the second quarter was an 80-yard bomb to Sanders for a touchdown. After a Denver three-and-out, Williams put the Redskins in the lead with a 27-yard touchdown pass to receiver Gary Clark. Denver missed a field goal, putting Washington back on the field, where Williams hit Clark for a 16-yard gain, setting up a Timmy Smith touchdown run to make it 21-10.

The points just kept pouring in for Washington. Williams nearly was picked off by defensive back Mark Haynes, but the pass fell incomplete, giving him a reprieve. He fired to Sanders for a 10-yard gain, then launched another bomb to Sanders for a 50-yard

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<sup>xxv</sup> Art Spander, “When Will We Begin to Acknowledge the Contribution by Doug Williams?,” *Kingston Whig-Standard*, Jan. 27, 1988, 13.

<sup>xxvi</sup> William C. Rhoden, “Redskins’ Williams Was First to Reach the NFL’s Promised Land,” *ESPN*, Jan. 30, 2008, <https://www.espn.com/espn/blackhistory2008/news/story?id=3222066>.



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touchdown. Finally, right before the half, Williams connected with tight end Clint Didier for his fourth touchdown pass of the quarter. The Redskins led, 35-10, and the game was in effect over.

Williams threw for a then-Super Bowl record 340 yards, tied the then-record of four touchdown passes, and posted a sparkling passer rating of 127.9. He was named Super Bowl XXII MVP, and there was no arguing it. His second quarter may have been the finest 15 minutes ever played in the history of the big game.

Coming off his Super Bowl victory, Williams started much of the next season, while Schroeder was shipped off to the Los Angeles Raiders. However, Williams went just 4-6 as a starter and missed some time with an injury. The 1988 Redskins went 7-9 and missed the playoffs, leaving Williams' career in limbo.

Even after having led his team to a Super Bowl win, Williams was still receiving outside criticism, in this case that of his own general manager. "If anybody knows Doug Williams," Beathard said before the 1989 season, "they know they have a heck of a time getting him to work out in the offseason."<sup>xxvii</sup> Williams started two games in 1989, going 1-1 and scarcely playing after suffering a herniated disc.<sup>xxviii</sup> By that time, he had been fully supplanted by new starting quarterback Mark Rypien.

The Redskins and Williams had an acrimonious split following the 1989 season. Gibbs decided to move on with Rypien as starting quarterback, while signing Jeff Rutledge to be Rypien's new backup. Worse, no NFL team wanted Williams, even as a backup. Williams himself suspected it to be because no team wanted to pay a black quarterback to sit on the bench.<sup>xxix</sup> Whatever the reason, Williams' NFL career ended then and there.

For the 1990 NFL season, Black Entertainment Television (BET) hired Williams as a college football analyst. "I didn't come into television saying this is going to be my career," Williams said. "It was more or less to have fun." The following year, Williams followed his dreams and got into coaching. He took a job at Pointe Coupee Central High School as athletic director and head football coach.

Williams went back to his own high school, now named Northeast High School, before cycling through many assistant coaching jobs. Finally, in 1998, after Eddie Robinson retired from coaching, Williams took over his old coach's position as head coach at

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<sup>xxvii</sup> Vito Stellino, "Beathard Criticizes Williams' Work Habits," *Baltimore Sun*, Sept. 11, 1989, 24.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Warner Hessler, "Frustrated 'Skins Have Soul-Searching Meeting," *Daily Press*, Oct. 19, 1989, 77.

<sup>xxix</sup> Williams and Hunter, *Quarterblack*, 1-7.





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Grambling.<sup>xxx</sup> There, he'd lead the Tigers to three consecutive Southwestern Athletic Conference titles. "It's great to have done it as a player," Williams said, "and it's great to have done it as a coach."<sup>xxxi</sup>

After that, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers mended fences with Williams and hired him as a personnel executive. He'd eventually come back to Grambling for a short stint, then came back to Washington, where the Redskins also patched things up with him. There, Williams has served in one role or another since 2014.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Perhaps one of Williams' greatest legacies is the Black College Football Hall of Fame, which he and quarterback James Harris founded in 2009. The Black College Football Hall of Fame now resides within the Pro Football Hall of Fame, located on a floor below the bronze busts. With 90-plus entries to the Black College Football Hall of Fame, it serves as a celebration of HBCU football.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Through all kinds of adversity, prejudice, and criticism, Williams fought through and made history. His legacy is vast – the first black quarterback to win a Super Bowl, the coach who followed Eddie Robinson and won three conference titles, and one of the founders of the Black College Football Hall of Fame. In July 2019, Grambling honored Williams by naming a street after him on the college's campus. When black quarterbacks such as Russell Wilson, Patrick Mahomes, and Jalen Hurts win Super Bowls, they have Williams to thank – a true pioneer in every sense of the word.

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<sup>xxx</sup> Bernard Fernandez, "Williams Razes Grambling's Robinson Era," *Philadelphia Daily News*, Aug. 25, 1998, 66.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Solomon Crenshaw Jr., "SWAC Notebook," *Birmingham News*, Dec. 15, 2002, 39.

<sup>xxxii</sup> "Washington Commanders Front Office," Washington Commanders, Accessed Aug. 3, 2025, <https://www.commanders.com/team/front-office-roster/>.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> "About Us," Black College Football Hall of Fame, Accessed Aug. 3, 2025, <https://www.blackcollegefootballhof.org/about>.