

NEWS

HBCU quarterbacks Doug Williams, James Harris credit Grambling coach for success

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CANTON – James "Shack" Harris recalled when legendary sportscaster Howard Cosell posed a question to Grambling State University football coach Eddie Robinson.

Although the legendary Robinson had seen scores of his athletes play in the NFL, the provocative Cosell asked him why none of them were a quarterback.

So Robinson told Harris that in four years he would leave Grambling prepared to play quarterback for an NFL team.

"He came by my house and talked to me and ... he said, 'James ... America's not ready now, but in four years, America will be ready for a Black quarterback if you come to Grambling,'" said Harris, who played for the Grambling Tigers from 1965 to 1968.

Harris shared the story during an appearance Thursday night with fellow Grambling alum and former NFL quarterback Doug Williams. The duo spoke at the Canton Palace Theatre as part of the Stark County Library's Dr. Audrey Lavin Speaking of Books Author Series.

Moderating the discussion was Adrian Allison, chief relationship officer for the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

The event also was among the events leading up to Sunday's 4 p.m. Black College Football Hall of Fame Classic. Central State University faces Winston-Salem State University.

'They questioned our ability to lead, they questioned our character.'

Recalling Robinson's plan, Harris said he was committed to playing quarterback in the NFL. That's why he plummeted to the eighth round of the 1969 draft before being selected by the

Buffalo Bills. Most teams wanted to switch him to another position.

But Harris was undeterred, and became the first Black quarterback to start a season in NFL history. For the Los Angeles Rams, he became the first Black quarterback to start a conference championship game. Harris was named to the NFC Pro Bowl team in 1974.

NFL teams and scouts traditionally had questioned the intelligence of Black quarterbacks, Harris recalled.

"They questioned our ability to lead, they questioned our character," he said. "But those are things I could control, and I wasn't going to get cut because I wasn't smart enough. I wasn't going to get cut because of my character."

'I was the Washington Redskins quarterback who just happened to be Black.'

Williams, meanwhile, followed Harris' trailblazing path as the No. 17 overall draft pick of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in 1978. He would lead the franchise to the playoffs before leaving the NFL for a stint in the USFL.

Returning to the NFL with the Washington Redskins, Williams led the team to a Super Bowl victory in 1988 while being named MVP. He was the first Black quarterback to start in a Super Bowl.

Williams, however, doesn't view his Super Bowl feats through the lens of skin color.

"That wasn't important to me," he said. "I was the Washington Redskins quarterback who just happened to be Black."

The comment drew a burst of applause from the theater audience.

Williams spoke modestly of his record-setting performance, quickly crediting the offensive line and other teammates for their contributions.

"No one man's going to win a game by himself," he said. "You need the team."

Both men told the Palace Theatre audience of the discrimination and obstacles they had faced as youth. However, it was Robinson whom they praised and credited for shaping them both on and off the football field. Academics, faith and character were prioritized as much as football, Williams and Harris explained.

"Failure is when you fail to prepare for an opportunity when it comes," Harris said.

Added Williams: "It wasn't about going to the NFL; it was about taking care of yourself and your family when you left Grambling."

Williams and Harris said their stories are reflective of other players from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Some of them proved their abilities in the NFL. Others were never given the opportunity.

That's why Harris and Williams co-founded the Black College Football Hall of Fame before a permanent home was secured at the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton.

Pro Football Hall of Fame officials "felt this was a place where our story should be told," Harris said.

Ten percent of Pro Football Hall of Fame inductees are from an HBCU, he noted.

"One reason we wanted this story to be told is we think these players and coaches have contributed so much to (professional football)," Harris said.

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