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*Think Piece  
Pigmentation and the Pigskin:  
The Politics of Race in Professional Football  
by Matthew C. Stelly*

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The majority population members in this society are in a constant state of denial: about the war, about the intelligence of their President, about their role in the perpetuation of racial segregation. The success of sports as a leisure activity is supposed to be a way to allow them to get their minds off of everyday necessities and realities. But since sports is becoming increasingly black and brown, these people must think about "race" even as they work to get their minds off of it.

Few people want to write or talk about "the politics of the pigskin and of pigment" in professional football. And why not? The whole society is afraid to talk about race and most of the pundits sit around wondering why. Here's why: to talk about race in America would be an indictment of the people who are in the majority, that's why! Look at how they ducked and dodged the obvious conclusions of the Katrina evacuees: what that incident showed the world was what we have been trying to tell them for two centuries. This avoidance of reality extends to every institution that these people have created to support their system: law, health, labor, education, religion and so on.

So why should those involved in sports be any braver or honest than those who sign their paychecks, build their stadiums, manage their League office or write about their sport? All are involved in segregationist realities, stereotyped thinking, and eurocentric value systems inevitably resulting in *avoidance and a refusal to deal with the politics of pigmentation*.

One newspaper airs a commercial featuring a black man and a white man sitting in the football stands arguing over a statistic. Up comes a man who represents the newspaper, and he corrects them both. He is then joined by other writers from the sports department of this same newspaper. In an attempt to promote how "accurate" this newspaper is supposed to be, this team of people actually proves an even greater point: an all-white staff writing about and sharing their views on sports that are dominated by non-white people. But in the newspaper's collective eyes, this is the sign of "greatness." Again, the power of pigmentation

Let's explore a related phenomenon and the arena of professional football, and gain a better understanding of

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the psychology of race relations in this nation, *from the real side*. Much of what you are about to read is excerpted from my manuscript, "We Must Protect This House: Professional Football, Black Men – and Everybody Else."

### ***About Terrell Owens***

If you think slavery ended, then just look at the Terrell Owens situation and you will see the plantation mentality, the master–slave relationship, the manhunt tradition and modern day "nightriders" in action, no doubt about it.

It is clear that the plantation still exists. And for the first time, there are "slaves" among black folks. In those ante bellum days, those were not slaves, but captives. As LaRue Nedd pointed out in his pamphlet, *Why We Shouldn't Call Our Foreparents Slaves*, we fought back during those times. Marshall Taylor of Omaha's Aframerican Bookstore confirms that there were more than 1,500 recorded uprisings back in the day. Black people resisted. *How could we have been "slaves"?* We were, in fact, prisoners of war. Today we are slaves because we have options that we are too cowardly and assimilated to consider. That's what makes a slave: the refusal to consider *all* options.

The master–slave tradition is therefore evident, not only in terms of the NFL's control of these powerful black men, but look again at Owens' situation. While slated to apologize for dogging out another black man, Donovan McNabb (the QB, no less), Owens had his pitiful attempts dampened even further by his big mouth agent, Drew Rosenhaus. It was Rosenhaus who convinced Owens to ask for a new contract, Rosenhaus who stood by and instigated Owens' antics and then when the heat came, in typical fashion, Rosenhaus ran for the hills crying "no comment, no comment." Remember: whatever amount of money Terrell earns dodging huge men, getting hit and busting up his body, Rosenhaus gets a huge percentage for merely sitting behind a desk and talking on the telephone.

Manhunt tradition – that's what Oliver C. Cox called it in his classic, *Caste, Class and Race*. Those folks were out to get Terrell to make an example of him. To them, he was an "uppity n-----," just like the NBA's Littrell Sprewell who wouldn't let a coach verbally abuse him, and just like wideout Keyshawn Johnson in 2003 – traded to another team when the coach couldn't "control" him. The media helps stigmatize Owens even more; almost every picture is one with a scowl, or Owens smelling his top lip. This is the same thing Time magazine did to O.J. Simpson and local newspapers do to black youth who are arrested. The worse they can make them look, the more physically menacing they can make them appear, the less empathy they'll get from society.

Indeed, others had done far worse: Ray Lewis, a member of the Baltimore Ravens football team, literally got away with murder but was found not guilty so that he could continue playing ball (the O.J. Simpson syndrome). Bill Romanowski was and remains a racist who not only spit in Owens' face while with the 49ers, but used the N–word then, when busted, kowtowed and whimpered, claiming in essence, some of my best friends are black (akin to Howard Cosell calling Art Monk a little monkey and then later claiming he didn't see anything wrong with it).

And there's more atrocities taking place that never make the news. Why? Because sports reporters can be bought, that's why. This is why the ESPN series, "Playmakers" was cancelled. When that show dealt with homosexuality in the NFL, dealt with players going to bed with their teammates' wives, and the drugs and gambling – it hit too close to home.

### ***The Issue of Black "Attitude"***

"Be humble"

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"He has an attitude."

Black Nebraska State Sen. Ernie Chambers has said many times that a black man with an attitude is probably one that has been raised correctly. He is a black man who is not going to be called "boy" or made fun of by some coach who wants to make him an example. When that individual gets a reputation for speaking up, he becomes someone with "an attitude." Even in graduate school, cowardly professors expect students to kowtow and say nothing when they attempt to pass on some lie or myth they've heard from some negro who wanted a good grade. When you correct that person and document how wrong they are, you get the reputation for having "an attitude." This is the 21<sup>st</sup> century version of "an educated black man is a good field hand, spoiled."

Even the most ignorant and lowly of majority group members feel they have the right to comment on what black people should say or how they should act. They all seem to have an opinion on O.J. Simpson and no matter what the courts say, white folks say he did it and should die. Not only do they have an opinion but, more importantly, they have the system behind them. That's why the issue still persists: jokes by Leno and Letterman, bumper stickers and even trivia questions. This is how they act when they feel *they* have been affronted.

But when we bring up Emmett Till, the Scottsboro Boys, the maltreatment of Ida B. Wells, Martin Luther King or Malcolm, many whites want to make it appear as if all of these were acts of someone who was deranged and acting alone. They never want to see that most of what whites have achieved was accomplished when black people were in various states of servitude. This includes the NFL and its attempts to control "black attitudes."

The fact is, when many of the records were set, there were no black defensive backs to deflect those passes, no black linebackers to bury those slow running backs into the turf. And when black people *did* get in, we did the same thing that we do in every other sport: we rewrote those record books and dominated the sport, and became so good that the people in charge had to rewrite or "modify" the rules. And as long as white people make up the bulk of the sportswriters, broadcasters, sports historians and the like, the politics of pigmentation will always be overlooked. In their view, somebody woke up one morning and said, "Let's integrate. And so it was done."

The fact is, white folks have different frames of reference than we have. Their version of "guts" and "bravado" is the brother who runs the slant – across the middle of the field, risking maiming and pain to please that white man. To them getting clocked at full speed by somebody 70 pounds heavier than you is a sign of "heart." (Athletes who play hurt get played up by the white media). And those white QBs send brothers into the jaws of the defense with no regard for what's going to happen. Brett Favre was notorious for doing this to his wideouts, and no one in the Wisconsin media says anything about it. "The slant" can *kill* folks – ask Antonio Freeman!

Speaking of Favre, it was Brett whom Owens complimented while putting down his own brother, five-time pro bowler, Donovan McNabb. According to Owens' "wisdom," the Eagles would be undefeated with Green Bay's Favre at quarterback. How could he make such an asinine statement?

I was in Wisconsin when Favre got his big break. Everybody knew Favre was a drunk. It was the offense that was making him a star, and the acrobatic black receivers that were bailing him out time and time again. When his best pal got kicked out of the League because he felt up a young girl at a party, the brothers stepped in and made Favre look invincible. Then, he claims he quit drinking.

Maybe he did – for a season or two. But I know a drunk quarterback when I see one! This guy throws every pass as if he's trying to perform kidney surgery on his receivers! These white announcers brag and laugh

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about it. They call it the "Favre X" – he threw so hard in practice that the little "x" at the end of the football would be engraved in the chests of his receivers! Seriously! How else to explain somebody who throws off the wrong foot, throws a ball to a receiver who is covered by three men and then, after all that, still gets praised for being a "gunslinger"?

Then these broadcasters instigate and point out the brothers who are smart enough to avoid getting hit, or to watch out for their health no matter where the ball is at. They are called "soft," and this could impact on their money and their future with that team. So it becomes "run the slant and get clocked" or else. If I'm not mistaken, Daryl Stingley was running a slant when he got hit by Jack Tatum. Stingley was paralyzed on that play and never played another down. But the New England fans, to this day, celebrate him and remember him for his "heart." Stingley sits in the stands and cheers with them – from his wheelchair.

The fact is, fans celebrating touchdowns are celebrating black athletic performance. Who else is getting in the end zone? Terrell Owens pointed this out and reporters got quiet. If you penalize the people who are getting in the end zone and who celebrate by dancing or some other antic, then you are penalizing black folks, simple as that! It's all about white folks still wanting to keep black people "in their place." It's about "showing who's in charge." Look who's in charge of the NBA; look who's in charge of pro baseball. And look who's in charge of the NFL. All three are white men from the same ethnic background. Do you think that's a coincidence? Why isn't anybody writing about *that*?

Another way to control people is through sexual coercion. It starts when the black athlete steps on campus and encounters those "hostesses." Very seldom are any black coeds among this group. And once that athlete has established himself as a "star" (translation: someone who can play pro ball), the ranks of those women grows exponentially. And it continues once in the pros.

Cheerleaders in professional football. Why? What purpose? I can understand, to an extent, the NBA: closed setting, better proximity to the action and so on. But why football, when you can barely see the field, let alone cleavage? I'll tell you why: because somebody's watching. And the skimpier the "uniforms" on these women, the more binoculars in the stands, watching. Glorified, high paid strippers.

I've got a friend, Carolyn "Kay Kay" Howard, who used to be a cheerleader for the Oakland Raiders back in the late '80s. She used to tell us about what they have to do, and she let us know some of those players flirt and offer money for certain favors (like the fathers of some of those "Husker Hostesses" probably do). Even if some of the girls are married, their husbands will allow men to fondle them in the name of being "a fan"! I ask again, what functional purpose do cheerleaders serve? Cheering is the function of the fans!

"Kay Kay" also said that there is a racial quota in the cheerleading ranks. That explains why there are so many white women cheering, even when the fans are predominantly black or the players are predominantly black. There is an unspoken code, she told me, that there should be no more than three black cheerleaders on a squad of ten, no more than four on a squad of twelve.

The reason I believe her is that on at least two major college campuses I have been on, there are regular "cheerleader controversies" that involve the Black Students' Union, where some talented sister is "cut" from tryouts by an all-white selection committee. In the meantime, some blonde, blue eyed selection with no rhythm, makes the squad because her parents are alumni or her mother used to be a cheerleader.

But cheerleading is a reflection of the role that sexuality plays in the politics of pigmentation. The trip is long, but it's not a difficult stretch to see that it's a journey from cheerleading to suburbia. And don't you think for a minute that these women are victims. Look at the front rows of football games at the collegiate and pro ranks; look at the first rows of professional basketball games. These women know what they're doing. And what few pro athletes Nebraska has will tell you about these "groupies" as well. But some are in it for more serious

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game – ask Shawn Kemp, stuck with paternity suits from nine different women.

Let's take a look at football life in suburbia. The brothers will understand where I'm coming from.

Ah, football life in suburbia. The black athlete marries, usually not a woman of his race, and moves to suburbia. He then gives birth to child after child and in doing so, becomes further entrenched in the system. This "love" for his family has not only taken him away from his own community, but has endeared him to the community of his spouse. He ends up doing more for HER parents – the same parents who called him "n-----r" before they got a chance to know him and even now, may believe, "he's married to our daughter. He's not like the rest of them."

He is accepted into this community because of what he does: he's an entertainer. He is "controlled" because he reports to his coach and to others who keep his activities in line. It is like living in the same neighborhood with a circus clown. Sure, he's big, but he's "humble" and, therefore, "acceptable."

This is the alien version of "integration." In reality, it is "one-way integration." The fact is, this man has *paid* his way to get into the neighborhoods, minds and hearts of people who accept him because he has "paid." If his wife gets a scratch on her arm, it's in the newspapers and the myth of the black rapist is plastered all over the media. In a society where sex and race sell, nobody brings that home more than the black athlete. What did "Desperate Housewives" do when they wanted publicity? They stuck Nicole Sheridan in a locker room with Terrell Owens and had him say, "The team's gonna have to do without me," implying that he and Sheridan – clad only in a towel – were going to be having sex.

Who made the decision to air that commercial? How long did it take to put it together? How long was Sheridan standing in a room with a towel on, alongside Owens, as cameramen, producers, and cable-carrying flunkies stood and gawked?

**"We Must Protect This House!"**

The commercial concludes that, "If you don't get motivated when you put on the armor, then you don't got a pulse, man." Really?

These huge, muscular black men don't protect any house that lives in the black community. They will fight each other during practice, argue with one another (instigated by the white media), talk trash on the field, and make commercials promoting "protecting the house" of the people who make the football gear. But what do they do off the field?

They give all their time and attention to certain charities that spend the athlete's money any way they want to. These black men don't designate specific contributions to the black community. Therefore, the charities take their money and give it to people who, in turn, give it to groups that don't even cater to blacks, such as recreation centers and Christian associations that were as segregated as anywhere else in society before having to be forced to integrate. In every city, there is a YMCA – and then the "Black YMCA." There is the "Boys Club," and then the "Boys Club in the hood." Why do you think that is?

These millionaire footballers don't just stop with financial donations. They donate their time to causes that help, on the *individual* level. They help this group of kids or that individual homeless person. They are shown helping Habitat for Humanity build *a (one) house*. Why don't they do what Roger Troutman and Zapp did two decades ago: take your money and build low-income affordable housing? Why don't they build apartment buildings "for single sisters only"? Why don't they construct hospitals the way Houston Rockets backup center Dikembe Mutombo and Manute Bol did?

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They spend more money on diamond earrings, bracelets and other effeminate accouterments than they do helping their homeless cousins, their impoverished grandparents, or their down and out aunts and uncles. And almost every single one of them has an agent or "manager" who is *not* black.

Protecting our "House" begins with protecting our families and communities. Without that, all the t-shirts, matching draws and helmets in the world don't mean squat.

### ***Quarterbacks Credited with Black Achievements***

When you hear the announcer say, "fantastic catch," or "great grab," you can bet that means that the quarterback has thrown a ball that is too low or too high, and some acrobatic black wide receiver has managed to catch the ball anyway. In fact, the white QB gets credit for all of the yards that the black man makes after he receives the ball. For instance, just recently the NFL has been recording "yards after catch." But before that, even now, those yards are also given to the quarterback. So if a QB throws a 4 yard screen pass, and the black running back or receiver or tight end takes off and dodges defenders for 50 more yards, the QB gets credit for those yards as well.

Sure, black quarterbacks can benefit from this as well. But it was just recently that the NFL began letting black men play quarterback. In the past, the tendency was to convert a black athlete from his QB slot to wide receiver or defensive back. Furthermore, a black quarterback can get yards on his own; you don't see them just standing around, stationary, waiting for something to happen. That is what Ken Stabler, Joe Montana, Dan Marino, Dan Fouts, and most of their all-time white QBs did. *Just stood there.* Today, you still have some who play as if they have two feet in a bucket of cement: Peyton Manning, Tom Brady, Joey Harrington, Vinnie Testaverde, and several others. The fact is, seeing what black QBs have done with their running, most white QBs now emulate it – but not with the same success.

I've seen two NFL playbooks in my lifetime. One of them looked like a telephone book. The other one had to be at least 100 pages. The point is, because of the duality and inequality of the school system, brothers who *do* make it to the NFL should be commended. Imagine this: mis-educated throughout elementary school, shunned during middle school, passed on in high school because of your size and lazy teachers, able to get to college because of your accomplishments and again, size, and then four years of college where tutors, the girls in the dorm, and others around campus do your papers for you.

By the time you're drafted, *you're an imbecile!* Then, they hand you this playbook. Did you ever stop to think why so many great college players don't make it, or why they are passed around the League? These black men have never been given the kind of attention that they needed. As Senator Chambers has pointed out time and time again, they were exploited. They had it good all that time and now it's time to *think*. And they don't know how. The ones that *do* make it are but a small percentage of those who *would* make it had they not been victims of an uncaring educational system.

And that's the general story. So you can *imagine* what a quarterback, the thinking man on the team, must have to go through. And in addition to the issue of the playbook, there is also the culture and image of the QB. Does this particular college want a black man at the helm? What will the alumni say? Do any of the backers or supporters or boosters have a son or close friend that they want to see in that position? These are the "politics" that the black recruit has to go through. You see what Nebraska did to Joe Daly, don't you? They strung him up and then left him to blow game after game. Then they abandoned him and talked about him like a dog. Then they went out and recruited a slew of white boys to make sure they don't make that mistake again.

### ***Praise of White QBs***

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From the days of referring to John Elway as "a genetic marvel" up to today, when these broadcasters praise Brett Favre no matter how drunk he gets, no matter how many times he gets back on the wagon, no matter how many interceptions he throws, the fact remains: the white QB always gets his praise from the announcers. There is rarely any hesitation (for instance, in regard to Peyton Manning. "This guy could run for president if he wanted to.")

Flashing back to Elway for a moment: even when Black quarterback Doug Williams destroyed Elways' team in Super Bowl XXII, the white reporters wouldn't give Williams a break. When Denver got a 10–0 lead on Washington, the commentators were showering Elway with hosannas of praise; but then Doug and the Redskins ran off 35 unanswered points, and almost right away, these racists started making excuses for the Broncos.

And when black quarterback Rodney Peete destroyed Troy Aikman's UCLA Bruins a decade or so ago, it was Aikman who was drafted ahead of the black QB, and Rodney's own father, who was an assistant coach for the Packers, learned about racism when the coach wouldn't even consider bringing Rodney to Green Bay.

When the elder Peete learned how racist his "pals" were, he got angry and lashed out. I wrote a column about the incident in The Milwaukee Courier the following week, with the headline, "Peete the Packer Peeved About a Pick By Pecks."

No matter what, the white QB is going to be made out to be a brain or a prophet. The announcers tell us, "he's a cerebral player," meaning that he is so intelligent. When it comes to black footballers, the most that is said is that they have a "natural" gift at what they do. There is always the subtle insinuation that the white man, no matter what position he plays, is the one with the "brains," "the know how" and the "experience." Black athletes on the field, meanwhile, are said to "rely on instinct" or are "just naturally gifted."

And these quarterbacks have a lot of power off the field. I just learned during the Colts–Texans contest that Peyton Manning, QB for the Colts, "lobbied" to keep a third wide receiver on the team. So in other words, this guy – white – was about to get cut from the squad and Peyton enabled him to not only stay on the team, but to earn hundreds of thousands of dollars and as a result, feed his family and live a comfortable life. But that *also* means that this guy took a slot that could have gone to a black man who may have been of equal talent but who *surely* had a greater need. These are the "politics of the pigskin and of pigment" that no one wants to talk or write about.

### ***What IF?***

What if black men worked tirelessly in black communities, before, during and after their stints in the NFL? What if they endured broken legs, sprained ankles and torn cartilage in order to build a community center, attend a development meeting or speak at an Urban League or NAACP function? These same men who will play despite having had major surgery or debilitating injuries, will forego commitments to the community, claiming they have a headache or a tooth is bugging them.

What if the majority of pro football team cheerleaders were black women? Why shouldn't that be the case? Who does the choreography for these teams? White women do. Who selects the cheerleaders? White women and white men. Why do even the most predominantly black of cities and teams still have white women waving pom–poms, doing scissor kicks and shaking various parts of their body like there's no tomorrow?

### ***Conclusion***

Discussions of pigmentation scare much of white America, so it is hypothesized here that they sublimate such discussions with talks and views of professional sports and athletes. How they react in public may differ from

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the way majority population members act in private. How can they cheer and idolize black athletes, allow their daughters and sons to have huge posters in the classrooms and then, in real life, promote racist policies, practices and procedures? And even if they don't actively promote racist practices, by staying out of it, being low key or not getting involved, they aid and abet the active racists in their crimes against black folks.

Even now, white folks are spray painting themselves orange and brown in order to get color. They appear to not be satisfied with their pale skin. But even those who seek tans or crave color have a negative feeling about black skin color. What makes them act so hypocritical? It's almost the inverse of that saying that the young people use. Instead of "don't hate the player, hate the game," in this case it's, "Don't hate the game, hate the player."

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