Discrimination at the Margins: Evidence of Discrimination Against Black NFL Backup Quarterbacks

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Economists have long used data sets from professional sports as fertile testing grounds of fundamental theories in labor economics due to the richness of employment, production, and salary data in sport (Kahn 2000). In particular, numerous studies have investigated the presence and extent of potential labor discrimination in professional sports throughout history (see Kahn 1991). Although these studies have varying findings, generally the results can be summarized as: large-scale discrimination in professional sports used to exist (see Kahn 2000), but that now more subtle discrimination lies hidden in the margins (e.g. Palmer and King 2006). Therefore, to appreciate the presence of discrimination one must make sure to disaggregate data sets and investigate more specific circumstances of potential discrimination. This is especially true in the NFL, where most positions are either overrepresented by white players (e.g. quarterback, kicker) or by black players (e.g. wide receiver, safety). Thus, aggregating across the league will be problematic, as based on the position it is just as likely that white players could be discriminated against as black players (e.g. Keefer 2016). For this paper, we chose to focus on and investigate arguably the most important athletes in professional sports: NFL quarterbacks.

As of this writing, there are six starting NFL quarterbacks that are black: Cam Newton, Dak Prescott, Deshaun Watson, Patrick Mahomes, Russell Wilson, and Jameis Winston. This represents 19% of the quarterback position while 70% of the players in the league are black (Harper 2018). This alone could be potential cause for concern but it also ignores the larger number of NFL players that serve as backups. Although not the main purpose of their study, Berri and Simmons (2009) found that race was not predictive of draft position for NFL quarterbacks. However, this finding could be clouded by a select group of prominent black quarterbacks that have been drafted in the first round in recent years (Lamar Jackson in 2018, Mahomes and Watson in 2017, Winston in 2015, Teddy Bridgewater in 2014, EJ Manuel in 2013, Robert Griffin III in 2012, and Cam Newton in 2011). Taking just the most recent year as an example, Jackson was the only black quarterback chosen in the entire draft, and though he was drafted by the Baltimore Ravens as a potential quarterback successor in the first round, pre-draft chatter suggested that many teams wanted him to convert to wide receiver instead (Bergman 2018). In order to better understand the potential for entry discrimination among black NFL quarterbacks, especially as it relates to backup quarterbacks (discrimination at the margins), this study will use the Berri and Simmons (2009) regression model to formally investigate the presence of discrimination among quarterbacks chosen in the later rounds of the NFL draft. Using data from 1999-2018 on all draft-quality quarterbacks, we hypothesize that after controlling for the “star” black quarterbacks chosen in the first rounds, there will be significant discrimination against black quarterbacks, both in terms of where they are drafted (if at all), as well as their subsequent NFL career length.