

The Paradox of Integration: Racial Composition of NFL Positions from 1960 to 2020

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Abstract

As highly visible organizations, professional sports teams provide a context to examine the reproduction of racial hierarchies over time. This study analyzes racial segregation/integration in the NFL between 1960 and 2020. Using data from 20,357 players, we examine the racial composition of positions in the field and how these patterns influence career length. Our analysis reveals three distinct patterns of segregation/integration over time: cumulative hyper-segregation in high-risk positions, durable segregation in high-prestige positions, and integration in hybrid positions. We consider the implications of these findings for theory and research on racialized organizations as well as for the lives of players.

Keywords

race, racism, segregation, sports, football, NFL

Player injuries are routine in any given season in American football. A recent study found a season average injury rate of over 750 (Baker et al. 2021). The high rate of injuries is consistent with the violent nature of the sport; players running into each other at full speed will likely cause bodily harm to those involved (Canada 2023). Although catastrophic player injuries have been widely documented, they have not fundamentally changed how professional football is played. Professional football proceeds because it is more than a sport, it is a highly profitable source of entertainment.

NFL teams earned an average of nearly 4.5 billion dollars in 2022, a 28 percent increase over the previous year (Ozanian and Teitelbaum 2022). While some players earn generous salaries, league powerbrokers are remunerated with far heftier sums while facing none of the physical risk. It is a prime example of racial capitalism (Robinson 2000), the notion that “racialized exploitation and capital accumulation are mutually constitutive” (Laster Pirtle 2020:504). Black players, who comprise over

70 percent of players, are a commodity of significant value due to their athletic abilities and financial potential (Canada 2023). They are reduced to what their bodies can produce, used, and “never theoretically far from the plantation fields” (Canada 2023; Hawkins 2010). Racial capitalism provides an overarching framework to understand the material conditions of Black professional football players.

Importantly, some positions place players at higher risk than others. During their four-season study, Hayden P. Baker et al. (2021) found that those in the wide receiver, linebacker, and safety

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positions reported over 400 injuries compared to quarterbacks (73), centers (57), and kickers (27). While there is some evidence that Black players are steered toward positions with greater risk, longitudinal and systematic analysis of race and position in the NFL is lacking. In the present study, we examine every player in every position of the NFL from 1960 to 2020 to establish whether Black players are “stacked” into positions with the greatest physical risks. Furthermore, we employ the NFL as a case study to critically interrogate the systemic means by which racial hierarchies are produced and reproduced across organizational contexts (Alexander 2020; Ray 2019, 2022).

Work organizations are primary sites where racial hierarchies are produced and reproduced (Acker 2006; Ray 2019; Ray, Herd, and Moynihan 2023). Work organizations function as critical gatekeepers for access, advancement, and rewards as well as for status, prestige, and power (Bell and Nkomo 2003; Elliott and Smith 2004). According to Victor Ray (2019), organizational hierarchies, norms, and practices must be understood in the context of larger social structures. Thus, Ray’s (2019) theory of racialized organizations rests on the premise that “race is constitutive of organizational foundations, hierarchies, and processes” (p. 26). As work organizations, professional sports teams rely on cultural schemas regarding strength, intelligence, and ability to shape access and rewards for athletes. Organizational norms and practices mediate the relationship between macro-level inequalities and lived experience, translating larger cultural and structural schemas into material realities for individuals and groups (Bonilla-Silva 1997, 2016).

The largest professional American style football league (hereafter “NFL”) represents an important context to examine how racial hierarchies are reproduced through organizational norms and practices. While many view the NFL as a model of racial progress due to the strong representation of Black players in the league (Dufur and Feinberg 2009), evidence suggests racial diversity has failed to challenge the schemas used to allocate both material and intangible resources (Ray 2019) within the league (Allison, Davis and Barranco 2018; White et al. 2021). Characterizations of the NFL as “post-racial” or “colorblind” are undermined by evidence regarding the underrepresentation of Black coaches, front office staff, and team owners (Leonhardt 2022) and the great risk of injury, decreased quality of life, and disability for Black players (Roberts et al., 2019, 2020). These

complexities make the NFL an ideal context to examine how embedded racial ideologies shape organizational outcomes.

The purpose of this study is to analyze racialized patterns in player position and career duration. We rely on a unique data set documenting race, position, and career length in the NFL for 20,357 players from 1960 to 2020. The NFL represents one of the most visible, high-status platforms for athletic achievement, nationally and globally. As a majority Black league (Gough 2022), it is vital to understand how Black players have been integrated over the league’s history. This analysis contributes to theory and research on racialized organizations in three ways. First, this study represents the most comprehensive analysis of racial integration in a professional sports league. Earlier research has explored racial integration in sports by relying on a shorter time frame (e.g., Coleman and Scott 2018; Siler 2019), focusing on a single position or set of positions (e.g., Coutts and Van Rheenen 2021), or analyzing a single institution (e.g., Hawkins 2002). No previous study has analyzed every player in every position across the entire history of a professional league. Second, our data allow us to observe change over time in the racial composition of key positions, thereby supplying insight into whether and how positional composition has evolved over time. Finally, we analyze how racial dynamics and position interact to shape career duration. We begin with a theoretical framework centered on Ray’s theory of racialized organizations, followed by a brief history of the inclusion of Black players over time. We then turn to our empirical analysis.

RACIALIZED ORGANIZATIONS, CULTURAL SCHEMAS, AND POSITIONAL “FIT”

Organizations serve as central sites where racial hierarchies are reproduced over time (Ray 2019; Ray and Seamster 2016; Wooten and Couloute 2017). Inequality regimes within work organizations, defined as “interlocked practices and processes that result in continuing inequalities” (Acker 2006:441), shape every aspect of employment, including recruitment, retention, advancement, and termination. Racial ideologies are embedded within and shape these interlocking practices in ways that reproduce macro-level social hierarchies (Bonilla-Silva 2015; Omi and Winant 2014; Ray 2019). Racialized hierarchies within organizations

matter for access to a range of social, political, and economic rewards (Avent-Holt and Tomaskovic-Devey 2019), including wealth and income, prestige, power, and recognition. Thus, by reproducing racial hierarchies, organizations produce and reproduce society's racial order (Ray 2019).

Organizational decision-makers rely on cultural schemas to imagine the ideal incumbent for each position (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Ridgeway 2006; Williams, Blair-Loy, and Berdahl 2013). Cultural schemas draw on racial ideologies regarding skill, ability, and competence and map these onto the characteristic of the job-specific "ideal worker" (Roediger and Esch 2012). Schemas are reinforced over time as successful examples are held up as typical; characteristics of *successful* incumbents come to be viewed as *requisite* characteristics necessary for success (Dumas and Sanchez-Burks 2015). In this way, cultural schemas serve as mechanisms for translating racial ideologies into organizational practice in ways that reinforce status hierarchies in performance evaluations, job allocation, and the distribution of rewards (Wooten and Couloute 2017). The embeddedness of these schemas enhances segregation over time, which further concentrates power and resources among more privileged members of the organization (Ray 2019).

Cultural schemas also reinforce racialized patterns of occupational attainment by rationalizing unequal practices and outcomes (Carrillo 2020), often with reference to natural or innate differences in ability. Racial and gender stereotypes about White and Black men date back at least to the antebellum period when Black men were constructed as brutish, naturally strong, impervious to pain, and lacking in intellect (Davis 1991). Black men's ability to endure hard work was attributed to innate characteristics rather than work ethic (Plous and Williams 1995). By contrast, White men have historically been viewed as intellectually superior, possessing a strong character and commitment to work (Feagin 2020; Plous and Williams 1995). Thus, White men's relative status and power resulted from their social characteristics, what W. E. B. Du Bois (1935) termed the "wages of whiteness." Inequalities resulting from perceived natural or innate differences are seen as legitimate and are less likely to be challenged (Glenn 2002). Turning these perceived differences into a social fact—the "reification of racism" (Sewell 2016)—allows inequality to persist through reliance on cultural schemas by organizational actors (Ray 2019).

Essentialist understandings of physical and intellectual ability are particularly salient in shaping cultural schemas regarding athletes (Billings and Eastman 2002; Denham 2020). Racialized schemas regarding White intellectual prowess and Black physical endurance shape attitudes and participation in football starting in childhood and continuing through the professional career (Beamon 2010). Black male adolescents are strongly encouraged by family members, coaches, peers, and others to pursue athletics as a pathway to economic mobility (Beamon 2010). This over-emphasis on sports over academic achievement often reflects a tendency to view young Black men as less capable and committed to academic success (Bryan 2017) and more suited to roles requiring physical strength and "natural" athletic ability (Coakley 2006; B. W. Collins 2007). Thus, racial schemas contribute to the socialization of Black boys into sports by discouraging academic and intellectual pursuits and rewarding them for athletic achievements (Beamon 2010; Beamon and Bell 2002). Participation trends suggest that White adolescents' participation in football is declining—what Alana Semuels (2019) refers to as "white flight" from football—relative to Black adolescents, accelerating in a widening racial gap in the pipeline of current and future NFL players (Drape and Belson 2019).

Racialized dichotomies of "brain vs. brawn" remain deeply entrenched in stereotypes of athletes and shape the perceptions of athletes by scouts, analysts, fans, broadcasters, reporters, and coaches (Bigler and Jeffries 2008; Foy and Ray 2019; Rasmussen, Esgate, and Turner 2005). Black athletes are perceived as physically superior yet intellectually and academically inferior (Sailes 2017). Similarly, media coverage often reinforces the same dichotomy by equating Black athletes with natural talent and physical prowess while denigrating their character and intelligence (Hughey and Goss 2015; Rada and Wulfemeyer 2005).

Rather than integrate players into roles where they are best suited, racial schemas systematically limit individuals' access to certain positions. "Racial stacking" refers to the channeling of players into roles or positions based on stereotypes regarding athleticism and intellectual ability (Coleman and Scott 2018). Racial stacking has been documented in men and women's collegiate and professional sports including football, baseball, basketball, hockey, softball, and volleyball (Eitzen and Furst 1989; Eitzen and Sanford 1975; Hawkins 2002; Jamieson, Reel, and Gill 2002; Lewis 1995; Perchet et al. 2016; Pitts and Yost

2013; Sack, Singh, and Thiel 2005; Siler 2019; Valentine 2012; Woodward 2004). Compared to White athletes, Black athletes tend to be channeled into positions characterized by lower visibility and status, higher physical demands and risk, and fewer opportunities for leadership on and off the field (Sailes 2017).

Racial stacking in football begins early and continues across the career. Charles Coleman and Jason Scott (2018) document the ways that racial schemas channel White players into the quarterback position and Black players into the cornerback position. White players are channeled into the quarterback role, White players are channeled into the quarterback role, the position most associated with intellect and leadership while Black players are channeled into the cornerback role, a position more associated with strength and athleticism. During the transition from high school to college, Black quarterbacks are more likely than White players to change position over time, while White running backs are more likely than Black players to change position (Pitts and Yost 2013). For example, Terrelle Pryor was a star quarterback in high school who led Ohio State to two Big Ten championships. However, after being drafted he switched to wide receiver where he played professionally on multiple teams (Haynes 2020).

Black players also face greater scrutiny compared to White players during the draft process and are routinely confronted with racist stereotypes about their criminal history, proclivity for violence, and extended family obligations (Dufur and Feinberg 2009). Black quarterbacks are described in ways that emphasize their physical strength and lack of intelligence (Mercurio and Filak 2010), while White quarterbacks are described as less physically gifted but more mentally prepared for the rigors of professional play (see also Ferrucci and Tandoc 2017; Woodward 2004). Black quarterbacks are routinely rated lower on leadership, intelligence, and decision-making compared to White athletes by NFL draft experts (Bigler and Jeffries 2008), thereby reinforcing barriers to entry into professional sports, particularly for Black quarterbacks.

Sorting by race and position continues after players enter the NFL. In their analysis of racial stacking among quarterbacks and cornerbacks from 1990 to 2016, Coleman and Scott (2018) found that cornerbacks remain dominated by Black players, while quarterbacks remain dominated by White players. Warren Moon, the only Black quarterback in the Pro Football Hall of Fame, recounts in his autobiography repeated attempts by coaches at every level to shift his position due to doubts

regarding his intellect and leadership ability (Moon 2009). This evidence suggests that starting very early in their playing careers and continuing through their professional careers, Black players are channeled into positions according to racial schemas regarding their physicality and athleticism. By contrast, White players are encouraged to take on highly visible leadership roles on and off the field. In this way, channeling serves to restrict Black players' access to certain positions *and* reinforce stereotypes about Black athleticism and White leadership.

By driving perceptions about positional "fit," cultural schemas contribute to racialized patterns of segregation (Ray 2019). The endurance of racial stacking over time strengthens cultural schemas that associate race with strengths and abilities and players with particular roles. The current study advances our understanding of these processes by analyzing racial segregation/integration in the NFL. By overcoming data limitations that restricted analyses to certain positions, seasons, or time frames, we provide the most comprehensive analysis of racial integration in the NFL. Before turning to our analysis, we supply a brief historical overview of racial integration in the NFL.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF RACIAL INTEGRATION IN THE NFL

The racial composition of the NFL has dramatically changed since the league's inception in 1920 (as the *American Professional Football Association*, renamed the *National Football League* in 1922). Formed by Midwestern club owners during the height of Jim Crow, professional football explicitly¹ excluded Black players until desegregation in 1946 (Crepeau 2014). While the league has become less openly discriminatory, racism continues to shape Black players' experiences. Specifically, the historical roots of anti-Blackness have led to a continued de facto separation of races in both on-field player positions, coaching, and leadership roles off the field.

The 1960s

The 1960s served as a landmark era for the introduction of Black players into professional football, particularly in the AFL. Black athletes began using sport as platform to advocate for new federal civil rights laws, including Title VI of the Civil Rights Act that prohibited workplace discrimination (Dubin 2015). Compared to the NFL, the AFL took

a more expansive approach to racial integration focusing on racial disparities in player treatment, pay, quotas, and stacking (Berrett 2018; Crepeau 2014). The appointment of Marlin Briscoe as the league's first starting Black quarterback in 1968 was a pivotal moment in challenging racist stereotypes regarding the ability of Black players to lead teams on the field.

1970 to 1992

The late 1960s merger of the AFL and NFL brought cohesiveness to the industry and granted players more bargaining rights vis-à-vis league management. As the NFL became an “unparalleled economic juggernaut” and cultural spectacle (Powers 1984; Serazio 2019:6), Black players began organizing through the NFL Players' Association, a labor union that represents their interests on and off the field. In 1987, the NFL crushed a strike by hiring replacement players and instituted “Plan B,” a policy protecting teams from free agency demands. Black players continued to organize, taking the NFL to court in the 1990s. New York Jets running back Freeman McNeil stood as lead plaintiff in *McNeil v. National Football League* (Freeman 1992), successfully suing the league for violating federal antitrust laws for restricting players' free agency. The plaintiffs won a unanimous jury verdict (Freeman 1992), which greatly expanded players' autonomy to negotiate their contracts. Soon thereafter, players brought another class-action suit to recoup financial losses suffered under Plan B. Philadelphia Eagles defensive lineman Reggie White served as lead plaintiff. When players won the suit, the NFL agreed to an expansive free agency policy that offered athletes control of their careers. Remarkably, McNeil and White's roles as representatives in these cases meant that Black men legally and visually represented *all* NFL players in the fight for free agency.

1993 to 2002

Racial discrimination—and resulting tensions—continued into the 1990s. In a survey by *Sports Illustrated*, a majority of Black athletes reported discrimination while White players believed everyone was treated equally (Johnson 1991). Conservative pundit Rush Limbaugh demonstrated the persistence of racial stereotypes in sports media when, in 2003, he argued on ESPN that quarterback Donovan McNabb lacked talent and had been hired because he was Black (Bonesteel 2021). While Limbaugh

lost his job over the comment, his continued popularity illustrates millions of Americans' acceptance of anti-Black stereotypes.

2003 to 2013

By the early 2000s, the NFL's weak record of racial equality in coaching, management, and executive roles was increasingly apparent. Team owners and executive leadership attempted to resolve this issue by implementing the Rooney Rule, an internal affirmative action policy named after Pittsburgh Steelers owner Dan Rooney. As head of the NFL Committee on Workplace Diversity, Rooney wrote the policy, which was adopted in 2003 (Carroll 2018). Enacted in response to concerns about persistent racism, the rule mandated team leaders to interview at least one candidate of color for head coaching jobs (SI Staff 2017). The rule doubled the number of Black coaches within four years, from two Black head coaches in 2003 to four in 2007 (B. W. Collins 2007; Madden and Ruther 2011), though the long-term efficacy of the rule has proven less clear (Gallagher et al. 2021).

2014 to 2020

Racial tensions in the league bubbled over yet again in 2014 when Colin Kaepernick's non-violent protest and subsequent ban by the NFL drew attention to #BlackLivesMatter nationwide. In 2017, then-U.S. president Donald Trump railed against football players who knelt on the field (Jenkins 2017). Trump unintentionally united players and managers when he lambasted team owners for keeping activist players on the roster and mocked the league's rule changes aimed at protecting players from head injuries (Houghteling and Dantzler 2020). Even the most conservative owners took umbrage at being told how to run their business though they responded to players' demands with vaguely supportive statements rather than any condemnation of systemic racism (McGannon and Butryn 2020). The Sunday following Trump's statement, teams around the country knelt together (Graham 2017); aside from rebuking Trump, this was the largest racial justice protest in American sports history.

As this brief history demonstrates, Black players have long been at the forefront of mobilizing and organizing for better and more equitable treatment. Though the league has transformed from an exclusively White to a Black majority league, racial inequality continues to shape players' experiences.

METHODOLOGY

Data

Our study relies on a data set that includes 20,357 players who appeared in at least one regular-season or playoff game in the NFL from 1960 through 2020. Player data were acquired from Hidden Game Sports (HGS; Hidden Game Sports 2022), which licenses professional-grade statistical and biographical sports data sets including to Pro-Football-Reference.com to commercial entities (e.g., media entities, sports websites, sports statistics providers, game companies) and academic research centers. Maintained by Sports Reference LLC, PFR was built from the Palmer-Pullis Pro Football Dataset and first published in the *ESPN Pro Football Encyclopedia [Silverman and Palmer]*. HGS independently developed and licensed the Race/Ethnicity football data set, which gathered and verified all race/ethnicity assignments (see Racial Categorization Methods).

Football-related Variables of Interest

We grouped all offensive and defensive football positions into nine categories: defensive back, defensive line, kicker/punter, linebacker, offensive line, quarterback, running back, tight end, and wide receiver. Players who only played on special teams were not tracked by HGS and were excluded. We used the year of first and last game to determine career length. The year of the first game was also used to assign each player into the following eras: 1960 to 1969, 1970 to 1992, 1993 to 2002, 2003 to 2013, and 2014 to 2020. We categorized years in five eras according to major events related to racial integration as outlined in the previous section.

Racial Categorization

Race data for all former NFL players are housed in a separate demographic database held by HGS. HGS originally identified 20 race/ethnicity categories that included conventionally used definitions (Black, White, Asian, Latino) with additional designations based on country of birth.

For the pre-integration era, race designations were assigned using a number of criteria. Players contracted to play for a professional team or college conference prior to its known historical integration date were categorized solely by this membership. Players on NFL teams prior to integration were characterized as White unless evidence indicated they were Latino, Native American/

First Nations, or Asian. Similarly, men who attended Historically Black Colleges and Universities were characterized as Black if they played football before integration. For teams integrated in their early years but later segregated and reintegrated, players were recorded as White for the segregated periods. HGS also classified some players as White for the early years of integration and re-integration unless they were found on reliably documented lists of known Black players.

Those who played in leagues post-integration were classified by HGS based on multiple sources including but not limited to self-identification by players; biographical data from social media; birth country of origin; interviews, biographies, autobiographies, and memoirs; U.S. census compilation of Latino surnames; Native American/First Nations tribal registration and membership definitions; academic, media, or historical accounts of pioneering players of color and/or teams, conferences, or leagues that broke integration barriers; team photographs; trading cards and Hall of Fame images; high school, college, or league websites; NFL's media guides, publications, websites, and photographs; interviews with players, coaches, executives, and scholars; and game footage review. Players with undetermined race and/or ethnicity were excluded; most were replacement players and/or non-drafted free agents who played under Plan B during the 1987 strike or drafted before media coverage included photographs.

For the purposes of this study, NFL players were categorized as Black, White, or Latino. Lived experience studies suggest that multiracial Americans with Black or African American identity and ancestry have been historically perceived solely as Black (Chen et al. 2018; Ho et al. 2011; Krosch et al. 2013). Thus, HGS characterized these multiracial players as Black.

Statistical Analysis

We calculated frequency distributions for Black, White, and Latino players by career length, era of first game, and position. Players of other racial backgrounds and missing players were excluded due to small cell size. We estimated generalized linear models to predict position status and Poisson regression to estimate career length. Players whose first game occurred between 1960 to 1969 served as the reference group for the era of first game variable. Players with White race designations served as the reference group for Black and Latino

Table 1. Characteristics of the NFL Cohort (1960–2020; N = 20,357).

	Total, N (%) ^a	Race/ethnicity, N (%) ^b		
		Black N = 12,121	White N = 8,070	Latino N = 166
<i>Era of first game:</i>				
1960–1969	2,862 (14.1)	756 (26.4)	2,091 (73.1)	15 (0.5)
1970–1992	7,207 (35.4)	3,967 (55.0)	3,193 (44.3)	47 (0.7)
1993–2002	3,335 (16.4)	2,337 (70.1)	968 (29.0)	30 (0.9)
2003–2013	4,052 (19.9)	2,906 (71.7)	1,109 (27.4)	37 (0.9)
2014–2020	2,901 (14.3)	2,155 (74.3)	709 (24.4)	37 (1.3)
<i>Position:</i>				
Defensive back	3,779 (18.6)	3,109 (82.3)	658 (17.4)	12 (0.3)
Defensive line	3,030 (14.9)	1,928 (63.6)	1,081 (35.7)	21 (0.7)
Kicker/punter	634 (3.1)	19 (3.0)	579 (91.3)	36 (5.7)
Linebacker	2,849 (14.0)	1,635 (57.4)	1,197 (42.0)	17 (0.6)
Offensive Line	3,191 (15.7)	1,002 (31.4)	2,155 (67.5)	34 (1.1)
Quarterback	815 (4.0)	93 (11.4)	711 (87.2)	11 (1.3)
Running back	2,473 (12.1)	1,921 (77.7)	543 (22.0)	9 (0.4)
Tight end	1,195 (5.9)	512 (42.8)	674 (56.4)	9 (0.8)
Wide receiver	2,391 (11.7)	1,902 (79.5)	472 (19.7)	17 (0.7)
<i>Career length^c:</i>				
One season	4,567 (25.2)	1,315 (52.6)	1,165 (46.6)	19 (0.8)
2–5 seasons	6,775 (37.3)	4,126 (60.9)	2,597 (38.3)	52 (0.8)
6–9 seasons	4,309 (23.7)	2,552 (59.2)	1,731 (40.2)	26 (0.6)
10+ seasons	2,499 (13.8)	2,558 (56.0)	1,968 (43.1)	41 (0.9)

^aTotal N values for era of first game, position and career length are shown alongside column percentages.

^bTotal N values for race/ethnicity categories are shown alongside row percentages.

^cPlayers whose final game was listed as 2020 have been removed because they may still be active.

players. Kicker/punter was the reference group for the position variable. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$. All estimations and analyses were calculated using R Statistical Software (R Core Team 2013).

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the distribution of race including Black, White, and Latino categories across era of first game played, position, and career length. Since 1960, the percentage of Black NFL players across the league has increased such that Black players comprised more than 72 percent of all players who played their first professional games between 2014 and 2020. In contrast, the percentage of White players has steadily decreased since 1960 from 73.1 to 24.4 percent. Latino players have represented a small percentage of players since 1960 (0.5 percent), although do show slight increases over time (1.3 percent in 2014–2020). Looking

across all eras, positions including defensive back, defensive line, linebacker, running back, and wide receiver have been played by a majority of Black players. Kicker/punter, offensive line, quarterback, and tight end have been played more by White players than other groups. While Black players were the most represented group across all career length categories, White and Black players were almost evenly represented in the longest career category.

Figure 1 displays the percentage of players in each race category by year. Since 1960, the percentage of Black players has increased from approximately 15 percent of all former players to more than 70 percent. The sharpest increase in Black players occurred before 1990. Since then, the percentage distribution of Black and White players has remained relatively stable.

Figure 2 shows the percentage of each race for each position category by year since 1960. Three distinct patterns emerge. First, a pattern

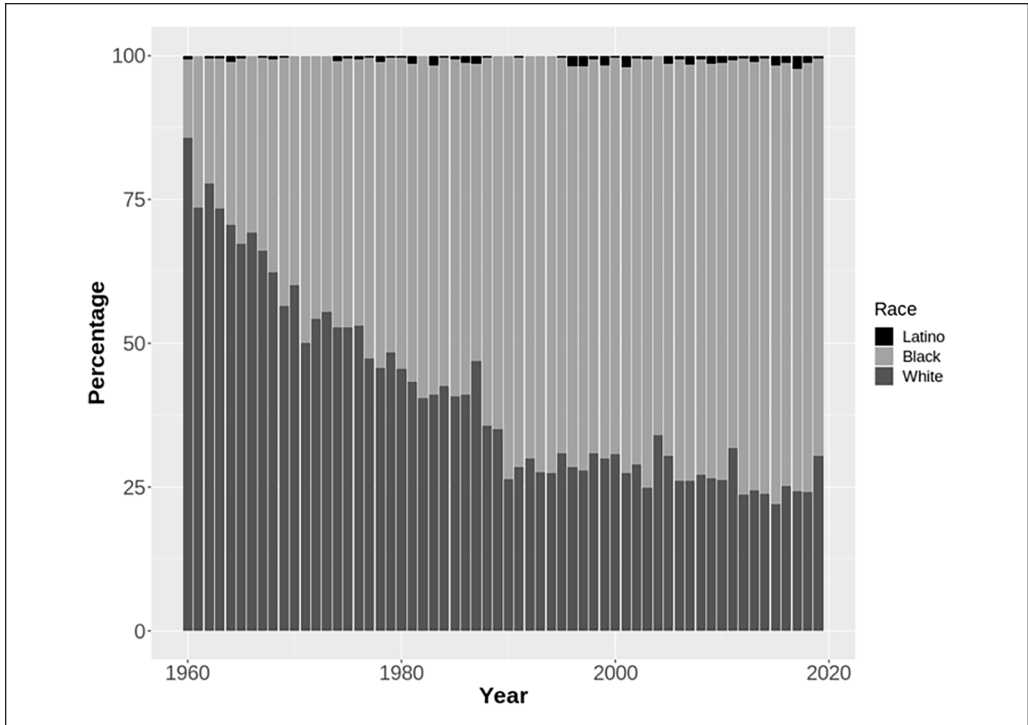


Figure 1. Percentage of professional football players by race/ethnicity from 1960 to 2020.

of *cumulative hyper-segregation* in which the defensive back, defensive line, linebacker, running back, and wide receiver began as White-dominated positions and over time came to be comprised of mostly Black players. The second pattern, *durable segregation*, is represented by the quarterback and kicker/punter positions, where little change has occurred since 1960; White players have dominated these positions with very little change over time. Finally, positions including tight end and offensive line started as predominantly White positions, and over time have become relatively equally represented by Black and White players displaying a pattern of *cumulative integration*. For example, from 1960 to 1969, 15.0 percent of offensive linemen were Black, and 85.0 percent were White; in 1993 to 2002, 39.2 percent of offensive linemen were Black and 58.4 percent were White. By 2014 to 2020, 44.0 percent of offensive linemen were Black and 54.4 percent were White (data not shown).

Table 2 displays the results from models that predicted position status (yes/no) for each of nine positions that used race and era of first game as predictors. In all nine models, race was a significant

predictor of position status, after adjusting for the era of first game. Black players are 4 and 3.4 times significantly more likely to be a defensive or running back compared to White players, whereas they are 99 percent less likely to be quarterbacks. The odds of being assigned to a specific position were associated with the era of first game for all positions except for linebacker and wide receiver.

Table 3 reflects parameter estimates and 95 percent confidence intervals for models that predicted career length using race, era of first game, and position. These analyses demonstrate that Black players had small but significantly increased career lengths when White players are used as the reference group. After adjusting for race and era of first game, running backs, wide receivers, and defensive backs had the shortest careers, while quarterbacks and kicker/punters—two positions that have maintained White dominance—had the longest careers.

DISCUSSION

The current study analyzed patterns of racial integration among players in the NFL from 1960 to 2020. We framed our analysis using Ray's (2019) theory of

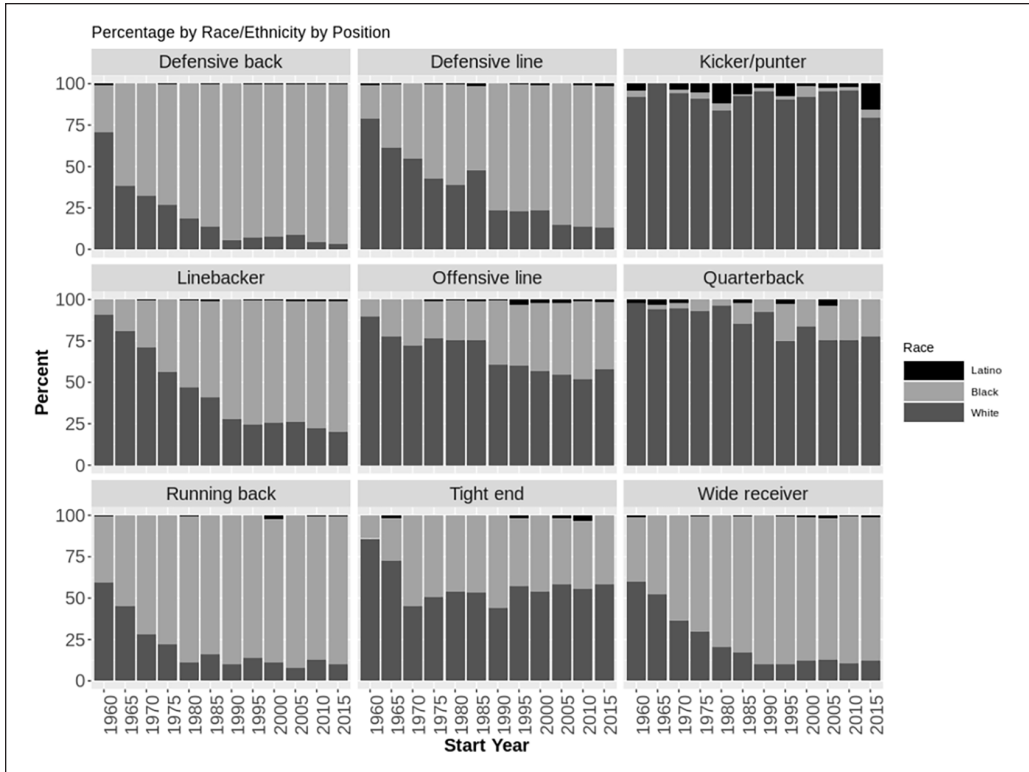


Figure 2. Percent race/ethnicity by position by year of professional football career start, 1960 to 2020.

racialized organizations, which suggests that racial schemas are embedded in the structure of organizations and reproduced through organizational practices. Relying on data for 20,357 players over a 60-year period, we explore the racial distribution of positions and the impact on career length. Our analysis reveals three distinct patterns of integration over time: *cumulative hyper-segregation*, *durable hyper-segregation*, and *cumulative integration* (see Table 4).

First, our analysis shows *cumulative hyper-segregation* of the highest-risk positions, including defensive back, defensive line, linebacker, running back, and wide receiver. The hyper-segregation of Black players in these positions has significant consequences for players’ careers and post-career well-being. Our analysis shows that players in these positions (particularly running backs, wide receivers, and defensive backs) tend to have the shortest careers. These positions are also associated with a greater risk of injury and long-term adverse cognitive, physical, and emotional outcomes, and death compared to other positions (Roberts et al. 2019, 2020). Defensive lineman, running backs, linebackers, defensive backs, and wide receivers

are also more likely to experience high frequency head impacts (Karton, Hoshizaki, and Gilchrist 2020). Repetitive head impacts are associated with neurological disorders later in life, including chronic traumatic encephalopathy, worse cognition, hormone insufficiencies, and brain alterations (Adams et al. 2018; Alosco et al. 2018; Didehbandi et al. 2013; Koerte et al. 2016; Ling et al. 2017; Mez et al. 2017; Stern et al. 2019; Roberts et al. 2019; Kmush et al. 2020). Furthermore, over 90 percent of players report a musculoskeletal injury during their careers, and 75 percent report long-term damage from those injuries (Kerr et al. 2021). Injuries also limit earning potential as “a dollar of injured talent is a dollar of productivity lost” (Gregory-Smith 2021:846). Hence, these players trail behind quarterbacks in terms of salary and perceptions of value to the team (Brooks 2015; NFL 2022). Notably, some of these positions are associated with substantial salary, public recognition, and even, in some instances, celebrity status. However, players who occupy these hyper-segregated positions face significant risks and do not enjoy equivalent rewards as quarterbacks.

Table 2. Odds Ratios, 95 percent Confidence Intervals (CI), and *p* Values for Position Assignment by Race/Ethnicity and Era of First Game for Players in the NFL from 1960 to 2020.

	Model 1:	Model 2:	Model 3: Kicker	Model 4:	Model 5:	Model 6:	Model 7:	Model 8: Tight	Model 9: Wide
	Defensive back OR, CI, <i>p</i> value	Defensive line OR, CI, <i>p</i> value	OR, CI, <i>p</i> value	Linebacker OR, CI, <i>p</i> value	Offensive Line OR, CI, <i>p</i> value	Quarterback OR, CI, <i>p</i> value	Running back OR, CI, <i>p</i> value	end OR, CI, <i>p</i> value	receiver OR, CI, <i>p</i> value
Era of first game					Reference				
1960–1969									
1970–1992	0.66 (0.58, 0.74), <i>p</i> < .001	0.69 (0.61, 0.78), <i>p</i> < .001	3.03 (2.3, 4.05), <i>p</i> < .001	1.27 (1.12, 1.45), <i>p</i> < .001	1.12 (1, 1.26), <i>p</i> = .061	1.19 (0.98, 1.45), <i>p</i> = .085	0.6 (0.52, 0.68), <i>p</i> < .001	1.85 (1.5, 2.3), <i>p</i> < .001	1.23 (1.05, 1.45), <i>p</i> = .012
1993–2002	0.62 (0.54, 0.72), <i>p</i> < .001	0.73 (0.64, 0.85), <i>p</i> < .001	3.59 (2.61, 4.99), <i>p</i> < .001	1.17 (1.01, 1.37), <i>p</i> = .04	1.41 (1.22, 1.62), <i>p</i> < .001	1.43 (1.12, 1.83), <i>p</i> = .004	0.43 (0.36, 0.5), <i>p</i> < .001	2.66 (2.1, 3.38), <i>p</i> < .001	1.1 (0.92, 1.32), <i>p</i> = .292
2003–2013	0.65 (0.57, 0.75), <i>p</i> < .001	0.77 (0.68, 0.89), <i>p</i> < .001	3.09 (2.25, 4.29), <i>p</i> < .001	1.2 (1.03, 1.39), <i>p</i> = 0.17	1.41 (1.23, 1.62), <i>p</i> < .001	1.28 (1, 1.63), <i>p</i> = .046	0.38 (0.32, 0.44), <i>p</i> < .001	2.45 (1.94, 3.1), <i>p</i> < .001	1.2 (1.01, 1.43), <i>p</i> = .044
2014–2020	0.66 (0.57, 0.76), <i>p</i> < .001	0.72 (0.62, 0.84), <i>p</i> < .001	3.57 (2.54, 5.05), <i>p</i> < .001	1.18 (1.01, 1.38), <i>p</i> = .04	1.56 (1.34, 1.8), <i>p</i> < .001	1.24 (0.94, 1.63), <i>p</i> = .124	0.32 (0.27, 0.38), <i>p</i> < .001	2.56 (2.01, 3.29), <i>p</i> < .001	1.29 (1.08, 1.55), <i>p</i> = .006
Race					Reference				
White									
Black	4.29 (3.9, 4.72), <i>p</i> < .001	1.3 (1.19, 1.41), <i>p</i> < .001	0.02 (0.01, 0.03), <i>p</i> < .001	0.87 (0.8, 0.95), <i>p</i> = .002	0.22 (0.21, 0.24), <i>p</i> < .001	0.08 (0.06, 0.09), <i>p</i> < .001	3.38 (3.04, 3.77), <i>p</i> < .001	0.4 (0.36, 0.46), <i>p</i> < .001	2.9 (2.6, 3.24), <i>p</i> < .001
Latino	0.95 (0.5, 1.65), <i>p</i> = .873	0.98 (0.6, 1.52), <i>p</i> = .939	3.06 (2.06, 4.44), <i>p</i> < .001	0.64 (0.37, 1.04), <i>p</i> = .087	0.64 (0.43, 0.93), <i>p</i> = .022	0.7 (0.35, 1.23), <i>p</i> = .254	1.01 (0.47, 1.88), <i>p</i> = .979	0.53 (0.25, 0.98), <i>p</i> = .066	1.78 (1.03, 2.88), <i>p</i> = .027

Note. OR = odds ratios; CI = confidence interval.

Table 3. Effect Estimates, 95 percent Confidence Intervals, and *p* Values for Career Length Adjusted for Era of First Game, Position and Race, 1960 to 2020, *N* = 18,150.

Predictors	β (95% CI), <i>p</i> value
<i>Race:</i>	
White	Reference
Black	0.083 (0.056, 0.11), <i>p</i> < .001
Latino	-0.074 (-0.213, 0.064), <i>p</i> = .293
<i>Era of first game:</i>	
1960–1969	Reference
1970–1992	-0.038 (-0.072, -0.004), <i>p</i> = .029
1993–2002	0.042 (0.003, 0.081), <i>p</i> = .035
2003–2013	-0.136 (-0.174, -0.098), <i>p</i> < .001
2013–2019	-0.847 (-0.896, -0.798), <i>p</i> < .001
<i>Position:</i>	
Defensive back	-0.291 (-0.371, -0.211), <i>p</i> < .001
Defensive line	-0.208 (-0.288, -0.128), <i>p</i> < .001
Kicker/punter	Reference
Linebacker	-0.254 (-0.334, -0.174), <i>p</i> < .001
Offensive Line	-0.117 (-0.196, -0.039), <i>p</i> = 0.003
Quarterback	-0.022 (-0.116, 0.073), <i>p</i> = 0.654
Running back	-0.404 (-0.485, -0.322), <i>p</i> < .001
Tight end	-0.221 (-0.307, -0.134) <i>p</i> < .001
Wide receiver	-0.368 (-0.451, -0.284), <i>p</i> < .001

Note. CI = confidence interval.

Table 4. Racial Pattern Designations, Descriptions, and Positions.

Racial pattern designation	Description	Positions
Cumulative hyper-segregation	Positions that originated as White-only or White-dominated (1960–1969) but became Black-dominated by 2014–2020	Defensive back; defensive line, linebacker, running back, wide receiver
Durable hyper-segregation	Positions that originated and remain White-only or White-dominated across all studied eras	Quarterback; kicker/punter
Integration	Positions that originated as White-only or White-dominated but converted to relatively more equitable proportions of White and Black players.	Tight end; offensive line

The second pattern we observed was *durable hyper-segregation* among the highest-prestige central position: quarterback. Our analysis shows very little integration of Black players into the quarterback position (or kicker/punter) from the 1960s to the present. White players continue to dominate this position even though Black players comprise a large majority of players overall (74 percent for the period 2014–2020). Not only do quarterbacks enjoy the longest average careers, but this position is also the most visible,

prestigious, and lucrative. Quarterbacks are the top 10 highest-paid players as measured by 2022 contracts (NFL 2022) and frequent winners of the Most Valuable Player Award (Pro Football Reference 2021). The 10 highest-paid players in NFL history have been quarterbacks, all of them White (Rolfe 2021). Both quarterbacks and kickers/punters—two positions where White players dominate—enjoy the longest careers and are the least likely to experience negative health outcomes, cognition related injuries, and diminished

quality of life post-career compared (Karton et al. 2020; Author 2019).

The lower health risks and high status of quarterbacks also translate into other opportunities, such as branding endorsements and post-career coaching deals (Braddock, Smith, and Dawkins 2012; Finch, McDowell, and Sagas 2010; Foreman and Turick 2020; Rolfe 2021). As Gary Sailes (2017) concludes, a lack of leadership on the field translates into a lack of leadership opportunities off the field. Thus, the pattern of durable hyper-segregation among the position with the highest prestige, status, and visibility has significant implications for players on and off the field, during and after active playing years. Notably, coaches, front office staff, and team owners are still overwhelmingly White (Leonhardt 2022).

Finally, our analysis shows *cumulative integration* in more hybrid positions, including tight end and offensive line. While these positions began as White-dominant positions, over time they have become integrated and now comprise Black and White players equally. We refer to these positions as “hybrid” because they fall near the middle in terms of risk and reward. While both positions put players at some degree of risk for head impacts, these positions present medium risk to players’ quality of life post-career (Author 2019; Karton et al. 2020). Importantly, these positions have evolved in highly variable ways in terms of style and expectations of play. The nature of tight end and offensive line positions is such that teams designate different roles and expectations to players depending on player strengths and team needs. For example, players in these positions can be utilized as receivers, blockers, play makers, or option run players (Maaddi 2022; Reid and McManus 2021). In hybrid positions, Black or White players may be preferred based on the nature of the position, a practice known as racial tasking (Wingfield and Alston 2014). In this case, White players might be assigned more leader-like roles, while Black players are relegated to bear the brunt of riskier physical work. Under these conditions, racial task assignments may uphold racial hierarchies even within the same, seemingly integrated, positions (Wingfield and Alston 2014).

These findings reveal an important distinction in theory and practice between racial diversity and racial equality. During the period of our study, the representation of Black players in the NFL increased from 15 percent to over 70 percent. Yet, numerical representation has not translated into equal status, full acceptance, or

equitable integration of Black players within organizations. The data presented in Figures 1 and 2 illustrate that, rather than eliminating the salience of racial differences within and across teams, increased representation of Black players has led to patterns of segregation across positions. These findings reinforce research on workplace discrimination, which finds that Black workers confront a range of barriers—including channeling, downgrading, and devaluation of skills—that limit access to high status positions of power and authority (P. H. Collins 1993; R. A. Smith 2005). Black workers are often relegated to secondary labor markets and tend to be steered into more physical and dangerous jobs with less autonomy and fewer rewards (Foy and Ray 2019; Huffman and Cohen 2004). Furthermore, racist stereotypes create a burden of doubt for Black workers, including highly skilled professionals, whereby they are “presumed incompetent” for positions requiring leadership, strategic thinking, or intellectual complexity (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. 2012; Sailes 2017). These trends, which reproduce stereotypes about Black masculinity within a White racial frame (Leonard and King 2010), align closely with the patterns identified in our analysis whereby Black players are relegated to lower paid positions that place them at greater risk in the short and long term.

Our findings also undermine key elements of token theory, which suggests that increasing numerical representation will reduce stereotypes and hyper-scrutiny and enhance opportunity (Kanter 1977). A Black majority on its own has failed to overcome deeply ingrained racial schemas. Instead, teams in the NFL have developed novel ways to reinvent inequality through “unequal incorporation” (Ray 2019:34) in the face of increasing diversity among its rosters. Besides the lack of incorporation of Black players into high prestige and leadership roles, they remain at much higher risk than their White counterparts to punitive measures including fines, suspensions, and other forms of player discipline (Pradhan and Yacobian 2021). Similarly, starting Black quarterbacks are more likely to be benched than White quarterbacks, despite evidence suggesting that teams show less improvement when replacing Black quarterbacks than when replacing White quarterbacks (Volz 2015).

These findings undermine claims that NFL teams represent “post-racial” organizations (Hartmann 2007; Love, Deeb, and Waller 2020). On the contrary, the NFL and its supporters continue to engage the central frames of colorblind racism, including abstract liberalism (e.g. “players’ positions are based on merit,

they all have equal opportunity”), naturalization (e.g. “that’s the way it is”), and minimization (e.g. “racism has nothing to do with players’ positions”) (Bonilla-Silva 2022). Colorblind racism is overlooked because diversity provides an effective cover. It is harder to make a racialized organization argument when the entity in question is over 70 percent Black. It is the organizational equivalent of “some of my best friends are Black” (Bonilla-Silva 2022:109). Beneath the surface, the NFL remains unchanged, with power and leadership concentrated among White quarterbacks, coaches, front-office staff, and team owners.

Our findings also reinforce previous research on racial stacking, the process by which Black athletes are “stacked” in positions assumed to require maximum athleticism and minimum cognitive ability (Coleman and Scott 2018). The patterns we observe reflect racial schemas that posit Black athletes as skilled and strong but disposable and of White athletes as intellectual leaders and decision-makers (Bigler and Jeffries 2008; Siler 2019; Woodward 2004). The embedded nature of these schemas in organizational practice legitimizes racialized patterns of rewards and disadvantages by making them appear natural or the result of ability and merit—two cornerstones of colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2022). Significantly, the historical and systemic nature of these processes also renders simplistic or individualistic solutions impractical and ineffectual.

Finally, our findings illustrate racial capitalism in action. Black athletes are the backbone of professional football as a commercial enterprise. In 2022, the NFL had a revenue of 18 billion dollars (Moore 2022), while total payroll for the league was about six billion (Pimentel 2022). Black players generate significant wealth for White owners while putting their own bodies and futures on the line. This is why when a player collapses on the field, the league’s activities continue mostly undisturbed: the alternative impedes profit. Salary disparities and access to additional sources of revenue such as endorsement income further underscore our argument. Ultimately, Black players’ bodies and athletic abilities are commodified in the quest for profits. Du Bois stated in 1946, “The Negro race has been the foundation upon which the capitalist system has been reared . . .” and his statement rings true to this day, as evidenced in our analysis.

CONCLUSION

Our analysis demonstrates that organizational diversity alone is compatible with the reproduction

of racial hierarchies. Representation in such contexts ultimately does not advance—and may even impede—racial justice (Leong 2021). We also illustrate how professional football is a racialized organization, governed by racial schemas that determine the distribution of resources (Ray 2019), both material and symbolic. Finally, the history of American football and our empirical analysis provide a reflection of the mutually constitutive nature of racialization and capital exploitation. Future research can build upon the current study in several ways.

First, an analysis of racial integration among head coaches, front-office staff, and team owners over time would complement the current analysis. Such a study could provide insights into how NFL organizations incorporate Black individuals into leadership positions. For example, Black head coaches remain underrepresented in the league (Trotter 2021), and they are held to higher standards of performance (Madden 2004). Research suggests coaches are valued in highly racialized ways, with White coaches being valued for their knowledge, insight, and experience and Black coaches being valued for their ability to build relationships with players and recruits (Cunningham and Bopp 2010). Such an analysis could also reveal whether and how Black coaches serve as change agents in terms of racial dynamics within teams.

Second, while our study focuses on the league overall, our data do not permit analysis of the mechanisms underlying patterns of racial tasking within teams. Our analysis reveals important patterns at the aggregate level, and subsequent studies could integrate organization-level analyses to identify team characteristics that contribute to players’ segregation or integration. Racial tasking refers to the tendency for expected tasks to be race-dependent even within the same job or position (Bopp and Sagas 2014). Analysis of how position-specific demands and expectations evolve at the team level may reveal important processes that shape patterns at the aggregate level. Research finds that Black quarterbacks are more likely than their White counterparts to be benched net of injury, age, experience, and performance (Volz 2015). Black quarterbacks are also assumed to be a greater “dual threat” compared to White quarterbacks, who are typically classified as “pocket passers” (J. Smith 2019). These findings suggest the presence of racial regimes *within* positions, with different expectations, risks, and rewards for players depending on how they are racialized. Such dynamics may be particularly salient for hybrid positions (e.g.,

tight end) for which expectations vary significantly and may follow racialized patterns. Understanding how recruiters, coaches, and players construct the characteristics of position incumbents would reveal whether and how racial schemas shape perceptions of aptitude and ability.

Third, future research could build on the current analysis by comparing patterns of integration and segregation in the NFL to other sports contexts. Racial stacking has been shown to affect position allocation in men and women's sports, at the collegiate, Olympic, and professional levels (Eitzen and Furst 1989; Valentine 2012). Yet, longitudinal analyses of these patterns remain rare. Understanding the evolution of racialized (and gendered) patterns over time can illuminate how racialized (and gendered) schemas inform perceptions of position requirements and how hierarchies are reproduced and culturally sanctioned through norms and practices.

Finally, future research can more directly measure how race and position influence income and wealth accumulation over time. Such a study could also trace the influence of race and position on cognitive and physical risks. While our study is suggestive of a strong link between race and position and position and financial rewards and health risks, we do not measure these associations directly. Such an analysis would build on the current study by illuminating the full range of consequences of position-based racial hierarchies in the league in the short, medium, and long term.

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NOTE

1. The NFL formed in 1922 and from 1960 to 1969 competed against the American Football League. In 1969, the AFL and NFL merged, forming the league as it is known today.

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