

Black Men Can't Kick?

In a mixed society, one should expect to see a balanced ethnic mix in sports – the arena where fairness is the sine qua non, for sure. Having followed the NFL for nearly forty years, however, I'm puzzled: I've never seen a black kicker or punter on any NFL team. And, the puzzle doesn't stop there....

*

As some would know, the above title is simply a parody of a movie title from 1992: *White Men Can't Jump*. That was a comedy about a white guy (Woody Harrelson) who teams up with a black guy (Wesley Snipes) to hustle for money playing basketball, in and around the LA area. Recently, I got it from a local video store for another look-see.

As movies go, I enjoyed it – then and now – although I'm not a basketball fan at all. I can understand, however, those who do like it: it's fast, furious, non-stop action and demonstrates great skill and endurance. And it was hugely funny.

I like to watch a different game, however: NFL, the game I've followed since 1973, when I first went to live in Montreal, Canada. Initially, I was drawn to the Canadian league, but as I learnt more about both games, I eventually favored the American version. Among other things, I liked the fourth down that made for a more interesting game, albeit somewhat longer overall. Time for more beer, anyway....

So I joined the viewing audience when Roger Staubach was king QB at the Dallas Cowboys; when Dan Marino was showing the others how to throw long touchdown passes; when Fran Tarkenton demonstrated the art of scrambling to elude the blitz; when Ron 'Rifle' Jaworski drilled a pass like no other QB; and when other players – Tony Dorset, Franco Harris, Lynn Swann, Walter Payton, Barry Sanders etc – all became household names and weekend heroes across the continent.

For the twenty years I lived in North America, I'd watch every game I could during the season. Shoot, I even watched the Pro-Bowl. Putting aside the skill to play – if you can – the most interesting aspect of the game for me is the strategy: for example, watching the last two minutes of a nail-biter can be compared, I think, to the closing moves of a tightly-matched end-game in chess. And that's *not* a back-handed compliment because I love chess.

Getting to know the game means getting to know the teams, the rules, the plays, the strategies and, of course, the players – by name, reputation, skill and performance. Dallas was America's Team then; Pittsburgh was its nemesis; the cheese-heads in Wisconsin usually beat anybody on home ice, er, turf; it was the time when the 49ers began their steamroller progress to Super Bowl so often; the Houston Oilers were ...well, Houston's business was always oil really, *not* football; and as for the New Orleans Saints? What can I say? How times change – *that* team is now awesome.

During my NFL viewing, however, I began to notice – without even trying – curious aspects about the players: all QB were white (Warren Moon had departed for Canada before I started watching – although I saw him later playing for Winnipeg); most running backs were black; the majority of wide receivers were also black; yet, every tight end was white, as I recall. Weird, I thought. But there appeared to be a good balance between blacks and whites in the offensive and defensive lineups. On the other hand, I recall that defensive backs were mostly white.

What's going on here? I wondered. In any endeavor, selection of participants should be based primarily on competence, as we know. In reality, that doesn't always apply, for many familiar reasons. I puzzled about it though – even as I enjoyed the rough and tumble – because from my reading I knew that African-Americans represented around 12%, give or take, of the population of the United States. Even today, according to Wikipedia, the figure hasn't changed significantly; there is, apparently, much debate about what the true figure is, anyway.

After analyzing data at NFL.COM, however, what matters is this: African-Americans now form the large majority of players across the entire NFL. Within quarterbacks, they now represent over 30% of players – a welcome development, compared to forty years ago. The same applies to tight ends: 30% are now African-American.

In contrast, most of the offensive and defensive lineups I see on TV are now almost entirely black. The majority of wide receivers are still black; not only that, they're the quickest, according to [this news report](#). And now also, it looks like most defensive backs are black.

In the 1970s, the overall racial mix leaned towards non-blacks; today, the reverse is the case. Is there a trend here? Are whites gradually leaving the NFL? If so, why? The money's still good, even great for some, and would be the envy of most citizens.

Come to think of it, when I consider some other sports, it seems that non-whites also form a majority therein: basketball, cricket, boxing, martial arts, track and field, the World Game i.e. soccer (plenty of black kickers there), perhaps also baseball. Yet, in other areas, the opposite appears to be the case: skiing and other winter sports, sailing, rowing, swimming, gymnastics, tennis, Formula One racing, rally driving, NASCAR and so on are all sports where whites seem to congregate and excel.

Superficially, some of the reasons for the differences have to do with national and international demographics; national sports; national geography; national climate; and other peculiarities of the planet's overall topography and weather. There are positive factors, however, across a truly global world – an obvious one being improved opportunities for some and, one hopes, for many.

Sorting out the facts and the truth across the entire sports scenario obviously requires more research, however. Just as obviously, you could write a book on it. A quick online enquiry produced a heap of results about racial mix within sports, with one such [journal article here](#).

Concerning those NFL stats, though, I submitted an enquiry to NFL.COM describing my observations and asked for relevant comments. That was a while ago. I haven't received any reply yet. I didn't expect to get one.

What's more interesting to me, right now, is this: back in 1974 and thereafter, I never saw one black kicker or punter. Over the years, I might have missed one, maybe. Even so, I thought that was anomalous then. Today, the anomaly remains: I could not find one black kicker or punter listed in *any* NFL team, according to NFL.COM player listings.

So, what's the matter with African-Americans – can't they kick? I can't believe that, given the evidence of black kickers globally. Is it just preference then? Is it the money for those two categories? Is it the psychology of the NFL kicker/punter? What gives with kickers?

One thing is certain: it's not the physique. Here's another certainty: it's *not* funny.

Copyright 2010, Roger J. Burke, www.rogerjburke.com. All rights reserved.