

Gods of the Gridiron: The Racial Characterization of Quarterbacks in
Sports Illustrated

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Abstract

Race relations are constantly examined in the United States. The world of sports is a microcosm of the larger society. The positions of a football team are stratified and hierarchical much like race can be. Black athletes are often stereotyped as physically strong and white as cognitively strong. The position of the quarterback sits on top. This study is a content analysis of Sports Illustrated magazine from January 2007-December 2009 to look at recent race relations of quarterbacks in the National Football League. The purpose of this study was to track the differences in the physical and personality traits used to describe quarterbacks based on race. The character traits were also coded for having a positive or negative tone. Overall, black quarterbacks were characterized positively by physical traits and white quarterbacks were characterized \positively by personality traits.

In his 2006 novel *The Blind Side: Evolution of a Game*, Michael Lewis begins by explaining the evolution of the position of the left tackle in the National Football League (NFL). The job of the left tackle is to fend off anyone who tries to tackle the quarterback. At least one left tackle has historically been chosen in one of the top five positions in the NFL draft since the 1980's. (Lewis 2006) Teams pay millions of dollars for a quarterback bodyguard. While it can be argued that there are leadership roles on any sports team, few require the skill of a quarterback. They must remain poised while facing eleven members of the opposing team that's number one goal is to sack them. The outcome of the game sits in the hands of the quarterback. Intelligence is necessary for memorizing the playbook, overseeing the field and making clutch, efficient decisions. When black players were integrated into the NFL it became standard for the white player to remain quarterback while the black players filled in positions without any leadership or control. The position of quarterback, the most important position on the team, has been a historically white role. White players are constructed as intelligent and hard working while black players are often renowned for their speed and natural athleticism; meaning the skill is a gift they do not have to work for. (Dufur and Feinberg 2008)

Willie Thrower became the first black quarterback in the NFL in 1953 but the black quarterback received little attention. Doug Williams, Warren Moon, and Steve McNair emerged as prolific quarterbacks but their talent was sporadic. In 2000, the Atlanta Falcons made history by drafting Michael Vick as the number one overall draft pick out of Virginia Tech. (Billings 2002). This was a sparkplug for many to believe that the black quarterback was no longer oppressed. This paper will investigate the racial identity of the quarterback in the recent 21st century. Despite recent media attention focusing on the black quarterback, white quarterbacks are portrayed in *Sports Illustrated* as better leaders on and off the field.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The hierarchy of a football team fits in line with the institutional racism still embedded in American society today. The NFL does not try to hide their 'stacking' tactics. Historically, stacking is when people within a certain identity group are placed within a construct based on stereotypes (Billings 2002) Since stacking is a normal practice, often times black college quarterbacks are asked to switch positions to wide receiver or running back before the NFL draft. No matter how well they succeed on the college level, it takes an intellectual person to adapt to pro style offense and so some scouts say it would be in their best interests to take up a new position (Bigler, Jeffries 2008). Previous research has focused the treatment and the portrayal of the black professional football player and how the media perceives them.

Perception of Black NFL players:

The NFL 'Combine' is, essentially, a try out for college football players who wish to play in the NFL. Dufur and Feinberg (2008) interviewed 45 black athletes, 22 white athletes, and 12 who identified themselves as 'other'. In observing the Combine and interviewing the players, Dufur and Feinberg found that black players believe they experience symbolic discrimination. They feel that team owners look to them to see what peripheral roles they can play to help the white players shine. Coaches would often ask black players about their family life but did not ask white players the same types of questions. When interviewed by the researcher black players said they did not want to complain because people would think they were 'playing the race card' (Dufur and Feinberg 2008: 18).

Dufur and Feinberg also noted that the practice of 'walking the plank' was a humiliating experience for blacks (2008). Wearing only a pair of underwear, players at the Combine are paraded individually in front of league executives, scouts, and coaches while their height, weight,

arm length, body span, fat proportions, and other measurements are broadcasted over a loud speaker. No player enjoyed this but interviews with white players found that they viewed it as a necessary evil. Black players compared walking the plank to the slave trade. (Dufur and Feinberg) White players saw 'walking the plank as a way to make money off their bodies. Black players saw it as a way for high level executives to make money off their bodies.

How the media portrays black athletes:

Bigler and Jeffries (2008) did a content analysis of sportsillustrated.com and Sporting News' NFL draft coverage from 1998-2007 to assess what words were used to describe the athletic ability of black and white quarterbacks. Writers described black quarterbacks less cognitively able as their black counterparts. In the intelligence category, black quarterbacks are referred to as 'negative' 15.7% of the time where as white players were referred to as 'negative' 9.2% of the time. In the leadership category, 84% of the time there was no mention to the black quarterback's ability. The writers are not commenting on their leadership often. In the 'athleticism' category, 63% of black mentions to athleticism were positive where as 29% were positive for white players. In arm strength, 78.8% of black quarterbacks were referred to as having a strong arm where as 49% of white quarterbacks were. According to Bigler and Jeffries, this reinforces the stereotype of the physically stronger black player (2008).

Niven (2005) conducted a similar study about the 'Rush Limbaugh effect'. According to espn.com, Rush Limbaugh said the following about black quarterback Donovan McNabb.

"Sorry to say this, I don't think he's been that good from the get-go," Limbaugh said. "I think what we've had here is a little social concern in the NFL. The media has been very desirous that a black quarterback do well. There is a little hope invested in McNabb, and he got a lot of credit for the performance of this team that he didn't deserve. The defense carried this team."

Limbaugh was essentially saying that the black quarterback receives more credit if his team wins than a white quarterback would. After coding 10,000 articles in the 2002 season to determine if Limbaugh's statement had any credibility, Niven found that writers gave more credit to the defensive line rather than the quarterbacks. The writers would refer to how well the defense blocked for the black quarterback and that is why they were success; rarely did they refer black players being assertive (2005). When referring to a black quarterback, Additionally Niven found that writers chose to ignore race in their writing. Buffington (1999) in examining articles that contained the words 'black' and 'quarterback' found that current discourse favors the black quarterback. Buffington said that 50% of the articles he found emphasized black quarterbacks athleticism, mobility, and running ability. Buffington said the majority of his articles found that quarterback's ability to run was his best skill. When looking at quotes from black quarterbacks, 25% of them said that silence, writers not referring to their race, was a positive thing. Only 15% of black quarterbacks referred to race relations as getting better. In his research Buffington found that 15% of black quarterbacks do not find race to be a problem anymore citing a quote from black quarterback Warren Moon who said improper treatment of blacks was a thing of the past (Buffington 1999). Buffington and Nevin both found similar things. Talking explicitly about race relations might not be prevalent in the media today but words and characteristics still stereotype. Black quarterbacks are still referred to as having physical traits such as athleticism or speed which perpetuates the idea that black athletes are physically stronger.

In their content analysis of Sports Illustrated covers from 1954-2004, Primm, DuBois, and Regoli, (2005) found that black football players and basketball players were represented more than other black athletes. White players are pictured on the covers more often as a whole. The group coined the term 'the fraternity of white quarterbacks' because of the lack of

media covering black quarterbacks (2005). To them, fraternity was referred to in the sense that the white quarterbacks were a group that was not easily accessed and permission needed to be granted to enter the brotherhood. In his content analysis of race of athletes compared to the sports they play, Michael Shermer found that black athletes dominated certain sports (2000). The highest race to play professional football and professional basketball was black. According to Shermer, this is not a bad thing. In his findings he argues that certain races dominate certain sports. In his findings he stated that it was less of a hierarchy and more that certain races are better at certain things and it is neither positive nor negative (2000).

THEORY

Viewing the relationship between the white man, as the master, and the black man, as his property is not a new concept for Americans. From the earliest history classes, Americans learn of white people's capturing of Africans for chattel slavery and oppression. Most Americans believe this brutal form of slavery has ended. However, in his book, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise and Fall of the Black Athlete*, William Rhoden argues that the slave owner/slave dynamic still exists in professional sports.

Rhoden's theory is based on a series of dilemmas. Rhoden (2006) begins his argument with the dilemma of physical bondage and he refers to slave accounts of boxing and wrestling matches. White slave owners would hold fight nights where two slaves would fight each other for show. Rhoden argues that slaves did not mind the fighting because it let them release some of their aggressiveness and anger. Rhoden claims that these slave fight matches created the stereotype of black athletes' aggression and the idea that black athletes are physically stronger and faster than whites (2006).

The second dilemma is ‘the conveyor belt’ (2006: 171). This process by which black players get pushed into supporting roles began emerging in the late 1950’s. ‘The conveyor belt’ occurs as white executives compete to recruit black athletes in the commercial, professional sports world. White executives work to recruit these players to improve their team, who shine in the sports briefly, before owners send players to the backburner.

A conundrum occurs between the dilemma of inclusion without power and the dilemma of alienation. In the late 1970’s, professional sports teams recognized they could not win without black players. However, once the black players were on the team, they were expected to follow the coaches’ orders and be grateful just for receiving the change to play. This is inclusion without power. Rhoden mentions that Michael Jordan, the professional basketball player as an example. Jordan, like many others, was a product of ‘the conveyor belt’ (Rhoden 2006). Jordan became a worldwide basketball super star who could have been a voice for racial equality. For Jordan, his fame was a perceived privilege and not a platform for social reform. It does not matter how much money black athletes were making, they had no control over their careers. Rhoden notes that white players were proud to get traded and sold; it meant they were wanted and they had made it in the professional league. Black players identify this process of buying and selling with the slave system; they knew how their ancestors must have felt.

Rhoden’s theory on the plantation like atmosphere of professional sports has been explored in other studies. In their study “Race and the NFL Draft: Views from the Auction Block” (2008), Dufur and Feinberg note that while Rhoden’s theory explains how black players are treated like slaves, black players also internalize these racial stereotypes. Dufur and Feinberg and Rhoden look at ‘the excessive celebration penalty’ the NFL instituted in 1995. The penalty punishes a player, or a team, if they get too excited (dancing, chest bumping, high fives) after

scoring a touchdown. Rhoden believes this penalty is targeted at the black players because they usually the ones in the wide receiver or running back positions scoring the touchdowns and because they are more expressive with their celebrations. By contrast, Dufur & Feinberg (2008) argue that the 'old white executives' that made the law were not intentionally targeting black players. Rather, black players are paranoid believing they are treated differently when in reality they are not (2008).

In "An Amazing Specimen: NFL Draft Experts' Evaluation of the Black Quarterback", Matthew Bigler and Judson Jeffries take a more positive view of the place of black athletes. In *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, Rhoden discusses a CBS sports commentator's statement, "the black athlete is bred to be the better athlete". The white commentator was fired for his statement because it was perceived to be racially insensitive. Rhoden claims that the statement was referring to white coaches and owners 'breeding' black players for the team's success. By contrast, Bigler and Jeffries use the powerful image of the black athlete as a compliment. Black players were born with natural speed and strength and should use it to their advantage (2008).

William Broussard (2006) critiques Rhoden's theory. Broussard believes that Rhoden spends much of his time singing the praises of black athletes from the 1960's and 1970's who stood up for racial injustice. Furthermore, Broussard thinks Rhoden over generalizes that black professional athletes today only care about money and fame rather than racial justice. While Broussard recognizes that many black athletes may concentrate on money, he criticizes Rhoden for not mentioning the black athletes that are working for racial equality. Broussard states that Rhoden writes out of the 'Gramscian hegemonic' frame which views all members of a group as conforming to one frame of mind. While Rhoden thinks that black athletes all want to make

money and be obedient to the white men in charge, Broussard thinks that Rhoden needs to give credit to the black athletes who do not want to change.

Andrew Billings (2008) critiques Rhoden's notion that race relations in professional sports are typically handled in insensitive ways. Also, Billings argues that words such as strong and speedy, (often used to describe black athletes) are not negative words, but are objective. Billings notes that prior to the NFL draft, all potential draftees have to run the forty yard dash. If a black player records the fastest time and a white commentator calls them 'fast', Billings would argue that the black athlete is not being stereotyped. This is simply an objective fact. Billings argues that Rhoden is too concerned with playing the race card. However, Billings does not explore life outside the athletic arena and his research fails to notice that black involvement in upper level management is minimal.

METHODOLOGY

A content analysis is a technique for gathering and analyzing the content of text (Neuman 2007). The content can refer to words, meanings, pictures, symbols, ideas, themes, or messages. The text is any medium of communication such as written, visual, or spoken communication (Neuman 2007). For this research, 38 issues of *Sports Illustrated* from January 1st, 2007-December 31st-2009 were examined to determine the type of rhetoric used to describe NFL quarterbacks. *Sports Illustrated* is a weekly publication that provides comprehensive coverage of the sporting world and has approximately 3.5 million subscribers.

To get to the sample size the issues were narrowed based upon the cover of each individual issue. 'The Vault', the division of the *Sports Illustrated* website that was used to access articles, allows the user to narrow archives by sport. After the date range was entered, the

researcher used the search criteria of ‘NFL football’ and ‘cover’; meaning a story about NFL football had to be the focus of the cover of the issue. Once these issues were located, articles were chosen from the table of contents based on the following criteria. First, the description in the table of contents had to reference a NFL team, player, coach, owner, or league executive. Second, the articles had to be written by a senior news writer whose specialty was the NFL. A senior writer is considered an expert on their subject and has experience and authority in the area. Articles written by Peter King, Tom Layden, and Paul Zimmerman were used in this study because they are considered *Sports Illustrateds*’ leading experts on the NFL. (www.sportsillustrated.com) The third criteria used to select the articles was that articles could not be part of ‘special edition’ and ‘commemorative issues’. Opinion columns, interviews, and weekly columns were not included in the sample. The use of this criteria resulted in a final sample of 38 issues and 85 articles.

When coding for the word ‘quarterback’, each player was labeled ‘white’ or ‘black or ‘other’’. Thus, the ‘black’ or ‘other’ category included quarterbacks who are African American and Latino; no other racial groups were represented in the quarterbacks covered by *Sports Illustrated*. Using a study by Bigler and Jeffries (2002) these references were coded for the following categories: leadership, arm strength, accuracy, speed/agility, intelligence/decision making, natural talent, family life, and work ethic. “Leadership” is defined in reference to the quarterbacks as the ability to guide, direct, or be at the head of the team. “Arm strength: is defined in reference to the force of the quarterbacks passing abilities. “Accuracy” is defined in reference to the precision in which the quarterback can pass. “Speed/agility” is defined in reference to how fast or quick moving the quarterback can move on the field. Intelligence/decision making is defined in reference to how well the quarterback can grasp

the plays and how well quarterbacks execute those plays. “Natural talent” refers to the quarterback’s natural or inherent ability. “Family life” is defined as references to the quarterback’s relatives. “Work ethic” includes references to the amount of time and effort the quarterback puts into their position both at practice and outside of practice. The words were chosen partly based on stereotypes people have about each races’ athletic abilities. Each quality was coded for direction as well with either a positive or negative view.

Content analysis as a methodology can help to unveil messages or themes within text and images that are difficult to notice at first glance (Neuman 2007). However, since latent coding is being used as opposed to manifest coding, where a researcher is coding for specific words; this study is based on the researchers interpretation of the words. Only one researcher is doing the study so inter coder reliability cannot be guaranteed thus it may not be possible to generalize. A copy of the coding sheet is attached in the appendix.

FINDINGS

There were 38 articles coded with mentions of 43 different quarterbacks. Out of the ten minority quarterbacks, nine of the ten were black. Table 1 show that the position is dominated by white athletes.

Table 1: Individual Quarterback Mentions throughout the Sample

Individual Quarterbacks	Mentions
White Quarterbacks	33
Black Quarterbacks	10
N=	43

The categories of characteristics referred to by writers were coded by physical or personality traits. The physical traits were arm strength, speed, accuracy, and natural talent. The personality traits were leadership, intelligence, family life, and work ethic. Table two shows the references to physical characteristics.

Table 2: Physical Traits, Race and Direction

	Arm Strength	Speed	Accuracy	Natural Talent
Black Positive	7 (14.89%)	10 (58.83%)	6 (3.31%)	9 (75.00%)
Black negative	0 (0.00%)	1 (5.88%)	8 (4.42%)	0 (0.00%)
White positive	35 (74.47%)	6 (35.29%)	123 (67.96%)	3 (25.00%)
White negative	5 (10.64%)	0 (0.00%)	44 (24.31%)	0 (0.00%)
N=	47 (100.00%)	17 (100.00%)	181 (100.00%)	12 (100.00%)

Black quarterbacks have more positive references to speed than white quarterbacks with 58.82% of the mentions. Peter King writes of black quarterback Donovan McNabb's 'quick return' (9/3/07) or Tim Layden's reference to black quarterback Byron Leftwich's 'nimble swiftness' (9/3/07). Black quarterbacks positively outrank white quarterback's in the natural talent category. In a ranking done by Peter King, of the top five most naturally athletic quarterbacks listed, four of the five were black quarterbacks. (9/7/09) White quarterback's were characterized more positively in the accuracy category (67.96%) and it should be noted that

typically their accuracy was mentioned along with the difficulty of the plays they were running. Also, for accuracy, white quarterback's were characterized by play by play descriptions whereas black quarterbacks were characterized for overall performance. For their overall lack of mentions, black quarterback's received a positive rating of 14.89% for accuracy which is high. Layden characterized black quarterback Steve McNair as having a 'strong upper arm'. (9/3/07)

Table three shows the references to personality traits.

Table 3: Personality Traits, Race, and Direction

	Leadership	Intelligence	Family Life	Work Ethic
Black Positive	7 (5.6%)	1 (2.44%)	0 (0.00%)	8 (14.29%)
Black negative	13 (10.3%)	3 (7.32%)	1 (2.78%)	1 (1.79%)
White positive	86 (68.3%)	30 (73.17%)	30 (83.33%)	43 (76.79%)
White negative	20 (15.9%)	7 (17.07%)	5 (13.89%)	4 (7.14%)
N=	(100.00%)	(100.0%)	(100.0%)	(100.0%)

White players are positively portrayed as leaders (68.3%) King references white quarterback Peyton Manning as 'trusting his receivers when they have earned his trust' (11/16/2009) King is implying that quarterback and the receivers are not equals in this case and the quarterback is superior. An interesting outlier in the case of negative black leadership (10.3%) deals with Michael Vick. During the time the sample was collected he was found guilty

of partaking in animal abuse and dog fighting and was no long allowed to play in the NFL. There were more negative references to white leadership (15.9%) than black leadership. When a team loses the blame typically falls in the hands of the quarterback and this was the case for many of the negative references. Sports writers were almost silent on black quarterbacks and family life with only one negative reference. An interesting thing about the 83.33% of positive references made to white quarterback's family life, they were not dispersed across the quarterback's. With white quarterbacks and brothers Peyton and Eli Manning playing each other during the time the sample occurred, many of the mentions were for the much hyped game between their teams. This game typically only occurs every four years. With the eight mentions making up the 14.29% of references, positive black quarterbacks' work ethic can be placed in two categories. First, players like Donovan McNabb and Byron Leftwich were praised for their ability to rally and beat their injury. Second, black quarterbacks Jason Campbell and David Garrard were referenced their willingness and dedication to learning how to play the quarterback position. The white quarterback positive mention of (76.79%) for work ethic was different. White quarterback's were mentioned as working extra, or more, than their teammates from coming into practice early or reviewing videos on weekends.

DISCUSSION

Findings indicate that black quarterbacks are still represented more positively in reference to physical traits as opposed to white quarterbacks who are represented as positive in reference to negative traits. As shown in Table 1, it is important to remember that throughout the sample; only ten different black quarterbacks were mentioned as opposed to thirty three different

white quarterbacks. Keeping this in mind, it is important to note that when a black quarterback received seven or more mentions in a category it was a large amount.

Black quarterbacks received 58.2% of the references for speed and 75.00% references to natural talent which were all positive. Speed and natural talent are physical characteristics and both are ascribed and inherent. These are the two categories that black quarterbacks scored the best in by far. While the positive references are not a bad thing, the writers are praising the black quarterbacks for things they cannot control. By putting physical characteristics ahead of personality characteristics, it is saying that black quarterbacks are valued for their bodies, not their overall person.

A relationship developed between the categories of intelligence and accuracy. Intelligence can be seen in Table two and accuracy can be seen in table one. Black quarterbacks received more negative mentions in these two categories than positive mentions. The pace of an NFL game is quick therefore requires fast decisions. In order to score touchdowns, quarterbacks must have a quick release and be precise. Intelligence is necessary to be accurate. Black quarterbacks are referred to negatively in these categories. The articles referred to them as being overwhelmed by all the action on the field and making poor choices. White quarterbacks received the most positive mentions in the accuracy category. These mentions often referred to their poise and ability to block distractions. It was as though the quarterback and the receiver or running back was the only two on the field and no one else was there.

An area where a relationship did not occur, though one was predicted, was between natural talent and work ethic. It could be implied that if a quarterback referred to positively in the natural talent category then he would not be rated as positively in the work ethic category. If a quarterback is naturally good at the position, he should not have to work hard at it. The tables

show that the black quarterback is rated positively in natural talent, Table two, and work ethic, Table one, category. White quarterbacks did not receive any mentions of natural talent but were referred to as having a positive work ethic. Differences in the characterization of mentions were that white quarterbacks' positive work ethic referred to the amount of time the quarterback put in whereas the black quarterbacks' positive references were to the amount of physical force exerted. This is another reference to the physical traits of black quarterbacks.

Building off this point, natural talent, as seen in Table two is a physical trait and work ethic, seen in Table three is a personality trait. Looking to see the relationship between these two traits and leadership, seen in Table three, it shows that white quarterbacks have high positive references to leadership and work ethic. Natural talent does not seem to have any relationship to references about positive leadership skills. White quarterbacks are referred to as better leaders and harder workers.

These findings are supported by Rhoden's *Forty Million Dollar Slaves* theory, especially his point on physical bondage (2006). Rhoden wrote that black athletes have been stereotyped stronger as and faster than white athletes since the days of slavery. The findings show that black quarterbacks dominate the references to speed and natural talent. The basis for this research was that the black quarterback was finally solidified in the NFL world. Contrary to this belief, the findings are similar to Rhoden's 'conveyor belt' idea. Overall, there are not many black quarterbacks and furthermore, they are not highly referred to in the personality categories. This supports Rhoden's notion that white executives and coaches will work tirelessly to recruit black players but they are placed in peripheral roles. The *Sports Illustrated* writers have managed to cast the black quarterbacks, the leaders of the team, into peripheral roles and give credit to their inherent ability or their teammates.

After reading through the sample it is clear that the sports writers wrote about black and white quarterbacks differently. For the black quarterback, the language was about what they had to overcome and how they succeeded despite many things working against them. White quarterbacks were described as mystical and immortal. While black quarterbacks have had more of a presence in the NFL in recent years, the rhetoric used to describe them is that they are making strides but the white quarterback is still dominate and the better leader. The black quarterback is still subordinated because of the God like references that sports writers place on white quarterbacks.

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Appendix

Coding Sheet

Date on cover of Sports Illustrated:

Number of NFL related articles:

Number of different quarterbacks mentioned throughout the designated articles:

Racial Breakdown—

_____ # who were black _____ # who were white _____ other

	Black	White	Positive view	Negative view
Leadership				
Arm strength				
Accuracy				
Speed/agility				
Intelligence/decision making				
Natural Talent				
Family Life				
Work Ethic				