

RG III: Standing on the shoulders of Sandy Stephens

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An old boss of mine used to say, "If you're going to pray for something, pray for long life because if you live long enough, everything else will happen."

I was reminded of this while watching young Robert Griffin III, rookie Washington Redskins quarterback, in his NFL debut.

Years ago, back when there were "Purple People Eaters" roaming the old Metropolitan Stadium, I met Deacon Jones; the then retired L.A. Rams sack master who was here visiting mutual friends. I remember Jones saying he'd have gray hair where the sun don't shine before there'd be a Black QB in the NFL. Well, that was then, this is now.

Make no mistake; this is not "post-racial" America at all. But, a brother is the president – even if he does have to keep his birth certificate on his person. A sister has just raised the bar for all First Ladies. And two young brothers, Cam Newton, and now, RG III (as Griffin is commonly referred) are taking their places, along with Michael Vick, in a line of brothers who are helping to redefine quarterback play in the NFL.

I bring this up because if we look at the America that enumerated all the things that African-Americans couldn't do, we must acknowledge that America knew it was lying to us and itself. The last quarterback to lead the Gophers to the Rose Bowl was the late, great Sandy Stephens, a brother. He was forced to suffer the indignity of being drafted to the NFL as a defensive back. To his credit, he declined the offer. Sandy "coulda, shoulda, woulda" been the RG III of the 1960s and retired to live in the comfort and luxury that the likes of Fran Tarkenton and Dan Marino now enjoy.

I watched Jackie Robinson endure the "slings and arrows" of a racist country in order to pave the way for a host of men with names like Larry Doby, Henry Aaron, Willie Mays, Bob Gibson and Roberto Clemente. I could go on for a long time. And, while he was at it, Robinson showed Major League Baseball how to run the bases in ways that have not been done since.

In recent years we've watched Tiger Woods fitted for green jackets at Augusta National Golf Club when all the other brothers and sisters there were using the service entrance. Make no mistake; he knew where the shoulders of Lee Elder and Charlie Sifford were. Venus and Serena Williams knew where Althea Gibson's shoulders were while they were taking women's tennis to the next level.

So, now, while Barack and Michelle Obama are standing where no African-American family has stood before; a Republican controlled House of Representatives is showing us again just how much some segments of America fear African-American excellence.

I often wonder what the old sports icons; the Babe Ruths, the Ty Cobbs the Sam Sneads would've accomplished if they were playing against all Americans. And, who knows, maybe the Gophers are suffering from the curse of Sandy Stephens by not pushing for him to be drafted as a quarterback, the position he played when he took the team to the Rose Bowl.