Racial Tasking and the College Quarterback: Redefining the Stacking Phenomenon

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One of the manners in which racial discrimination is manifested on the field of play is through positional segregation, commonly referred to as stacking. Stacking is the segregation and designation of athletes to certain positions as a result of assumptions made concerning a link between athletic ability and race, leading to the overrepresentation of minorities in some playing positions and the underrepresentation in others (Sack, Singh, & Thiel, 2005). Positional segregation, manifest through the phenomenon of stacking in sport, seems to have evolved from the errant assumption that African American athletes have naturally superior talents and are more individualistically driven than their White counterparts, who conversely, are mentally superior and harder workers (Anshel, 1990; Buffington, 2005). This fallible mind-body dualism approach to athletic superiority and mental inferiority, and vice versa, nevertheless endures today.

Woodward (2004) found that African American amateur athletes were more likely to be described in terms of their physical attributes rather than their mental skills by professional NFL scouts. Similarly, Dufur (1997) exposed the discrepancy in portrayals of African American and White athletes in advertising. African American athletes were portrayed to owe their successes to an innate physical ability while their White counterparts were portrayed to have earned their achievements through hard work, intelligence, and strong leadership behaviors. In football, African Americans have historically been relegated to the peripheral positions of running back, wide receiver, and defensive back while being largely ignored for the most central position in all of sport: the quarterback (Anderson, 1993; Finch, Sagas, & McDowell, 2009; Hawkins, 2002; Woodward, 2004). Such institutional discrimination can lead to management concerns with the resultant decrease in African American resources and opportunities for advancement in the coaching field (Anderson, 1993; Finch et al., 2009).

It can be argued that the role of quarterback has become more multidimensional, with an emphasis placed more on running the ball than on passing (Buffington, 2005; Hawkins, 2002). Thus, in accordance with the mind-body dualism approach, African American athletes would increasingly occupy the role of quarterback as the need for cognitive aptitude is truncated by physical abilities. This study sought to demonstrate the validity of such contentious convictions and explain if positional segregation continues to be preserved at the quarterback position in the NCAA’s Division I-Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS). We also aimed to introduce a new manifestation of positional segregation; one we have labeled as racial tasking. This study examined the materialization of racial tasking through possible racial differences in the number and percentage of passing and rushing attempts for White and African American quarterbacks at the NCAA Division I-FBS level.

The resultant tally of NCAA DI-FBS quarterbacks analyzed in this study was 200, of which 26.5% were African American and 73.5% White. In testing for possible differences in the plays called for African American and White quarterbacks, it was found that African American quarterbacks averaged 71 rush attempts and 204 pass attempts on the season, while White quarterbacks averaged 41 rush attempts on the season and 230 pass attempts. The race of the quarterback was found to significantly impact the number of rushing attempts he had on the season $F(1,198) = 20.64$, $p<.000$, $\eta^2 = .09$. However, the quarterback’s race was found to have no significant impact on the number of passing attempts $F(1,198) = 1.15$, $p>.05$, $\eta^2 = .01$.

Significant differences were found between the percentages of rush attempts versus the percentage of pass attempts for the racially different quarterbacks $F(1, 198) = 33.52$, $p<.000$, $\eta^2 = .15$. White quarterbacks ran the ball only 16.2% (SD=.14) of the time as opposed to passing the ball 83.8% (SD=.14) of the time. Conversely, African American quarterbacks ran the ball 31.1% (SD=.21) of the time compared to passing the ball only 68.9% (SD=.21) of the time.

Controlling for the quarterback’s team passing attempts, team rushing attempts, and the time of possession per game, race was found to significantly impact the quarterback’s number of rushing attempts $F[1, 195] = 18.20$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2 = .09$. However, the quarterback’s race was found to have no significant impact on the number of passing attempts $F[1,195] = 0.14$, $p>.05$, $\eta^2 = .001$. Controlling for the aforementioned variables, African American
quarterbacks had more rushing attempts (EMM=69.09, SE=5.40) and passed the ball fewer times (EMM=217.29, SE=18.40) than did their White counterparts (for rushing attempts, EMM=42.16, SE=3.23; for passing attempts, EMM=225.18, SE=11.00). Likewise, a greater percentage of African American quarterbacks’ attempts were rushes (EMM=.29, SE=.02) when compared to White quarterbacks (EMM=.17, SE=.01). In contrast, a greater percentage of White quarterbacks’ attempts were passes (EMM=.83, SE=.01) compared to the African American quarterbacks’ (EMM=.71, SE=.02). These differences between the mean percentage of rush attempts versus pass attempts for the racially different quarterbacks was significant $F[1, 195] = 33.86, p<.000, \eta^2 = .15$.

We found that African American quarterbacks are called to run the ball more often while White quarterbacks are more prone to execute passing plays. We propose one possible explanation for this phenomenon can be defined as racial tasking. We contend that racial tasking in sport is a function of one’s prejudice towards a minority athlete’s capability, both mental and physical, to perform. According to the aforementioned theories, racial stacking occurs to decrease the impact of minorities on the result of a game (outcome control hypothesis) or to remove minorities from vital decision-making positions on the field or during play (centrality). Racial tasking on the other hand is a practice in which positional segregation does not occur. Rather, the tasks athletes are asked to perform are dependent upon the athlete’s race and vary despite holding the same playing position. Thus for quarterbacks, the plays they are asked to carry out (i.e., run or pass) are contingent on their race. Despite possible decreases in racial stacking the existence of racial tasking perpetuates a type of institutional discrimination of which all coaches and management alike should be made aware.

The increase of African American quarterbacks seems to signify an end to the negative propositions of the outcome control hypothesis and centrality theory. Through the quarterback position, African Americans are able to have a more direct impact on the outcome of a game as well as play in the most vital of decision making positions. However, the increase in rushing attempts for quarterbacks coinciding with the increase of African American quarterbacks provides fodder to centrality theorists; reinforcing negative stereotypes about the mental and physical capabilities of African Americans to play the position. As suggested, we contend that a new form of discrimination and positional segregation, racial tasking, may be present in this context. While this assertion is speculative, additional research on the presence of any bias or prejudice that leads to differential roles and expectations with a position is merited. Further, continued examination and understanding of the outcomes of play calling and positional segregation in college football is particularly important.