2024

Historical Racism and Professional Football

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Defense Date: May 1, 2024

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Eleanor Miller for serving as my thesis advisor. Your guidance made this possible. I would also like to thank Max Girouard and Ryan Pepe for helping with survey testing, as well as Max Girouard and Scott Moser for their help facilitating and collecting the surveys. Finally, thank you to anyone and everyone who helped me in some way to complete this project.

Abstract

Ideas of biological differences between people of different racial groups have existed in the United States for centuries, either as popular belief or pseudo-scientific fact. These supposed biological differences have evolved over time as they incorporated new anecdotes and stereotypes. Today, the impact of these supposed biological differences can be found in sports through racial stacking. Stacking is a phenomenon whereby players of a certain racial group are more likely than players of other racial groups to play a certain position. This thesis investigates stacking in the National Football League, using both content analysis of football commentary and an experimental survey given to students at the University of Vermont who are members of men's sports teams. This project aims to contribute to the growing body of work focused on race in the sociology of sport.

I. Introduction

Existing work traces the idea of race in America to the very beginning of the United States as a nation. In a document entitled *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson wrote: "I advance it, as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind" (Jefferson, 1955). Historian Paul Finkelman argues that this quote from Jefferson can be viewed as the first recorded theory of race in the United States (Finkelman, 2001). Jefferson's suspicions were shared by the scientific community in the United States and abroad. In fact, Carl Linnaeus, the Swedish scientist famous for his contributions to the field of taxonomy, had already developed a theory that divided humans into four distinct categories, although they were

not yet referred to as races. Linnaeus ascribed both physical and mental characteristics to people belonging to these categories, unsurprisingly claiming that Europeans were superior to all other groups in both aspects (Hübinette; Wikström; and Samuelsson, 2022).

The rest of the scientific community quickly came to accept Linnaeus' theory, both in Europe and in the United States. American scientist Samuel Morton developed his own racial hierarchy of intelligence in the early 19th century by measuring the size of skulls from people of various racial groups. He used his findings to assert that white people were the most intelligent race, an argument that he and other academics would use in attempts to justify the continuation of slavery (Laboratory Equipment, 2018). Edward Drinker Cope, an American paleontologist, would argue shortly after Morton that every anatomical feature of the body was in some way linked to the mind and intelligence (Somerville, 1994). These theories were an integral part of scientific racism, and they were incredibly persistent. In 1995, Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray published *The Bell Curve*, a book that attempted to link intelligence to genetics and genetics to race in order to prove the existence of racial differences in intelligence in America. Despite severe methodological flaws, their work was quite effective in legitimizing what many people already believed because it appeared to be scientific (Taylor, 1995).

Although there would be less tolerance for an argument in support of the intellectual inferiority of a racial group today, the American public still largely believes in biological differences between racial groups, especially those two groups socially constructed as black and white. Disparate racial representation and achievement in various sports and differing medical outcomes by race are often believed to be evidence of these innate differences. However, the narrative surrounding these supposed physical differences has shifted since the era of scientific racism. While white people used to be thought of as intellectually and physically advantaged, it

is now commonly accepted that black Americans are athletically superior to all other racial groups (Khanna and Matsumoto, 2021). There is no agreed upon moment of transition between these two beliefs. There are some arguments for Jesse Owen's performance at the Berlin Olympics in 1936 as a challenge to notions of white physical dominance (Dyreson, 2008). Others identify Jack Johnson's victory in the heavyweight boxing championship of 1908 as a time when these perceptions began to shift (Foy and Ray, 2019). Regardless of when the narrative changed, black athletic superiority is the consensus today.

In a study of high school students, Azzarito and Harrison (2008) found evidence that children, particularly white boys, had learned and internalized stereotypes regarding black athleticism. This affected their attitudes and behaviors while participating in gym class, with or without the presence of black classmates. Foy and Ray (2019) studied commentary from collegiate men's basketball games and discovered patterns that emphasized Black physical dominance and white intellectual superiority. Their study provides evidence that stereotypes about racial intelligence and physicality remain linked today, even though the relationship between them has changed. These stereotypes lead to a phenomenon where players within sports are racially segregated according to the positions they play, an outcome known in sports as "stacking." There is strong evidence of stacking in American college football, where white players are more likely to participate in positions that are seen to require leadership and mental skills, such as quarterback, and Black players are likely to have positions where physical skill is seen as important, such as wide receiver (Siler, 2019). The nature of stacking in the National Football League has changed over time. Gradually, the quarterback position in the NFL, a place where white players have historically held a monopoly, has become more accessible to Black players (Buffington, 2005).

This thesis attempts to bring together the phenomena of scientific racism and positional stacking in order to investigate the connections between race and the positions played by athletes in the NFL as well as the narrative which both makes stacking possible and implicitly legitimizes it. I undertake two separate projects in this regard. First, I perform a content analysis of the commentary from NFL regular season games played by Lamar Jackson, a black quarterback, and Josh Allen, a white quarterback. I identify patterns in how commentators speak positively and negatively about Jackson and Allen with regard to their physical and mental characteristics as well as in descriptions of particular plays where they perform athletic feats such as throwing and running. Second, I conduct an experimental survey of members of men's sports teams at the University of Vermont that investigates the effects that stacking in professional football has on their beliefs about the association between the skin tone of athletes who play football and the appropriateness of their assignment to certain positions.

II. Content Analysis

Hypotheses

Every single play in a football game involves a series of decisions and physical feats performed by the players. Not all of these decisions and physical feats will be noticed by the viewer, so it is the job of the commentators to help the viewers parse the action and understand the most important elements of each individual play. This often creates scenarios where commentators could choose to emphasize a decision, a physical feat, both a decision and a physical feat, or fail to see the accomplishment as worthy of comment. These decisions must be made quickly, both as the commentator analyzes the game in real time, and as they analyze the replay that is typically shown before the next play begins. This type of quick decision making

might allow for racial biases and stereotypes to influence commentators' decisions. I explore two hypotheses regarding football commentary:

Hypothesis 1: Given the influence of the stereotype that blacks are physically superior to whites (Buffington, 2005; Dyreson, 2008; Khanna and Matsumoto, 2020), I hypothesize that commentators will more frequently discuss and praise the physical characteristics of a black quarterback than those of a white quarterback.

Hypothesis 2: Given the influence of the stereotype that whites are intellectually superior to blacks, (Buffington, 2005; Siler, 2019; Taylor, 1995), I hypothesize that commentators will more frequently discuss and praise the mental characteristics of a white quarterback than those of a black quarterback.

Hypothesis 3: Given the associations between black quarterbacks and running driven by the perception of running as a primarily physical feat and throwing as a mental and physical feat (Buffington, 2005), I hypothesize that commentators will praise a black quarterback's running and criticize their throwing more often than a white quarterback's.

Methods

My content analysis is based on a study by Foy and Ray (2019) about race in NCAA basketball games. They found that commentators were more likely to mention the performance and mental characteristics of lighter-skinned players and the physical characteristics of darker-skinned players (Foy and Ray 2019). My analysis is narrower and more targeted; I focus on race as an independent variable instead of using the finer lens provided by skin tone. I use football games instead of basketball games in my sample. Football is a good subject for this kind of analysis because it is clearly subject to significant racial stacking, allowing for analysis of racial

stereotypes within position groups (Buffington, 2005; Siler, 2019). Another advantage to using football for this analysis is the pace of play. In football, there is significant time between plays. After one play ends, the offense usually has 40 seconds to snap the ball and start the next play. This is airtime that the commentators must fill, as there is very little action happening on the screen. I found that this time is often filled with discussions of the previous play and (racialized) analysis that goes beyond an initial reaction.

I drew data for content analysis from NFL regular season games from the 2018 to 2022 regular seasons. I chose to focus my analysis on quarterbacks because they are the players that get discussed the most by commentators and the quarterback position is subject to significant racial stacking (Buffington, 2005; Siler, 2019). Race is also present in the way that different quarterbacks play the game. Black quarterbacks are more likely to run the ball, while most white quarterbacks rely more heavily on passing (Buffington, 2005). In the 2023 NFL regular season, the three leading quarterback rushers, Lamar Jackson, Justin Fields, and Jalen Hurts, were all black (Statmuse). With race and play style being the two variables that I was interested in, I looked for quarterbacks who represented each of the four possible quadrants created by the intersection of these two variables.

Lamar Jackson is the most obvious example of the black rushing quarterback. Jackson has had over 100 rushing attempts and 600 rushing yards in each of his five seasons with the Baltimore Ravens (ESPN). He has led all NFL quarterbacks in rushing yards in three of those seasons and ranked second in 2021 and 2022 (Statmuse). The best example of a white rushing quarterback is Josh Allen. Allen, of the Buffalo Bills, has reached 100 carries in all but his first season, in which he played in only 12 of 16 games. He has had over 400 rushing yards in each of his five seasons (ESPN). He has finished in the top three for quarterback rushing yards in four of

those years (Statmuse). Jackson and Allen were extremely convenient subjects for me because they are so comparable. Although Jackson does run more and pass less than Allen, they are overall quite similar and have both proven themselves to be capable runners and passers in the NFL. This means that the differences between the commentaries about them may be driven by the narratives where the racial stereotypes that I am interested in are likely to be present. Because they both entered the NFL in the 2018 season and played through the 2022 season, that also allowed me to control the time frame for my analysis.

When I looked for white and black quarterbacks who rushed the ball very rarely, the best examples I could find were Dak Prescott and Kirk Cousins. I planned to record the commentary from five games for each player, but once I began this work it became clear that using 20 games would generate too much data for me to analyze on my own for this project. I did not want to reduce the number of games I looked at for each player because having a smaller sample size would increase the likelihood that my sample would be less representative of all regular season games for that player. For these reasons, I decided to reduce the number of players I focused on from four to two. Prescott and Cousins were not nearly as statistically or stylistically similar as Allen and Jackson were, so I chose to move forward with only the latter two in my sample.

I used a random number generator to randomly select five regular season games for both Jackson and Allen from the 2018 to 2022 NFL regular seasons. The Lamar Jackson games in my sample were September 28, 2019: Baltimore at Miami, October 6, 2019: Baltimore at Pittsburgh, December 8, 2019: Baltimore at Buffalo, December 14, 2020: Baltimore at Cleveland, and November 7, 2022: Baltimore at New Orleans. The Josh Allen games in my sample were October 19, 2020: Kansas City at Buffalo, September 26, 2021: Washington at Buffalo, October 31, 2021: Miami at Buffalo, November 14, 2021: Buffalo at New York Jets, and December 26,

2021: Buffalo at New England. Replays of all NFL games are available through a subscription to NFL Plus.

I used Otter, a transcription application, to generate transcripts of the commentary for these games. Because I was focusing on individual players, I only recorded and transcribed commentary when the quarterbacks I investigated were on the field. This meant that I missed some mentions of Jakson and Allen while they were on the sidelines, but most of the commentary revolves around the players on the field so the times when Allen and Jackson were not on the field would have yielded a much lower density of relevant comments. I always started transcribing before the quarterback went onto the field, which was typically during the opposing team's punt or after a commercial break. When a possession ended, I waited until the commentators transitioned to talking about the next possession before I stopped recording. This approach allowed me to capture most but not all of the commentary about Jackson and Allen from these games. My sample included roughly 37,000 words of commentary from Allen's games and roughly 33,500 words of commentary from Jackson's games.

After generating the transcripts, I moved on to my content analysis which I performed using the software NVIVO. I first went through all of the data in search of comments that the commentators made that were evaluations of the quarterbacks' play. This included anything related to an outcome, process, or decision attributed directly to the quarterback but not criticism or praise of a group of players that included the quarterback or the whole team. In total I found 73 comments evaluating Allen and 94 comments evaluating Jackson. On this first pass through the data, I coded all of the evaluative comments by whether they characterized the play made by the quarterback positively or negatively and by whether the comment was focused on physical or mental evaluation of the quarterback. In some instances, a comment made mention of both

physical and mental aspects of the player or included both positive and negative characterization. These comments received both codes in the relevant categories. Examples of comments that I coded to the physical category include “Jackson, he just makes it look so easy with his feet,” and “And here’s John Brown running across the middle of the field… Allen missed him.” The word “missed” in the second example refers to Allen’s throw missing the receiver, not Allen failing to notice him. Examples of comments that I coded to the mental category include “That looked to be the right decision by Allen. He faked it to Zack moss took it himself,” and “Jackson looking to throw, Jackson will just throw it away. Another smart play in the development of Lamar Jackon.”.

After the initial coding was done, I went back through all of the comments I had coded to sort them into more refined categories. Because of the different expectations about running and throwing the ball that white and black quarterbacks face, I coded every comment as pertaining to either passing or running. Comments about passing were more common than those about running, as both quarterbacks pass the ball more often than they run. Some comments were ambiguous with respect to these two categories, such as comments about the quarterback evading the defensive pass rush. I only coded comments that explicitly mentioned the passing process into the passing category. Some comments pertained to both running and passing, so I coded them to both categories. A small number of comments mentioned neither passing nor running but still made evaluations of the quarterback’s mental performance. I did not assign a code for passing or throwing to these comments. An example of a comment that I coded to the running category is “You would expect some sort of option play for Lamar Jackson. Take advantage of his unique skills as a runner.” An example of a comment that I coded to the throwing category is “Good ball placement by Allen.”

Comments were also more likely to be about physical characteristics of the quarterbacks than mental ones. The most common comment for both quarterbacks was focused on the physical element of passing, so I was able to assign those comments to three subcodes: execution, mechanics, and ability. Comments about execution focused on the result of a passing play and mentioned things like a throw that was "too high" or a throw that was "on target". Comments about passing mechanics focused on the physical process of throwing the ball and how the quarterback used their body to perform an act that has been practiced and refined over years of playing football. An example of a comment about mechanics is "Real quick delivery just off the shoulder right there." Comments about ability discussed things like arm strength that are relevant to the quarterback's passing but are presented as innate or natural rather than learned and practiced. An example of a comment that I coded to the ability category is "That just shows you how strong Josh Allen's arm is."

While comments about the quarterbacks' cognitive abilities were less common, there were a small number of comments that clearly belonged under the "mental" code but did not directly describe running or passing. I created two subcodes under "mental" for these comments: chemistry and attitude. Comments about chemistry made specific mention of the chemistry the quarterback had with another player. An example of a comment I coded to the chemistry category is "Roman was talking about the chemistry between Jackson and Andrews. He said it's very strong and something you cannot manufacture." Comments about attitude evaluated the general effort, drive to win, or work ethic of the quarterbacks. An example of a comment I coded to the attitude category is "He's involved in a lot for a young quarterback, and he has grown. They see his work ethic and his passion for the game and how much it means to him." I used this content analysis to test hypotheses 1, 2, and 3.

Results

In the five games in my sample Lamar Jackson completed 75 of 112 passes for 926 yards, ten touchdowns, and four interceptions. He averaged 8.27 yards per attempt and completed 66.96% of his passes. Jackson also ran the ball 48 times for 322 yards, two touchdowns, and two fumbles. He averaged 6.71 yards per rush. In my sample Josh Allen completed 126 of 187 passes for 1,409 yards, 13 touchdowns, and 2 interceptions. He averaged 7.53 yards per attempt and completed 67.38% of his passes. Allen also ran the ball 34 times for 173 yards, two touchdowns, and one fumble. He averaged 5.09 yards per rush.

Mental Characteristics

Table 1 shows the frequency of comments in the mental and physical codes and subcodes for Allen and Jackson. There was a total of 22 evaluative comments made about Jackson's mental characteristics and 29 made about Allen's mental characteristics. These comments were more likely to be about passing than running for both players. There were a greater number of evaluative comments made about Allen's mental characteristics and passing than about Jackson's. Because Allen attempted far more passes than Jackson, Jackson received slightly more evaluative comments about his mental characteristics and throwing per passing attempt than Allen. Comments evaluating Allen's mental characteristics and his running were more common than comments evaluating Jackson's mental characteristics and running despite Jackson having more rushing attempts in the sample. There was one comment pertaining to attitude made about each player. Three of the comments evaluating Jackson's mental characteristics specifically mentioned the chemistry he had with other players on his team. None of these comments were made about Allen.

Table 1: Frequencies of Comments About Lamar Jackson and Josh Allen by Code

Code	Allen	Jackson
Mental	31	22
Mental- Running	5	3
Mental- Throwing	25	14
Mental- Attitude	1	1
Mental- Chemistry	0	3
Physical	44	74
Physical- Running	12	34
Physical- Throwing (ability)	11	2
Physical- Throwing (execution)	35	33
Physical- Throwing (mechanics)	2	6

Physical Characteristics

There were a total of 74 evaluative comments made about Jackson's physical characteristics and 44 about Allen's physical characteristics. For Allen, these comments were much more likely to be about throwing than about running. For Jackson, these comments were also more likely to be about throwing than running but the distribution was much closer to even. When discussing throwing, commentators made note of Allen's physical ability much more than his mechanics. Conversely, Jackson's mechanics were mentioned more often than his physical ability. For both quarterbacks, the majority of the comments about throwing were focused on execution. Despite Allen throwing 67% more passes than Jackson, the two received a nearly equal number of comments about their physical characteristics and throwing. Jackson was the subject of nearly three times as many comments about physical characteristics and running as Allen was while having less than one and a half times as many rushing attempts. Comments

about Allen's physical characteristics were much more likely than comments about Jackson's to fall under multiple subcodes.

Characterization

Tables 2 and 3 show the frequencies of positive and negative characterizations within comments about physical and mental characteristics as well as comments about throwing or running for Josh Allen and Lamar Jackson respectively. Jackson was the subject of significantly more comments about physical characteristics than Allen. A higher proportion of these comments about Jackson than those about Allen were negative. The two players had a roughly equal number of comments about their physical characteristics and throwing, but the comments about Allen were more likely to be positive than those about Jackson. Comments that evaluated physical characteristics and running were overwhelmingly positive for both players and were much more frequent for Jackson than for Allen. Despite being the subject of fewer evaluative comments overall, Allen was more likely to be the subject of comments about mental characteristics than Jackson was. Most of the comments about mental characteristics were positive for both quarterbacks. None of the negative comments about mental characteristics were about running.

Table 2: Characterization of Comments About Josh Allen by Code

Code	Positive	Negative	Mixed Sentiment	Total
Physical	36	7	1	44
Physical- Throwing	30	7	1	38
Physical- Running	12	0	0	12
Mental	25	6	0	31
Mental- Throwing	19	6	0	25
Mental- Running	5	0	0	5

Table 3: Characterization of Comments About Lamar Jackson by Code

Code	Positive	Negative	Mixed Sentiment	Total
Physical	55	17	2	74
Physical- Throwing	25	14	2	41
Physical- Running	32	2	0	34
Mental	18	4	0	22
Mental- Throwing	11	3	0	14
Mental- Running	3	0	0	3

Taken together, the data on physical and mental characteristics and characterization partially support hypothesis 1. The physical characteristics of Jackon are discussed more frequently than those of Allen. However, contrary to hypothesis 1, Jackson's physical characteristics are criticized at a higher rate than Allen's. The data also partially support hypothesis 2. Allen's mental characteristics are discussed more frequently than Jackson's, despite fewer total comments being made about Allen. Contrary to hypothesis 2, comments about Allen's mental characteristics were not more likely to be positive than those about Jackson's. The data support hypothesis 3. Jackson receives far more positive comments about his running than Allen does. This is somewhat mitigated by the greater number of rushing attempts and greater efficiency that Jackson has compared to Allen. While neither quarterback receives much

criticism of their running, Allen receives 32.7% of the positive comments about running while having 41.5% of the rushing attempts. During the samples, Jackson is arguably a more efficient passer than Allen. Allen has many more pass attempts, and their completion percentages are nearly identical, but Jackson produces more yards per attempt. Despite this, he receives a higher proportion and greater number of negative comments about his passing.

Discussion

I analyzed the commentary from NFL regular season games played by Josh Allen and Lamar Jackson, two quarterbacks, for differences that may be explained by race. I hypothesized that commentators would be more likely to discuss and praise Allen, a white quarterback, for his mental characteristics, while the physical qualities of Jackson, a black quarterback, would be discussed more often. I also hypothesized that Jackson would be more likely to be criticized for his throwing and praised for his running than Allen. The data provided some support for hypotheses 1 and 2 and strong support for hypothesis 3. This section will examine the ways in which the data supports and contradicts those hypotheses in greater detail.

Overall, there were more comments made about Jackson's physical qualities than Allen's, but Jackson was the subject of more critical comments, not more positive comments. Initially, this is a surprising result. It is, however, largely explained by negative comments about Jackson's physical characteristics and throwing. His throwing is much more heavily critiqued than Allen's. In fact, only three of the negative comments about Jackson's physical characteristics are not about his throwing. Of these, one relates to him missing time due to injury, another criticizes him for being sacked while attempting to throw a pass, and the third is about the higher risk he takes on by running the ball more than other quarterbacks. None of these are framed as direct

criticisms of Jackson's performance (the comment about being sacked is as much praising the defense as it is criticizing Jackson).

Throwing is an area where I expected the comments about Jackson to be more negative than those about Allen. Because negative comments about running are so rare for both quarterbacks, the greater amount of criticism of Jackson's throwing makes his physical characteristics more criticized overall. I interpret this as the connection between black quarterbacks and subpar throwing being stronger than the connection between black quarterbacks and superior physical abilities. A larger sample that includes more negative comments about the quarterbacks' physical characteristics and running might reveal a pattern where Jackson is criticized more for passing and Allen is criticized more for running because of this stereotype. Alternatively, Allen might not receive much criticism for his running because both he and Jackson are better than average runners among NFL quarterbacks. There is much greater variation in running output among NFL quarterbacks than passing output, as quarterbacks who cannot throw well do not last long in the league but there are many quarterbacks who run the ball very rarely.

As I hypothesized, Allen was more likely to be the subject of comments evaluating mental characteristics than Jackson was. More of these comments were made about Allen, despite fewer evaluative comments being made about him overall. Contrary to what I hypothesized, there was no significant difference between the frequency of positive and negative comments about mental characteristics between the two players. There were fewer comments made about mental characteristics than physical characteristics, and especially few negative ones. A larger sample may have revealed a stronger pattern. Alternatively, the assumed cultural connection between whiteness and intelligence may not have a significant effect on how football

commentators talk about quarterbacks. This question would benefit from further research and investigation.

Of the theories I tested, hypothesis 3 is most strongly supported by the data. Jackson's passing performance was equal to, if not better than, Allen's performance over this sample. Allen had more yards, completions, and touchdowns than Jackson, but he also had more passing attempts. Jackson's completion percentage was within half a percentage point of Allen's, and he averaged more yards per attempt than Allen. Despite this, Jackson faced more criticism related to his throwing. There was also a narrative present in some of Jackson's games about the Ravens as a team needing to throw the ball more in order to find success. One commentator had this to say about what he viewed as the Raven's overreliance on running the ball: "But we know at some point it's going to come down to it- you're going to have to be able to throw the ball against the more high-powered teams that can put up a lot of points." Ironically, this comment was made in a game where the Raven's scored 47 points, including 10 in a short sequence in the fourth quarter where Jackson almost exclusively threw the ball.

One of the more interesting patterns in the data was in the comments about physical qualities and throwing. For both Jackson and Allen, the majority of these comments were about execution. These comments focused on outcomes, stating that a throw was good or bad in some way without explaining why. The other subcodes for comments about physical characteristics and throwing were mechanics and ability. These categories are more concerned with the process behind a throw. Comments about mechanics evaluated the physical process through which the quarterback throws the ball. Comments about ability evaluated physical qualities of the player while presenting them as natural or innate. Good mechanics are the result of hard work and repetition, while a "big arm" is something that commentators mention as being a natural part of

the player. There were a lot of comments focusing on mechanics made about Jackson, compared to few made about ability. The opposite was true for Allen, as the commentators frequently mentioned his arm strength but rarely spoke about his mechanics. This is surprising, given the tendency for commentators in basketball to focus on the hard work of white players and the natural athleticism of black players (Foy and Ray, 2019).

Part of the explanation for this phenomenon undoubtedly lies in the fact that Josh Allen is commonly understood to be able to throw a football farther than most NFL quarterbacks. He is described by writers at ESPN as having a "rocket arm" (Hockensmith and Getzenberg, 2023). There is no narrative about Lamar Jackson having a "rocket arm" of his own. This does not, however, explain the focus on mechanics for Jackson but not for Allen. Most of the comments about Jackson's mechanics focus on his tendency to throw the ball from different arm angles, not just straight over the top. This is usually presented as a positive, although one comment mentions Jackson using an unconventional arm angle after a throw goes wide. Another comment focuses on how Jackson's throwing mechanics have improved, leading to better results as a passer. This comment specifically mentions the work that Jackson has done to make those improvements, making it quite similar to the kind of comments Foy and Ray found to me more often made about white players. I do not have a satisfying explanation for why this pattern is so dissimilar to Foy and Ray's findings. It is possible that because throwing is a skill associated with white quarterbacks, commentators are more likely to focus on the mechanics of black quarterbacks and the work that they need to put in to make up for this assumed racial disadvantage. This is another area where further research could prove fruitful.

Limitations

My findings in this analysis should not be generalized to the larger population of NFL quarterbacks for a variety of reasons. My sample size is quite small, including only two players and ten games. This makes it possible that any patterns in my data may be caused by chance, and not by the racial stereotypes that I hoped to shed light on. Lamar Jackson and Josh Allen may be treated differently from typical NFL quarterbacks for any number of reasons. Additionally, in my sample for Jackson, the game against Miami was a significant outlier. In that game, he passed for 324 yards and five touchdowns. That one game accounted for half of his passing touchdowns and nearly one third of his passing yards. It certainly could have had an outsized effect on the data. The effect of that one game could actually have been even greater, as Jackson only played for three quarters before being pulled from the game because the Ravens were winning by so much.

Another caveat to my findings is that all of the coding was done solely by me. Studies that have more resources, such as Foy and Ray's 2019 analysis of basketball commentary, use multiple coders for all of the data so that intercoder agreement can be measured. I did my best to code the data objectively, but that is no guarantee that another person would code the data the same way or even similarly to how I did. Additionally, the transcription software that I used, Otter, was by no means perfect. The crowd noise that is part of an NFL game often made the transcription inaccurate. When I was coding the data, I sometimes had to interpret what the commentator had likely said based on the transcription. Most of these cases felt trivial, like a sentence that began "the division of Lamar Jackson- just remarkable". This was clearly a comment praising Jackson's *vision*, not his *division*. There were some cases that were less easy to interpret, and for those I went back to the moment in the game to listen to the commentator myself. Even though this never gave me much trouble, it remains the case that Otter misses and misinterprets statements sometimes, which may have led to me missing some relevant remarks.

It does seem difficult for this to have significantly biased my results, as there would need to be a systemic issue that caused Otter to frequently miss a certain kind of comment in order to do anything beyond slightly reducing my sample size, but it cannot be ruled out entirely.

III. Survey

Hypothesis

It is well documented that racial stacking affects the positions that football players choose to play or are assigned to by coaches (Buffington, 2005; Siler, 2019). Football viewers are in a position to observe racial stacking when they watch games. Although the uniforms and protective equipment sometimes make it hard to notice a player's race visually, player names may act as a proxy for race. I test one hypothesis regarding the effect of racial stacking on football viewers:

Hypothesis 4: Given the long history and persistence of racial stacking in collegiate and professional football (Buffington, 2005; Siler, 2019), I hypothesize that football viewers will be more willing to assign darker skinned athletes to positions where black players are typically overrepresented and lighter skinned athletes to positions where white players are typically overrepresented.

Methods

The goal of my survey was to identify if racial stacking has an effect on which positions football viewers believe are appropriate for athletes. To do this, I created an experimental survey where respondents were asked to imagine that they were the coach of a hypothetical football team. They were then presented with pictures of nine current and former NBA players and asked to assign each of them to the position where they would perform best. Respondents were given

the options of quarterback, tight end, cornerback, and running back for each athlete. Quarterback and tight end are positions where white players are typically overrepresented while black players are typically overrepresented at the cornerback and running back positions (Siler, 2019).

I chose to use NBA athletes as the hypothetical football players because they are athletic enough to play a professional sport, even though not all of them have good body types for football. It was also easy to find pictures of NBA players that showed all or most of their bodies. Using professional athletes came with the downside of recognizability: it was possible for respondents to know things about the players I used that would affect their answers. In an effort to counteract this, I instructed respondents to consider only the physical qualities of the athletes when assigning them to positions. This would, in theory, leave only the physical differences between the athletes and the respondents' unconscious associations to determine which positions the athletes were assigned to. I expected racial stacking in football to have a powerful effect on which positions respondents assigned the athletes to.

I selected the NBA athletes included in the study based on two variables: skin tone and size. I first created three size groupings where I tried to find players with comparable heights and height-to-weight ratios. This was an attempt to control for variables like height and bulk that are relevant for determining which football positions are appropriate for a player. Within each size category I found a player with light skin, a player with moderately dark skin, and a player with dark skin. This gave me a total of nine athletes in the survey. The survey and instructions given to respondents can be found in Appendix A.

I administered this survey to a sample of 26 respondents, who were all members of the UVM men's club baseball or men's hockey teams. I got back 25 completed or mostly completed surveys. The goal of this sample population was not to be representative but to minimize non-

response due to lack of football knowledge. I believed that people who were on the baseball or hockey teams would be more likely than the general population to know enough about football in order to complete the survey. I used this survey to test hypothesis 4.

Results

Table 4 displays the results of the survey. The first column has the player's name, while the next two columns show which size and skin color group that player belongs to. The next four columns display the frequency at which that player was selected for each of the four available positions: quarterback, tight end, running back, and corner back. The last two columns record the total number of responses given for that player and the number of respondents who did not give an answer for that player. Quarterback and tight end are positions where white players are overrepresented, while running back and cornerback are positions where black players are overrepresented.

Table 4: Survey Responses by Player (N=25)

Player	Size	Skin	QB	TE	RB	CB	Total	non-response
Nash	small	light	13	0	7	4	24	1
Young	small	medium	3	1	15	6	25	
Morant	small	dark	7	3	4	11	25	
Doncic	medium	light	5	19	1	0	25	
Tatum	medium	medium	9	10	1	4	24	1
Bridges	medium	dark	10	7	0	8	25	
Jokic	large	light	3	17	1	4	25	
Gobert	large	medium	3	13	2	5	23	2
Durant	large	dark	9	6	2	6	23	2

This data provides some support for hypothesis 4. Within each size category, the player with the lightest skin is placed most often at quarterback or tight end. In the medium and large size categories, the player with the darkest skin is the least likely to be placed at quarterback or tight end. In the small size category, the player with medium skin is least likely to be placed at quarterback or tight end.

Discussion

While the data from the survey mostly support hypothesis 4, the relationship between skin tone and positional assignment does not appear to be very strong or consistent between athletes. Some players, like Luka Doncic, are overwhelmingly placed in the positions I would expect given their skin color. Other players, like Jayson Tatum and Mikal Bridges, are more likely to be placed in positions that are racially stacked towards white players despite not being in the lightest skin tone group. I suspect that Tatum and Bridges ended up so heavily represented in the positions that are typically played by white players in large part because of the inclusion of the tight end position. Tight ends are often taller and usually bulkier than quarterbacks, running backs, and cornerbacks. Players from the medium and large size groups are taller than the players in the small group. Their height may have been a more significant variable than their skin tone in determining where respondents placed them, as many respondents cited an athlete's height when placing them at tight end. In hindsight, I believe the survey design would have been improved by eliminating the tight end position as an option, because it is the only position included that is uniquely suited towards a different body type- tall players.

Despite this flaw, there was some interesting data in the explanations provided by respondents. Two respondents invoked race in their explanations, both times to justify placing

Steve Nash, part of the lightest skin tone group, at quarterback. This clearly demonstrates that the connection between whiteness and quarterback has been absorbed by those respondents. They had learned that quarterbacks are supposed to be white and used that knowledge to make their decision. One common occurrence was players being deemed “to skinny” or “too thin” to play any position other than quarterback. Many respondents seemed to see shortcomings in physical strength or bulk as being disqualifying for the other positions, but acceptable for a quarterback. This could have something to do with quarterbacks mostly being white combined with the stereotype of white athletes being less athletic, but I believe it is more likely to be caused by a belief that quarterback is simply a less physically demanding position than the other options.

Despite instructions to only place athletes in positions based on their physical characteristics, many respondents used non-physical characteristics to justify their choices. Terms like “IQ” and “vision” were frequently mentioned when placing an athlete at quarterback. This is unsurprising, as those are skills that quarterbacks are expected to have and are connected to the overrepresentation of white players at the position (Buffington, 2005). Traits like “quickness” and “good hops” were often used to explain placing an athlete at cornerback or running back. These cases are example of athletes being assigned to positions where black players are overrepresented because of physical strengths that are stereotypically associated with black people.

Limitations

The data from this survey is not generalizable because of the sample. The sample size of 25 respondents is simply too small. Additionally, the sample is non-representative in the extreme, as all of the respondents are men, students at the University of Vermont, and members of the

hockey or baseball teams. There are also a number of issues with the survey's design and execution that make it an imperfect tool for measuring the effects of stacking on which positions football viewers believe are appropriate for athletes with different skin tones. As I discussed in the previous section, respondents frequently used non-physical characteristics of the athletes when explaining their answers despite being instructed not to. Under ideal circumstances, this would not have been possible because the survey would have used pictures of athletic people who were unknown to the respondent. I did not have access to a group of extremely athletic people or pictures that I could use that were not of well-known athletes. Even the pictures of NBA players left much to be desired as the pictures were not standardized and showed varying amounts of the athletes' bodies. They were the best solution that I could come up with, but the recognizability clearly affected where the athletes were placed. Respondents who placed Steve Nash at quarterback often referenced his reputation for being a great passer when he played in the NBA. There were clearly other variables besides skin tone and size that affected the positional assignments that I had not successfully accounted for.

Another issue was that my attempts to control for weight or bulkiness were insufficient. I did not find NBA athletes of the appropriate skin tones that were truly comparable in their height-to-weight ratios. Nikola Jokic in particular is an outlier in the large size group, being significantly bulkier than Kevin Durant or Rudy Gobert. This makes it impossible for me to point to his lighter skin as the primary reason why he was placed at the primarily white positions so often, especially when tight ends tend to be bulkier than quarterbacks, cornerbacks, and running backs. Bulk was also not quite even among the players in the other size categories either, so it was likely an active variable throughout the survey. Additionally, I sorted the players into skin tone groups based solely on my idea of what their skin looked like. Using only myself as a judge

of skin tone leaves this element of the survey vulnerable to bias. An ideal approach would have been to use input from many people on the skin tones of the different athletes in order to ensure that individuals I placed in the same skin tone category would be perceived that way by respondents. For these reasons, I am unable to claim that the patterns that show up in the survey data are caused primarily by skin tone.

IV. Conclusions

This thesis takes an approach to analyzing the role of race in football that, as far as I am aware, has not been taken in previous research. Although the content analysis that I perform is similar to Foy and Ray's work (2019), they focus on basketball instead of football. The prominence of racial stacking in football makes it an especially intriguing subject for this kind of analysis, as results may be dramatically different for different position groups. My work does not utilize a representative enough sample to draw strong conclusions, but it largely supports the hypotheses that a white quarterback will be praised and discussed more for their mental characteristics, while a black quarterback will be praised and discussed more for their physical characteristics. The data that I have also provide support for the hypothesis that a black quarterback will be praised more often for their running and criticized more often for their throwing than a white quarterback. I suspect that there are quarterbacks in the NFL who might serve as counterexamples to my hypotheses, and I believe that sociology of sport as a discipline could benefit from thorough research into the similarities and differences in commentary about black and white quarterbacks.

It is difficult to draw conclusions from the survey data I gathered, both due to the size and composition of the sample and the methodological difficulties in designing it. Nevertheless,

evidence of the effects of stacking showed up in the written explanations that respondents provided. Buffington (2005) and Siler (2019) both provide solid theories for the causes of stacking in football, but there is a lack of research into how stacking affects the people who constantly observe it without having their attention drawn to it. I am not sure that I found the correct approach to measure the effects of stacking, but I am quite confident that they exist and are measurable.

Final Thoughts

This thesis came out of a conversation that I walked in on while my roommates were watching football in the fall of 2022. They were talking about different types of quarterbacks and were trying to come up with an example of a black quarterback who could be described as a "pocket passer" (a quarterback who is primarily known for their ability to stay relatively immobile and complete passes to their receivers). While they could identify many examples of white pocket passers, the only name they could come up with for a black pocket passer was Tyrod Taylor, a quarterback who has seen little success and has primarily been a backup throughout his career. Listening to their conversation, I realized that they were describing a sociologically relevant phenomenon.

One thing that I have learned in my four years of studying sociology is that the people we see in certain positions affects who we believe can hold those positions. This is just as true of football positions as it is of offices like President of the United States. Siler notes that one of the causes of stacking in football is a lack of role models for young football players who do not match the typical racial profile of certain positions (Siler, 2019). It is hard for a young, white football player to envision themself as a cornerback because of how few white cornerbacks there are in the NFL. The same is true for a black child and the position of tight end. This leads to

players choosing to play positions that fit the stereotypes they cannot help but notice. Sports can often feel like a microcosm of society, and football does an excellent job of emulating the real world in this regard. During the fall and winter, millions of people watch football every Sunday. Each player that appears at any position sends a message to every viewer about the type of person that can play that position. Likewise, each person who holds a position in our society sends a message to everyone who sees them in that position about the type of person who should hold that position. Football players are very visible, especially to the people who watch and play football. The racial composition of quarterbacks or cornerbacks in the NFL may seem innocuous, but it says something about who we believe is smart enough to find an open receiver or athletic enough to cover one, and those beliefs are bigger than football.

Appendix A: Survey Instructions and Content

Research Information Sheet

Title of Study: Attitudes About Appropriate Body Types for Football

Principal Investigator (PI): Evan Leaf

Faculty Sponsor: Eleanor Miller

Funder: University of Vermont College of Arts and Sciences

Introduction

You are being invited to take part in this research study because you are a student at UVM and a member of a sports team. This study is being conducted by Evan Leaf at the University of Vermont.

Purpose

This study is being conducted to gain insight into how sports fans infer athletic capabilities from physical features.

Study Procedures

If you take part in the study, you will be asked to fill out a survey. During the survey, you will be asked to imagine that you are the head coach of a theoretical football team. You will be shown pictures of NBA basketball players who want to join your football team and must decide which of four positions: quarterback, running back, cornerback, or tight end you think they would be most likely to succeed in. Please consider only the physical qualities these players possess when making your decisions. If you are familiar with any non-physical characteristics these athletes have that you believe may make them well

suited for a specific football position, please ignore them to the best of your ability. For each player you must choose the single position that you think they are best suited for physically. Space will be provided for you to explain the reasoning behind your decision. Explanations are not required, but they would be helpful in analyzing the results of the survey. If, after starting the survey, you feel like you do not know enough about football to make informed decisions please do not submit your answers. If you withdraw from the survey for this reason, please write "void" across the first page.

You may choose not to answer some questions while remaining in the study. The study will take roughly 10-20 minutes to complete and will require only one session. After the survey is completed, your active participation in the study will be over.

Benefits

As a participant in this research study, there is no direct benefit for you; however, information from this study may benefit other people now or in the future.

Risks

We will not collect any information that will identify you to protect your confidentiality.

Costs

There will be no costs to you for participation in this research study.

Compensation

You will not be paid for taking part in this study.

Confidentiality

All information collected about you during the course of this study will be stored without any identifiers. No one will be able to match you to your answers.

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You are free to not answer any questions or withdraw at any time. You may choose not to take part in this study, or if you decide to

take part, you can change your mind later and withdraw from the study. Because your data will be anonymized, you will not be able to withdraw from the study after completing the survey.

Questions

If you have any questions about this study now or in the future, you may contact me, Evan Leaf, at the following phone number 413-404-2040. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, then you may contact the Director of the Research Protections Office at (802) 656-5040.

1) Mikal Bridges

Height: 6 feet, 6 inches

At which of the following positions do you think Mikal Bridges would be most likely to succeed?

a) Quarterback

b) Running back

c) Cornerback

d) Tight end

Explanation:

2) Ja Morant

Height: 6 feet, 3 inches

At which of the following positions do you think Ja Morant would be most likely to succeed?

a) Quarterback

b) Running back

c) Cornerback

d) Tight end

Explanation:

3) Luka Doncic

   Height: 6 feet, 7 inches

At which of these positions do you think Luka Doncic would be most likely to succeed?

a) Quarterback

b) Running back

c) Cornerback

d) Tight end

Explanation:

4) Jayson Tatum

Height: 6 feet, 8 inches

At which of the following positions do you think Jayson Tatum would be most likely to succeed?

a) Quarterback

b) Running back

c) Cornerback

d) Tight end

Explanation:

5) Kevin Durant

Height: 6 feet, 10 inches

At which of the following positions do you think Kevin Durant would be most likely to succeed?

a) Quarterback

b) Running back

c) Cornerback

d) Tight end

Explanation:

6) Trae Young

Height: 6 feet, 1 inch

At which of the following positions do you think Trae Young would be most likely to succeed?

a) Quarterback

b) Running back

c) Cornerback

d) Tight end

Explanation:

7) Nikola Jokic

   Height: 6 feet, 11 inches

At which of the following positions do you think Nikola Jokic would be most likely to succeed?

a) Quarterback

b) Running back

c) Cornerback

d) Tight end

Explanation:

8) Rudy Gobert

Height: 7 feet, 1 inch

At which of the following positions do you think Rudy Gobert would be most likely to succeed?

a) Quarterback

b) Running back

c) Cornerback

d) Tight end

Explanation:

9) Steve Nash

Height: 6 feet, 3 inches

At which of the following positions do you think Steve Nash would be most likely to succeed?

a) Quarterback

b) Running back

c) Cornerback

d) Tight end

Explanation:

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