

I DIDN'T DO IT!

By George Taliaferro

I read that Fritz Pollard is considered the first pro quarterback, and for a second it startled me. Then I realized they meant “quarterback” as play-caller. In Pollard’s day – the 1920s – play-callers were almost always tailbacks or blocking backs in a singlewing formation. Some teams in the old days lined up in a T with the quarterback a couple of yards behind center and then shifted into a wing. If a team actually ran out of the old-fashioned T, the so-called quarterback functioned more like a shallow tailback.

The first African-American to play as a modern T-formation quarterback in the NFL was Willie Thrower. As a matter of fact, his hometown of New Kensington, PA, recently put up a plaque announcing his deed.

From time to time, instead of Willie Thrower, I’ve been nominated as the first modern T-formation quarterback. The timing is close, but I’ve always bowed to Willie.

First off, I was drafted as a halfback both by the AAFC Los Angeles Dons and the NFL Chicago Bears in 1949. The Dons made me their first pick and I signed with them. Over the next couple of years, I played for the Dons, the New York Yanks, and the Dallas Texans. I often took snaps in what has become known as a “shotgun” formation because I was a triple-threat.

However, I never took snaps up under center which is the thing that distinguishes a modern T-quarterback from those who came before.

In 1953, I was with the Baltimore Colts, the team that had succeeded the Texans in the NFL. That year, the Bears signed Willie Thrower who had been the first black quarterback in the Big 10 while at Michigan State. The Bears listed Willie as a quarterback on their roster. That’s important. Because of the variety of plays used in a game and the changes caused by free substitution, a player might begin a play at almost any position. But, whatever a team lists as a player’s position is what the team and his coach thought his position was. The Bears thought of Willie as a quarterback.

Against San Francisco on October 18, Bears Coach George Halas replaced a shaky George Blanda with Thrower who went on to complete three of eight passes for 27 yards. One of his throws went for an interception. The 49ers won 35-28. Shortly after that, Thrower was released by the Bears, but his place in history was secure.

Meanwhile, the Colts were having serious problems with quarterback injuries. First, regular Fred Enke was hurt, then his back-ups went down one-by-one. I remember I was walking to practice with Gino Marchetti, one of my teammates, when our coach, Keith Molesworth, came up to me and asked if I’d ever played quarterback. I told him I’d taken direct snaps as a tailback.

Molesworth, asked me if I’d ever taken snaps under center. When I assured him that I hadn’t, he said, “Well, there’s nothing to it. Just take a couple of snaps and you’ll get used to it.”

Needless to say, Coach Molesworth had never taken snaps under center. It’s not easy, and it takes a lot more than a couple of practice snaps to turn around and do it in a game. As much as I enjoyed the shotgun position I hated the T-quarterback slot. No one rooted more than I for Fred Enke to get healthy.

Everyone should remember Willie Thrower as the first black modern T-quarterback. He deserves the honor.

As for me, I hope I'll be remembered as a player who could do a lot of things and worked hard to do them as well as possible. The teams I played on didn't have the greatest records, but we had some Hall of Famers in Len Ford, Artie Donovan, and Marchetti. I like to think that I belonged in their company.