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Race and the Bucs

Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Race and the Bucs
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As the nation prepares for the inauguration of Barack Obama as the 44th president of the United States (I have not seen that referenced as Henry Aaron's number), I am struck by how much has been written about the changes in American society that have prepared the United States for this moment. There have been articles about how the music industry has transformed the way in which Americans think about African Americans. The New York Times today has a piece on how American film has contributed to the transformation of American society. There have been numerous comments on the significance of the civil rights movement in preparing for this moment in our history. There has been more than a little discussion of the role sport has played in changing the perception of African Americans in the United States. All of these have an element of truth to them, all have been catalytic, but none of them are singular in their power.

Over the past week I have been drawn to the events surrounding the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, past and present, and contemplating the meaning of change in that small corner of American life.

A few of you may remember that on several occasions I wrote disparagingly about the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, their ownership, their fans, and the city. I explained their woeful incompetence by The Curse of Doug Williams which was visited upon them after Buc owner Hugh Culverhouse let Williams go to the USFL refusing to pay Williams anything approaching what he was worth. The Curse was also payback to all those Buc fans who showered Williams with racial insults every time he set foot on the field in Tampa Stadium, even though he led the Bucs to the playoffs and the NFC championship game, places the franchise had never been. It was a chorus worthy of the Klan and the lynch mobs of the old South. Williams left after the 1982 season.

By this time Tony Dungy was beginning his career as a defensive coach in Pittsburgh where he established his reputation as one of the best defensive coaches in football. It took fifteen years before Dungy was able to break the racial barrier into a head coaching position in 1996, and when he did it was in Tampa. By then Malcolm Glazer had replaced Hugh Culverhouse as owner, and Doug Williams had gone on to be the MVP of Super Bowl XXII with a record setting performance leading the Washington Redskins

over the Denver Broncos. He was the first African American quarterback to win a Super Bowl.

Dungy quickly established the Bucs as a contender and perennial playoff team. In three years they played in the NFC championship game. Dungy coached the Bucs to more victories than any coach in their history, a feat he would duplicate in Indianapolis. However after the 2001 season and a loss in the playoffs he was fired. The feeling was he couldn't get his team over the hump offensively and win a championship.

His replacement was Jon Gruden whom the Bucs hired away from the Raiders and for whom they gave up two first-round draft picks, two second-round picks, and \$8M dollars. Gruden led the Bucs to the Super Bowl and an NFL championship the following year, and Gruden became the youngest coach to win a Super Bowl. As many would point out, Gruden did so with the team crafted by Tony Dungy.

As for Dungy he was hired almost immediately by the Indianapolis Colts and took them to the playoffs every year he was their coach. Dungy was the first black coach to win a Super Bowl in 2006 when the Colts beat the Bears, who also had a black coach, a former assistant of Dungy's, Lovie Smith. Dungy was the winningest coach in the history of the Colts, led his teams in Tampa and Indianapolis to ten straight playoff appearances, and eleven in thirteen years. Many of Dungy's former assistant coaches are head coaches across the league.

Whether Dungy faced the racial taunting that Doug Williams endured I do not know, although with his success in Tampa it is hard to imagine he did. What is known is that in the past week after Jon Gruden was fired as Bucs head coach and his successor was named the comments were about Morris's age, 32. Raheem Morris is an African American and there was little comment about that in reactions to his hiring.

All of this certainly points to the fact that in Tampa, once a hotbed of the Ku Klux Klan, once a place that made life for an African American quarterback quite miserable, there has been some change. The NFL franchise that cast off the first African American quarterback to win a Super Bowl, and the first African American head coach to win a Super Bowl, has now hired their second African American head coach with little comment about the color of his skin.

That all of this has transpired within a week of the inauguration of Barack Obama as the first African American president of the United States is more than a simple convergence of time and place. It is also less than cause and effect. Perhaps it is one more of those small signs that there are some changes we can believe in.

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