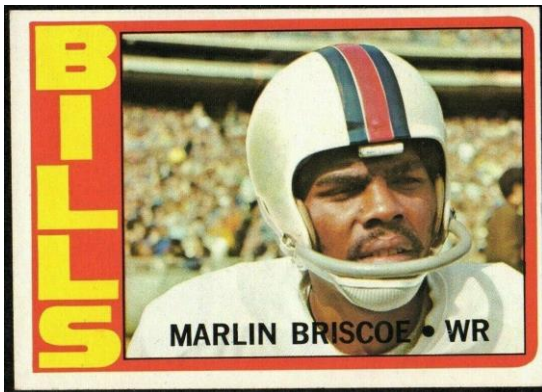


Marlin Briscoe

This article was written by Robert Blackstock.

This is the story of Marlin Briscoe who was undeniably an extremely talented football player. He was more than that though and led a remarkable life; He was the first black starting quarterback in professional football and a 2-time Super Bowl champion. He was also a civil rights trailblazer, multiple hall of famer, coach, college graduate, educator, author and honoree of a statue. But he was also a one-time drug addict, police brutality victim and a kidnap victim.



Marlin Briscoe was born on September 10, 1945 in Oakland, California to Marlin Briscoe and Geneva Moore. His parents broke up when Marlin was four years old. Marlin, his sister and mother moved to Omaha, Nebraska. Marlin's mother got a job in a meatpacking plant. To Marlin, his mother was remarkable and resilient. Neighborhood children sought her advice. She was the treasurer at church. Eventually she took a job in the cafeteria at Omaha University where Marlin attended and acted as a den mother to all the guys on campus both black and white.

Marlin's cousin Bob Rose introduced Marlin to sports. Bob taught Marlin how to play baseball, football, basketball, soccer and boxing. Bob taught school and played quarterback and basketball at the University of Omaha. Bob coached Gayle Sayers and Johnny Rodgers. However, he was not allowed to coach high school sports because he was black. Marlin excelled in sports with help from Bob's coaching.

Marlin practiced constantly. He watched football on TV and loved watching Johnny Unitas. Marlin noticed how he commanded respect and was cool under fire during the game. Marlin loved playing quarterback. He played quarterback in Pop Warner leagues and was a star.



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Marlin alternated at quarterback at South High School in South Omaha. During his senior year he played strictly running back but didn't complain because he was a team player. His team won the city championship, and he was the All-City running back. Marlin also starred in basketball. He demonstrated leadership abilities as he was selected the team captain in both football and basketball.

Marlin was the first black elected to student council at his high school, and during his senior year he was elected president of student council. Marlin selected Omaha University (today it is called University of Nebraska Omaha) for college. He received partial scholarships in football, basketball and academics. He was recruited by football coach Al Caniglia, who eventually became a father figure to and the most influential person in Marlin's life.

As a freshman Marlin started on defense as a cornerback and was the second-string quarterback. However, entering his sophomore year, Marlin was the starting quarterback. Prior to the season, the school newspaper recognized Marlin's talent and wrote, "Marlin Briscoe was already being touted as the team's key to victory. Fortunes of his team may depend on the flying feet of the sophomore quarterback Marlin Briscoe. Briscoe amazes you with his speed and deceptiveness and the ability to cut a thousand different ways when cornered. Coaches say he throws the running pass with the best. He has the ability to call the right play and remains cool under fire."¹ Marlin earned the nickname "Marlin the Magician." Former college football teammate and actor John Beasley takes credit for the nickname (One movie role John had was an assistant football coach in the movie Rudy). The team finished 6 – 5. As a junior the team was 8 – 2, and Marlin made All-Conference.

Being a football star didn't prevent Marlin from becoming a victim of police brutality. In 1966 right after the Watts riots in Los Angeles, he was driving home from school and saw police beating a black kid. Marlin stopped his car and got out and yelled to the police, "What is going on?" Police hit Marlin with a baton and knocked him down. Police ran Marlin back to his car, but the beating of the kid stopped.

One week before his senior year, Marlin got injured when he fell on his head during a pick-up basketball game. Initially doctors could not find anything wrong. Then during the first football game, Marlin took a hit and felt a pop in his neck. The doctors determined that he had a fractured vertebra related to his basketball injury. Doctors told him his football career was finished. As a result, Marlin redirected his efforts to other areas including becoming the first black to win election to student council at the university. He



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helped coach the football team. He joined a black fraternity. However, to the surprise of his doctors, his vertebra healed. The doctors said that it was very rare and that he could play football again.

As a result, Marlin was eligible for another year of football. He had a great senior season, setting 22 records for passing in a season and in his career. Marlin was selected to the 1967 NAIA All-American Quarterback First Team. Marlin was also selected to the All-American Negro Backfield along with Leroy Keyes from Purdue, O.J. Simpson from Southern California, and Lee White from Weber State. He was also selected as second-team quarterback on the Small College All-American Team behind Greg Landry.

Marlin was 5' 10" and 177lbs. He was selected by the Denver Broncos in the 14th round of the 1968 AFL football draft. Denver wanted Marlin to play defensive back, but Marlin wanted a chance to play quarterback. Coach Al Caniglia recommended that Marlin negotiate his own contract which would stipulate that he get a tryout at quarterback. Denver agreed to give Marlin a tryout during quarterback camp. During the camp there were eight quarterbacks participating. Steve Tensi was chosen as the starting quarterback. Denver acquired Tensi from San Diego for two first-round draft choices in 1967.

During the tryout, each quarterback was supposed to get 30 passes. Marlin went last in each drill and did not get his 30 throws. Marlin impressed spectators and media during the camp, however. He threw the ball as far as Tensi and was accurate. His throws drew positive reaction from the fans and media. He also excelled at footwork. After the quarterback camp, Marlin switched to cornerback and was set to start. Unfortunately, Marlin pulled his hamstring and could not play. Then Tensi broke his collarbone. The other backup quarterbacks did not perform well. Denver lost the opener to Cincinnati 24 – 10 and then got crushed by Kansas City 34 -2. At that point, Marlin recovered; and Coach Saban named Marlin the backup for the next game vs Boston.

Marlin was surprised. He thought he was going to be cut, not picked as the backup quarterback. In the game vs Boston, Denver was losing 20 – 10 in the fourth quarter. Saban inserted Marlin at QB. Marlin played well and led the team to a touchdown and the final score was 20 – 17. After the game Boston's linebacker Nick Buoniconti congratulated Marlin and told him that they hadn't played against a quarterback who could run and throw like Marlin.

With Marlin's outstanding performance vs Boston, Denver Coach Saban named Marlin the starting quarterback in the next game vs the Cincinnati Bengals. Marlin would be the first black to start at quarterback in professional football. Though Saban named Marlin quarterback, Marlin was skeptical that Saban supported him. Marlin believed Saban didn't want a black quarterback, and that Saban wanted Marlin to fail so he could go back



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to Tensi or another quarterback. Also, Marlin was disappointed that Saban didn't give him more plays to run.

There was excitement leading up to Marlin's start. John Wooten, a black lineman for the Cleveland Browns and Washington Redskins during his NFL career, recalled the feeling of anticipation upon learning Marlin would make the historic start. Wooten said, "To see him get an opportunity was exhilarating to us. You know so much is riding on what he does."² The Bronco's October 6 football program for the Cincinnati game stated, "Marlin ignited both the Broncos and their fans last Sunday with a flashy fourth period performance that had the Boston Patriots on the ropes when time ran out." Marlin said, "I realize it will be the first just like Jackie Robinson going into baseball. I'll have to perform as well."³

Though Marlin was skeptical of Saban's motives, Saban did say, "As far as being black, white, pink, or blue, it didn't matter or make a difference. He was a talent that could electrify the fans and the team that surrounded him enjoyed seeing the things he was doing."⁴ Then in a November 16, 1968 Cleveland Plain Dealer column, football writer Chuck Heaton wrote, "Lou Saban sounds like Paul Brown of some years back when he talks about Marlin Briscoe, the first black quarterback in pro football who has been piloting the Denver Broncos. The reason he is playing quarterback is because he was the best of the batch of newcomers, Saban explained. If he can win football games for me, that's all I'm concerned about."⁵

During the week before the Cincinnati game, Marlin and a teammate stopped at a department store to purchase records. Marlin purchased three albums. The cashier who sold the albums inexplicably asked for the receipts for proof of purchase. Marlin could only find two of the receipts. The security guard interviewed Marlin and his teammate and determined that Marlin was the Denver quarterback everyone was talking about. The security guard handcuffed Marlin and walked him out of the store stating that he arrested the quarterback of the Broncos. That night Cousin Bob Rose and an attorney got Marlin out of jail. Later that evening Marlin found the third receipt. Marlin was cleared.

In the game vs the Bengals, Marlin was pulled after the first half trailing 7 - 0. Tensi started the second half and rallied the Broncos to a 10 - 7 victory. The following week Marlin led the Broncos to a 21 - 13 win over the New York Jets. Following the Jets victory, the Broncos lost to San Diego 55 - 24, but Marlin threw three touchdown passes and ran for another.



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The following week, Marlin rallied the Broncos back from a 14 – 0 deficit to a 21 – 14 win over Miami. With the game tied 14 – 14 and the Broncos on the Dolphins 10 yard-line with less than two minutes left, Marlin changed the play at the line and ran up the middle for a touchdown giving the Broncos the win. For his efforts Marlin was named the AFL offensive player of the week.

Other highlights for Marlin included a 34 – 32 victory over Buffalo in which Marlin threw three touchdown passes. The following game Marlin threw three more TD passes in a 47 – 23 loss to San Diego.

The next game was at Oakland. Marlin's father called him at the hotel the night before the game and invited him to dinner. Marlin had not seen his father since he was four years old. His father did call him on Christmas. They had a nice conversation over dinner. In the game against Oakland, Marlin had three more touchdown passes in a 33 – 27 loss.

Marlin threw a total of 14 TD passes for the season, a Denver rookie record. He finished second in the Rookie of the Year ballot to Paul Robinson who ran for over 1,000 yards for Cincinnati. In retrospect, considering Marlin at quarterback was an afterthought along with being from a small college and having little practice with the Broncos, he had a remarkable rookie season. Marlin remembered that he got great support from teammates, and the fans were amazing. Denver players, both white and black, told Marlin the Broncos could have won with him as the starting quarterback going forward into 1969.

In the off-season, Marlin went back to Omaha to complete his college degree with a major in education. However, during the off-season Coach Saban held a quarterback camp but inexplicably did not invite or inform Marlin about it. Marlin heard about the camp from a teammate. Marlin flew to Denver and went to the quarterback camp and waited for a quarterback meeting to end to see Saban. When Saban came out he ignored Marlin. Steve Tensi said he was sorry. Marlin thought that at least Saban could have told him that he was no longer a quarterback and should focus on playing defensive back. Saban said nothing. Marlin just wanted to compete for the quarterback job.

At the start of football camp Marlin was the third string quarterback behind Tensi and Pete Liske from Canada. Marlin could see he was not going to get a fair shot. He asked for his release. Saban said "ok" but waited four days to announce it. Marlin was released and became a free agent. Inexplicably, no team contacted Marlin for a tryout even after his great rookie year. Marlin felt Saban blackballed him during those four days. Marlin went back to Omaha to work out. At Omaha, his old friend Rick Davis and his college defensive coach both suggested that Marlin try out at receiver.



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Marlin did not have a coach or general manager in professional football as an advocate for him to be quarterback like Jackie Robinson had an advocate in Branch Rickey. A great “what if” question is what if Marlin had been given a chance at quarterback with a supportive coach. How would he have performed?

With no interest from the NFL or AFL, Marlin went to a tryout with British Columbia in the CFL. It went well but Marlin wanted to play in the NFL or AFL. Marlin contacted teams he did well against including Buffalo. Buffalo coach John Rauch told Marlin they wanted to see him at wide receiver or defensive back; they were set at quarterback. However, the quarterbacks were injured so they wanted Marlin to come in as an emergency quarterback until the other guys were healthy. Unfortunately, Marlin had only 10 days to play well enough to make the team.

Buffalo had drafted James Harris, a black quarterback out of Grambling; Buffalo also had veteran quarterbacks Jack Kemp and Tom Flores. Harris told Marlin that based on Marlin’s performance as a black quarterback with Denver, Buffalo drafted Harris. Harris said that Marlin was hurt by what had happened in Denver. Marlin told James, “Don’t trust them. You can play well, and they’re going to cut you anyways. They don’t want a black quarterback.”⁶

Marlin quarterbacked during Buffalo practices until the other QB’s recovered from their injuries. During one drill Marlin was not happy with the effort by first round draft choice O.J. Simpson. Simpson responded to Marlin that he was not a quarterback but a wide receiver. Marlin was upset with O.J.’s comments and threw a football at O.J.’s head. Simpson moved out of the way just in time. Marlin felt he gained respect from teammates and coaches for standing up to O.J. Eventually Marlin and O.J. became friends. O.J. even went to Omaha for a sports camp that Marlin was conducting. Also, later in life, O.J. paid for expensive medicine for Marlin that he could not afford.

Marlin did well as a wide receiver during Buffalo practices. He studied films of Paul Warfield running routes and hand positioning on catches. He blocked well. However, Marlin did not play in exhibition games until the fourth quarter of the last game. Then, with Jack Kemp as quarterback, Marlin caught four passes which was good enough to make the team.

Marlin did not start initially but eventually became a starter in 1969. In 1970 Marlin led the AFC in receptions and was selected as a starter to the Pro Bowl. After a 1 – 13 record in 1971, Buffalo fired their coach and hired Lou Saban. Saban traded Marlin to Miami for a first-round draft choice. Buffalo drafted Joe DeLamielleure with their draft choice.



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Miami acquired Marlin to complement their other wide receiver Paul Warfield. In 1972 Miami became the only undefeated team in NFL history going 17 – 0. Marlin started but pulled a hamstring in game four. Howard Twilley played great as his replacement and became the regular. Marlin did play in Miami's 14 – 7 victory over Washington in Super Bowl VII. On one play, Miami scored an apparent TD on a pass from Griese to Warfield, but Marlin was called for an offside penalty. Marlin is still upset to this day about that play.

In 1973 Miami won the Super Bowl again. Marlin was their top receiver during the regular season, catching 30 passes, one more than Warfield. The Dolphins beat Minnesota in the Super Bowl 24 – 7. Marlin had two receptions in the game. The 1974 Dolphins lost in the playoffs to Oakland 28 – 26. Marlin started three games that season but injured his hamstring a lot during the year and was placed on the injured reserve list for the playoff game.

Dolphins owner Joe Robbie dismantled the team after the 1974 season. Marlin was not offered a contract. After the season, Marlin was inducted into the University of Nebraska Omaha Hall of Fame. Ironically, Joe Robbie was the presenter that night.

In 1975 Marlin was in training camp with St Louis and had a good camp but was traded to San Diego. At San Diego Marlin started but the team got off to a 0 – 3 start. As a result, San Diego began to rebuild and got rid of the veterans, including Marlin. Marlin was traded to Detroit. In Detroit, Marlin continued to be the starter. The Lions quarterback was Greg Landry who had been First Team All Small College All American in college and Marlin was named to the second team that season.

Marlin was one of 15 players who successfully sued the NFL to ban the use of option compensation clause for free agents in 1975. This rule allowed Commissioner Pete Rozelle to establish compensation for free agency. This successful lawsuit helped pave the way for the NFL players to gain the free agency they have today.

In 1976, Marlin was traded to New England who was coached by Chuck Fairbanks. Marlin played well and became a starter. Fairbanks liked the drills Marlin learned in Miami. New England finished 11 -3 but lost in the first round of the playoffs to Oakland, though. In 1977 Marlin was cut in preseason camp, ending his professional football career. Marlin believed he was ready for retirement.

He settled into a job in Los Angeles as a financial broker. He had a beautiful home with a swimming pool, a Mercedes and two daughters who were born in 1972 and 1979. Marlin started using recreational drugs to have a good time. His drug usage increased. Then



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Butch Cribbs, Marlin's best friend growing up, had emotional issues and shot a police officer in Omaha. Afterwards, Marlin's drug use climbed. Marlin starting using free-base cocaine. For the next 10 years, Marlin had an internal conflict between using drugs or becoming clean. It was a 10-year nightmare where Marlin lost everything.

Marlin's former coach, Chuck Fairbanks, asked Marlin to be one of his assistant coaches at the University of Colorado, recognizing Marlin's talent as a teacher and coach. Marlin accepted the job to get away from drugs in Los Angeles. Unfortunately, his drug use increased in Colorado. Marlin declined coaching for a second season and headed back to Los Angeles. He started borrowing money from friends James Harris and Larry Little to pay for drugs. The drug usage shocked Marlin's family and friends.

In one incident, Marlin was kidnapped by drug dealers for writing them a bad check. They held Marlin captive for a weekend threatening him. Eventually they stopped at a bank and Marlin withdrew \$1,500 to pay for the drugs. Then Marlin jumped out of the car on a freeway, safely escaping.

In 1986 Marlin ran into old teammate Tom Flores, who was now the Oakland head coach. Flores recognized that Marlin had a drug problem. Flores put Marlin through rehabilitation. But Marlin went back to drugs. Marlin was in and out of jail. Marlin went to San Diego and stayed with former teammate Dennis Shaw from Buffalo. Marlin kept borrowing money from Shaw and ended up in jail again in San Diego as a result of drugs. Marlin left the San Diego jail with \$500 from his friend Lance Allworth and went cold turkey and never went back to drugs. Marlin became deeply involved in his church, First Presbyterian Church in Southern California. Marlin became a mathematics high school teacher and coached football at West Los Angeles Junior College. After three years, Marlin was dismissed from the school because of his prior drug conviction and jail time.

Eventually Marlin got a job with the Boys & Girls Club. He advanced to Director, worked in Watts, and then moved to Long Beach. He worked for the Boys and Girls Club for 12 years and found the work to be the most fulfilling he had ever experienced.

Marlin was inducted into the Florida Sports Hall of Fame in 2000 as part of the 1972 undefeated Miami Dolphins. Marlin wrote his autobiography in 2002.

In February 2009 Marlin was recognized as the first black man to start at quarterback in professional football by U.S. Rep. Lee Terry on the House floor in Congress as part of Black History Month. A Congressional Record was also presented to Marlin during a ceremony at Metro Community College in Omaha. Omaha-based actor John Beasley, who started calling Marlin the Magician in college, presented the award.



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In 2013 the 1972 undefeated Miami Dolphins were honored by President Obama at the White House. President Obama shook Marlin's hand and said, "I know you. You're a trailblazer. You set the tone for black quarterbacks."⁷

In 2014 a portion of M Street near South High School in Omaha was renamed Marlin Briscoe Way.

In a 2015 Sports Illustrated Vault SI.com, Eric Crabtree, a former teammate, said "It's almost funny; the feeling back when we played was that blacks didn't have the intelligence to play quarterback. But Marlin's brain was probably his greatest strength. He was always thinking. Even when he was talking to you, it seemed like he was deep in thought."⁸

In 2015 Marlin was named the 17th best athlete from Nebraska in a poll conducted by the *Omaha World Herald*. On the list Bob Gibson was #1 and Gayle Sayers was #2.

In 2016 he won the Tom Osborne Leadership Award.

The University of Nebraska Omaha honored Marlin Briscoe on April 19, 2016 and celebrated his life and career as a civil rights trailblazer. The event was called "An Evening with the Magician." During the event South High School Principal Ruben Cano said, "When I think of what Marlin accomplished for the game of football, I liken it to what Jackie Robinson did for baseball. Marlin blazed a path for quarterbacks like Warren Moon, Russell Wilson, Cam Newton and more to follow"⁹

On December 6, 2016 Marlin was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame. The next day a life-sized statue of Marlin was unveiled at Baxter Arena on the campus of the University of Nebraska, Omaha.

Marlin believes he should be a member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame. "I'm not bragging or anything, but if I had been any other player, I guarantee you, I'd have been in the NFL Pro Football Hall of Fame a long time ago. Nobody had ever done it – making history as the first black quarterback. People don't realize I was also the first black holder on extra points. Counting cornerback and wide receiver, I played four different positions in the NFL. I'm not sure anybody did that before. I won two Super Bowls and made All-Pro after switching to receiver."¹⁰



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Marlin's life can be summarized as various stories. The first is a young boy's dream coming true from hard work, dedication and talent in professional football. Another story is his 10-year drug addiction nightmare where he lost his possessions and self-respect and hurt family and friends. The third story is Marlin's lifelong battle with racism. Finally, it is the story of redemption. He never gave up, overcame drug addiction, and led the Boys and Girls Club as Director, earned awards and honors from his great football career and from being an outstanding leader.



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