

EDDIE ROBINSON NOMINATION

**Pro Football Hall of Fame Selection Committee
2121 George Halas Drive
Canton, OH 44708**

In “100 Yards to Glory,” the famous 1968 documentary by Howard Cosell, Grambling State University’s football coach, Eddie Robinson, recounts the day decades earlier when he put Paul “Tank” Younger on the bus to travel from Ruston, LA to Los Angeles, CA. In their final moments together in Robinson’s car, the coach told his star running back, of his tryout with the Rams, “Man, you got to make it; because if you don’t make it, they (NFL) won’t ever give another one of our (HBCU) players another shot.” As Tank approached the bus, there was now a gathering of local reporters on scene to cover the beginning of his journey. One reporter asked, “Tank, will you make the team?” Tank responded curtly by answering the journalist’s question with one of his own: “Will they be playing football?” And with Tank Younger, soon to be starring for the Rams, Eddie Robinson began more than a half-century of profound influence on the NFL as the greatest generator of pro players from the HBCUs.

Members of the Selection Committee, with this letter, we want to reiterate some of the many highlights of Robinson’s career both as a football coach and as a leading African-American in 20th Century America, and, in so doing, to persuade you that he fully deserves induction into the Pro Football Hall of Fame as a Contributor. A cornerstone for induction into the Pro Football Hall of Fame is whether a given candidate is essential to the “story” of the NFL. It is our contention that Eddie Robinson’s contribution was integral to the NFL and should be recognized accordingly.

Eddie G. Robinson began his coaching career at the young age of 22 in 1941 at what was then Louisiana Negro Normal and Industrial Institute, now known the world over as Grambling. And the primary reason why is Grambling known the world over is because Eddie Robinson and his Tiger football teams ultimately produced hundreds of professional players. Many of those players personally broke racial barriers in the league, becoming not only gridiron stars but vital figures in the Civil Rights Movement. From “Coach Rob,” as they called him, they learned sustaining lessons not only in football but in character.

Eddie Robinson made this possible for his players at Grambling; but it was because of the immediate success of Younger, the first player ever to be drafted by NFL (Los Angeles Rams), that the doors began to open for countless numbers of other HBCU players. Many of these HBCU products are now arguably considered among the best ever to have played their position in the NFL.

That long list would only start with wide receiver Jerry Rice from Mississippi Valley State, running back Walter Payton from Jackson State, defensive back Mel Blount from Southern, and defensive end Richard Dent from Tennessee State. In 1971, Eddie Robinson was responsible for 43 players in NFL camps at the time, a number that was unprecedented. Ultimately, four of Robinson's Tigers were, themselves inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame: defensive end Junious "Buck" Buchanan, defensive back Willie Brown, linebacker Willie Davis, and wide receiver Charlie Joiner.

Eddie Robinson's greatest contribution to the NFL, however, is that he singlehandedly ushered the black quarterback into the NFL. It was during Howard Cosell's radio show that the legendary sportscaster asked Robinson bluntly and boldly, "Eddie, you have produced many a player for the NFL and you have done a marvelous job, sir. Many would say, however, that despite all your success, you have yet to produce anyone who could play quarterback in the NFL. Can you, Eddie Robinson, produce a black player that can lead a team as a quarterback in the NFL?"

Robinson quietly took this as a personal affront to his coaching prowess and vowed to himself that he would produce such a person. He studied the league; he studied the systems teams were using; he learned the profile of the prototypical quarterback at that time and then set on his journey to find his guy. Fortunately, the journey was just a 36-mile jaunt down Interstate 20 from Grambling to Monroe, LA, to the home of James "Shack" Harris. Robinson told Harris's parents about the challenge he'd accepted from Cosell and promised that he was going to groom Shack to be the first Black quarterback to start in the NFL. Four years later, as an NFL rookie, James Harris started for the Buffalo Bills, and during the mid-1970s with the LA Rams, he twice led the team to the NFC title game, led the conference in passing, and won MVP honors in the Pro Bowl. Harris's success set the stage for another Grambling quarterback, Doug Williams.

Eddie Robinson continued to refine his system to meet the standards of the NFL, which demanded athletic excellence, intellectual rigor, and leadership ability from its starting quarterbacks. He sought counsel from Harris and other Grambling players in the league at that time; he also solicited advice from Bert Jones, a native son of Ruston LA who was starring for the Baltimore Colts. With Robinson's knowledge base and system adjustments, Doug Williams thrived, ultimately leading to his 4th place finish in the Heisman Trophy balloting his senior year. And as it was with Harris, so it was also with Williams. Drafted as the #1 pick by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, Williams made a swift and resounding impact. He led the Bucs to the NFC Championship game in just his second year and they made the playoffs in four of his seven years with the team.

It was not until a perfect winter's day in San Diego for Super Bowl XXII in 1988, that Eddie Robinson delivered the culminating answer to Howard Cosell's challenge. Doug Williams made history in a record-setting, winning performance as Washington routed Denver that day and was named the game's MVP, forever putting to bed the question of whether a Black man could lead a team as quarterback to the game's highest pinnacle. After the game, Robinson was asked if he had ever seen anything like it before. He smartly replied, "Hell, we saw this every week at Grambling!"

A nation's eyes were opened that day; more importantly, the NFL's eyes were opened, and a new era

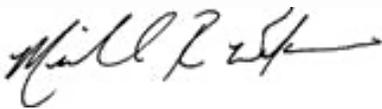
was born that only grows stronger and more prevalent to this very day. Had Eddie Robinson not accepted the challenge of Howard Cosell, how much longer would it have taken before the era of today's NFL quarterback?

In the human body, there are multitudes of connectors, each with different jobs and functions; but in the end, everything must come through the heart. While there have been other successful HBCU programs and many great players from these universities that have made it to the NFL and have even become Pro Football Hall of Famers, the heartbeat that gets players from HBCU football to the NFL is **Eddie Robinson**. It is at his doorstep that all the stories of how these individuals making it to the NFL begin.

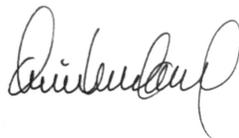
It matters not that we are the grandchildren of Eddie Robinson. We were taught first and foremost to be fans of the game, to respect the game. We do not submit this request for selection lightly nor without extremely careful consideration. However, the record of Eddie Robinson stands the test. He paved the way for more men to go to the NFL than any other individual coach of his era; and the Grambling team ranks equally high when considering the total number of players to have played in the league (drafted or undrafted).

With this selection, the NFL can honor a great American and tell a story of one of its greatest contributors. And it is our hope that you will honor him, every player to wear the black and gold, every HBCU player that has played in the league, and every person that has stood for what is right about our great Nation by naming him to your Class of 2022 as a Contributor.

Humbly and respectfully on behalf of the Robinson Family,



MICHAEL WATKINS
GRANDSON



CHERIE KIRKLAND
GRANDDAUGHTER