

Fritz Pollard was first; who's next?

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By RONTOMAS

Fritz Pollard was proud of the fact that in the 1920's he became the "first" black NFL coach. But, as more than a half-century elapsed without a successor, he wasn't pleased with being the "only" black coach in league history.

He still carried that distinction when he died on May 11, 1986, at 92 years old, and he still has that distinction today.

"He used to talk about it all the time," said his son, Frederick Douglass "Fritz" Pollard Jr., a 72-year-old retired State Department official. "He knew what the situation was, and that they (NFL owners) weren't ready to accept a black as a coach."

So it's startling that the NFL accepted Pollard as a black coach over 60 years ago — when we supposedly were in the primitive age of race relations. According to Joe Horrigan, the historian at the Pro Football Hall of Fame, Pollard was player-coach of the Akron (Ohio) Pros in 1921 and 1925 to '26, probably coached the Milwaukee Badgers in 1922 and was player-coach of the Hammond (Ind.) Pros in 1925.

"That made me the first black coach in the NFL, but it was no big thing," Pollard said in a 1977 interview with "Pro! Talk," an NFL publication. "I was just another coach and happened to be a colored man."

Because it has been so long since there was a black NFL head coach, race now is an issue whenever a job-opening occurs. Signs of a breakthrough occurred just this year as several black assistant coaches (such as San Francisco's Dennis Green, Pittsburgh's Tony Dungy and Chicago's Johnny Roland) were interviewed for head-coaching vacancies at Green Bay and the Los Angeles Raiders. But the all-white status quo remains.

Pollard's "distant nephew," John Pollard, said his uncle believed that, "It's a



Fritz Pollard
(Pro Football Hall of Fame photo)

shame they don't have black coaches when they have so many players come up through the ranks and people who ... could have developed into a top coach. Also, these were people who loved the game."

Although Pollard's coaching career makes him noteworthy today, he initially distinguished himself as a talented, 5-8, 155-pound halfback.

He starred at Brown University and, in 1916, was the first black All-American and the first black to play in the Rose Bowl. Then, in 1919, Pollard joined the Akron Pros, who became charter mem-

bers of the American Professional Football Association in 1920.

The league was renamed the National Football League in 1922, and Pollard was one of its top drawing cards. There were a few other black players in the NFL, including Pollard's teammate at Akron, Paul Robeson, who later became the famous black entertainer and civil-rights activist.

Pollard enjoyed his playing days, although in 1978 he told the *New York Times* that he was not allowed to eat in the restaurants or stay in the hotels in the cities he played in. In addition, black players were often hassled by fans.

"There weren't any really bad situations," Pollard said in "Pro! Talk." "About the worst thing that would happen was sometimes when we played an away game the local fans would start to sing 'Bye, Bye, Blackbird.' But I guess other players were subjected to taunts like that regardless of color.

"Other times they would have me wait until right before the kickoff to come out on the field. That way I'd just run out on the field and the game would start right away, and there wouldn't be any time to raise a ruckus. Once in a while they'd throw stones at me in some of the towns. Now that I think about it, maybe there was a little more prejudice than I first recalled, but I never let it bother me that much."

Pollard fortunately played for a fair-minded owner at Akron, Frank Neid, who named Pollard player-coach in 1921 even though Elgie Tobin officially was head coach. In the 1920's, being player-coach actually was more important because coaching from the sidelines wasn't permitted during a game. Once the game began, Pollard said the team captain and quarterback were the dominant figures.

"Elgie Tobin was listed as the coach, but, when I came, they were still using

some old plays," Pollard told the *New York Times*. "So I said, 'Why don't we try some of the stuff we had been doing at Brown?' The owner, Frank Neid, told everybody that if they didn't want to listen to me, they could leave right then."

"Tobin was a limited player by 1921," Horrigan said. "Pollard was getting more playing time, and Frank Neid was paying Pollard quite a bit of money, so he got the second role as coach."

Akron was 8-3-1 under Pollard in 1921, then he joined the Milwaukee Badgers in 1922. There is some dispute among historians about whether Pollard coached the Badgers, but Horrigan has written correspondence in which Pollard states that he did.

Horrigan said Pollard coached Milwaukee to a 2-1-3 record, then Jimmy Conzelman replaced him in midseason for unknown reasons and lost the last three games of the season.

In the NFL's disorganized early years, it was common for players to jump from team to team, depending on who offered the highest salary. That explains why Pollard's coaching records are unknown in 1925 and 1926.

In 1925, he was player-coach at Hammond and Akron and ended the season as a player with Providence. In 1926, he ended his NFL career as Akron's player-coach after replacing Al Nesser in mid-season.

Pollard later coached semipro, college and high-school football teams, made feature movies, and owned a coal company in Chicago and a weekly newspaper in Harlem.

"He was an innovator any place he went," said Fritz Jr., who won a bronze medal in high hurdles at the 1936 Olympics. "Not only did he have (athletic) ability, but he had the ability to teach and command."

Joel Buchsbaum (Continued from Page 7)

doesn't deserve to go before Paul Gruber

some people have him going in the first

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