

Defend Lamar Jackson: Broadcaster comments highlight ingrained NFL racism

written by Steven Ceci
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Baltimore Ravens quarterback Lamar Jackson.

Baltimore — A white San Francisco 49ers broadcaster, Tim Ryan, made the following statement about Baltimore Ravens quarterback Lamar Jackson, who is African American, after the Ravens beat the 49ers on Dec. 1: “He’s really good at that fake, Lamar Jackson, but when you consider his dark skin color with a dark football with a dark uniform, you could not see that thing. I mean you literally could not see when he was in and out of the mesh point and if you’re a half step slow on him in terms of your vision, forget about it, he’s out of the gate.”

The [San Francisco Chronicle reported](#) that Ryan made his comments during his weekly segment on KNBR radio’s “Murph and Mac” morning show on Dec. 2, as the hosts reviewed Jackson’s role in the Ravens’ 20-17 win over the 49ers.

Jackson rushed and passed for more than 100 yards in the contest between the two top-rated teams. During the Dec. 1 game, he used his “running quarterback” strategy of faking a handoff to a running back and completing the play himself.

In a statement to the Chronicle, the San Francisco 49ers front office maintained that it was “disappointed” by Ryan’s commentary and that he “must be more thoughtful with his words.” Ryan later expressed regret to the 49ers and Jackson.

The 49ers suspended Ryan for one game on Dec. 8. Some sports commentators and reporters, both Black and white, stated that the suspension was an overreaction — that Ryan’s statement was “stupid” and “ignorant” rather than being racist because he is a “nice guy.”

But many fans felt Ryan should have been fired.

Lamar ‘Action’ Jackson’s greatness

Lamar Jackson Jr., the Baltimore Ravens’ 22-year-old quarterback, is considered one

of the most dynamic players in the National Football League (NFL). As a sophomore at the University of Louisville, Ky., he won the Heisman Trophy, which rewards and recognizes the best collegiate player annually. Currently, Jackson is in his second season in the NFL and is the frontrunner to win the league's Most Valuable Player (MVP) award for this season.

With two games left in the regular season, Jackson has broken the record of 1,039 rushing yards by a quarterback in a regular season, previously held by Michael Vick.

This year, the NFL is celebrating the centennial of its founding — an important milestone, since professional football remains one of the most popular sports in the U.S.

Like other sports in the U.S., football is stamped with capitalism's deeply embedded racism, sexism and other forms of bigotry.

NFL centennial and racism

A classmate of the great baseball player Jackie Robinson, running back Kenny Washington became the first Black player to sign an NFL contract with the Los Angeles Rams in 1946 — nearly 30 years after the league's founding.

It would be another 22 years before Denver Bronco Marlin Briscoe became the first Black quarterback in the NFL.

The quarterback, as the playmaker and leader of the team, is considered the most prestigious player. Quarterbacks are revered more for being highly intellectual than for being gifted with physical abilities.

Based on racist stereotypes, Black college quarterbacks have often been forced into other positions when they are drafted into the NFL—such as receivers or defensive backs—because their intellect is considered inferior by wealthy, white NFL owners.

An example of that racist mentality towards Black quarterbacks was demonstrated in comments made by former NFL executive Bill Polian, [who said in 2018](#) that Lamar Jackson should give up on being a quarterback and become a wide receiver.

“Don’t be like the kid from Ohio State and be 29 when you make the change,” Polian said, referring to the Washington, D.C., team’s wide receiver Terrelle Pryor, who switched from quarterback in 2015.

Jackson has endured other criticisms. ESPN’s [Mel Kiper Jr. maligned Jackson](#) for inaccurate passing because his career completion percentage hovers around 57 percent. Football writer and former NFL scout [Greg Gabriel dinged Jackson](#) because, in his view, Jackson did not run a pro-style offense at Louisville.

And before the start of the 2017 college football season, an [unnamed ACC coach told Sports Illustrated](#) that Jackson “can’t make the throws and can’t read coverages.”

Various writers have vehemently and persuasively defended Jackson on each of these knocks. (See some examples [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).)

Double standard

The critiques and criticisms of Lamar Jackson prior to his being drafted in 2018, and even now, are totally rooted in racism. The Heisman Trophy winner had all the skills and intangibles to be a top-ten first-round pick in 2018 instead of being the 32nd overall pick by the Baltimore Ravens in the first round.

Intended to serve as a backup in his rookie season, he became the team’s starting quarterback following Joe Flacco’s injury in a game against the Pittsburgh Steelers.

[Dr. Harry Edwards](#), a renowned sociologist and respected civil rights activist who has advised many Black athletes, gave the San Francisco Chronicle his thoughts before and after Ryan’s suspension. After listening to the radio clip, [Edwards said](#) he

was “particularly disturbed that Ryan’s comments perpetuated the bigotry involving Black players and particularly the quarterback position.”

A clear double standard is at work in relationship to the response to Tim Ryan’s comment about skin tone and race in general. One just has to look at the treatment of Colin Kaepernick versus that of Tim Ryan.

Kaepernick spoke out against racism and police terror, while Ryan spoke about skin complexion in a way that perpetuates racist stereotypes, particularly when it comes to Black quarterbacks.

Kaepernick has essentially been banned and whitewashed out of the NFL, while Ryan got a slap on the wrist with a one-game suspension.

