NFL More Bigoted Than Dixie?

By Sam Lacy

The question is asked: Why are there no black head coaches in the National Football League? But there is another question that could be asked just as often: Why are there so few black quarterbacks in the NFL?

Many are convinced that the answer to both rests with the adjective: black.

In major league baseball, the third base coach is looked upon as the man who is just one step away from a manager's job. At the moment there is only one, (Cuban) Ruben Amaro of the Chicago Cubs.

In professional football the quarterback is regarded as the extension of the head coach, a man who might well carry his experience and leadership qualities into the front office. At the moment in the NFL there is only one black quarterback, Vince Evans of the Chicago Bears—and each year he is forced to accept the role of backup. The last two years it was to Bob Avellono; this season it is to Jim McMahon.

There were a few breakthroughs in the past. James Harris played briefly with the Buffalo Bills and later with the Los Angeles rams. Joe Gilliam was installed briefly at QB for the Pittsburgh Steelers until he ran into personal problems. And Johnny Walton had occasional backup shots with the Philadelphia Eagles.

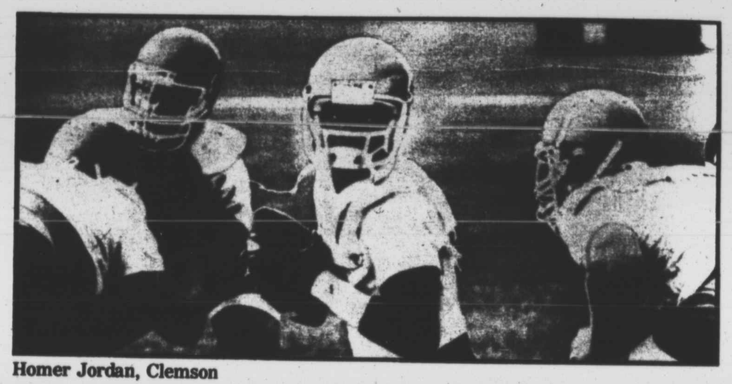
The early Bears had Willie Givens and in 1971, the Baltimore Colts drafted Karl Douglas of Texas Á and I in the third round. But neither Givens nor Douglas got closer to the field action than sideline charting assignments.

Aside from Evans, James Harris and Doug Williams, black quarterbacks have had minimal attention in the NFL.

The fact is that the NFL would not only have been guilty of oversight had it ignored Williams, it would have exposed itself to blatant discrimination.

In 1978, the year of his draft, Doug had been a 2-1 choice among the three major polls as first-team All-America. And Tampa Bay coach John McKay, who had experienced good rapport with black QB's during his years of college coaching at USC, drafted the Grambling star in the first round.

Yet, despite the team's success in reaching the NFL playoffs three times in the five years of his leadership, Williams was denied a contract for 1983 that would have kept him from accepting an offer from the United States Football League.



Homer Jordan, Clemson

Condredge Holloway, Tennessee

Donnie Little, Texas

In their first four games without him, the Buccaneers were winless and had scored just 43 points, an average of fewer than 11 points per contest.

However, though Harris, Evans, Gilliam, Walton and Williams were recognized, there are countless others who were never even considered as quarterback prospects in the NFL.

This despite the fact that many had outstanding collegiate careers.

One of these is Warren Moon who quarterbacked Washington to the Rose Bowl title over Michigan in 1978, and was named New Year's Day MVP.

Ignored by the NFL, Moon went to the Canadian League where he proceeded to direct the Edmonton Eskimos to four consecutive championships.

Another is Condredge Holloway, named Southeastern Conference player of the year while QBing Tennessee in 1974. This followed seasons in which the SEC had honored him as sophomore of the year, then junior of the year.

Yet, the Volunteers' "artful dodger," described by Alabama's legendary Bear Bryant as "a fellow who has more moves and is harder to get hold of than any back I ever saw," also was insultingly underpriced by the NFL and was permitted to go to the Canadian League's Toronto Argonauts.

Still another is J. C. Watts. The NFL didn't want his quarterbacking after he twice led Oklahoma to consecutive Orange Bowl championships with MVP performances. J. C. quarterbacks the Ottawa Rough Riders of the CFL.

Phil Bradley, who cracked all Big 8 records while at Missouri; Reggie Collier, who stood independent ranks on ears at Southern Mississippi; Eddie McAshan, who pioneered at Georgia Tech; Homer Jordan, the QB who guided Clemson to the national title in 1982, and Terry Elston, one of three black signal-callers at Houston from 1980-82, got no attention as QB prospects from NFL selectors in their years.

On the other hand, Freddie Soloman of Tampa was scratched as a QB hope and placed at wide receiver by the 49ers. The same thing happened to Derrick Ramsey, Kentucky's all-SEC quarterback, when he was drafted by the Raiders; to Florida's Derrick Gaffney by the New York Jets.

But Sandy Stephens of Minnesota, Cornelius Ellis of Ohio State, Jimmy Jones of USC, are among the scores of quarterback talents who were bypassed by American pro clubs.

It will be interesting to watch the NFL's evaluation of two of college football's most proficient quarterbacks when draft time rolls around next spring.

Alabama's Walter Lewis and Nebraska's Turner Gill are definite All-America contenders. But they're also black. As is the young sparkler at Oklahoma, Danny Bradley.

It is worth noting also that many of the quarterbacks mentioned in the foregoing played on college teams of the deep south: Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Texas, Missouri, Tennessee and Kentucky, among others.

Does this mean that acknowledged racists like Maddox, Wallace, Bilbo, Eastland, Bull Conner, etc., could manage to live with something the NFL finds intolerable?

Turner Gill, Nebraska

J. C. Watts, Oklahoma

Joe Gilliam, Steelers

Walter Lewis, Alabama

Doug Williams, Tampa Bay