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SUPER BOWL

History In The Making

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[Video: Blake High Coach Grateful For Dungy](#)

TAMPA - It may be the Super Bowl, but it's still just a football game between teams from cities about a thousand miles from here. How can such a thing matter so much to so many in the neighborhoods and living rooms of the Bay area?

When head coaches Tony Dungy and Lovie Smith lead the Indianapolis Colts and Chicago Bears, respectively, into today's Super Bowl in Miami, they will be the first black men to do so. That makes it historic.

That is the simple answer.

But it's more than just the breaching of a racial barrier. It's a celebration of opportunity, hope realized, and it has been accomplished by men highly regarded for leading lives of distinction beyond the football field.

The fact that both coached the Tampa Bay Buccaneers - Dungy was the head coach, and he hired Smith as an assistant - brings the story home.

"It shows that people who look like us can achieve on that level," said Randolph Kinsey, 65. "The average white person is used to white coaches coaching in the Super Bowl. We're not used to black men coaching in the Super Bowl. But it has happened.

"Then you see that it's Tony Dungy. There are so many people who only know Tony Dungy from coaching football, but there are many other people in our community who don't know where Tony Dungy works.

"They don't know he's with the Indianapolis Colts; they just know him from things here in Tampa. It's a feather in the cap of black folks because he's one of our own."

With that, the stage is prepared for something that will last far beyond the confetti shower at the end of the game.

"Once this happens, what else will happen now? Are we really going to have an African-American in the White House one day? Or a female?" said 34-year-old Romey Battle, who works with minority youths to gain athletic college scholarships.

"This is one of the best things that could have happened to America because it's a worldwide event. It goes past just black and white. It says that people are human."

Little Opportunity

The numbers on this issue are so stark there is no room for debate. Although about two-thirds of National Football League players are black, only 10 black men in the NFL's modern era (starting in the 1950s) have

been head coaches.

Of the league's 32 teams, six have black head coaches.

Art Shell became the first black man of the era to lead a team in 1989. Dungy became the fourth black head coach when the Bucs hired him in 1996.

"I think there was a subconscious barrier. I don't think it was directed at African-Americans per se, but I think we had a vision of what a head coach looked like," Dungy told reporters in Miami last week.

"The head coach of a successful team, to many people, looked like Vince Lombardi. It was a white, middle-aged coach who screamed fire and brimstone, and that's what we saw in NFL Films and everything. It was a great picture."

It took the threat of legal action to force change. The lawyer Johnnie Cochran took up the cause by promising a lawsuit against the NFL for not giving opportunities to black assistant coaches. That led to the Rooney Rule in 2002 - named for Pittsburgh Steelers owner Dan Rooney. It required teams to interview at least one nonwhite for each head-coaching opening.

"That was important," said Richard Lapchick, director of the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport at the University of Central Florida. "But I don't think it's more important than what will happen" today.

Lapchick said his studies show that the problems extend beyond the NFL.

"Coaching positions at the college level across the board are very unrepresentative of people of color," he said.

Only five of the nation's 119 Division I-A football programs are headed by blacks. There are 242 offensive or defensive coordinators in college - the head coach at some schools may hold that title as well - and only 31 are black.

A similarly large percentage of the presidents, athletic directors and faculty representatives at those schools are white.

Lapchick added that the NCAA, which governs college athletics, has been resistant to regulation similar to the Rooney Rule. However, that could be changing. NCAA President Myles Brand has agreed to meet with leaders of the Fritz Pollard Alliance, formed to promote racial hiring in the NFL, to discuss a similar process.

Sparks Of Change

So perhaps it's understandable that blacks wondered when they would see this day.

Kinsey has lived in the Bay area all his life. He went to high school in St. Petersburg and coached boys varsity basketball at Tampa's Blake High from 1961 to 1968. Blake was an all-black school then and wasn't allowed to play against Tampa's white high schools such as Plant or Hillsborough. They had to travel as far as Georgia and Alabama to find games.

"I remember that we had kids who grew up in Port Tampa, in the Robinson district," Kinsey said. "Robinson was all-white then, so those kids had to drive past Robinson and Plant just to get to their school.

"Sometimes you get to thinking that this is the way it's going to be, at least in my lifetime. You think there will be no changes, so, no, I never thought it would happen. Later on, I began to believe it might happen. There were more opportunities. I began to understand it was only a matter of time until it happened."

First, Baseball's Barrier Was Broken

Cito Gaston has traveled the same road Dungy and Smith are walking today. In 1992, Gaston became the first black to manage a team in baseball's World Series when he led the Toronto Blue Jays to a championship against Atlanta. Gaston followed it the next season by beating Philadelphia in the Series. He now lives in Dunedin and works as an assistant in the Blue Jays' front office.

There wasn't as much made of Gaston breaking the barrier as is being made today, possibly because Frank Robinson became Major League Baseball's first black manager in 1975. Gaston, though, said the attention being given the Super Bowl is appropriate.

"It's important that we recognize this, and it's important for the future," he said. "Once it happens, it won't be as big the next time. But the first time is important."

Gaston said his memory of that first World Series is a blur.

"I think about it now when people mention it, but when it happened, it was happening so fast," he said. "You get so busy and caught up that you don't think about the other things that are going on. Sometimes people accuse me of not enjoying it, but I did enjoy it. I hope [Dungy and Smith] enjoy it. I know I'll be watching the game."

Dungy Encouraged Female Coach

Debra Dawkins knows a little about overcoming stereotypes. She grew up around football and loves the sport, so much that she is an assistant coach for the Blake High varsity team. Before that, she was a graduate assistant at the University of Florida, helping coach wide receivers for head coach Steve Spurrier in the mid-1990s.

She became a pen pal of sorts with Dungy after he took over the Bucs in 1996. She faxed him a letter of encouragement and introduced herself, and he replied. The faxes became sort of a Monday ritual after Bucs games, many of which were losses in Dungy's first year with the team.

"We'd talk about the game. We'd talk about football, my interest in football. We'd talk about what he was going through. He encouraged me as a woman not to give up on my dream. I encouraged him to hang in there," she said. "He always told me to go for it. He took me under his wing without really knowing me, and I'll always be grateful for that."

Dawkins didn't meet Dungy in person until late December 2005, when she attended a wake of the death of Dungy's son, James. She recalled being impressed with his poise.

"He has this demeanor about himself that's hard to describe," she said. "He is just a very humble man, but still he knows who he is and he knows that people look up to him."

There has been an ongoing show of love and respect for Dungy, even though he was fired by the Bucs five years ago for failing to take the team to the Super Bowl. That reached a crescendo last week.

"I've gotten calls from people in Tampa that say that Dale Mabry Avenue is painted blue and white and a lot of Colts signs, and that's really awesome," Dungy said. "I have got a lot of great friends back there, and I really appreciate them pulling for us. It's something that's really, really hard to describe."

Another First

Race and the significance of this game have been thoroughly discussed since the Super Bowl teams were

set two weeks ago. Dungy has met the issue head on.

"I've probably thought about it since 1999, when [the Bucs] were one step away from this game, and what it would have meant to me at that point. Now, seven years later, a lot of it is crystallized. It's important for me to let people know how proud I am to be here. It's important for me to let people know the guys who have gone before me, who spurred me on and were my role models," he told reporters in Miami.

"I watched John Thompson win that national championship [at Georgetown, in college basketball], and I was excited. Seeing guys like John Chaney. Most often it had been in basketball, and it's great that we're seeing it in football now, and it's important. But it's also important for me to kind of state my case, too, as to the fact that it's not just African-American, but it's how you do it. Doing it with excellence, whether you're a minority, majority, whatever, anybody who gets an opportunity can do it well and do it with excellence."

Doug Williams understands what that is like. The former Bucs quarterback became the first black to start at that position in the Super Bowl when he led the Washington Redskins past Denver 42-10 in 1988.

Williams threw for 340 yards and four touchdowns that day in winning the Most Valuable Player award for the game.

Back then if you were black, "you played not because you were two steps ahead but light-years ahead," he said.

Black quarterbacks have not been an issue in the NFL since that day when Williams became a star, and it is likely that black coaches in the Super Bowl will never be an issue after today. The discussion, though, needed to be held, many people say, so no one will forget what it took to get here.

"Kids today have heard about segregation, but they've never been involved in it or touched by it," Kinsey said. "These kids always went to integrated schools and lived in integrated neighborhoods. They've had diverse friends. They could go to any movie they wanted.

"That's why this is a big deal. Whether you understand, or whether anyone else understands it, to the black community this is a big thing. I'll be rooting for Tony Dungy to win because of what he has meant to Tampa, but either way it turns out is OK. That's because I'll wake up Monday morning and a black man will have won the Super Bowl."

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