25 – 6: The Racial Stratification of the National Football League

by

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Introduction

25 – 6

Close your eyes. Imagine the perfect quarterback. The player that will lead your team to a Super Bowl championship. What player do you see? A man who is tall, clean-cut, suave, confident, outgoing, looks you right in the eye and shakes your hand. Well spoken. Makes good decisions. Smart. White. The golden boy is never an African American, and throughout my many years of playing football I never thought to question the reasons behind the decision. Coaches make the decision and players follow. In sports it’s easy to hide behind the numbers. Coaches are able to look at player’s statistics and determine who will offer the best chance to win. However, this covers up many societal factors hiding in analytics. The National Football League is 70% African American. However, the quarterback position is dominated by white players. Out of the 32 starting quarterbacks only 6 are African American, meaning that black players are being left out of the position of authority. Tracing this phenomenon, it runs deep within the history of football and has bled down affecting young players, as I never even got the chance to play quarterback. Moving through each level of football, the systemic exclusion becomes more overt especially when reaching the ultimate goal of the NFL. These players are not even that much older than myself and are forced to live out their dream in a football culture today that forces them out for white players. This is a relevant topic that continues every single day. As the 2018 Draft draws closer the skepticism to African American quarterbacks grows; while current

quarterbacks are constantly being systematically benched and kept out by white owners in the 2017 season. While there is a large number of black players in the league, starting black quarterbacks are outnumbered 25 – 6. A score that affects decisions in all levels of football and is not going to change anytime soon.

**History 101: The Plight of the Black Quarterback**

American football was created in the backyards of New England’s top colleges. Already a popular student activity, the first inter-collegiate football game was played between Rutgers and Princeton in 1869, marking the birth of organized football.² The game spread across the northeast as newer, smaller colleges began creating their own leagues. Amherst College, nestled in a small town in Massachusetts, was part of one of these leagues. There, William Henry Lewis became the first African American to play football in a structured setting. As a center lineman, Lewis demonstrated strong communication and leadership skills and was named captain during his fourth and final year in 1891.³ After graduating, Lewis enrolled in Harvard Law School and continued his football career. He was elected as first team All-American during his first year, an award reserved for the top players in each college football league. Soon after the birth of organized football at the collegiate level, towns began adopting local teams to represent them. These teams that would later evolve into the National Football League that we know.

Though initially recreational, these small teams grew quickly, and by the early 20th century had taken the shape of organized leagues. Earliest teams were based out of

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³ Ibid P.6
Pennsylvania (the Western Pennsylvania Professional Football Circuit), New York (the New York Pro Football League), and Ohio (the Ohio League). While the games themselves only attracted small crowds, the popularity of the sport was steadily growing outside of the collegiate arena. Although the leagues were primarily recreational in nature, they were comprised of individual players who developed a consistent fan base. In an effort to retain these players and earn the continued support of their fans, leagues began paying their players. Soon after, these leagues were professionalized, and the first professional African American football players were born.

Many black football players followed, each leaving their own impact on these early football leagues. Known as the “Black Cyclone from Wooster”,

Charles W. Follis’s football career began in 1901. Rather than playing for Wooster, the local college, he opted for the local amateur football team, the Wooster Athletic Association. He then moved on to play for the Shelby Blues between 1902 and 1906. Follis was renowned for his incredible versatility as an athlete. In addition to football, he also played baseball. It was here that Follis met Branch Rickey, the manager who helped Jackie Robinson break the color barrier in the MLB. Branch observed that “although [Follis] was the frequent target of verbal and physical abuse from white fans and opponents, even on the most trying occasions he never resorted to belligerent behavior or open hostility,”

Many of the first black athletes, independent of Follis, demonstrated this non-combative behavior as well.

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Of the leagues that existed at the time, the Ohio League was the most popular and fastest growing, and was home to many talented black players. Charles Doc Baker, a black half-back, played between 1906 and 1908 for the Akron Indians, a team within the Ohio League. A few years later in 1915, Gideon Charles Smith played a one game stint that resulted in a state championship win for the Ohio Canton Bulldogs. Henry McDonald played the longest out of the early African American pioneers. He played for seven seasons in the New York Pro Football League, first for the Oxford Pros in 1911 and then for the Rochester Jeffersons until 1917. Generally, the reception of African American players was not positive, and often resulted in confrontations and conflict. In an attempt to halt discriminatory encounters on the field, the prominent Native American player Jim Thorpe stressed that “we just here to play football.” As a Native American, Thorpe had the ability to navigate between groups of color, and attempted to dismantle the divisive race dynamics on the football field. Furthermore, Thorpe’s skills were unmatched: not only was he elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame, but he also won gold in the 1912 Olympics for track. His was so renowned that in 1920, when the country’s local leagues decided to combine into one unified structure, Jim Thorpe was elected as the first president of American Professional Football Association (AFPA). This organization was later renamed the National Football League (NFL) in 1922.

The development of the Black Quarterback started early but progressed slowly. Within the first year of the of American Professional Football Association, Frederick

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6 Ibid P. 53
Douglass "Fritz" Pollard entered the APFA. Positions were not as defined as they are today, and Fritz took on the conventional role of the quarterback while officially labeled a running back. He took snaps from under center and even threw for a couple of touchdowns, though forward passes were not allowed until 1933. Ultimately, it was Fritz’s agility and speed that led the Akron Pros to their first NFL championship. “His spectacular runs, his elusive speed, along with his hard play earned the respect of all who played the game or saw him play.” In the following year, Fritz began coaching the Akron Pros while still playing, and so became the first black coach in the NFL. Fritz was one of the first black players in the APFA. It would take another thirty years for a black quarterback to enter the league.

In 1934, the NFL implemented a color ban. Some owners cited a lack of talent within the black community, others blamed the underdeveloped college recruitment systems. Regardless of their reasons, however, almost all the owners agreed with Washington Redskins owner George Marshall: that African Americans had no place in the NFL. As a self-proclaimed leader of the NFL, Marshall took it upon himself to restructure the league’s divisions in order to create new markets for the NFL. During this time of growth, the owners entered a so-called gentlemen’s agreement, implementing an informal color ban. While some owners still advocated for the hiring of black players, the majority of owners looked to Marshall for guidance. And so black players were barred from the game. Moreover, Marshall had plans of his own. As the

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8 Ibid
11 Ibid P. 50
owner of the Redskins, Marshall sought to capitalize on southern markets by moving his team from Boston to Washington. This “team of the south” would not allow black players, a rule meant to appease the home market.\(^\text{10}\) However, black players found other ways to play. Mirroring baseball’s trajectory, they formed their own negro football leagues. Though never extremely popular, these leagues kept the sport alive within the black community.

Jumping forward in history, 1946 signaled the end of the World War II and the end of the color ban within the NFL. In the MLB, the color barrier was broken by Branch Rickey’s success in signing Jackie Robinson. It was from Charles Follis, the first professional black football player, that Rickey learned the attitude African Americans would need to adopt to survive within a white dominated sport. Soon after this breakthrough, Kenny Washington, an African American running back who played alongside Jackie Robison at UCLA, began playing for the Hollywood Bears in the Pacific Coast League. He was initially scouted by the NFL, but with the color barrier still in effect, had to settle for a less prestigious league. When the NFL’s Cleveland Rams moved to Los Angeles, their home stadium was to become the Olympic Colosseum. The Colosseum was publicly owned by the city, and LA’s citizens demanded integration within the NFL. This demand was met, and Kenny Washington signed with the Rams in 1946, effectively ending the NFL color ban.\(^\text{12}\)

African Americans found more opportunities to play professional football with the creation of the All-American Football Conference. This conference challenged the NFL from 1946 – 1949, but eventually failed due to the NFL’s growing presence.

Featuring players such as Bill Willis and Marion Motley, the AAFC attracted some of the nation’s best black players who were looking to break into the NFL. Within the AAFC, black quarterbacks enjoyed quicker growth and development. Players such as George Taliaferro had the talent to play in the NFL, yet opted for the rival league. Taliaferro was a star athlete, playing seven positions including quarterback. He was noticed by coaches right out of college and became the first African American drafted to the NFL. Though he was drafted to the Chicago Bears in the thirteenth round, he never played for the team. The previous week, he had signed a contract with the Los Angeles Dons, thereby joining the rival All-American Football Conference.13 Eventually, Taliaferro did find his way into the NFL. In 1951, he became the second black quarterback in NFL history as a player for the New York Yanks. Taliaferro ended up being more of a utility player than a definitive quarterback to the team. He did, however, accumulate over 200 passing yards, and went on to play for another seven seasons.14 After Taliaferro, Willie Thrower became the NFL’s third black quarterback in 1953, yet only tossed eight passes his whole career.

The NFL’s fourth black quarterback experienced similarly limited play time. Charlie "Choo Choo" Brackins signed to the Green Bay Packers in 1955 and only threw twice in his single season. Though he did not make much of an impression on the field, “Choo Choo” helped open the door for the college recruitment of black players, as he was the first black quarterback to come from a historically black college. Even though the color barrier had been broken for NFL players and quarterbacks, coaches,

executives, and white players still exhibited strong doubts and racism toward black players. Another twelve years passed before the sport saw its next black quarterback.

Ever year after 1967 the NFL had at least one black quarterbacks apart of the league. In 1968, the position of black quarterback began to gain definition and specificity. Previously, the position of black quarterback resembled a utility position, one that most black quarterbacks felt compelled to take in order to break into the NFL. Marlin Briscoe took snaps under center and was one of the first black players to hold a position that resembled the modern quarterback. He ranked sixth in passing yards and touchdowns, and led the league in yards per catch. However, Briscoe was traded the next season to the Bills. Here, he was forced to become a wide receiver, as coaches once again viewed him as a utility player rather than a quarterback. In the same year, the Bills drafted James Harris, a black quarterback who started just one game that season. In 1973, Harris joined the Los Angeles Rams and became the first black quarterback to make it to the Pro Bowl. During the following years, black quarterbacks became more common in the league, though most did not start. Then, in 1977, Doug Williams made draft history and became the first black quarterback to be selected before the sixth round. He played for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. While every single one of the aforementioned quarterbacks made it into the league, most of them were not able to reach their full potential. They were constantly overshadowed by their white teammates and were generally viewed as backups, which gave them few chances to prove their talent.

15 Ibid P. 72
16 Ibid P. 73
This changed when Warren Moon stepped into the league. He initially found more opportunity in Canada, and started for the Edmonton Eskimos for six seasons. He led the Eskimos to the title six consecutive seasons and set the single season passing record in the Canadian league. It was only after winning the MVP award in 1983 that Moon finally gained the attention of the NFL. He was drafted to the Houston Oilers the following year. Moon thrived in the NFL, in 1990 throwing for 33 touchdowns and 4689 yards, unprecedented numbers even in today’s game.\textsuperscript{17} Warren was not forced to accept the position of utility player in order to play for the NFL like many aforementioned black quarterbacks. Yet his entry into the NFL was arguably even more difficult. He had to prove his worth through six consecutive championship wins before the NFL even acknowledged his skill. He was a pure thrower who did not rely heavily on his legs. He resembled the ideal quarterback in every aspect save the color of his skin. The nine-time Pro Bowler is enshrined in the NFL Hall of Fame. After Moon’s success, “a string of black quarterbacks entered the NFL.” \textsuperscript{18} Moon paved the way for future black quarterbacks in the league, increasing their chances at professional success.

Many players fought the long and arduous battle to disband the NFL’s color barrier, working to make the league more diverse and open. While faced racism and criticism, these players made strides not only for black quarterbacks, but for black players more generally as well. While today, there are 6 starting black quarterbacks in the NFL, compared to the 25 white players. These contemporary players are still met

by similar challenges faced by African-American pioneers. As acceptance for black players in leadership positions, issues of representation and respect quickly come to light. Especially in today’s society, a critical eye needs to be taken to the National Football League, examining their practices of today and the effect on not only their players but also the players of the future.
Chapter 1

Cheers to Our Tradition

I’ve played football my whole life and still remember every quarterback I ever played for. At age seven, I played with Josh Love, a young boy given the opportunity to lead our Mighty Midget Blue Saddleback Bears. Thirteen years later, he now leads the San Jose State Spartans. In high school, Kevin Cunningham, Cameron Bondy, and Lucky Zuvich led us through several turbulent seasons of wins and losses, yet our commitment to the game and to each other led the Laguna Hills Hawks to a 2013 league title. When I graduated to college football, my focus shifted from offense to defense, which meant I worked less closely with the quarterback than I had in the past. I learned, however, that the team’s success still dependent on the support of our quarterback. Jesse Warren, Gernald Hawkins, and Mark Picarrilo led the Wesleyan Cardinals to the best years in football this school has ever seen. Each of these quarterbacks brought unique skill, ability, and leadership to the team. Because of the importance that football culture places on the position, I can remember each of these quarterbacks from the first time I stepped onto the field. The traditional image of quarterback is defined by a set of standards and expectations, and each of these quarterbacks met these standards. Each of the quarterbacks, except for one, was also white. Though this is an anecdotal example, it affirms the pervasive notion that the quarterback is a position reserved for the white male: he is given the privilege of time and attention, which invariably enables his successful fulfillment of the role.

In the NFL, African Americans make up the overwhelming majority of players. In fact, according to the annual racial and gender report card published by TIDES, the
2017 NFL is almost 70% black. This statistical majority, however, does not extend to the position of the quarterback. At the start of the 2017 NFL season, out of the 32 franchises, 25 of the starting quarterbacks were white, roughly 78%. Black quarterbacks, then, hold only 6 of the remaining starting positions. Taking into account backup positions doesn’t improve the picture either: out of the 32 backup quarterbacks, only 5 are African American.

The quarterback is the cerebral leader of the team; the positions requires a perceived superiority of intelligence and in-game mental agility. He is responsible for directing the players in the positions surrounding him. Looking at a diagram of a football formation, the quarterback is the focal point of the team, always at the center. The linemen, running backs, and wide receivers become the quarterback’s tools as he directs and controls them in an effort to score points. Certain traits have become normalized characteristics of these positions: namely aggression, reckless abandon, and physicality. Incidentally, these are also the positions dominated by African Americans. The quarterback, on the other hand, is not expected to endure this level of physicality. As the brain and strategists on the field, he is exempt from

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20 Appendix
these physical demands. In light of the typical team’s racial stratification, the white body and mind is valued as more important than the black body. The outside players, generally African American, are reduced to expendable pawns in the game, their roles as intelligent players discouraged. These players more frequently sustain physical injuries. According to a study that tracked the all injuries over the 2015 season, an accurate percentage gives the chance a position will be injured per game.\textsuperscript{22} The quarterback was the lowest rate, having a 2.5\% chance to acquire an injury during a game. The wide receiver’s chances of an injury are at 4.5\%; the running back is injured at a 5.2\% rate per game. Outer-positions are injured at a higher rate. Consequently, black bodies are seen as more able to endure physical pain within in our society. The black body is defined by its physicality, and black players are slotted in places where they do not need to think, just play and take hits. If one of these players is injured, he can quickly be replaced by another black body under the jurisdiction of the white quarterback. This strips the outside skill players of their individualism; they become the instruments through which the quarterback orchestrates success.

The discrepancies between the quarterback and the outside players mirror the society that nurtured the sport. In a game colloquially known as America’s favorite, it is no surprise that African Americans are used as instruments by a white superior. Today, this racial hierarchy may not be as overt, yet it still thrives on the football field. In 2018, it is not remarkable for an African American to occupy a leadership position on the field and in society, but it certainly contradicts the norm. These positions are

only recently becoming more accessible to black players. And when, or if, these athletes are considered for traditionally white positions, there is little room for error.

These racially-motivated choices of the NFL are cyclical, and are therefore entrenched through repetition. Each team wants to be successful, so naturally, they imitate the most successful teams. Teams are “looking to be successful, according to the pattern that has worked,” which explains why it is so difficult to break from tradition.23 A black player cannot simply come in, match the skills of a white player, and displace the tradition of white superiority. He must come in and outperform that white player.”24 By emulating this familiar pattern in pursuit of success, the team leadership bars black players from holding leadership positions on the field. Due to these historically ingrained racial biases, today success still looks like a white quarterback. While some argue that the number of wins should be the only statistic for measuring a team’s success, it is hard to ignore that almost all winning quarterbacks in the NFL have been white, meaning the cycle and tradition of whiteness continues. Because the NFL is looked to as the model of success, this trend trickles down the levels of football.

Another way to describe the congregation of similar players by team is called the stacking theory. In the context of the quarterback, “stacking is thus a concentration of black athletes in non-central positions and whites in central positions.”25 Early in football history, coaches placed all black players in certain positions like receiver.

24 Ibid
Within these positions, a limited number of black players, usually three or four, could compete with each other for playing time. This was seen as a method for avoiding racial tensions between black and white players on the field. Since then, different theories have been proposed in an attempt to answer the question of why white players are consistently given the quarterback position. According to the economic hypothesis, white players “have a comparative advantage acquiring high-level sport skills because of income differences.” Quarterbacks must develop special skills such as arm strength, mobility, and vision. Receivers, on the other hand, must learn to run routes and catch the ball. The quarterback’s unique set of skills creates an opportunity for revenue, because specialized. Hired coaches can help young players refine these attributes. Players who have access to these specialized coaches have the greatest chance at success. Yet access to coaching cannot be the only factor at play: while the median income for African Americans has increased compared to 1976, the number of African Americans in central quarterback positions has not. The biological hypothesis states that a larger male would not choose to play wide receiver, and that a player who cannot throw the ball would not choose to play quarterback. This hypothesis assumes that coaches objectively evaluate each player’s body and place him in the position that best suits his physical capabilities. However, this is not a simple question of body type or innate skillset. It is a question that has become highly subjective: coaches make assumptions about perceived athletic potential and ability. There are plenty of white players who are physically equipped to learn a skilled position and, most have a chance

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26 Ibid P.2
27 Ibid P.3
at quarterback. There are plenty of African Americans who can learn or play quarterback, however most are slotted into skilled outer positions. This would indicate that factors other than physiology are responsible for stacking.\textsuperscript{28} There are clearly other reasons why African Americans are systematically excluded from a young age.

Every kid playing football dreams of being the quarterback, but most never get the chance. Being African American makes this chance a virtual impossibility. As a young player ignorant to the nuances of the game, I had no idea which position I was best suited for, and left it up to my coach’s discretion and expertise. They tested my strengths skill by skill: how fast I could run; how physical I could get with my hits. Yet they never thought to put the ball in my hand.

I was a late bloomer in football, and once I’d joined the team, we already had a quarterback, a young Josh Love. Yet at the time, I was only seven: how could a coach make a definitive decision about the strength of a candidate when he hadn’t even tested the new player’s arm? The coaches placed me in the position of receiver, even after they saw me drop the ball. Every day they took me aside for extra training after practice so that I could reach my “full potential” as a receiver, a position they assigned to me based solely on my speed and agility. Their teaching methods seemed rewarding at the time: they exploited my love of hotdogs. For every catch I made in the game, I got one hot dog, two for every touchdown. This motivated me in practice, and I spent extra hours working on a craft that they had forced on me. I did finally come into what they saw as my full potential, dominating the receiver position in my town for years. But as I look back, I question their judgements. If they could do the impossible and teach me

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid P.3
to catch, why didn’t they apply this training mentality to my arm and train me as a quarterback? They never even gave me a chance to throw, and they were reluctant to devote the extra practice time to train me as a quarterback. Not one time in the developmental years of my football career did I see a coach encourage an African American to play quarterback. They spent that time and energy with the white players. Coaches of youth teams follow the example set by the NFL, guiding young African American boys away from the quarterback position. They mimic the choices of NFL and slot these boys into the spots reserved for black players, just as they did with me.

In no other sport is there such a strong racial carve out for a specific position except America’s other favorite pastime, baseball. Nine players work together on the field to gain three outs and prevent the other team from scoring. Most positions are defined only by athletic skill and agility. Once the pitch is hit, the ball is flying and players rely on their athletic ability to react fast off the ball. However, there are two positions on the field that require both analytical skill and athleticism. The players in these positions are able to control the ball before it comes into contact with the other team. The pitcher and the catcher are the primary players who have the onus of choice on the field. The pitcher can shake off the catcher’s signals and choose the pitch he thinks is right in the situation. However, it is the catcher who has the greatest power. He is responsible for studying each batter on the team, calling the pitches and location around the plate that he thinks will give the pitcher the best chance for a strike out. In the words of Darrell Miller, an African-American and MLB’s Vice-President of Youth and Facility Development, “you’re running the game if you’re a pitcher or a catcher.
You’re the quarterback. You’re in charge.” These players are voices of authority on the field, calling the games with minimal input from the dugout. And just like the quarterback, these positions are dominated by white players. According to the MLB, the overall percentage of black major league players in 2017 was 8%. This statistic is down from 8% in 2015 and 2016. This means that white players make up 59% of the MLB, over half of the league. As Adam Jones, centerfielder for the Baltimore Orioles, has repeatedly asserted, “baseball is a white man’s sport.” Baseball mirrors football in that white men dominate the positions that require in-game authority and decision-making. The positions reserved for African Americans in baseball tend to be the non-central positions in the outfield. On average, major league teams are composed of 13 pitchers and two catchers. The active roster size is 25 players, meaning that pitchers and catchers make up almost half the roster. This is the reason that the proportion of African American players in the MLB has remained so low and has even declined since 2015: pitchers and catchers make up almost half the team, and these positions of power are reserved for white players.

This is not to say that there have not been black catchers at lower levels. I used to play baseball in Laguna Hills, California, even before football. Baseball ran deep in my family: my father was the head umpire of the league, my mother was the events coordinator, and my brother another player. I knew I couldn’t play infield early on; the

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bouncing ball scared me as I had no control over its course until after it was hit. I wanted control over the ball, a say in the game. I started playing catcher, and never looked back. It was my position of choice. I got to call the pitches, choose their location, and control the infield plays. I didn’t notice the racial politics at a young age, and I didn’t think anything of being the only black catcher in the league. As I rose through the ranks, I was ready to take on the position at a higher level. In high school I signed up as a catcher. During the first days of freshman baseball, the coaches watched us play our positions, bat, and run. I ran the fastest, and had the strong arm to throw out runners stealing bases. But I was pulled aside by our coach and asked if I could play outfield. I had played outfield before as a spell for other players, but catcher is where I had grown up, where I had honed my skills through years in the Little League system. I wanted to make the team and play, so I took to the outfield position. That’s where I stayed the next four years. Standing in centerfield, my agency over the game was lost. When the coaches took the ball from my hands, they stripped me of the very power and control that had come to define my relationship with baseball. The catchers chosen to stay were not superstars; we had all played on the same little league teams. The only black catcher was forced into the position that most African Americans play at the major league level, outfield. And so I became an outsider to the power of the game.

Football is known as America’s Sport; it developed from its home nation. Over fifty years before the NFL, the MLB, was being born from a long recreational past. Baseball is commonly known as America’s pastime. It comes as no surprise, then, that these two sports share so many similarities. Moreover, they reflect their country of origin, a country controlled by white figures of authority and founded on slavery. Put
these ideals into a sport, and you’ve created America’s sports: baseball and football. In baseball the intelligence factor of the team is handled by the catcher, and some of the pitcher, on the field. While the quarterback, a clear position of dominance, intelligence, and the voice of authority on the field, is the leader on the gridiron. All these positions have a clear cut out for white players to take over the dominate leadership positions mirroring America’s diversity issue. This created the idea and visual look of success with a white quarterback, emulated throughout each team trying to capitalize on that success. This idea trickles down to coaches at lower levels where a young African American boy who had never played football was never even give the chance to throw one, and instead was forced to learn a different skill when that extra training time could have been used for quarterback. There was never even a try out, affirming the way in which African Americans are stereotyped, pigeon-holed, and type casted in sports that mirror a racially stratified country.
Chapter 2

**King of the Gridiron**

I understand that I may be more knowledgeable about sports than the average person. In the early stages of my thesis research, my advisor needed a crash course in the positions, rules, and intended goals of football. My colleagues had similar questions at our weekly presentations, curious about the requirements of each position and the strategy of the game. Through my explanations, I realized there was a clear disconnect between my first-hand account of the sport and their understanding of the game. As these talks and lessons continued, I noticed a common trend: no one questioned the quarterback position. These individuals, students and professor alike, knew who the quarterback was and what his specific job entailed. However, it went beyond the field; they had a pop culture education as well. Many of these individuals had never seen any quarterbacks in action. Yet through television shows and often-referenced NFL stars, they knew there was more to the position than throwing the ball. On the field, the quarterback is the undisputed leader, and in the American lexicon, among fans and non-sports lovers alike, the position signifies control. This means that there are intangible qualities that teams feel they must assess to determine who is right for the position. The quarterback must meet social standards that are unrelated to success on the field. The cultural and popular significance of the term quarterback creates unrealistic qualities for these young men to embody: it’s not enough to play well. They must also be suave, cool, and popular to obtain comprehensive success.

The quarterback is the unspoken, yet outspoken, leader of the team. They are the most valued player on the field because of the constant contact with the ball. The
rest of the players fall into more subservient positions. Even the language used by other players to talk about their quarterback confirms this relinquishment of power. For example, take my own experiences on the field as a player. During my chapter that discussed the tradition of the quarterback, I said that “I can remember almost every quarterback I have ever played for.” The word “for” is not commonly used to refer to the other positions on the field. One would say, “I play with this receiver” or “I play with the running back”. Yet one “plays for the quarterback,” as the other positions defer to his authority while he makes in-game decisions. The linemen are told to protect the quarterback, the receivers to position themselves to catch the ball from the quarterback, the running backs to receive the ball from the quarterback. All these players must react to the movements of the quarterback, never the other way around. We are told to play for the quarterback, which gives him a higher, almost divine, power in comparison to a regular player. Captains of sports teams also have this type of power. In football, the captains set the example of excellence. They lead their team off the field during lifts, practices, and training. During the game, the team looks to the captain as well; he is an extension of the coaching staff and garners respect and trust within all successful teams. Because of this, it is rare that the quarterback is not one of the captains. Given his intelligence and importance on the field, the quarterback has already earned the players’ respect. This position, then, becomes doubly central; this highly white-washed position holds far more power than just leading plays.

This respect for the quarterback comes not only from the players but from the larger football community as well: the fans, coaches and owners. For example, most of the players on a roster are seen as replaceable, as there are many capable players ready
to take their place. Most positions also have multiple spots on the field, meaning that there is more than one player who can play the position at a single time. The quarterback, however, is not expendable. He is the main staple of the team. He is the irreplaceable part of the franchise. It is a commonly held belief that a team is built around its quarterback, and therefore to lose this player could result in devastation, both for the fans and for the franchise. People treat the quarterback as the only valuable player on the field.

The 2017 Philadelphia Eagles started Carson Wentz at quarterback tall, athletic, and white. He led the team to a historic run, and Wentz and the Eagles seemed to be unstoppable. The team received high praise for their new quarterback as they managed to win eight of their first nine games. A strong candidate for MVP of the league, Carson Wentz was on the verge of a historic season. Then Wentz tore his ACL during Week 14 and was done for the season. In came back-up Nick Foles, no stranger to stepping in at big moments. He secured the win in week 14, which gave the Eagles the number one playoff spot in the division. The Eagles won two out of three of their remaining games, and tied their franchise record for most wins, with a 13-3 record. Though he hadn’t played during these final games, all praise went to the sophomore phenomenon, Carson Wentz. So much emphasis was placed on Wentz’s importance that without him, the Eagles were written off for the playoffs. Here are just a few of the headlines and sports analyst comments predicting the Eagles future run at the Super Bowl:

The Washington Post:
“The Eagles just lost Carson Wentz, and their shot at the Super Bowl”

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New York Post:
“Why Carson Wentz injury may kill Eagles’ Super Bowl hopes”

New York Times:
“With Carson Wentz Out for the Season, Eagles’ Dreams Turn to Dread”

Daily News:
“EAGLES HURT IN LONG RUN: Wentz leaves game with possible torn ACL, may miss playoffs”

Nick Wright (First Things First – Fox Sports 1)
“You cannot lose the league MVP and go win the Super Bowl. Just can’t.”

Michael Wilbon (Pardon The Interruption – ESPN)
“Can they survive? Maybe? But this is a star quarterback league, not a backup quarterback league.”

According to nearly everyone, the Eagles were doomed. The quarterback is viewed as such an integral part of a team’s success, that it seemed that the loss of Wentz would kill any chances at a Super Bowl run. How could the team hope to win without their star quarterback? He is, after all, the most irreplaceable player on the field.

Going into the divisional round, the Number One Seeded Eagles were the underdogs in their own home stadium. They proved critics wrong and moved onto the next round. Again, they played on their home turf, and again they were labeled the

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underdogs. Yet, again, they won. Shockingly, they made it to the Super Bowl. They were set to play the formidable Tom Brady and the New England Patriots, who had also won the previous year’s Super Bowl. Analysts believed that the Patriots could be asleep and still win against the Eagles and their backup quarterback. A win for the Eagles was impossible. Except they forgot about the ten other skilled players on the field other than the quarterback. They were the undisputed underdogs, yet for the first time in franchise history, the Eagles became the 2017 Super Bowl Champions.

The Eagles’ story confirmed the overblown importance that football places on one position. This extreme is seen in no other team sport. The pitcher and the catcher have much less agency on the field and rotate with other players during the long season. There are no assigned captains in baseball. There are no assigned captains in basketball either. In the National Hockey League (NHL), and Major League Soccer (MLS), captains often change. There is no one position that is responsible for calling plays or that necessitates higher intelligence and inherent leadership. All these sports follow a similar structure where players often trade off responsibilities. Players do not switch in and out for offense and defense, meaning that players must be able to play both. When the ball switches to the other team, the offense becomes the defense. These sports ask for players learn both sides making all players are equally as important. Football does not work like this. In football, when the ball changes possession, the play stops and the defense switches with the offense. This is when the quarterback can take over the play and lead his team down the field. His has one job, to score points. When he is on the

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field, he is the offense and touches the ball every play. Football is different from other sports in that the ball rarely transfers to more than one other player in a play. The quarterback does not have to turn around and play defense, and only has one responsibility: to get the ball to the other players. Given the specificity of this position, it seems illogical that the quarterback is so heavily emphasized. He is praised for doing his one job, and because he handles the ball and makes decisions on what to do with it, he is made the team’s undisputed leader.

The NFL has recognized one Most Valuable Player every year since 1957. While teams may have individual MVP awards within their franchise, the most prized accolade is the overall award for the league. The award of MVP is generally reserved for the player who demonstrates extraordinary talent through plays, leadership, and skill. It signifies success on an individual level, but also on a public level, confirming the support of the writers and broadcasters who pick the leagues’ MVPs and of fellow players, fans, coaches, and owners. The MVP award, therefore, represents the opinions and inclinations of the time, and can be used as a historical measure of the overall impact of a player and his position.

In the NBA, the point guard position has drawn many similar comparisons to the quarterback. Point guards call plays that help their team score and are often regarded as the most intelligent players on the court. Yet their importance does not parallel that of the quarterback. The position is less central from the perspective of other players, the media, fans, and overall culture of the sport. The NBA has given out the MVP award since 1955. Only 18% of the NBA’s MVP awards have gone to point guards.40

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The point guard is not guaranteed the award; his importance, though central, does not obscure the perceived value of other players. The point guard is not treated like the quarterback because the game is more fluid. This means that any player can take control on the court at any given moment. The leadership becomes more horizontal because each player’s role can switch more quickly. This means that it is difficult for one player to orchestrate the action on the court. The other positions are just as important in scoring points; they all touch the ball, all play offense, and all play defense. The point guard may call the plays, but each player must be able to react quickly to the defense. This requires the individual intelligence and improvisational ability of each player. Therefore, the award of MVP can be given to any player who has influenced his team and the league the most.

In contrast, the NFL tends to give this award to one specific position. It’s not difficult to guess which position that is; since 1957, 41 out of 63 NFL MVPs have been quarterbacks, a rate of 65%. More than half of the awards have been given to the quarterback. The quarterback is not necessarily the most athletic on the field, yet he is the most visible, the most followed. All eyes are on him every single play. He is the voice of authority on and off the field, so it is logical that he often becomes the chosen MVP. The winners of the award therefore are almost all white, which serves to further conflate whiteness and success. Out of the 41 NFL quarterbacks who have won MVP, 97% have been white. Only two African American quarterbacks have won the award, sadly an almost impressive statistic given the racial breakdown of the position. These

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42 Ibid
statistics all tell us that in the most visible and respected position, there is no place for African-Americans.

The term quarterback is relevant in everyday vernacular. This is unique; most other football positions are not used outside the realm of football. In the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, most football positions are defined by a single entry, for example:

Running Back: a football back (such as a halfback or fullback) who carries the ball on running plays.43

Linebacker: a defensive football player who lines up immediately behind the line of scrimmage to make tackles on running plays through the line or defend against short passes.44

While the Quarterback has two definitions:

Quarterback:
1: an offensive back in football who usually lines up behind the center, calls the signals, and directs the offensive play of the team.
2: one who directs and leads.45

This second entry equates the quarterback with leadership and power, not only within the sport, but within common vernacular as well. It broadens the role of the quarterback to roles in society, and people with power are linked to the quarterback’s power on the field. Because racial assumptions already define this position, its use in everyday vernacular is implicitly reserved for white leaders off the field. The term, therefore, takes on a cultural meaning of its own. It is no longer a term limited to the sport as it

has become a cultural one, and therefore fuels norms for leaders off the field as well as on it.

The quarterback is the star of the team. He is supposed to be cool, suave, and popular. He gets what he wants, when he wants it. He is the quarterback, the staple of the team. This definition is emphasized in the media through movies and television that show the handsome young man gaining popularity as a product of his position. The media embraces physical tropes; these on-screen quarterbacks are tall, strong, white, in short, the classic golden boy. These representations perpetuate the idea that real-world quarterbacks must embody these external traits that are purely aesthetic, not at all necessary to the position. Therefore, the quarterback position carries connotations of social rank. The star now becomes a star off the field. He dates the head cheerleader and wins prom king; he sits at the pinnacle of the social pyramid. Society places these values on the position. It upholds the racial norms of the social status as well. These norms dictate who is allowed to be popular, who is allowed to gain the status of a superstar. There is no denying it is much more likely for a non-person of color to occupy that space as there are more opportunities, more leniency, more support.

The quarterback is like no other position in any other sport. He is held to a culturally defined set of standards, standards that extend far beyond athletic ability. Even if an individual quarterback does not possess these qualities, the title itself is enough to transfer those qualities to the player, at least in the eyes of others. The position has become a cultural standard for excellence and leadership. All of these qualities are reserved for the person who plays quarterback, and that person is almost always a young white male. These attributes are not associated with black males.
because they rarely get the positions that breed these qualities. As black males are consistently relegated to the submissive positions, the image of the powerful white male quarterback becomes more deeply entrenched, both in the standards set by the game and the standards adopted by the popular culture surrounding it.
Chapter 3

Cut The Weeds

It is rare for an individual to pick up football at an older age, as the game requires years of training and skill development. Athletes hone their skills through high school, college, and hopefully, the ultimate destination, the National Football League. At each of these levels, coaches choose players that resemble successful players in the NFL, assuming that these amateur athletes will grow into the professional athletes they resemble. The long and arduous road is riddled with bias starting at a young age. In addition to the racial coding of intelligence and cultural importance of the quarterback positions discussed in the previous chapters, there exist ideologies of systematic exclusion at every level of football: youth, high school, and college, that are often ignored when assessing the racial stacking seen within the quarterback position.

I started football at a young age, because my mother, from Malaysia, was always fascinated with American culture: country music, Bud Light, westerns, and of course, football. When I accidently ran through our sliding glass door and came out the other side unfazed and uninjured, she saw an opportunity to live out her Friday Night Lights-inspired dreams. When I first joined my youth football team, I did not have a choice in position; it was up to the coach’s discretion, or so I thought. But there were other elements such as historical precedent that factored into the decision. In football’s early years, “blacks were limited both in total number and only to a few positions”\textsuperscript{46}. This on-field segregation was meant to ease tension between the black and

white players, as white players would not be competing with black players. Coaches could then limit each player’s time on the field, as only a few designated “black” positions could play at any given time. While today, there is greater flexibility in the positions available to black players, the options still remain limited. These limitations no longer take the form of policies, but nonetheless continue to exist within the systemic coaching ideologies that govern football. This is a powerful and dangerous phenomenon, as coaches have the ultimate say in who plays what, especially in the lower level leagues of football. These youth league coaches, almost all dads and amateur enthusiasts, use their young players to emulate NFL teams. They want success, and look to achieve it through recreating what they see within the upper echelons of football. Again, as white quarterbacks have been given more opportunities for success in the NFL, they have come to represent what success looks like. This trickles down to the lower levels as juvenile coaches admiringly observe these white players.

Young players share this same admiration for the adult players featured on television. They want to be them. It is important to note that research indicates that black athletes are more likely to have an athlete as their hero than their white counterparts.\footnote{Mcpherson, Barry D. "THE SEGREGATION BY PLAYING POSITION HYPOTHESIS IN SPORT: AN ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATION." Social Science Quarterly 55.4 (1975): 960-66. JSTOR. Web. 3 Apr. 2018.} There few places to look for black figures as role models. Sports are an extremely visible and accessible form of entertainment. As many young athletes can watch and relate, it is easier for young black players to self-identify with older athletes who are their own race.\footnote{Mcpherson, Barry D. "THE SEGREGATION BY PLAYING POSITION HYPOTHESIS IN SPORT: AN ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATION." Social Science Quarterly 55.4 (1975): 960-66. JSTOR. Web. 3 Apr. 2018.} Unfortunately, it is not often that a black quarterback attains the opportunity for success. As black players continue to be forced into certain
positions, young players watch their favorite heroes only playing the outside positions, those around the quarterback. This is a probable cause of self-segregation. Players pick positions that they see their favorite athletes playing; since there are only certain positions that most professional black athletes play, youth players tend to place themselves in these same positions, namely as receivers, running backs, and defensive positions. These are the more physically and deemed appropriate for the black body.

Coaches are tasked with steering their players toward success, which is defined for most as maximum playing time. The player is inclined to comply with whatever avenue the coach deems best for the player to make an impact on the field. Given the power that the title of “coach” yields, young players are unlikely to argue with the position their coach assigns. They believe in their coach’s unbiased ability to give them a position that will translate to success on the field. In college, I moved positions based on where I had the most opportunity to receive playing time. At my coach’s instruction, I made a switch, moving from a defensive corner position to a defensive safety. And as my coach said I would, I saw a significant increase in my playing time, my ultimate goal. At the amateur level where my skills were still being tested and developed, I, like most players, had no way of truly knowing where my greatest potential lay. Consequently, I had to trust in my coach to place me in a position, even with the knowledge that it was likely a permanent, career-long decision. Universally, coaches are tasked with steering young athletes into the positions that they believe will best serve the individual and the team. However, when the standards for success are racially coded, and black athletes are systematically trained to be successful in outer positions,

\[48\] Ibid
these choices become automatic for coaches. Rather than trying out a variety of different positions, kids playing youth and high school football are pigeonholed far too early. At this point, the level of seriousness is low; young players should have the opportunity to try their hand at all positions. Yet just as early, racial stereotypes are already at play.

During junior year of high school, the recruiting process picks up for most athletes. Whereas in high school, coaches must develop the talent they are dealt from the players in the community, college marks the beginning of a new stage, where coaches may choose the players they wish to further develop. Recruiting is a glorified weeding out process, as college scouts search their talent pool for the best players to take to the next level in hopes of sustaining their college program’s success. There is less of a monetary incentive during college recruitment, as success is truly what matters for these teams. Unlike the NFL, college football is not based off a monetary transaction between team and player, which means that at its core, college recruiting is a player’s market. In the eyes of a college coach, a player’s success is what matters; no budgetary concerns or fan base culture muddles the decision-making process. From the player’s point of view, he is in the position to search for the perfect school, one where he can be accepted to the school and to the school’s team. There is no single governing agency that organizes the players or colleges, meaning that if one school says no, a player can search for a new school that will say yes.

In an unfavorable climate for black quarterbacks, this open market in college football is often the one opportunity athletes get to break into this position. Within the top five divisions in college football (Southeastern Conference, Atlantic Coast
Conference, BIG 10, Pacific Conference 12, BIG 12), 64 schools make up the top college programs across the country. By examining each school’s 2017 season roster and depth chart, a list of African American quarterbacks can be obtained. While black starting quarterbacks made up around 23% of rosters, closer to the NFL’s 19%, backup quarterbacks made up a shockingly high 41% compared to the NFL’s 16%. This higher statistic is a testament to the racial implications that an open market theory at the college level meaning player have a choice where to play. Beyond these 64 top colleges, there are thousands of other schools that quarterbacks can play at. However, in the NFL, higher authorities have the power to accept or deny players. And because there is only one NFL, there are no other options to turn to; their decision is both limiting and final.

College presents a unique environment different from that of youth leagues and the NFL. Players have the agency to make the decisions; they do not have to defer completely to coaches. This difference allows more room for experimentation and change, though at the non-elite level. By not abiding by the norms of the NFL, colleges have the ability to try new offensives, new types of players, and new quarterbacks. Moreover, the turnover rate in college is much higher, as players only stay for four or five years before leaving for the NFL or retiring from the game altogether. College teams also get an almost guaranteed influx of new players each year. High turnover means each player acquisition is less risky: coaches can recruit players that fall outside the traditional scope without worrying about the long-term effects. Roster changes

50 Ibid
happen relatively quickly at the collegiate level. In contrast, the NFL has no set turnover rate for players, and each player that signs with the team is a longer-term investment. This may explain why colleges are keener on exploration outside the norms of success than the NFL. College is by no means exempt from the racial prejudices of the African American quarterback; the statistics still show starting quarterbacks to be an overwhelmingly white position. Nonetheless, diversity at the college level demonstrates the importance of players’ agency. Because the decision of where to play is more dependent on the interests of the player, racial biases are less divisive.

College still can be an environment governed by bias that does not allow black players to reach their potential. By college, most players are experienced in their positions and in the game of football. They usually have a vision for the trajectory of their football career. Players have learned and have been taught by their youth coaches. Therefore, college coaches can claim that the already-defined skillset of a player determines where they play. Coaches can look back and “point to mentors at the lower levels, like high school, when others train players at certain positions.” However, a study done by Eitzen and Sanford (1975) followed black high school quarterbacks as they entered college football and found that “a striking 95.5 percent of Black high school quarterbacks [shift] to other positions versus 50 percent for White players”. These statistics prove that college coaches do have a direct influence on players’ positions, even during this later stage past the developmental years. A coach’s job is to produce the best team possible, and when they restructure their roster, black players

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and quarterbacks are the first to go. As stated before, I have played for many
quarterbacks in my life, and only one has been black. His presence on the field was
electric, and he was given the opportunity to take over the starting role his sophomore
year of college, ahead of two older quarterbacks and one younger, all white players.
During his second college season, he was not afforded much leniency. He also grappled
with covert racial tension as a black quarterback, and was not allowed the proper
opportunity to grow. During his sophomore campaign, he threw for over 1,031 yards,
rushed for 88 yards, and accounted for five touchdowns in an eight-game season. That
is roughly 130 yards per game, a solid average in division three. Despite this enormous
success, his main competition, a younger white quarterback, was given the opportunity
to grow while receiving playing time as a freshman. The same year, this player rotated
in with the black quarterback, throwing 57 times for 526 yards with a 75% completion
rate while rushing 36 times for 133 yards. These were strong statistics for a young
quarterback who was afforded the opportunity to grow from his freshman year. The
coaches groomed him from a young age, planning ahead for his success as the starter.
This type of planning and forethought was never given to the black quarterback; he
played in only three games his freshman year as a running quarterback with not one
pass thrown. By his senior year, he had a choice: change positions and actively play for
the team, or sit behind the younger quarterback who was made the starter. He was
forced to change positions because he was not given the proper opportunity to grow
and adapt to the college level of play. There may be more black college quarterbacks,
yet more often than not, they are weeded out, which makes the possibility of continuing
to the NFL nearly impossible. Those who do make it are subjected to yet another
screening process, where coaches, general managers, and owners who work in the monetary market of the NFL have more ability to project their ideas onto players. They have the power to make judgments as to whether these players fit into their franchise system and overall league.

The NFL Draft is one of the most exciting events for fans and franchises. In an extended performance review, scouts judge players over their college career, talking with their coaches about skills and attitude, watching players at the Combine and College Pro Days. The Combine is an invitational skills test where scouts watch players’ abilities up close with other top recruits in the country. Pro Days are similar testing situations, except they occur at the top colleges around the country. This allows players who may not have been invited to the Combine to display their skills. Though scouts have this opportunity to view all these diverse quarterbacks, the weeding out process keeps black quarterbacks a minority within the NFL; out of their 32 starting quarterbacks, only six are black (19%), while immediate back-ups are 16% black. This low level of black quarterback recruitment is shocking within a league that is 73% African American.

In baseball, statistics indicate greater diversity within positions of power, namely those of pitcher and catcher. However, this diversity does not come from African American players. There is an extended effort for the recruitment of specific players. The path to the MLB is different, as there are specific camps set up mostly in Latin American countries that train and groom prospective players for the league. This allows a direct path to America, meaning that individuals may come to the United States with the intention of becoming professional players. This recruitment and
training allows teams to stack positions of power as they groom Latino players from a young age. This racial stacking does not happen with minorities in the United States, which results in a low number of African Americans in the pitcher and catcher positions. In fact, “seven teams opened the [2017] season with neither an African-American pitcher nor catcher in their minor-league systems. Eight had one African-American pitcher and zero catchers. Half the clubs, in other words, were practically barren at those spots.” Comparatively, there “are now 10 times as many Latino pitchers as there are African Americans,” a direct result of recruiting tactics. There is no Combine for the MLB, and often players from high school go directly into the MLB minor leagues. The other option is to play in college and be drafted into the minor league farming systems, that’s only about 9% of all college baseball players. In the past five drafts, 20% of the first-round picks were African-American. 5 of those 34 selections. African Americans are systematically excluded from these positions, as MLB executives take only what they view as the best potential to the next level. They do not take black pitchers who have had no success in the position at the highest level. Yet these black pitchers and catchers aren’t given a chance at success. As a result of training camps, players from Latin America are given this chance.

Football recruits its players from within the United States without any outside recruiting tactics. Kids from the streets of New York, California and everywhere in

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between are not actively groomed to play in the NFL. Instead, football is considered an activity that grows into a passion without any agenda of possible recruitment from a professional league. Yet, even when black players are playing recreationally in youth leagues, they are already fighting against the weeding out process that only intensifies through high school, college, and the NFL. Additionally, there is no minor league farming system for football. The NFL draft is not the only way for players to enter the NFL. There are open camps in which players can try out for the NFL, and undrafted players make major impacts on the league today. However, on average, only 1.5% of NCAA football athletes make it into the league.\(^\text{56}\)

The NFL is a guarded community, regulated by the authority and monetary sources of the league, the coaches, the general managers, and the owners. When drafting new players, the administrative authorities have the ability to shape the league in order to gain revenue. With the unofficial color ban in the early years of the NFL’s establishment, owner George Marshall created an agreement with the owners that banned African Americans from the league. This encouraged the participation of southern states, thereby creating a larger market. Some may argue that this “overt discrimination no longer is a major factor in determining which players are drafted at certain position… for NFL owners, green, generally, is the color that matters most.”\(^\text{57}\) However, others argue that discrimination has become a covert undercurrent driven by a desire to bring in the highest possible revenue. These decisions start with the draft, which seeks to find new players that will guarantee the in-game success of the team


and the monetary success of the league. Remember, success looks like a white quarterback, as they have had the most opportunity to play. Therefore, the league follows this established path, each team hoping to gain that level of success. Choosing a white quarterback follows the path established through tradition; it is how it has always been. Owners, therefore, are hesitant to disrupt this pattern by choosing a strong black man as leader. Players would be playing for, protecting, and following a black leader, which would pose a threat to the owner’s power and revenue. Tradition tells us that black people cannot hold this power, that support may be revoked if success is not immediate. This is because it does not mirror the success of the past.

The transition between college and the NFL serves as another good time for coaches to repeat the weeding out process that already occurred in between high school and college, where black players are often forced to change positions. Many black quarterbacks are told that their abilities will better serve the team at a different position, especially at the higher levels. Warren Moon, a hall of fame quarterback in the NFL, knew that coming into the league he would most likely have to change positions, stating that “If you played those positions in college and you got drafted, you knew you were probably going to get moved in the NFL. Supposedly, we weren’t smart enough or had the leadership qualities or whatever it took.”  

Therefore, Warren had to play in the Canadian Football League to prove his skills before eventually signing with the Houston Oilers. In the draft and the NFL, there are notable position switches that have become commonplace. Undrafted Nick Marshall totaled 4,508 passing yards, 1,866 rushing yards, and 57 total TDs at quarterback in his last two seasons for Auburn,
leading them to the championship game in 2014. It is wildly impressive to lead a team to the national championship game; however Marshall went undrafted. He only found a place in the NFL after he decided to switch back to a defensive corner position. In college, Terrell Pryor “finished with a 31-4 record with 74 total touchdowns from 2008-10 at Ohio State, which included wins in the 2010 Rose Bowl and 2011 Sugar Bowl.” Once in the NFL, Pryor started nine games for the Raiders as quarterback, but did not find much success. After moving from team to team, Pryor decided to make the switch to wide receiver and quickly found success. As a receiver, he became a solid option for teams and gained large amounts of playing time, which in turn led to more rapid growth. Michael Robinson was known as “a running quarterback at Penn State, and led the Nittany Lions to an 11-1 record, a co-Big Ten championship and a win against Florida State in the Orange Bowl in 2005.” However, his skills were not enough to keep him in the NFL, and he was forced to move to the running back and full back position behind the quarterback. Antwaan Randle-El “became the first player in FBS history to score 40 TDs rushing with 40 TDs passing.” However, his skill set was deemed better for the receiving position at the next level, even after he broke records. While these are only a handful of examples of talented, black quarterbacks being passed up, these examples illustrate what scouts, coaches, and analysts envision when they search for the ideal, prototypical, quarterback. They only acknowledge the success of white quarterbacks, disregarding quarterbacks who do not fit into this rigid image of

60 Ibid
61 Ibid
62 Ibid
success. These players are then forced to switch positions if they want to continue to play at all.

Coming into the draft, sports analysts all over the country give their opinions on players that they have supposedly studied extensively. For example, in 2013 Gil Brandt, a senior analyst at NFL Media, published an article about players who he thought should consider changing positions if they wanted to have a shot at playing at the NFL level. Out of the nine players on the list, six of them were African American. Out of the four quarterbacks on the list, three of them were African American.\(^6\) One of these quarterbacks was Logan Thomas from Virginia Tech. While Thomas was adamant about playing quarterback at the next level, Brandt’s opinion differed. He claimed that “Thomas has got a lot of things going for him. They're just not as a quarterback… It's my opinion that he would have a much better chance of being a longtime NFL player at a position other than quarterback.”\(^6\) Brandt advised that Thomas switch to tight-end, a receiving position on the offensive line. Logan entered the draft in 2014 and was drafted as a quarterback. He was never given a chance to develop. After failing to find a starting job for a team, he switched to tight end in 2016, playing for the Buffalo Bills. While this may boost Brandt’s credibility as an analyst, his advice comes from a system that is built upon racial stratification. He was unable to recognize the potential of an African American quarterback because there is no precedent for comparison; it was easier to slot him in a different position. These top

analysts have considerable influence on draft stock and public opinion about these players, which in turn can influence what eventually happens to the players.

In this year’s 2018 NFL draft, there are many exciting quarterbacks. However, none are as dynamic as Lamar Jackson. Bursting onto the scene in 2016, the black quarterback racked up yards through the air and on the ground, throwing for 69 touchdowns and rushing for 50 touchdowns in just three years. The young man also racked up the awards: the Heisman Trophy (2016), the Maxwell Award (2016), the Walter Camp Award (2016), Associated Press Player of the Year (2016), Sporting News Player of the Year (2016), 2x ACC Player of the Year (2016, 2017), 2x ACC Offensive Player of the Year (2016, 2017), Unanimous All-American (2016), and First-team All-ACC (2016, 2017). As he enters the draft, his resume speaks for itself, yet the color of his skin will alter how he is viewed by the top analysts around the country. Mel Kiper Jr. is one of those analysts. His words have the highest power around the league not only with fans but with franchise owners as well. People trust his evaluations and his mock draft boards are taken as gospel, and are the main boards used by ESPN to rank players. Jackson is a player that deserves the attention of Kiper’s analysis, as he will be drafted to the NFL this year. When asked about Jackson however, Kiper responded that he thinks “there’s a chance he can develop into an effective starter down the road… You always have that fall back plan with Lamar Jackson because of his athleticism to maybe be a wide receiver”. Kiper also added that “it’s the accuracy

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throwing the football…finished career around 57 percent.”

Jackson’s career completion rate was at 57%, and Kiper uses this statistic to justify why his skills and abilities will not last within the NFL. However, with another prospective player, Kiper stated, "You have to look beyond the stats… stats are for losers in my opinion in a lot of ways.” This appears to be a confusing contradiction. Yet in this second statement, Kiper is talking about white quarterback Josh Allen. Allen mirrors successful quarterbacks who have gone far in the league such as Ben Roethlisberger, the fourteen-season veteran. He is tall, strong, shifty, can throw the ball far, and is white. In a lengthy statement, Kiper defended Josh Allen, saying that stats need to be thrown out the window; “the kid won. You say what was his record? When he was out there, they won football games. The stats, a lot of guys have stats and can't get their team over .500.”

Allen’s poor stats are overlooked while Jackson is not given the same benefit of the doubt. Kiper’s defense of Allen does not stop there; “if you go watch the throws, it wasn't all on him. Incompletions are a result of bad offensive line play, not having a running game this year with the loss of Brian Hill, receivers dropping balls. There's a lot of factors that contribute to that.”

Kiper is now placing the blame on other players, positions that are usually played by students of color. He then brings in completion percentage. Lamar Jackson’s career completion rate was around 57%, a stat that is apparently concerning, while Josh Allen’s career completion rate is 56%, lower than Jackson’s. Yet according to Kiper, stats are not a concern for the white quarterback who has worse statics than the black quarterback. When asked about a comparison

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66 Ibid
67 Ibid
68 Ibid
69 Ibid
between the two player’s throwing abilities, Kiper said, “with Lamar you talk about a quarterback who when you watch the throws there were some accurate throws. Same thing with Josh Allen but they were tough throws, though. He didn’t have a lot of the gimmes, the layups, the screens, the tunnel screens, the bubble screens. He didn’t have many of those if any. He was tested in terms of the throws.” However, while watching the tapes, one reporter counted that Jackson had 62 of his 399 passing attempts occur around the line of scrimmage, roughly 15%. Josh Allen had 48 of his 251 passing attempts occur around the line of scrimmage, 19%. Jackson’s completion rate down the field was also higher than Josh Allen’s, yet his stats don’t matter for Mel Kiper Jr. He defends Josh Allen passionately, blaming other players and making excuses when Allen’s overall statistic are worse than Lamar Jackson’s. Again, the white quarterback is given higher draft stock because he fits the established mold for quarterbacks within the NFL, while Jackson faces criticism and pressure to move positions.

Bill Polian is another well respected individual within the NFL Community. The executive Hall of Famer manages players and rosters, and has successfully brought together five super bowl teams. He also helped a new franchise compete for the championship game in their second year of existence. His experience in bringing together and analyzing players is undeniable, yet also very flawed. His views are in keeping with the racially rigid views of the NFL. Looking at Lamar Jackson, he made a quick decision clearly based on tradition:

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70 Ibid
71 Ibid
“I think wide receiver. Exceptional athlete, exceptional ability to make you miss, exceptional acceleration, exceptional instinct with the ball in his hand, and that’s rare for wide receivers…This guy is incredible in the open field and [has] a great ability to separate and, again, he’s short and a little bit slight and clearly, clearly not the thrower that the other guys are. His accuracy isn’t there, so I would say, don’t wait to make that change, don’t be like the kid from Ohio State [Terrelle Pryor] and be 29 when you make the change.”

Mimicking Mel Kiper Jr, Polian takes his argument one step further and only assesses Lamar Jackson as a wide receiver. As Jackson is not a white quarterback, Polian and the entire NFL do not believe that he could find success in this position at the highest level. At the 2018 Combine, several teams asked Jackson to work out as a wide receiver. However, Jackson responded “I’m not going to be a wide receiver at all. I’m a quarterback.” He further stated that whichever team took him would want him to play quarterback. Jackson seemed baffled by the opinions of analysts and coaches, as he had never played receiver before and was determined to remain a quarterback for the NFL. Jackson has had to fight against more than just other talent; he is not afforded the respect reserved for the other white top quarterback draft prospects. He is fighting against the systematic weeding out of black quarterbacks. Moreover, once in the NFL, he will have to fight for the chance to grow and become a starter. Yet this growth will be difficult when he is inevitably held to higher standards than white quarterbacks and afforded little room for error.

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For quarterbacks, the NFL is very different than college football. There is no forced rotation due to age and school years. Players cannot walk away and search for new schools; they cannot pick from thousands of possible places to play. There are only 32 teams in the NFL. These teams are controlled by owners, coaches, and general managers who decide who they want to represent their league. The racial breakdown within these managerial positions of authority does not mirror the diversity seen within the NFL’s players. While African Americans make up the majority of the NFL’s players, the coaching staff, owners, and league staff are predominantly white.

A clear division exists between the players on the field and the staff in the front office. The players on the field are not represented by their owners, coaches, and managers, which creates a disconnect between these two sides of football. Moreover, the racial breakdown of the higher management mirrors that of the quarterback position. Like the league’s management, the quarterback represents the organization, acts as a figure of authority, and is far more white than the rest of the players. Owners talk to each other and make decisions together, which creates a closed market unlike college. Players cannot just choose a new team; they are controlled by the same people no matter where they turn for a job.

Figure 2: Diversity in the NFL 2013

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This makes it hard for black quarterbacks within the league to find a place to showcase or develop their skills.

Each level of football impedes black quarterbacks. Nowhere is the same level of respect for the white quarterback given to the black quarterback. The NFL sets the standard for the prototypical successful quarterback. This standard in turn affects and ideals for college players who gain higher draft stock when they resemble professional white quarterbacks. Meanwhile, black players are forced to switch positions if they hope to play in the game. These ideals affect even the most amateur levels of football as black children are steered away from the position of quarterback. As each of these levels weed out black quarterbacks with increasing selectivity, it is truly incredible when one of these players makes it to the NFL. These controlling factors work against the black player from the beginning.
Chapter 4

Get You a Man That Can do Both

For those who do not have an understanding of the game, football looks like a confusing chess match. A team of eleven players stands on each side of the ball, one side defending and one side attacking. There are several different players and roles that serve many different purposes. Without proper knowledge of the game, it is difficult to understand at first glance. While all teams follow the same rules, each team individually tweaks how they play within those rules. All offensive schemes are distinct, as each team must create formations that play to the strengths of its players. The two main styles of play, which can be mixed, are Pro and Spread. These styles each have their respective pros and cons, and each call for specific quarterback styles. Over the years of developing the game of football these styles have become racialized causing a necessary study of style of play and terminology.

The pro-style offense was originally developed in the NFL, hence its name. The foundation of a pro-style offense is balance. It hinges on equal options to run and pass effectively rather than relying on one over the other. This strategy is problematic for the defense, who enters into a guessing game. They have no way of knowing what the other team will do, especially if this other team is skilled at both running and passing the ball.

Spread-style is often referred to as the direct opposite of pro-style. This offensive style executes plays fast, and often involve trickery. The goal of spread-style offense is to stretch out the defensive formation by lining up multiple receivers outside
the lineman.\textsuperscript{75} It does not depend on traditional football plays such as running the ball up the middle. Rather, it relies on running outside the linemen in order to use the open field. This leaves more space for players to show their offensive abilities in open space and avoids the need to plow through many players close together. The speed of the receivers is often utilized through quick passes. In the passing game, the quarterback will throw the ball to receivers within five yards of the scrimmage line or before the line, which gives them open space to run. Different than pro-style, where deep passes are utilized more.

Style is not the only variation in offensive strategy across teams and levels. Each offense also requires different types of quarterbacks to help run these teams. There are generally two types, which makes it easier for scouts and analysts to describe a player and their attributes. The pro-style offense requires a pro-style quarterback, appropriately named after the offensive style. This player is regarded as a player pocket passer, in other words, a quarterback who stands behind the linemen and does not run away from the incoming defensive linemen. These quarterbacks are generally big, sturdy, and have strong arms. They rarely run or make plays while moving. The pro-style quarterback shares the ball. He gives it to his players, allowing them to make plays. Because of their generous outsourcing of plays, especially in a balanced pro-style offense, they become humble heroes willing to share the ball. This style of play is also regarded as more mental, as these quarterbacks “go through more complex read-

progressions.” A read-progression describes how the quarterback decides who to share the ball with. They appear more strategic, because they let the play develop instead of running with the ball themselves. NFL scouts believe that these pro-style quarterbacks have a deeper understanding of the game of football.

Everyone loves a good multitasker, especially football coaches. The pro-style offense relies on this multitasking, as it depends on a tight end who can both block and run routes. A lineman who can do everything, passing blocking and running blocking is a rare, but valuable find. A running back who can run and catch passes is an asset that can be utilized by the offense. So why not get a quarterback who can do both? The spread-style offense requires a mobile quarterback: a young player who can quickly escape pressure and get the ball out to other quick players. This is known as a dual-threat quarterback. The name “dual-threat” refers to players who possess the arm ability of a pro-style quarterback and the speed and agility of a running back. These quarterbacks make decisions with their feet as incoming defenders approach quickly. This allows the receivers to separate from the players covering them. This style is more improvisational: receivers make up new routes in response to their quarterback. The dual-threat quarterback can then use his pro-style arm to give receivers the ball. Like pro-style quarterbacks, dual-threats supposedly learn to read the routes of the receivers. Yet they also have the ability to rely on their instincts and improvise. They do not need to throw the ball or hand it off. They can to do it themselves, tucking the ball and running for the first down. It makes predicting the play even harder for the defense, as

they now must account for the quarterback as an additional active threat on the ground. It seems like the best of both worlds for the offense; these dual-threat players are a viable option at all levels of football because they add an element of confusion to the game. However, the NFL would rather not take the dual-threat to the professional level.

The dual-threat quarterback is the most contested type of dual threat player on the field. Coaches, general managers, and scouts all believe that the skills of a young college athlete who relies on both his feet and his arm to make plays does not translate well to the NFL. Even though this type of player would give the team the added asset of unpredictable plays, the league as a whole still shies away from the idea. Many coaches and scouts believe that the dual-threat strategy “ultimately fails not only the play design but also the open receivers. In other words, it leads to randomness rather than reliable, consistent success.”

This decision can be chalked up to the importance of tradition in the NFL. The pro-style quarterback is named after the NFL. These quarterbacks have had the most success because they are the most common type of quarterback in the league. Teams observe this tradition and attempt to build the rest of their team around this type of player. Starting with the NFL Draft, teams tend to look for players who fit within their existing system rather than changing that system based off the abilities of a new quarterback. As pro-style is clearly preferred, dual-threats are given less attention during the Draft and have fewer opportunities to make it to the league. Pro-style quarterbacks are trained to practice patience, not make the quick

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decision to run the ball by themselves. Teams are reluctant to challenge the current perception of the dual threat quarterback when they can simply draft a player who already ascribes to the mechanics that the team already has in place. Both Hall of Fame quarterback Steve Young and former NFL quarterback turned ESPN analyst Trent Dilfer agree that changing a dual threat quarterback to a pro-style quarterback is like “breaking a wild stallion...The young quarterback must capitulate to coaching, understanding that his own fundamentally flawed approach is not the avenue to sustained success.”

This is how many people view the dual-threat quarterback: uncontrollable, flawed, and selfish. While the pro-style quarterback gives away the ball to his receivers, the dual-threat does not. Selfishly, he keeps the ball to himself, taking the glory.

Connor Cook, a quarterback coming from a pro-style system at Michigan State, was the 100th pick in the fourth round of the 2016 Draft. At pick 136, the Cowboys had their eye on Connor. But after Connor was selected by the Oakland Raiders, the Cowboys opted instead for Dak Prescott, a dual-threat quarterback from Mississippi State. The Cowboys later revealed how they ordered their draft boards, explaining that “the only reason we had Connor ahead of Dak is he played in a pro-style offense”. The team believed that “a quarterback from a pro-style offense...could have been an NFL backup immediately—unlike someone coming out of a spread system.”

Teams want to develop quarterbacks that have experience with the NFL’s preferred style of play. While some players may never be starters, it’s important to have backups that fit

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77 Ibid
80 Ibid
the style of the team. This way, the team would not have to alter their system if something were to happen to the starter. However, the Cowboys had unintentionally struck gold. Dak Prescott was called into action early in the season when Tony Romo went down with a back injury. The rookie became an instant success, leading the Cowboys to a 13-3 season and an NFC East title. This stellar season earned him the Rookie of the Year Award.\textsuperscript{81} More importantly, Dak proved that the dynamic ability of a dual-threat quarterback right out of college could be harnessed at the NFL level. Dual-threats are given less of a chance to prove their abilities. Only after starting players are injured do players like Dak have the opportunity to demonstrate their skill. When that opportunity does arise, there is still skepticism surrounding the intelligence of these players, as they rely more heavily on their athletic abilities to move the ball. Though significant, this stereotype of intelligence over athleticism is not the only underlying factor to deciding quarterback styles. The racial breakdown of pro-style vs dual-threat quarterbacks is another primary factor that affects the NFL’s choices.

Connor Cook, a white quarterback, was taken ahead of the dual-threat, black quarterback, Dak Prescott. There is a clear racial component at play here, as dual-threats and pro-style quarterbacks are separated by race. In the 2018 top 100 pro-style quarterback high school recruits, 83 were white and 14 were African American.\textsuperscript{82} This large disparity shows that white athletes are being taught, from a young age, the mechanics necessary to make it to the next level, while black athletes are being left behind. Pro-style quarterbacks are also linked with the unselfish ability to share the

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid
ball, meaning that the white players are considered better teammates. They are seen as team players who help other players succeed, demonstrating patience in the pocket in order to get them the ball. White players then receive higher praise, coaching, and ultimately, more opportunity to move onto the next level. As white quarterbacks are the most successful and also have been trained in the NFL’s preferred style, they are far more likely to make it to the NFL. While black players may have the skill, they do not have the race factor that fits the part of leader. Simply put, either they are a “quarterback that can succeed in the NFL, or they're black.”

Within the 2018 top 100 dual-threat quarterback recruits out of high school, 68 were black while 31 were white. The rise of the black dual-threat quarterback coincides with the rise of other option offenses. This gives the quarterback options: hand the ball off, keep it for himself, fake a handoff and throw the ball, fake a throw and keep the ball, and many more - the possibilities are endless. Because of the harsh racial barriers, black players have to make a case for why they should have the ball. This resulted in the creation of a new type of offense that put the black players in a position to directly control the ball. Building the offense around getting the best players the ball is a shortsighted coaching strategy. When developing young African American quarterbacks, coaches are not looking to create elite players. Rather, they exploit their athletic gifts at the moment for wins. “They're not expected to hone their craft as passers; that's just wasted time.” These players are seen as human weapons whose

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86 Ibid
strengths are put on display to win games in the moment. It is not a training strategy that allows for future success or further player development.

I have seen this type of exploitation of the black body at the quarterback position in my own football experience. The one African American quarterback I played for in college was used as a weapon rather than a quarterback. There were specific plays made for him, which stunted his development in the college system as early as his freshman year. When called upon, he would enter the game and disrupt the pace of our pro-style offense, given the ball to run outside the lineman with the treat to pass. He was never afforded the opportunity to develop rather used as a weapon. This example illustrates how black quarterbacks with athletic talent are not given the long-lasting tools necessary to graduate to the next level. This does not mean that their style of play is improper. Yet within a system that thrives off of the repetition of tradition and success, scouts look for players who match their own idea of success, a pro-style quarterback. Coaches are not teaching their best athletes the skills that higher scouts want. They put the ball in their hands ask them to make plays. African American quarterbacks are systemically trained to abandon mechanics, which forces them to craft their own paths, paths that are deemed unacceptable in the NFL. To be able to play quarterback, they needed to find a way to combine the physicality coaches are used to getting from black bodies with the quarterback, giving extra value to the position. However, while successful at the lower levels of football, these dual-style techniques prove difficult in the NFL. Players must prove that their perfected style of play is a viable alternative to the systematic pro-style.

87 Ibid
It is important to remember that the dual-threat style is seen as selfish. Players who have the ability to advance the ball themselves are not sharing the glory with the other players. This perception of the dual-threat quarterback as flashy is tied to the fact that most of these types of quarterbacks are black. This combination only intensifies scouts’ skepticism toward dual-threat and African American quarterbacks. There are white quarterbacks who have made it to the NFL who can both run and pass. Yet these players are exempt from not only criticism, but the label of dual-threat itself. This label is reserved for black quarterbacks, a phenomenon that has not gone unnoticed.

Donavan McNabb, a former black quarterback for the Philadelphia Eagles, was labeled a dual-threat running quarterback. In the 2005 season, Houston’s David Carr, who is white, rushed for more yards than McNabb. When asked about Carr, McNabb replied, “I’m waiting for someone to call him a ‘running quarterback.’” He also said that he sometimes refuses to scramble in order to combat the notion that black quarterbacks are valued more for their running ability than anything else. Reporters more often use language that connotes intelligence to describe white players. They rarely use similar language to describe African American ones. White players are generally seen as more powerful and intelligent, which in turn affects the language used to describe them. Alternately, African Americans are defined by their physical characteristics. They are seen as racially inferior and more animalistic. This prevailing image within football is

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mirrored in the language that describes these players, linguistically reducing them to objects rather than individuals.

Within the NFL, Whiteness and pro-style connote success while blackness and dual-threat equal failure. This flattening of race and position is most often seen during the Draft when new players enter the league. During the offseason months where scouts look at black quarterbacks for potential NFL picks, it “practically becomes a traditional April game of Draft Cliche Bingo, in which ‘casual racism,’ is the free space.” As reporters evaluate new players, the same racial language is used against black quarterbacks. As mentioned before, Mel Kiper Jr. utilized Lamar Jackson’s stats to downplay the Jackson’s potential NFL impact. Meanwhile, Kiper praised Josh Allen, pleading people to ignore his stats. This is not the first time, or last time, that a black dual-threat has been treated with disrespect due to the way this position demands the player to play. Cam Newton was a black quarterback for Auburn who won the 2010 Heisman Trophy and 2011 National Champion. Coming into the Draft in 2011, a Pro Football Weekly analyst who had never met with or spoken to Cam Newton claimed:

“Very disingenuous -- has a fake smile, comes off as very scripted and has a selfish, me-first makeup. Always knows where the cameras are and plays to them. Has an enormous ego with a sense of entitlement that continually invites trouble and makes him believe he is above the law -- does not command respect from teammates and will always struggle to win a locker room ... Lacks accountability, focus and trustworthiness -- is not punctual, seeks shortcuts and

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sets a bad example. Immature and has had issues with authority. Not dependable.”

When has a smile ever been a significant factor in determining someone’s athletic ability? Because of his “fake” smile and large personality, Newton was seen as a less promising player. He was held to a very different standard than the white quarterbacks that surrounded him. Some of the qualities described by this analyst do hold some truth, such as his punctuality. But what college student is not late to a few meetings? This reporter is extrapolating: he is playing up the selfish connotations attached to players who can run the ball themselves and combining them with the racial standards of the NFL to discredit Cam Newton. Moreover, this is all based off qualities this reporter has inferred; they are not hard facts. Fortunately, despite these disparaging remarks, Cam Newton became the first overall draft pick for the Carolina Panthers. He was awarded the 2015 NFL MVP, and is still making promising gains as a dual-threat quarterback.

Cardel Jones played for the Ohio State Buckeyes and secured them the National Championship in 2015. During the 2016 NFL Draft season, anonymous scouts engaged in the typical April jargon about black dual-threat quarterbacks:

“This guy just throws the ball. His mechanics are all over the place.”

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92 Ibid
“Strong arm. Big, big body. Not the brightest cookie in the world. I worry about him when he gets money in his pocket. I just don’t know if it’s all there mentally.”

Jones was also the only quarterback on the scouting list to be compared to another black quarterback. They claimed that effectiveness Jones’s dual-threat mechanics did not match that of a pro-style quarterback. His skin did not match either; he is not white, and therefore cannot grow into the quarterback they want. His intelligence is also being judged. He took a pre-draft Wonderlic intelligence test and scored the same as Cowboys superstar Dak Prescott. The perceived intelligence of African Americans is lower than that of their white counterparts. These are the social constructs created by the white man within America. This bleeds into football, especially when the quarterback position of power is up for grabs.

In the 2017 Draft, DeShone Kizer of the Notre Dame Fighting Irish was under fire from an anonymous AFC head coach. Apparently, the coach believed that “he's got the size, the arm talent and he's very bright, but there's a disconnect there. There are diva qualities there.” This description “diva” is commonly used to describe the flashy demeanor of the dual-threat quarterback. It stems from the perception that this type of player steals the glory for himself instead of sharing the ball. Geno Smith was slandered in the 2013 Draft. He was described as “not a student of the game,” a shocking assessment for a player who has only ever played the game his whole life. Coaches

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94 Ibid
95 Ibid
don’t believe that the dual-threat is the “correct” way to play, or on a deeper level, that the black quarterback can be the leader. Player Deshaun Watson was seen as a risky draft option even with after high accuracy and success in college. Watson went on to become a two time Heisman Trophy finalist and win the 2016 National Champion, 2015 ACC Offensive Player of the Year, 2015 ACC Player of the Year, 2015 Consensus All-America, 2015 Davey O'Brien Award, 2015 Manning Award, 2015 Davey O'Brien Award, 2016 Johnny Unitas Golden Arm Award, and 2016 Manning Award. Ignoring this track record and awards, anonymous scouts and executives still knocked Watson:

"There's no doubt in my mind that Watson is a big-game player, but I wish he was more consistent. He has enough arm talent and athleticism to be a starter, but he will need to master the game from the pocket to be a legit guy" 

"He has the arm strength and all of the tools to be an effective pocket passer but he needs to be reprogrammed after being used as a dual-threat QB at Clemson. Sure, it worked out for him and the team because they won the national title, but it sets him back a bit as an NFL quarterback." 

"He needs to be more consistent from the pocket."

Watson is being forced into the mold of a typical NFL quarterback. There is little room to expand this rigid quarterback role at the elite level, even after players like Watson prove their abilities through strong track records. Instead, coaches want to change these

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99 Ibid
100 Ibid
101 Ibid
players’ style of play. They want to break quarterbacks like Watson, forcing them to become players that emulate the white pocket passers favored in NFL. Watson went on to earn the starting role for the Texans, who selected him with their first-round pick. He was a dominant force on his way to Rookie of the Year before tearing his ACL. Watson was allowed to play his style of quarterback not capitulating to tradition, once again proving it could be successful within the league.

All these previously discussed quarterbacks are dual threats. All are also young, black men looking to lead a franchise. All have faced racial bias in the form of coaching, recruiting, scouting. This racial bias makes the path to the NFL extremely difficult. While these quarterbacks have made it to the highest level, there are millions of young men who never get a chance at the position or never receive the proper coaching that would increase their chances at development. Black players have to find a way to make it on the field. Because traditional routes to the field are often barred to them, these black players must evolve into dual-threat athletes. Yet these athletes’ trials aren’t done here, as the position of the dual-threat athlete is not well-received in the league, even less-so for black players. It makes it almost impossible for a black man to fill the role. Even with the skills of a pro-style quarterback the NFL, analysts and scouts find ways to disavow their abilities, as the traditional role of quarterback is white. Covert racism dictates the decisions of the NFL. Coaches envision who they want to lead their team, analysts put down the black quarterbacks, and owners hold the power to shut them out. These examples of various quarterbacks demonstrate that the correlation between styles of play and race. This correlation not only determines how
a quarterback should play but also reinforces the stereotypes surrounding how they
should look.
Chapter 5

The Times Are [Not] a-Changin'

Working through each level of football to the NFL is difficult for any player, but significantly, systematically harder for black quarterbacks. Currently there is a “solid” number of black starting quarterbacks in the NFL, six to be exact. Their paths were riddled with skepticism and setbacks due to the color of their skin. Yet even making it into the league comes with a price. The growth of the black quarterback at the highest level is not developing as quickly as you would think. Football’s pioneer African American players were faced with blatant exclusion, marginalization, and oppression, and the patterns established during these formative years continue to affect today’s black players even as they obtain positions of power that were once unavailable to them. This insidious discrimination demonstrates the control of the media, the owners, and the overall system of the league. Through their decisions, these controlling forces prevent black quarterbacks from receiving the same level of respect as their white counterparts.

Conviction

While I played football during my childhood, I had a favorite pair of cleats branded with the number 7. It felt good to play in them, like the real 7 Michael Vick was fueling my skills and helping me become a better player. There were many quarterbacks who helped pave the way for black athletes, but few were as dominant as Michael Vick. Today, he remains the premier example of a dual-threat quarterback, and paved the way for black quarterbacks as common household names. “He revolutionized the quarterback position and was arguably the most electrifying athlete
to play the game of football”.\textsuperscript{102} He created a market value for racial dual-threat talents and inspired a generation of players. Even though he fell from grace in a shocking dog fighting scandal, there is no denying Vick’s impact on the game of football. He opened the path for millions of players and helped validate their dreams of playing quarterback.

Vick established himself early in his football trajectory as a high school legend. He then went on to follow in the footsteps of his predecessors, players like Arron Brooks, a dual-threat Quarterback in the NFL, and Allen Iverson, an NBA Legend. But according to his high school coach Tommy Reamon, Vick had more talent than both of them. He was faster, was more agile, was “designed to do certain things”\textsuperscript{103} that no one else could do. He developed his iconic flick of the wrist, which he used to launch the ball like a cannon while simultaneously shaking defenders with his incredible change of pace. As the number two quarterback in Virginia, Vick opted to stay in his home state.

Vick put Virginia Tech on the map for college football. He stormed the scene from his rookie year, his unparalleled skill quickly demanding that people pay attention to a school whose program history lacked notoriety or success. Vick brought a “swagger” to the quarterback position that excited the college scene. From his freakish abilities to his black skin, he created a place in football for a new type of player. His approach to the quarterback position proved successful within the spread offense of college, and helped Virginia Tech win their first National Championship. Vick wasn’t the first black quarterback in Virginia, but his presence and arrogance was infectious.

He became an icon, a success story in the ghetto. But he was not finished there, as Vick soon became a superstar to the entire nation when he entered the NFL draft in 2001.

“With the first overall pick in the 2001 Draft, the Atlanta Falcons selected Michael Vick.” He became the first black quarterback ever selected as the number one draft pick. Looking to revitalize a mediocre franchise, Vick brought his style, personality, and skills to the city of Atlanta, quickly creating a buzz around the football franchise that had finished 4-12 a year ago. The San Diego Chargers first held the first overall draft pick, however, they had their doubts. They were “concerned with Vick's ability to grasp pro offenses. It is a tired and worn attitude about young quarterbacks in general and about young black quarterbacks in particular that has cost previous teams plenty.” The Chargers missed out on a generational talent, trading picks with the Atlanta Falcons. In his first season with the Falcons, Vick started the final eight games of his rookie season. They finished 7-9, just missing the playoffs. Then, in his sophomore campaign, Vick took the Falcons 9–6–1 and a playoff appearance. Vick revolutionized the position and is often cited as the greatest dual-threat quarterback to ever play the position. The league had dual-threat QBs such as Donavan McNabb, but Vick was stronger, faster, and flashier than any of them. His ability to break down plays and to act as an effective rusher while maintaining his accuracy scared opposing defenses. Pressuring up the middle, chasing from behind, and flushing out of the pocket, Vick made plays and made them look easy.

Vick’s electrifying plays quickly elevated him to NFL royalty. The annual Madden NFL video game was a way for youths to vicariously live out their dreams on the field. The video game brought the players into gamers’ livings rooms, and the player on the game’s cover unofficially becomes the face of the NFL for that year. In 2004, Michael Vick landed the cover of Madden. Everyone, me and my friends especially, played with Vick. Why would anyone want to play with a passer who doesn’t run handing the ball off when you could do it all yourself, throwing or running the ball? You could do anything with Vick. The game further elevated his status to one of a football superhero. He represented black excellence for young African American football players around the country. It’s why his presence could reach a young player in California who felt invincible while wearing Vick’s cleats, who watched Vick succeed on television and in video games. The door may have already been ajar for dual-threat, African American quarterbacks in the NFL, but Vick blew it wide open. He forced owners, general managers, coaches, players, and an entire nation to accept the dual-threat quarterback as a viable option for the position.

This begs the question of why other teams were and still are reluctant to draft other dual-threat black quarterbacks after the success of Vick. Doubt still shrouded his early career with the Falcons. In 2004, critics wondered if Vick could “take his game to a new level in Atlanta.”107 Vick was told that “he must learn pocket patience and come to terms that it’s sometimes okay to throw the ball away or, at the very least, slide.”108 That same year, he was named the face of football on the Madden cover.109

108 Ibid
109 Ibid
During the 2004 season, concerns over his health arose and he also broke his leg. On returning to the field, many reported that “his pre-season numbers were abysmal -- 5-for-12, 35 yards, no touchdowns, one interception and a sore hamstring.” This is a high amount of criticism. Pre-season is a time for players to slowly get back into the groove of football. Moreover, pre-season is some time backups to prove they are worth a spot on the team, not a time for starters to tire themselves out or sustain injuries before the season has begun. Vick was coming off of a broken leg into preseason games. His limited playtime, therefore, was logical, yet it had Falcons fans manning lifeboats.

Vick’s career also demonstrated the little room for error afforded black quarterbacks and black players in general. Vick committed an act deemed immoral and heinous by society. Most of his teammates had noticed something was going on as he traveled back and forth to Virginia during breaks from football. There, Vick had constructed a massive dog fighting estate with facilities to house, train, fight, and bury dogs under the advice of friends. The Bad News Kennels was established in 2001. Dog fighting was a common theme at the time within the black communities of the south. When a cousin who lived on the estate was arrested, Vick’s house was searched and seized. Vick was quickly under pressure from local authorities. At first, he denied the accusations. But after several acquaintances testified against him, he pled guilty in the same year. Dog fighting was not uncommon in the south, but Vick was made an example, an African American NFL star who was condemned and quickly fell from

\[110\] Ibid
grace. Vick was given two years in jail, the longest out of all his friends. Their longest sentence was two months. His massive contract with the Falcons was revoked, and the superstar also lost his endorsements, his fans, and the public’s respect. In a country predisposed to assume the worst in African Americans, Vick’s fall only confirmed preexisting racial stereotypes, especially as a high-profile figure placed behind bars. In 2008, the Falcons drafted their new quarterback with another early first round pick. This time they chose a white pocket passer. Meanwhile, Vick sat in prison and watched his future slip away.

Released in 2009, Vick did gain a second chance with some help. The Philadelphia Eagles made what may be seen as one of the most controversial moves in NFL history and took back Michael Vick. His best career numbers followed during his next three years. He achieved incredible success in the position and received the Comeback Player of the Year in 2010. Vick would continue with the Eagles until 2013 and finally spend his last two years in the league with the New York Jets and the Pittsburg Steelers. Officially retiring in 2017, Vick finished as the All-time rushing leader for quarterbacks with 6,109 yards. Even with in light of his criminal record, Vick is still being considered on the Hall of Fame ballet. Regardless, Vick revolutionized the game. He made people stop and pay attention to the traditions of the quarterback positon by subverting them. The dual-threat quarterback wasn’t created by Vick, but he popularized this playing style at the highest level, doing so with an attitude that inspired millions. Especially for young African American boys, Vick made us

believe in ourselves, giving us a model at the quarterback position with which we could identify. He gave dual-threat quarterbacks an opportunity at the highest level, which resulted in an influx of athletes at the position in the years that followed. Vick convinced the world that elite teams could be successful with African American quarterbacks.

**Not Taylor Made**

While Vick proved that black quarterbacks could play and be culturally relevant within the NFL, he also proved that the racial prejudice toward African Americans within the league had not been eradicated. Moreover, by opening the door for new quarterbacks, Vick created new opportunities for racially biased decisions to proliferate within the NFL franchise. It is not surprising that in a league with over 73% African Americans controlled by white owners, racism is still in full effect. Black quarterbacks have the smallest margin for error compared to white quarterbacks. Michael Vick was a revolutionary quarterback that defied the odds on and off the field. His colossal dog scandal did take two years of his freedom. Though he was afforded a second chance to play, he never could never fully erase the negative perceptions his past actions had generated. But in American Society, black people rarely get those kinds of second chances. “Screw up once, the thinking goes, and you’re out, having confirmed the view of many whites that you didn’t deserve a shot in the first place.”

It is even easier to take away chances on the field, because coaches and executives can use the pretense of skill and statistics to bench players. This type of pretense mirrors those used to justify

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not drafting black quarterbacks, when of course this decision is often motivated by underlying racial prejudice. Economist Brian Volz found that following a bad performance, “black NFL quarterbacks are roughly twice as likely to be benched the following week than their white colleagues.”¹¹⁵ In his study of the last 13 seasons, he took into account “a number of non-racial factors that could influence a quarterback being benched, including his age, experience, and performance; the quality of the second-string quarterback who replaced him; and of course any injuries he had sustained.”¹¹⁶ Black quarterbacks still face a level of discrimination even after reaching the NFL and obtaining the starting position. Their performance must be far more stable and sustained in comparison to the performance of white quarterbacks. These white quarterbacks are regularly given greater opportunity to work through mistakes. In short, the black quarterback has no room for error.

Tyrod Taylor played for Vick’s alma mater Virginia Tech and drew many similar comparisons from scouts leading up to the 2011 draft. But many questioned his ability to play quarterback at the next level, stating that “He has a quick release and a strong arm, but he is somewhat erratic as a passer.”¹¹⁷ Taylor completed over 60% of his passes with twenty-four touchdowns and only five interceptions, all the while becoming the all-time rushing leader by a quarterback, rushing touchdown leader by a quarterback, and passing yards in Virginia Tech history. Yet seemingly an erratic passer? Taylor was no stranger to pre-draft racism. Some pushed for him to change positions, feeling that “he should be able to contribute immediately as a running back,

¹¹⁵ Ibid
¹¹⁶ Ibid
receiver or return man.”118 He stuck with this position in spite of this skepticism, and was drafted as a quarterback in the sixth round as a backup on the Ravens. He played sporadically over the next couple years and developed as a player in the Ravens’ system before finally receiving a starting role in the Buffalo Bills franchise. Under head coach Rex Ryan, Taylor won the starting position outright and impressed the Bills so much that he was offered a six-year contract extension worth ninety-two million dollars in 2016. Taylor was held the starter position under Rex Ryan and played at an extremely high level. He continued successfully during the 2017 season even after Rex was fired. In week nine, Taylor completed a career high: 29 out of 40 passes, 72% completion rate, 285 yards and two touchdowns along with a rushing touchdown in a loss.119 The following week, Taylor hit a roadblock, topped off with a horrific day on the field, throwing for just 56 yards against a suffocating Saints defense. Still at 5-4 and well within the playoff hunt, the Bills were not playing poorly. Yet, these two back-to-back losses were enough for the Bills to bench Taylor.

Simply put, many, including Taylor himself, were absolutely stunned when he was benched.120 If the playoffs had started after week ten after the loss to the Saints, the Bills would have been in; they were one of six teams out of sixteen teams with a winning record.121 Up to that moment in the 2017 season, Taylor was one of only four quarterbacks with more than ten touchdowns and fewer than three interceptions.122 In

118 Ibid
122 Ibid
the Bills franchise, he had set multiple records. He held the record for highest completion percentage in single game (91.7%), most rushing yards by Bills quarterback in single game, most rushing yards by Bills quarterback in single season (580), most consecutive pass attempts without an interception in Bills history (222), Longest run by a Bills quarterback (49), and most career rushing yards by a Bills quarterback (1,575). Taylor also has the lowest interception rate in NFL history.123 But all it took was one game for the Bills to send him to the bench.

Many questioned the Bills’ decision and looked for logical answers. Former head coach Rex Ryan provided insight into the Bills organization, stating that “I was told to bench Tyrod Taylor, I'm like, there's no way. I'm not doing it.”124 Rex claimed that the only way they could stop him from playing Taylor in the season finale would be to fire him. So that’s exactly what the Bills owner did. The Bills did not want to save their quarterback for the next season. They wanted to make sure he wasn’t going to get hurt, because an injury would cost them. “His $27.5 million salary for 2017 was guaranteed for injury only, so if he suffered a significant one in the season finale, the Bills would have been on the hook for money they may not want to pay. They also wanted to see the other quarterbacks on the roster, EJ Manuel and Cardale Jones, get some game action.”125 This illustrates the amount of control owners have over the team, and brings into the question the role of ownership in quarterback decisions. Was the new head coach told to bench a perfectly capable black quarterback because of management? This storyline would make sense, as the new coach would not want to

123 Ibid
get fired like Rex Ryan. Owners have a say in all aspects of team decision-making. When the Falcons were looking for a new quarterback, their owner sought Michael Vick not only for his ability but also for his skin, to connect with the overall 54% of African Americans in Atlanta. It is up to each individual owner to choose how they interact with the team, but usually, if owners have a strong opinion about who should play or be drafted, they will let these opinions be known. Since they own the team, coaches will listen to owners’ opinions or run the risk of being fired.

This may have been the case when it was decided that the back-up Nathan Peterman would start over Taylor. Nathan was a white quarterback who comes from a pro-style system, typical. Many who agreed with the move to bench Taylor saw a white quarterback who had “pro-style looks, reads and responsibilities, understanding how to make the pre-snap decisions and to set protections.”

Apparently, Peterman had the skin and the pro-style practice to start ahead of Taylor, who had only strengthened the franchise since his arrival in Buffalo. To the credit of whoever put Peterman in, he did have a historic rookie outing. Historically bad. Peterman threw for five interceptions in the first half in his NFL debut. If Taylor was benched after one game do you cut Peterman from the team after one half, seems fair? Most of the football world took this disaster and ran with it. Here are just a few of the headlines:

**Benching Tyrod Taylor for rookie Nathan Peterman was a bad idea from the start**

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The Bills played themselves benching Tyrod Taylor.\textsuperscript{128}

Nathan Peterman Was A Very Avoidable Disaster\textsuperscript{129}

The Dumbest Football Decision of the Season Now Looks Even Dumber\textsuperscript{130}

Buffalo Bills' confounding decision to bench quarterback Tyrod Taylor\textsuperscript{131}

Tyrod was back in the starting role the next week; the Bills were forced to acknowledge that they had messed up. He led the Bills to a winning season and also to their first playoff game in over seventeen years. Yet he was not respected as a committed starter, one who only ever made records for the team. He led from the front, such a reliable starter that he managed to lead the Bills to a playoff game. As all black quarterbacks in this league, his leash was extremely short, a sad reality for black quarterbacks in the NFL. Even as the most successful Bills quarterback ever, Taylor’s achievements weren’t enough. The Bills traded Taylor to the Cleveland Browns for a third-round pick. This upcoming draft, they are looking for a white pro-style quarterback, feeling this will be their best chance at future success.\textsuperscript{132} In a game, coaches typically enjoy a certain amount of autonomy. But with the added component of owners, this expertise of coaches is disrupted. Owners have a direct influence on who is put on the field, giving them the power to shape the image of the NFL as they see fit.


Captain America

Owners form an exclusive club that drives many of the decisions within franchises and the league. They have much more control over the league than many realize. While it makes sense, because they own the team, it also curbs the control of the people who are actually playing the game. Owner meetings occur very frequently. They discuss many issues surrounding the league such as player suspensions, franchise relocations, new stadiums, team selections for London, player policies, and anything pertaining to the overall shape and direction of the NFL. To even become an NFL owner, one must be approved by the other owners. This essentially makes it “the most conservative fraternity of leaders in major American sports.”

Owners dictate the atmosphere of the NFL and control its public image. They look for revenue opportunities and eliminate anyone who threatens these opportunities, for instance, a black quarterback.

It is virtually impossible to discuss discrimination of the modern black quarterback in the NFL without talking about the most controversial player of this generation. Colin Kaepernick has hit a cord in the NFL that few would dare to strike. He has received the full force of the NFL’s discriminatory practices and has embodies just what the NFL fears: by threatening owner’s power and legitimacy, he has become a prime example of what a black quarterback could bring into the league. “Outside of politics, there may be nobody in popular culture at this complex moment so divisive

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and so galvanizing, so scorned and so appreciated.”

Kap, his nickname, was born to a black and a white parent, who quickly gave him up for adoption. He found a home in Turlock, California with two white parents. There, he was deeply loved, but also struggled with feelings of estrangement. Kap grew up with identity issues as he tried to fit into a place that would always question his belonging. When it came time for college, Kap’s brother helped him send out hundreds of letters. Only one school responded with a scholarship, Nevada. There he was subjected to the prototypical college dialogue about switching positions. Because of his athleticism and strength, his coach didn’t believe that he was going to grow as a quarterback, stating that his freshman year, “he was just a really good athlete, but boy would he have been a heck of a free safety.” This again upholds the common trope, switching the African American player to a more physical position. However, Kap grew into a dominant quarterback, showing his ability to stretch defenses with his arms and legs and finding his identity on the field. He also found his calling off the field with “the fraternity brothers at Kappa Alpha Psi, a predominantly black fraternity with a small chapter.” Kap found a brotherhood that encouraged the conversations he had always sought out. The issues of black bodies and lives were constantly discussed in the chapter, which prompted Kap to dig deeper into his own roots on his African American side. Kap nurtured his mind in the classroom as one few quarterbacks to

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134 Ibid
actually finish college with a degree in business management. After his time in Nevada, he was taken in the second round by the San Francisco 49ers and graduated into the NFL.

After sitting behind quarterback Alex Smith during the first year learning the offense, Kap hit his stride late in his sophomore year. In Week 10 of the 2012 season, Smith went down with a concussion and Kap stepped onto the field. He took the NFL by storm, putting up impressive numbers for someone who had only taken a few snaps. Even after Alex Smith returned, the 49ers continued to play Kap. He led them to into the NFL playoffs and then to the super bowl, setting multiple records for a quarterback in the postseason along the way. Although they lost in the end, the 49ers played a tight game; they had gained an undeniable superstar. Though shy in college, now “He kissed his tattooed biceps when he scored, which turned his name into a verb: Kaepernicking. His jersey was spotted across the Bay Area. All lean muscles and corrugated abs, he posed nude for ESPN Magazine’s Body Issue.” After the season, Kap became one the most talked about players, many predicting his future potential. “I truly believe Colin Kaepernick could be one of the greatest quarterbacks ever,” the ESPN analyst Ron Jaworski said the following preseason. “I love his skill set. I think the sky’s the limit.” The next year, Kap lead his team back to the NFC Championship, confirming the hype about his potential in the NFL. The 49ers went all in and offered Kap a six-year contract extension, effectively making him their quarterback for the foreseeable future. Unfortunately, this was when the 49ers as a team started to decline.

137 Ibid
138 Ibid
Kap was not a stranger to the same issues that black quarterbacks have faced in the past. He received complaints similar to those received by other flashy black quarterbacks. One NBC analyst said that “Kaepernick should spend less time "worrying about his six-pack and how he looks" and more time hunkered down in the film room studying other team’s defenses.” The reporter then referenced a white quarterback in comparison, hailing “Brady as a role model for preparation.” Soon after, teammates jumped to his defense, saying that he was always the first one into the practice facility and the last one to leave. Kap also had to defend his tattoos after a columnist said that a quarterback is, essentially, the team’s chief executive, “and you don’t want your C.E.O. to look like he just got paroled.” This type of criticism confuses image with playing ability, when in reality, they have nothing to do with each other. The reporter also compared Kap and his tattoos to other black quarterbacks, stating that Michael Vick and Terrell Pryor do not “exactly fit the CEO image, unless your CEO has done a stretch in Leavenworth.” However, when talking about white quarterbacks with tattoos, the same reporter stated that theirs are in respectful places where they cannot be seen when in uniform. They are highlighting something in their past or a something about themselves, honorable ink. People reduced Kap to his body and its tattoos, voicing fears about the message it would send if Kaepernick became the face of the NFL. His tattoos are bible verses; for him, they are reminders of his beliefs and

140 Ibid
He also expressed his love for his tattoos by kissing his biceps after touchdowns, a behavior that many condemned as a selfish display of arrogance. After he filed to trademark the move, many thought he was losing focus and distracted saw it as a distraction from winning games. Like other black people before him, Kap faced judgement based on his physical appearance alone. The narrative surrounding Kap embodies both a great success story and an attempt to knock down a black quarterback. “Depending on whom you ask, Colin Kaepernick was either a Millennial wunderkind, overrated and unproven, dynamic and exciting, a vision of football’s future, a flash in the pan, a thug, a victim, selfish, selfless, a work in progress, all of the above, none of the above, some of the above.” It is clear that the concerns of a black quarterback does not escape even the most successful ones.

In 2014, hard times hit San Francisco. With a season of 8-8 and the departure of a head coach, both Kaepernick and the franchise were starting to decline. In 2015, Kap was knocked out of the season halfway through with a shoulder injury. The 49ers went just 5-11. Though many blame Kap’s statistics for the team’s decline, the 49ers did not have the same players that composed their super bowl caliber team. Kap held up as best he could, but there is no denying that his stats were less impressive. Many doubted he would come back as the starting quarterback. He came back in 2016 and lost his job. But ever a student of society, Kap had bigger issues to occupy his attention; he focused on understanding how his impact could still be felt off the field.

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Kaepernick maintained his thirst for education. “Even as a rookie with the 49ers, he asked Edwards, the sociologist and civil rights activist who served as a consultant for the 49ers, for a reading list.” The famous Harry Edwards is the social consultant for the 49ers and leading sociologist in civil rights matters pertaining to black athletes’ voice and place within the sport and country. Edwards is best known for orchestrating the instrumental black power salute protest in the 1968 Olympics. Edwards himself grew up surrounded by racial stratification in sports. By studying sociology, he saw an opportunity to reflect on “his negative experiences as a student athlete on predominately white university campuses” and “became heavily involved in exposing the relationship between race and sports in society.” The intersection of sports and society interested him early on, as he saw it as an opportunity to voice these systemic patterns on a large stage followed by millions. He helped organize protests to give athletes a larger purpose and image while on the field. In addition to the 49ers, Edwards consults the MLB and Golden State Warriors about minority programs designed to increase diversity within these predominately white organizations. He is considered the leading voice in race relations within sports and clearly helped Kap expand his knowledge, potentially giving him guidance on how he could shake up the NFL.

Edwards recommended reading such as “The Autobiography of Malcolm X,” James Baldwin’s “The Fire Next Time,” Ralph Ellison’s “Invisible Man,” and Maya Angelou’s “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings” for Kap. Kap also found time to

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reach out to a Berkley professor and engage in lengthy discussions on the specific topic of race. Moreover, Kap was a regular visitor in the Berkley classroom, seeking to expand his own mind through further education. “He was willing to work and study to kind of understand what was happening with his teammates, with other people, and how this whole thing rolled out over 400 years,” Edwards said.147 He became more vocal about police aggressions toward young black men on the streets. During the summer of 2016 when two black men were killed back to back, “Kaepernick’s social media posts flared with urgent intensity. “This is what lynchings look like in 2016!” Kaepernick wrote on Instagram and Twitter when the video of Alton Sterling’s death became public. “Another murder in the streets because the color of a man’s skin, at the hands of the people who they say will protect us. When will they be held accountable? Or did he fear for his life as he executed this man?” When Philando Castro died a day later, Kaepernick posted, “We are under attack!” “It’s clear as day! Less than 24 hrs later another body in the street!” With training camp just underway, Kap was among the few within the NFL to mention these horrific events. Even Kap’s posts garnered a small reaction, as it is easier to focus on the entertainment on the field rather than the harsh relates of race within America. Kap wouldn’t let this go and made a statement in the preseason games that shook the football community.

Abandoned, adopted, and never quite fitting in, Kap understood the alienation one could face. “He would get the racist treatment from white people because he was a black quarterback. And some people gave him the racist treatment because he was

147 Ibid
148 Ibid
149 Ibid
raised by a white family.” Kap looked to Harry Edwards for guidance and decided to make a statement on America’s biggest stage about these wrongful killings and overall oppression of African Americans. Kap started the preseason by sitting on the bench during the national anthem, a gesture that got little press as he was not dressed for the games with a shoulder injury. By the third game, news of Kap’s refusal to stand had started to spread. He explained:

“I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color,” Kaepernick said. “To me, this is bigger than football, and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder.”

By the fourth game his gestures had gained him national attention. Suited up and slotted as the starter, Kap moved off the bench and took a knee next to his teammates during the national anthem, some of these fellow players joining him. The following days, over 200 football players took a stand by taking a knee during the national anthem. The movement in sports trickled far down to many different sports and levels. From high school to college, teams saw a chance to support their fellow African Americans in their struggle to find a safe place within America. It became the talk of the nation: how athletes were using their voices to point out the institutional racism around the country, and doing so, bringing the conversation to the forefront of sports. Especially in areas with a high concentration of black men, sports became more than just a score.

150 Ibid
Now it focused on the racism these men faced off the field. Kap’s protest expanded beyond race and became a symbol for other marginalized groups as well. Player Megan Rapinoe of the U.S. National Women’s Soccer Team also knelt during the anthem, showing support for gay rights within the country. Kaepernick used his stardom and platform to protest the national anthem, creating a national wave of attention.

This kneeling was accepted by many as a peaceful protest, but for others, it looked like disrespect for America’s game. At its core, football is American. It’s known for its wings, beer, cheerleaders, national anthem, flag service, military presence, and air force fly overs before games. And it too upholds the systemic exclusion of African Americans from leadership positions. Many question the national anthem’s place as a pre-game ritual, as it was written in a time where blacks were excluded democratic rights in the United States. Yet the anthem also commemorates soldiers lost at home and overseas. Some claimed taking a knee during the anthem was disrespectful to those who serve and those who lost their lives. “The media painted this as I’m anti-American, anti-men-and-women of the military and that’s not the case at all,” Kaepernick said. “I realize that men and women of the military go out and sacrifice their lives and put themselves in harm’s way for my freedom of speech and my freedoms in this country and my freedom to take a seat or take a knee so I have the utmost respect for them.”

This came from Kap only days after his protest gained national attention. Even the military supported his protest. Many of them acknowledged that they fight for this very reason: to give Americans the chance to use their amendments and speak their truths.

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Other, generally older, military figures voiced less supportive reactions. They found issue with when Kap demanded to express himself, arguing that “there has got to be a better way to address it than kneeling during our national anthem.” However, most did not complain about the actual protest itself, Others found issue with Kap himself, claiming that he was kneeling only to gain attention. They thought he was trying to refocus the national spotlight on a now second-string quarterback in order to play again. Others saw his protest as a way for him, a bi-racial male raised by a white family, to get in on the black oppression fight. Moreover, many of the NFL owners sided with the fans, who felt Kaepernick was disrespecting the flag. They felt that Kap was causing more controversy in the NFL than actual good. For owners, this opinion was a frightening one, as it could result in the loss of fans and revenue. Owners even met to discuss whether standing during the anthem should be made mandatory. Ultimately, they did not come to a conclusive decision. One of the biggest proponents of a ban on kneeling came from the Donald Trump. He publicized his opinion on the issue via twitter, stating that “The issue of kneeling has nothing to do with race. It is about respect for our Country, Flag and National Anthem. NFL must respect this!” It is quite clear that this protest has everything to do with race. Earlier that week, President Trump even stated at a rally in Alabama that “Wouldn’t you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, ‘Get that son of a bitch off the field right

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now. Out! He’s fired. He’s fired!”156 Directing his attack at the NFL and black protestors, Trump demanded the NFL to make a change. Owners “bathe their games in overtly patriotic ceremonies and discourage players, mostly hidden behind masks and uniforms of armor, from individual acts of showmanship. At least seven donated $1 million or more to Trump’s inaugural committee, far more than any other sport’s owners.”157 The kneeling debate was now affecting the politics and business of the NFL. Kaepernick brought national attention to an issue that the NFL has long ignored. It wanted to keep the entertainment and revenue aspects of the game central. For this to happen, players could not be activists. They had to play in the games and nothing more. Kaepernick reminded the world that athletes have a powerful voice, as they have the potential to reach millions. Though many disapproved of Kap’s activism within the sphere of entertainment, it served to highlight their interconnectedness. Kap took a knee and stood up for his beliefs, a legal right within our country. Yet he would be punished for his actions after the conclusion of the season.

Kaepernick regained his starting position mid-way through the season, but the 49ers finished 2-14. After the new head coach was fired, Kaepernick entered the market as a free agent and looked to join another team. The football world was waiting to see where Kap would sign in 2017, and we are still waiting in 2018. He has essentially been blacklisted from a job within the NFL. While within football you can hide behind stats and numbers to justify not hiring a player, Kaepernick’s current situation reminds viewers that the NFL is a controlled environment that only accepts the people that they

want within the system. Colin Kaepernick has been sentenced to NFL limbo for the crime of speaking his mind.158 In an article exploring the reasons behind Kaepernick’s inability to sign to a team, anonymous executives talked to reporter Mike Freeman of Bleacher Report. This article revealed that about 20 percent of the NFL’s decision-makers "genuinely believe he can't play." Another 20 percent are afraid of the reactions that signing Kaepernick would elicit. They fear the reactions of fans, advertisers and even President Donald J. Trump.159 "The rest genuinely hate him and can't stand what he did [kneeling for the national anthem]," one AFC general manager told Freeman. "They want nothing to do with him. They won't move on. They think showing no interest is a form of punishment. I think some teams also want to use Kaepernick as a cautionary tale to stop other players in the future from doing what he did."160 Kap, his social interests, and the media that follows him are a package deal. Many teams want to avoid this publicity, especially when it comes with a quarterback who may be a backup. Moreover, the owners and executives make the real decisions within the league, and they do not want the entertainment value of the NFL to become overshadowed by political protests. However, one fact of the matter has been overlooked. This protest is being led by a quarterback, the face of the franchise and the undisputed leader on the field. And players follow where quarterbacks lead. The 49ers allowed a black quarterback to take the lead, and he created a political revolution. Additionally, he is an intelligent black leader who could feasibly challenge the owner’s

159 Ibid
160 Ibid
authority by gathering support. This type of power posed a threat to owners, a threat that had to be dealt with.

There is no doubt that the owners colluded to keep Kaepernick’s increasingly political voice out of the NFL. A super bowl quarterback who has recently taken snaps in the NFL as a starter gets chances to be on a team. Even with his poor play in his last year, he is still a young, athletic, and available quarterback who has proven himself at the highest level. In total, there are 64 spots for starters and their backups within the NFL. There is no way that a super bowl quarterback is worse than every single one of those 64 players. His team did finish the season 2-14, but they also had the worst defense in the NFL for that season. If Kaepernick never took another snap in the NFL, he would still have the lowest interception rate when compared to 500 retired quarterbacks who each had over 500 pass attempts. When compared to the current 32 NFL starters, Kap has more attempts and less picks than all but one other starter.

Passer rating is a complicated formula that gives quarterbacks a score for their passing performance over a game and season. Simply put, the rating operates on a scale of 0 to 158.3, the higher the number the better. As of week 12, 54 QBs had started a game, which includes backup players taking over for injured starters. Kap’s ending rating in 2016 was 90.7, better than well over half the 47 quarterbacks and even half of the first game of the season starters. The average net yards per attempt measures the average gained yards per throw. Compared to the 54 quarterbacks who started a game in the 2017 season, Kap ranks 28th, right in the middle. This isn’t the best statistic, but it is

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162 Ibid
clearly not the worst. It means that 26 other quarterbacks made a roster and started a
game even though they had worse numbers. Yet using stats to explain his failure to
secure a roster spot does not tell the whole story. Kaepernick cannot get a job because
the owners will not allow him into their sacred spaces.

The black quarterback, now out of a job, has hardly been idle during his free
time. He has been donating $25,000 dollars each month to charities such as Helping
Oppressed Mothers Endure (H.O.M.E.), I Will Not Die Young Campaign, Black
Veterans for Social Justice, a clean-energy advocacy group called 350.org, the
Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, and the Center for
Reproductive Rights in New York. Kap has also held seminars and camps to educate
children about healthy eating, human rights, household finances, dressing for success,
and handling interactions with cops. The 49ers were busy as well. They went out and
traded Kaepernick for a prototypical white quarterback, Jimmy Garoppolo, mostly
known for being Tom Brady’s back up.

Kaepernick faced the racism and oppression of the black quarterback head on,
making a statement on the field that confirmed the classic ostentatious reputation of
dual-threats. However, his so-called flashy actions brought attention to deeper issues
of police brutality. Though he used the football field as his platform, Kaepernick
transcended the game with a statement that extended into very real social and political
issues. He “forced us all to grapple with difficult questions about protest, patriotism
and free speech—issues many would rather ignore, let alone face as part of their

weekend entertainment.” Kap also exposed the extreme power of the NFL Owners as well as their fear of black males in positions of power. This fear was only intensified by Kap’s intelligence; with brains and national attention, Kap was a legitimate threat to a status quo that owners desperately wanted to maintain. The traction he gained did not align with league expectations and ideologies. And so he has been effectively barred from the game, thus becoming an example of what happens when a black quarterback acts outside the realm of accepted behavior.

Every quarterback discussed in this chapter has displayed the talent and ability to make it within the NFL. They expose the systematic way in which black quarterbacks are limited at the highest level. Looking at today’s six NFL starters, we can see the same story. First their draft pick is always racially contested by reporters doubting their skills and leadership. Next entering the NFL, their opportunities are minimal. Even while playing, a black quarterback’s leash is short and is pulled by the owners. By upholding football’s historically-established precedents, owners bring the institutionalized racism of America to America’s game.

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164 Ibid
Conclusion

Comeback Season

We’ve all seen it. A blowout game in sports where the other team has no chance at a comeback, where a loss is inevitable from the first snap of the game. We have also all seen the other side of the situation as well. A losing team crawls back into the game and contradicts viewers’ expectations. Within the ever-shifting game, failure can quickly become victory, and, of course, vice-versa. Right now, starting black quarterbacks are outnumbered 25 – 6. How can black players change the notion that a quarterback must be white to succeed? In the ongoing battle for racial representation in the quarterback position, African Americans are positioned to lose.

Yet again, the quarterback is a position of power, and is therefore reserved for white players. By what mechanisms is this racial stratification achieved? Owners, the wealth that backs them controls the league and dictates who gets to play. This means that players, who do the actual work on the field, do not have a say within the system. The league is currently 70% African American, so the NFL can claim racial diversity. Yet in doing so, they turn a blind eye to the undeniable whiteness of the quarterback position.

Within the realm of sports, statistics play a unique and divisive role in the perpetration of racial stratification. Analytics and statistics can be used by coaches and reporters to determine the potential success of a player. Coaches claim not see the skin color, stating that those who have the best statistical record will play. I’ve heard it many times on multiple teams. However, coaches and owners use non-analytical factors when
picking players for their teams. Far before a player even takes a snap, his abilities are judged from a personal, non-analytical standpoint.

When scouting for players, coaches and scouts look for those who are embody leadership. They want players who are strong, tall, cool under pressure, smart, confident. The quarterbacks who have been the most successful have all of these qualities. Obviously, they are also white. This is not surprising, as football exists within a country whose leaders are also predominantly white. White athletes are seen to possess more potential as leaders within football, because it is all football knows. It is cyclical. On the field, success has come from white quarterbacks, therefore young white athletes are taught to be leaders from the beginning. At a young age, they are given the option to play quarterback, while African Americans are forced out to into other positions not typically associated with leadership or intelligence. At lower levels, black athletes who want to play quarterback must become the best players on the field if they want to play. Coaches recognize this skill, and give these players the ball. But rather than honing more time-intensive, long-term skills such as throwing, these coaches tell young players to get the ball and run with it. Thus the dual-threat quarterback is created at the youth level. These black players are systematically taught to abandon mechanics and rely on their athletic ability. College teams have taken these quarterbacks and have found immense success. The Dual-threat is more successful in college because of the open market theory. Quarterbacks can leave and succeed at another school if they feel that they are not being appreciated. However, within the NFL, owners control who leads their team. Quarterbacks cannot escape the system by switching teams.
This begins with the annual racist propaganda against black quarterbacks during draft time. The selection process is a time where the few quarterbacks who have made it to the collegiate level are passed over in favor of white quarterbacks. This means that they will not get drafted. Even if they make it to the National Football League, these players still face racially-fueled scrutiny. Over the 80 plus years of the NFL’s existence, few black quarterbacks have made it long enough to prove themselves to white owners as worthy of starting positions. Yet how can this self-fulfilling prophesy be combatted? The NFL sees success in the white quarterback because the other quarterback is given fewer chances to play.

The systematic exclusion starts young and only grows stronger through each level. To overturn this notion, the NFL must act as leading example. This means shaking up the patterns of authority within the NFL’s management. It is clear that owners run the league; this elite club of wealth controls players behind the scenes. New owners must obtain the approval of current owners before they can join the board. The owners are predominately white and wealth keeps wealth in power; it’s cyclical. Examples like Tyrod Taylor and Colin Kaeperninc demonstrate owners’ lack of interest in supporting black quarterbacks. They are interested in keeping the game devoid of racial politics. The quarterback mirrors the owner and represents the franchise on the field. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that they are also all white. Equalizing the racial balance in the owners’ room would allow for the discussion of more diverse ideas within the meetings. This would promote the acceptance of diversity for head coaches, which in turn would translate onto the field and to the quarterback position. And if this racial diversity made its way through the NFL, lower levels of
football would follow its example. Young African American children would finally receive opportunities to play quarterback.

25 – 6 is the score we are facing right now. Every year, it fluctuates by one or two players, yet has never been remotely close to a tied game. Again, change must be set at the most public, elite level. The NFL’s system must change before major change can be seen at lower levels. Players join football for a variety of reasons. For me, it was a way to be close with my friends, to release my energy, and to actively engage in a sport. Yet as players mature, the sport becomes more organized and less recreational. The system becomes more rigid as winning games and leading the team becomes more important. And at some point for a few players, football becomes a job. For black players, it’s a job that is dictated by white upper management. It is a job that only values black players as physical bodies that enable success. The National Football League prides itself on being diverse and open to everyone but hidden are these racist tendencies and low margin of error for African American quarterbacks. Covert yet powerful measures keep black players out of the position. Football was originally a recreational game. It was meant as an outlet for entertainment. However, once the game was monetized and organized, racism proliferated. It is time to change this system. It’s too late for me to play quarterback, but not too late for young athletes and men on the brink of their careers and dreams. These players cannot hope to lead tomorrow’s teams if they are not afforded the same respect as their white counterparts. 25 – 6 is the score right now, but the comeback is on the way. The effects of an increased proportion of black quarterbacks in the National Football League would extend far beyond the world of football. It would create a generation of strong black role models, models that would
affirm the capacity for black success in leadership positions. It is time to take over the
game of football creating an all-around beacon of black excellence helping the rest of
society push forward a change in the current culture.
## Appendix

### Racial Breakdown of 2017 NFL Quarterbacks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teams</th>
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# Racial Breakdown of 2017 College Quarterback

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</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
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| Black Ratio | 23.44% | 40.63% |
| White Ratio | 76.56% | 59.38% |

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| Black Ratio | 32.03% |
| White Ratio | 67.97% |
Bibliography


Blezow, Dave. "Why Carson Wentz Injury May Kill Eagles' Super Bowl Hopes." 


Whitley, David. "Colin Kaepernick Ushers in an Inked-up NFL Quarterbacking Era."

