

Lamar Jackson and Patrick Mahomes: portending a different future for black quarterbacks?

On Sept. 22, 2019, the Kansas City Chiefs and Baltimore Ravens faced off in a battle between two of the National Football League's brightest stars, in quarterbacks Lamar Jackson and Patrick Mahomes. Although the Ravens held a 6-point lead after the first quarter, the team's defense fell prey to a Chiefs onslaught in the second quarter, as Kansas City scored 23 unanswered points. The Chiefs won the game 33-28, en route to the franchise's first Super Bowl victory in February 2020 against the San Francisco 49ers.

That September game may eventually reside in the footnotes of football history: a normal Week 3 game on just another fall Sunday in America. That contest, however, may be a harbinger of a different NFL that most football devotees have not yet seen, one in which black quarterbacks thrive in offenses tailored to their skill sets and inspire legions of fans to enjoy a new generation of stellar quarterback play.

In Sam Allnutt's thorough examination of minority quarterbacks in the NFL, he finds that lower-evaluated minority players are undervalued by the NFL's draft process. Whereas higher-ranked black stars — Heisman-winning Arizona Cardinals quarterback Kyler Murray comes to mind immediately — tend to be graded more fairly, lower-ranked quarterbacks may face more obstacles to carving out a stable playing career.

As Allnutt notes, racial controversy and discrimination is no stranger to football; from youth leagues on, black players are shepherded away from the quarterback position toward positions that rely less on intangibles and leadership. Despite a record-setting Heisman campaign in 2016 and a similarly astounding 2017 follow-up, NFL commentators, most notably former Indianapolis Colts general manager Bill Polian, ascribed the seemingly-perfect role for someone of Jackson's build: running back.

Production, accolades, and abilities be damned; a black quarterback is a runner first, and a passer second. Although Allnutt's analysis does not take into consideration players drafted after 2011, the recent play of black quarterbacks across the league is inspiring optimism for those who want greater parity in football's most important and influential position.

Mahomes and Jackson were the most recent two NFL Most Valuable Players and are at this point surefire stars, but the current spate of black quarterback success remains unprecedented in NFL history. Last season should have put to rest any lingering doubts of if minority quarterbacks can succeed in the NFL. Jackson, Mahomes, and Seattle Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson dominated MVP chatter last fall when all three scored in the top 5 in total quarterback rating, or QBR, for the season.

The rating, created by ESPN in 2011, quantifies all of a quarterback's impacts on winning. Fellow signal-caller Deshaun Watson dragged another decent Houston Texans squad to the

playoffs, and much-maligned Dallas Cowboys quarterback Dak Prescott threw a personal record of 30 touchdowns off of 4,902 yards. Four black quarterbacks finished with an elusive perfect passer rating in at least one game out of five quarterbacks total. Four black quarterbacks finished in the top five in total touchdowns scored last season. Four black quarterbacks led their team to the playoffs, and won a combined five playoff games. By any measure, black quarterbacks in 2019 excelled in ways we have not seen before.

And yet, racial controversy continues to rear its ugly head. After a 20-17 loss to Tennessee in 2018, Watson was castigated on social media for his performance. One of those comments, by Texas school superintendent Lynn Redden, claimed that “you can’t count on a black quarterback” to make “precision decision making.” The statement went viral and cost Redden his job. San Francisco 49ers analyst Tim Ryan compared Jackson’s skin color to a football and claimed that defenders could be easily misled by the quarterback’s fakes. Quarterbacks at the collegiate level, as Bill Polian’s earlier running back comment shows, are still subject to double standards when compared to their white peers, who are often considered more intelligent than they are.

The quarterback position is one of the few positions in any sport that has attained an almost superhuman significance in popular culture. Star quarterbacks are deified by fans and vilified by foes, and are almost always the face of their respective teams. Tales of winning under pressure and leading a team in the face of adversity typically feature a quarterback rallying his troops. As such, improving equity at the quarterback position is vital for how we perceive traits such as leadership, poise, acumen, and other factors that Hall-of-Fame quarterbacks possess.

In the past, pseudo-intellectual myths of subpar black intelligence buttressed the notion that only white players could play quarterback. Whenever a commentator suggests that a black college star transition to wide receiver, they reinforce, perhaps unknowingly, these Jim Crow tropes. Americans accustomed to football management shuttling black players to these more “athletic” positions may view the positive traits associated with quarterbacks as reflecting whiteness. An NFL brimming with black quarterbacks, however, could cement black leadership on millions of TV sets around the nation and eradicate many of the pernicious falsehoods that surround black athletes.

In this regard, it may be more important for us to look not at the top of the QBR rankings to observe progress on this front, but rather at the bottom of the depth chart. A stronger measure of where minority quarterback stands may lie with how NFL management views lower-performing black quarterbacks.

Allnutt writes that scouts frequently undervalue black quarterbacks during the draft process; they end up less heralded than their more successful peers. If this is the case, the next standard by which we discern the state of black quarterbacks in the NFL should be whether black quarterbacks that lack the talent of a Mahomes or a Prescott can stick around in the league.

The verdict on this statistic is historically not great, but more black quarterbacks are establishing themselves as backups and spot starters. Tyrod Taylor established himself as a reliable starter and back-up after making the 2015 Pro Bowl and leading the Buffalo Bills to the 2017 playoffs. Teddy Bridgewater was one of the most sought-after free agents this past winter after not losing a game for the New Orleans Saints, and should start for the New York Jets this fall. Others, such as Brett Hundley, Geno Smith, Josh Johnson, and Robert Griffin III still compete for backup spots. The Las Vegas Raiders signed Marcus Mariota to compete with Derek Carr, and Jameis Winston should land on his feet by the time training camp begins after throwing 30 touchdowns last season.

The future is undoubtedly bright for younger minority quarterbacks. Last year, Murray and Dwayne Haskins, Jr. were first-round draft picks and started for their respective teams; Murray went on to win Offensive Rookie of the Year and displayed tantalizing potential in spurts for the Cardinals. Alabama star Tua Tagovailoa and Utah State's Jordan Love, and Oklahoma's Jalen Hurts heard their names called in the first two rounds of this year's draft. Ohio State's Justin Fields led his team to the College Football Playoff, and a slew of other quarterbacks, including Arizona State's Jayden Daniels and Georgia's Jamie Newman, can increase their national profiles with strong seasons.

Minority quarterbacks have taken the league by storm as NFL teams have begun to design their offenses around the prodigious abilities that these quarterbacks have brought to the league. Alnutt points to discrepancies at the lower end of the talent spectrum as an indication that despite the success of minority quarterbacks, the NFL still has work to do to ensure racial parity at the position. Alnutt's research should serve as a springboard for the tough discussions we need to have in order to develop the mindsets required to ensure equal opportunity for all budding athletes. Hopefully, we will begin to view black quarterbacks, and black leadership, as emblematic of an NFL that supports the best of what our country's athletes have to offer.