



**National
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Black Quarterbacks Leading More Teams in NFL

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"The NFL is entering the golden age of Black quarterbacks." Jason McIntyre, writing in "The Big Lead"

"Sports" is one of the most race-neutral meritocracies in America. From the record-shattering feats of Jesse Owens to the transcendent accomplishments of Serena and Venus, there is no doubt that African Americans can excel at the highest levels in any sport if given a chance. Historically, that chance has rarely been given to aspiring Black professional quarterbacks. For decades, the prevailing view seemed to be that while African Americans made good runners, blockers and receivers, they did not possess the ability or intellect to be quarterback -- the on-the-field CEO -- of a National Football League team. At one time, a Black NFL quarterback was as unthinkable as a Black American President. But, what was once a rarity is now becoming the norm.

In 1920, Frederick Douglas "Fritz" Pollard became professional football's first Black quarterback, leading the Akron Pros to victory in the NFL's inaugural championship game. It wasn't until almost 50 years later on the first Sunday of the 1969 regular season that James Harris, playing for the Buffalo Bills, became the first Black professional quarterback to start on an opening day -- and subsequently the first Black NFL quarterback to be a full-time starter at that position. From 1969-1977, with the exception of a six-game start in 1974 by Joe Gilliam for the Pittsburgh Steelers, Harris was the only starting Black quarterback in the NFL. In 1988, Doug Williams became the first Black quarterback to win a Super Bowl. A stellar few have joined them in the modern era -- Warren Moon, Randall Cunningham, Steve McNair and Donovan McNabb come to mind. But according to a 2012 article in Pro Football Weekly, "Surprisingly, based on the overwhelming majority of black players in the league, only four, or 12.5 percent, of the 32 starting QBs in the league on the final day of the 2011 regular season were black." The 2013 season has seen that number more than double.

The third week of this year's NFL season saw nine starting Black quarterbacks take the field for their teams -- the most in history. They include: Robert Griffin III (RG3) in Washington; Russell Wilson, Seattle Seahawks; Terrelle Pryor, Oakland Raiders; Colin Kaepernick, San Francisco

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49ers; EJ Manuel, Buffalo Bills; Geno Smith, New York Jets; Michael Vick, Philadelphia Eagles; Josh Freeman, Tampa Bay Buccaneers; and Cam Newton, Carolina Panthers. The trend is accelerating, and the new class of Black quarterbacks is making history. Jason McIntyre, co-founder of The Big Lead, a popular sports website, predicts that "It is conceivable that by week one in 2015, half the 32 NFL teams will have a black starting QB."

This is not to imply that we should only root for black quarterbacks. I began this column by noting how sports is largely a color-blind meritocracy. I still root for Drew Brees on Sundays, and most of the Black NFL quarterbacks will tell you themselves that race doesn't matter. Their only goal is to compete and win. But as we celebrate 50 years of African American progress, I cannot help but note that another barrier in sports is falling. More Black quarterbacks are getting a chance to excel on the field and earn the dignity, big salaries and endorsements that come with their success. That is good for football and good for America. Think about that as you sit back and enjoy another weekend of NFL skirmishes. And may the best man – the best team – win.

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