

Willie Thrower: A Forgotten Pioneer

On October 18, 1953, a crowd of 40,740 fans at Wrigley Field saw Bears coach George Halas – frustrated by the play of his starting quarterback, George Blanda – send an undrafted rookie into the game to lead his offense. With five minutes left to go and his team down 35-21, Willie Thrower took command of the Chicago offense and completed a pass to the 4-yard-line of their opponent, the San Francisco 49ers. Halas promptly re-inserted Blanda, [drawing the ire of his team's fans](#): “Blanda and [Fred] Morrison came into the game, and the crowd responded with a resounding razzberry. They wanted Willie to put it over.” Instead, Morrison scored the touchdown.

Thrower would return to the field, ending the game by throwing an interception to San Francisco's Lowell Wagner. He would never attempt an NFL pass again. But despite going just [3-for-8 for 27 yards](#), Thrower had made history. He had become the first Black man to play quarterback in the NFL. [He would never appear in an NFL game again.](#)

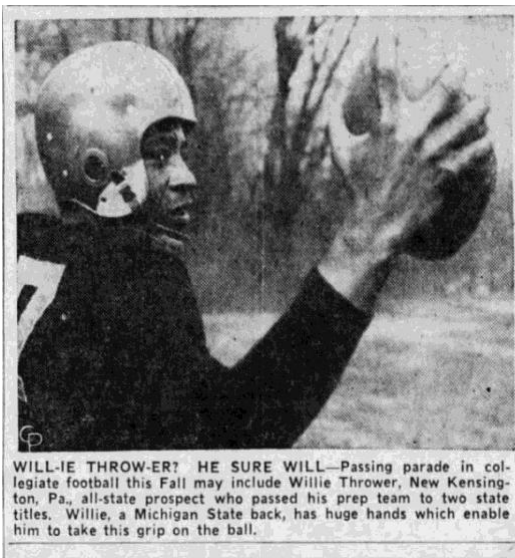
Despite what we sometimes think, color barriers in some sports had not existed since the beginning of time. They were often implemented later in a league's history and often in the form of informal “gentleman's agreements.” Before Jackie Robinson famously broke baseball's color barrier, there was [Moses Fleetwood Walker](#). Before [Joe Louis](#) became one of the first Black sports superstars (and – in a lesser-known achievement – integrated American golf), there was [Jack Johnson](#) (and even earlier, [Tom Molineaux](#)). The same was true for Thrower – by 1953, there were several Black players in the NFL. But even before the George Preston Marshall-led “unspoken agreement” barring them from 1933-1945, there had been Black players in professional football. Some of them had been occasional passers, but none had been quarterbacks in the modern sense. For this reason, directly comparing Thrower to Robinson and others isn't exactly apples-to-apples because he didn't break down the color barrier for an entire league. Interestingly, the first Black player to sign an NFL contract in the modern era was one of Robinson's former teammates at UCLA, [Kenny Washington](#). But the significance of Thrower's monumental – yet brief – NFL career is that he served as a trailblazer for what has become the most important, visible and glamorous position in American sport.

Black quarterbacks are starting to become somewhat commonplace in the present day. After all, [the reigning NFL MVP](#) and [the highest-paid athlete in North American professional sports history](#) are both Black quarterbacks. Ask football fans about pioneering Black quarterbacks, though, and many will begin with [Doug Williams](#), who started Super Bowl XXII in 1988. Die-hard fans may mention [Marlin Briscoe](#), who became the first Black starting quarterback in league history for the Denver Broncos in 1968. But Thrower's name had largely been forgotten [until this June when the WPIAL announced](#) that the district's top quarterback each year would receive an award named after Thrower.

To put Thrower's achievement into context, it is important to remember that from the NFL's birth in 1920 through the end of World War II, the single wing was the dominant formation across all levels of football. Typically, a team's primary passer was the tailback, although multiple players could throw passes in some systems. Fritz Pollard, a pioneering Black player, was a tailback but [threw touchdown passes as early as 1925](#). Quarterbacks in the early days of football might not ever throw a pass and instead were counted upon to be reliable blockers. This era was also when the term "forward pass" was used, as if throwing the ball downfield was a barely understood experiment...which isn't far from the truth. Until the late 1950s, passing was rare even at the professional level and teams tended to be extremely run-heavy.

By 1953, though, the Bears had been using the T formation for over a decade and utilized a quarterbacking style that would be recognizable to football fans today, although they briefly did so with a quarterback who looked like none had before him. [The first Black man to play the modern version of quarterback in NFL history](#) was Thrower that day in 1953. Thrower had made history even before arriving in Chicago; [he was the first Black quarterback in Big Ten history](#) while at Michigan State.

Before heading to East Lansing, Thrower became a legend in Western Pennsylvania for his arm strength and athleticism while playing for New Kensington High School (now a part of Valley High School). It was frequently reported that he could accurately throw a ball 60+ yards, leading to plenty of weak attempts at puns on his name in local newspapers. Legendary Ambridge coach Moe Rubenstein called Thrower the "[best high school passer I ever saw](#)." Thrower also ran for 11 touchdowns as a senior and would occasionally make one-handed interceptions on defense. As a freshman, Thrower started on a 7-2 New Kensington team that fell in the WPIAL postseason to a Donora team featuring future NFL rushing leader [Dan Towler](#); that Donora team would be [named the best in WPIAL history](#). Most descriptions of Thrower centered around his unimposing size (5'11, 175 pounds) and his enormous hands.



[Tue, Jul 18, 1950 – 15 · *Intelligencer Journal* \(Lancaster, Pennsylvania\) · Newspapers.com](#)

New Kensington was a power in the late-1940s, going 31-3-1 in Thrower's four years as a varsity player. After the 1946 season, New Kensington [was invited to the Peanut Bowl](#), a game held in conjunction with the Orange Bowl that featured two prominent high school teams from throughout the country. Once the game's organizers realized Thrower and other New Kensington players were Black, the team's invitation was rescinded; in the late 1940s, Florida – and other Southern states – did not permit players of different races to play against one another. The 1947 team (Thrower's junior season) [earned a state-leading Saylor Rating of 559](#), tied for the 8th highest of any team statewide before 1988. In 1948, New Kensington shut out Pittsburgh Central Catholic and Steubenville (OH) by identical 20-0 scores. They battled another 1940s dynasty – Allentown High School – to a 7-7 tie, but suffered their first loss since 1945 in a 20-14 upset at Vandergrift. [Thrower was named the Pittsburgh-area player of the year](#) in a poll of 153 coaches and was named to the AP All-State First Team. He capped the season by being named a high school All-American.

Ken High Backfield Threat



—Post-Gazette Photo

WHALIN' WILLIE THROWER, junior left halfback who has been a standout passer for Don Fletcher's Ken High teams the last three seasons, will be pitching against Har-Brack in the WPIAL Class AA playoff game at Forbes Field Thursday. Thrower's touchdown tosses for the defending champions range from five to 55 yards on the fly. Notice long hands gripping ball. Nickname is Mitts.

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With the accolades Thrower received throughout his career, it should come as no surprise that his college recruitment was a hot topic in Pittsburgh-area newspapers. [Many thought he was a lock to attend Pitt](#), despite the fact that [he was being pursued by Western Conference \(Big Ten\) programs](#), as well. In the end, Thrower chose to attend Michigan State, which, while surprising from a geographic standpoint, did make sense for two reasons. First, the Spartans in the 1950s and (especially) the 1960s featured one of the more diverse rosters in college football at a time when many rosters – particularly those in the South – had not yet been integrated. The second reason that it shouldn't be surprising that Thrower chose the Spartans is that the program already

had a large contingent of Pennsylvanians and several of Thrower's high school teammates also chose Michigan State that year. No fewer than seven New Kensington players were on the Michigan State roster in the late 1940s and early 1950s; at the time, New Kensington's population was about 25,000, double what it is today. Additionally, assistant coaches Duffy Daugherty (Barnesboro) and Earle Edwards (Greensburg), lineman – and future Arizona State head coach – Frank Kush (Windber), quarterback Tom Yewcic (Conemaugh) and halfback Jerry Planutis (West Hazleton) were all from Pennsylvania high schools.

Daugherty's arrival in 1947 saw Michigan State begin to actively recruit Black players to East Lansing, and Thrower was a primary target for them following his senior season in 1948. The Spartans were later known prominently for their diverse roster, particularly [the 1966 team](#) that finished No. 2 in the AP Poll but were named national champions by a few outlets. But Michigan State had recruited Black athletes for years before then, and Daugherty played a primary role. Born in the tiny northern Cambria County settlement of Emeigh in 1915, Daugherty had been a lineman at Syracuse in the late 1930s. His high school alma mater is now a part of Northern Cambria High School, whose field is named after Daugherty. As an assistant under head coach Biggie Munn at Michigan State, Daugherty's insistence on recruiting Black players was dubbed by some as "The Underground Railroad." His efforts (combined with a well-worn path between East Lansing and Western Pennsylvania) led Thrower, the high school kid from a Pittsburgh suburb, and Daugherty, a young assistant from a Cambria County coal town to lay the foundation of Thrower's future accomplishment.



Duffy Daugherty. Image source: <https://ccshof.org/member/duffy-daugherty/#jp-carousel-268>
Thrower [attempted](#) just 57 passes in his collegiate career, most of them coming in his senior season. That year – 1952 – saw the Spartans win the national championship. Thrower split time at quarterback on the 1952 squad with Yewcic, an All-American that season. Due to his limited production and playing time (and, perhaps, his combination of position and race), Thrower was not drafted into the NFL following his senior year. The Chicago Bears offered him a contract, though, setting the stage for him to break history.



Thrower at Michigan State. Image source: The Willie Thrower Foundation & <https://explorepahistory.com/displayimage.php?imgId=1-2-1474>

After Thrower's brief but significant NFL experience, he found it difficult to receive the respect and notoriety he felt he rightfully deserved. Many people weren't aware of what he had accomplished and others doubted the veracity of Thrower's claim. [In a column](#) written by Chuck Finder in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette following Thrower's death in February, 2002, it's clear that the man who broke the color barrier in his sport's most glamorous position hadn't gotten the recognition he had earned:

I was like the Jackie Robinson of football, he used to say. Almost until the day he died – Wednesday, after a prolonged illness, at 71 – Thrower had to convince people in his own hometown that he made history. They called him a liar. They doubted. So he hardly talked about it. “It was like a nothing, like a void,” said Vince Pisano, a longtime friend and backfield mate from their days at Ken High in New Kensington and Michigan State, where Thrower was likewise credited with being the Big Ten Conference’s first black quarterback, in 1950. “It didn’t come up too much.”

Would Thrower’s breaking of the quarterback color barrier be more widely remembered today had he continued to have a longer career? Possibly. Or if he had played for a better team rather than the 3-8-1 Bears? Maybe. Perhaps the biggest reason Thrower’s advancement of the game hasn’t been celebrated is, paradoxically, the advancement of the game since he jogged onto that field nearly seventy years ago. It doesn’t require a deep knowledge of the history of football to recognize that playing quarterback in 2020 is starkly different than playing quarterback in 1953, for myriad reasons. Be it offensive strategy, media exposure, money, or any number of other reasons, the position of quarterback has evolved greatly. But when Thrower went under center in the Bears’ T formation that October day, *he was playing quarterback*. He wasn’t receiving a snap as part of a trick play or serving as one of several players who could handle the ball. He was the quarterback in a modern sense. And he was playing that position while living as a man belonging to a race that for years wasn’t considered competent enough to play that position. In fact, following Thrower breaking the quarterback color barrier, a Black man wouldn’t serve as a starting quarterback [until Marlin Briscoe did so in 1968](#) (George Taliaferro played quarterback, among other positions, until 1955, throwing just a pair of passes in his career following Thrower’s debut in 1953). Thrower opened the door, but it still took a decade and a half for professional football to allow anyone else in.

[In a profile of Thrower in *The Undefeated* from 2017](#), well-known sports sociologist Harry Edwards summed up Thrower’s impact on the game:

“He was among that first post-World War II cohort of black athletes to step across the color line in professional football [...] Thrower was a pioneer playing the leadership, authority and intellectual position of quarterback, which, with the exception of him, was reserved at the time for white players. But he didn’t have many games in which to display his skills. Because of this, he is today largely forgotten despite his pioneering contribution. But in every social change situation, there is always somebody who is the first, someone who bears the pressure and scrutiny of the change moment.”

Yes, his time in the NFL was brief. But Thrower’s breaking of the quarterback color barrier’s impact has lasted until the present day. It is no longer strange to see a Black quarterback in any level of football, including the NFL. It isn’t uncommon to see Black quarterbacks in the Big Ten, the first of two leagues Thrower desegregated at the position. He took on a position reluctant to him changing it and changed it anyway. That alone is reason enough to remember Willie Thrower.