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The Curse of Doug Williams

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Have you noticed? Vinnie Testaverde led the Cleveland Browns into the NFL playoffs. Steve Young has become all-world, statistically having the best season for a quarterback in the history of the NFL.

We all know what these two quarterbacks have in common. They both were booed heartily and heavily in the city by the bay, and not the one in San Francisco. Yes, they are both ex-Tampa Bay Bucs. Neither one of them could play football in Tampa, but both seem to be doing fine, thank you, in other venues.

It is of course no mystery what is going on here.

And did you notice. The Tampa Bay Bucs have set a new standard for ineptitude. Twelve straight seasons now they have lost ten or more games. Double digit losses into a second decade, and still counting. Hugh Culverhouse predicted the Bucs would be the "team of the Nineties."

What is going on? Of course we all know. It is the dreaded, and now well established, "Curse of Doug Williams."

In 1980 the Bucs came within one game of the Super Bowl. Over the next two seasons the Bucs made the playoffs under the leadership of Doug Williams. And then everything fell apart. After a long and protracted salary dispute with owner Hugh Culverhouse Williams departed for Oklahoma or Arizona or some such USFL location.

A mere \$50,000 separated Williams from the Bucs and the gods of football have never been appeased. Williams went on to eventually lead the Washington Redskins to a Super Bowl Victory, as indeed Steve Young may do with the 49ers.

As for the Bucs they fell like a rock to the bottom of the NFC Central Division, and into a dozen years of double-digit losses. Coaches came and went and nothing changed: McKay, Williamson, Bennett, Perkins, and now Wyche. Geniuses all until they reached One Buc Place.

Bad players leave Tampa Bay to have fine careers elsewhere, with Young and Testaverde two recent examples. Good players come to the Bay area only to suffer injuries or inexplicably become bad players: Anthony Young and Rickey Bell come to mind. First round draft picks are misused--Bo Jackson says he won't come to Tampa

Bay, they pick him number one in the draft, and he doesn't. First round picks are traded away for budding superstars who come to Tampa Bay and achieve obscurity: Jack Thompson, the Throw'in Samoan; Chris Chandler who was an impressive 0-6 as a Buc starter and then released; Booker Reese who was acquired for a first round pick from Chicago and would play a total of seven games as a Buc over three years. And the beat goes on and on.

The Jack Thompson case was the most interesting. Cincinnati wanted a second round draft pick for Thompson, but the Bucs insisted that the Bengals take a first round pick. If you have to ask why, you haven't been paying attention.

It is uncanny how similar all of this is to the story of the Boston Red Sox. As any Sox fan can tell you they haven't won a World Series since 1918 when Babe Ruth pitched them to victory. The curse of the Bambino began when Harry Frazee traded Ruth to the Yankees, for a bunch of cash and a play to be named later. The Curse of Doug Williams began when Hugh Culverhouse let Williams walk away over a relatively small amount of money. Principle triumphed over interest. And like the Red Sox, the Bucs have suffered ever since. Both have shown an uncanny ability to find new ways to lose, new ways to demonstrate their incompetence. Occasionally they will tease their fans, showing some small spark of life, some indication that things are turning around. But in the end the story is the same.

Late this season the Bucs tantalized their fans running off four straight wins, the longest streak in years. The fans came out of hibernation and the final game saw a crowd approaching 70,000, double the recent average. And then having teased all these fans back into the stadium the Bucs reverted to form, and were blasted off the field by the end of the first half by the Green Bay Packers.

And now of course Hugh Culverhouse is dead and the estate is looking at bids from potential owners. Buc fans face the prospect that the team will move to another city. Maybe that's what they need. A new City, a new name, a new coach, new ownership, new unies, a new life: the American dream of reinventing oneself. Maybe that is the only way that the Curse of Doug Williams can be laid to rest, short of sacrificing vestal virgins or the first born of every Buc fan in a pre-season ceremony at mid-field.

As you watch Steve Young lead the 49ers this Sunday think of the Bucs and of what might have been, and remember Doug Williams.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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