

Making us all proud

by Jack_Kemp

This weekend's Super Bowl is a really big deal. It gets bigger every year and this year's game between the "Monsters of the Midway" and the Peyton Manning "monster passing attack" will be historical.

It's historical for another reason as well, as both coaches are African-American, the very first black coaches in history to achieve this distinction. This, my friends, is a really, really big deal! They got here on the merits of talent, leadership and character, not the color of their skin, but still, it's huge in terms of what Tony Dungy and Lovie Smith have overcome to get where they are.

Now some are thinking to themselves, why is Kemp making skin color such an important part of this achievement? And they'll say, "Isn't it time to put race behind us and forget the color of their skin?" My answer is yes, as the ultimate goal for our nation, but right now, this weekend and in this seminal moment in pro football, no! My reasoning is predicated on recognizing the progress we've made as a nation, and recognizing how far we have to go in meeting the ideal as laid down in our Declaration of Independence and celebrated by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have A Dream" speech in 1963.

All too often "white folks" quote Dr. King's "dream" of treating people without regard to the color of their skin, yet fail to quote King's comments on the inequality that still exists. He said in that great speech, "that the negro lives on an island of poverty in the midst of an ocean of affluence and wealth." I believe Dr. King's solutions were not about establishing equality of reward, but equality of opportunity. Equal opportunity in education, jobs, ownership of homes, access to capital and the chance not just to drive a truck but to own the trucking company and someday sitting on corporate boards, running businesses and yes, coaching Super Bowl teams, (my words).

Coach Dungy went to the University of Minnesota in the '70s because it was one of the few colleges where he would be welcomed as a black quarterback.

Coach Smith grew up in a tiny town in East Texas, where his mother constantly preached "you can do it, Lovie, you're special! Whatever you want to accomplish, you can."

What an inspiration they are to all of us - white, black, brown, but still I return to the color of their skin to make another point.

I was listening to a radio talk-show host, obviously a white conservative, the day after each team qualified for the Super Bowl, telling his audience over and over that he was above and beyond the issue of race, and why can't black folks rise above race as well and stop talking about the color of the coaches' skin?

Several self-described blacks called in and kept explaining why it was important, and that if Hillary Clinton, (or Condi Rice) were to be elected president, everyone would acknowledge the accomplishments of the first woman to reach the highest office in the land.

I write this as I reflect on my 13 years in professional football. This is the 50th anniversary of my being drafted in the 17th round by the Detroit Lions in 1957, moving on to the Steelers and Giants, before becoming the Chargers' first quarterback in 1960. I ended my career in Buffalo with the Bills in 1970 when I ran for Congress. So I've lived, played, worked and enjoyed pro football through four NFL commissioners: Bert Bell, Pete Rozelle, Paul Tagliabue and now Roger Goodell. I have seen the NFL go from 12 teams to 32 teams and from 34 men on a squad in the 1950s to 45 today with progress in just about every category of the game including the number of black assistant coaches.

When I started 50 years ago there were no black coaches, no black quarterbacks and no black general managers. Some said they weren't ready, but believe me, they absolutely were ready, but thanks to Commissioners Rozelle, Tagliabue and Goodell, owners like Dan Rooney, Al Davis, Jim Irsay and many others, black coaches are now interviewed, jobs are opened, opportunities are expanded and this Sunday two outstanding NFL coaches who happen to be black will be on the sidelines in front of millions or so people of viewers who will watch in person or on TV around.

Big deal? Absolutely, unquestionably a "big deal." Now six NFL coaches are black, some of the best quarterbacks in football are black and the Giants, Jaguars and Ravens have outstanding black general managers. This would make the great Frederick Douglass "Fritz" Pollard proud, as the first NFL black coach in the 1920s. Yes, much progress has been made particularly since 1949 when George Taliaferro, the all-American tailback from Indiana University, was the first black drafted by the NFL. Taliaferro was the Jackie Robinson of pro-football.

It's absolutely stunning that Coach Smith and Coach Dungy will square off Sunday, and while most will cheer for "da Bears" or "da Colts," millions of men, women and children will be equally proud that two men of color will help determine the outcome.

Hopefully soon, it won't be such a big deal. But for now and for those of us who know the history of the obstacles overcome, it's a really big deal.

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