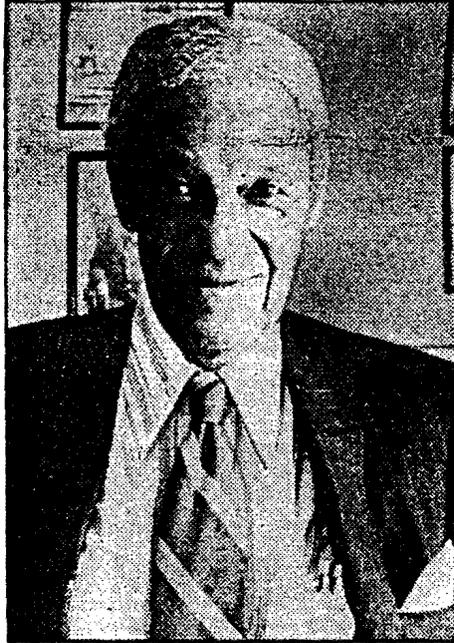
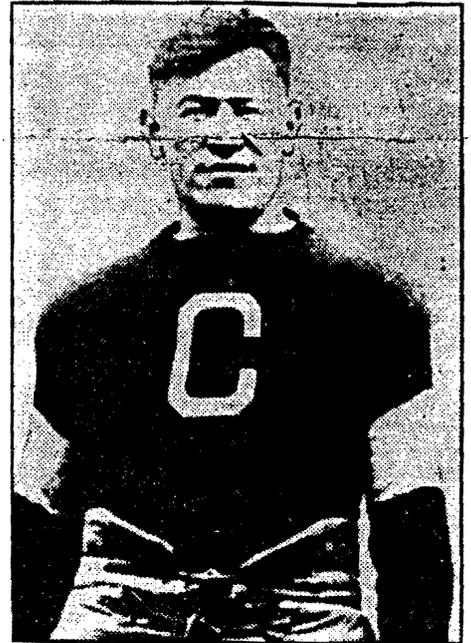




PAUL ROBESON
An early teammate



FRITZ POLLARD
Still the only one



JIM THORPE
Legendary NFL star

NFL's Only Black Coach

By Ron Thomas
Chronicle Staff Writer

Back in the 1920s, Frederick Douglass (Fritz) Pollard would have been shocked to know that in 1988 he still would be the only black head coach in NFL history. After all, Pollard didn't consider himself especially noteworthy when he coached several NFL teams back then.

According to Pro Football Hall of Fame historian Joe Horrigan, Pollard was player-coach of the Akron (Ohio) Pros in 1921 and 1925-26, 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 that appeared in an NFL publication. "I was just another coach and happened to be a colored man."

But when Pollard died on May 11, 1986, he was 92 years old and no black coach had followed him. In recent weeks, several black assistant coaches have received nationwide attention as speculation increased that one might become the head coach of the Green Bay Packers or Los Angeles Raiders. It hasn't happened yet, so Pollard still stands alone in history.

"He used to talk about it all the time," said his 72-year-old son, Frederick Douglass Pollard Jr., who also is called Fritz. "He knew what the situation was

and that they (NFL owners) weren't ready to accept a black as a coach."

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

A Pioneer

Pollard was named after the famous slavery abolitionist Frederick Douglass, and, like his namesake, Pollard was a racial pioneer throughout his lifetime. He starred at Brown University and in 1916 became the first black All-American

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and the first black player to participate in the Rose Bowl.

He entered the pro ranks in 1919 with the Akron Pros, who became charter members of the American Professional Football Association the following year. (In 1922, it was renamed the National Football League.) Most teams were in small towns because the larger cities were dominated by college ball.

The Pros were 8-0-3 in 1920 and Pollard, a halfback, ranked among the league's leading scorers. He also was one of pro football's early stars, along with the legendary Jim Thorpe. The next year one of Pollard's teammates was Paul Robeson, also black, who later gained fame as a singer, actor and civil rights activist.

Akron's official coach was Elgie Tobin, but Horrigan said there is "no question" that Pollard took over as player-coach in 1921.

"Elgie Tobin was listed as the coach, but when I came, they were still using some old plays," Pollard told the New York Times in 1978. "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."

A Coach on the Field

Another reason Pollard assumed the coaching duties is that the rules then stated that there could be no coaching from the sidelines during a game. Consequently, the team captain or quarterback called most of the plays. (That's how the expression "he's like a coach on the field" derived.)

"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."

Pollard's son said he believes his father's players "all knew his ability and liked him," but true to the racial customs of that era, many fans despised Pollard.

"Akron was a factory town and they had some prejudiced people there," Pollard told the Times. "I

had to get dressed for the games in Frank Neid's cigar factory, and they'd send a car over for me before the game. The fans booed me and called me all kinds of names because they had a lot of southerners up there working. I couldn't eat in the restaurants or stay in the hotels. Hammond and Milwaukee were bad then, too, but never as bad as Akron was."

Pollard coached Akron to an 8-3-1 record in 1921, then moved on to the Milwaukee Badgers in 1922. Horrigan has written correspondence from Pollard stating that he was the Badgers' coach, although some football historians dispute it.

"It's so long ago and no official records were kept, but the preponderance of evidence suggests he was," Horrigan said.

Horrigan said records indicate that Pollard was 2-1-3 with Milwaukee, then was replaced in midseason by Jimmy Conzelman for unknown reasons. Conzelman lost the last three games of the season.

A Busy Year

Pollard had a busy year in 1925, because he was player-coach at Hammond, player-coach at Akron and ended the season as a player with Providence. He finished his NFL career in 1926 as Akron's player-coach, replacing Al Nesser in midseason.

Pollard's coaching totals in 1925 and '26 are unknown because record-keeping was so fuzzy and he changed teams so often. Such job-hopping wasn't unusual among NFL players in that era.

"Players jumped from team to team to go to the highest bidder," Horrigan said. Enticing players from another team would be illegal today, but Horrigan said that in the 1920s it was the only way small-town teams could obtain a drawing card like Pollard.

After his NFL career, Pollard was an ambitious entrepreneur for the rest of his life. In addition to coaching semi-pro, college and high school football teams, he owned coal companies in Chicago, published a weekly newspaper in Harlem, made feature movies and was a theatrical booking agent. At 84, he still worked part-time as an income-tax consultant.

Pollard's son, a retired State Department official who lives in Silver Spring, Md., also was a star athlete. In the 1936 Olympics that made Jesse Owens famous, he won a bronze medal in the high hurdles, then he was the star quarterback at the University of North Dakota from 1936-38.

An injury in his last college game ended young Pollard's football career, but he couldn't have played in the NFL anyway because a color barrier existed from 1934-46, a period in which there no black NFL players.

Enjoyable Days

Pollard said his college roommate was the only other black player on North Dakota's team. "Hell, there were only 28 (black people) in the whole state," he said. But his coach, C.A. (Jack) West, made his playing days enjoyable.

Early in his career at North Dakota, Pollard said his teammates didn't mind if he carried the ball often as they drove downfield, but they grumbled if he called his own play near the goal line because they didn't want a black player to get the glory of scoring a touchdown.

"After that happened twice," Pollard recalled, "the coach called a meeting and said, 'Dammit, Pollard's my quarterback. Pollard calls the plays. I don't want to hear any of that (complaining).'"

But even after West's lecture, Pollard said he sometimes called plays for other players just to "mesh in" with his teammates. "I had to call those plays so they would block for me," he said.

Because of those types of experiences, Pollard will be rooting hard for the Washington Redskins' black quarterback, Doug Williams, during the Super Bowl on Sunday.

"I have been a Doug Williams fan for a long time because I know what he's going through," Pollard said. "It takes a long time to gain respect."

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