



photo by Michelle Bishop

Seven-year-old Benjamin Butler (center) shares the excitement with his mother, Barbara, as UNO football hall of famer Marlin Briscoe autographs his football Wednesday.

Football legend returns to discuss legacy as first black quarterback

JASON GLENN
SPORTS EDITOR

When Marlin Briscoe played quarterback for Omaha University he was known as "the Magician."

Nowadays, people refer to him by a whole different title -- pioneer.

As the first black starting quarterback in professional football, Briscoe not only broke the position's unspoken color barrier but also shattered the idea that only a white man could lead a football team.

Briscoe returned to UNO Wednesday to discuss the recently released book *Third and a Mile: The Trials and Triumphs of the Black Quarterback* by New York Times sports columnist William C. Rhoden. The book chronicles the experiences of groundbreaking black quarterbacks like Briscoe, Warren Moon and Doug Williams, and the hurdles they overcame in proving the color of their skin had nothing to do with their ability to run the show.

With the book release going on while Indianapolis Colts Coach Tony Dungy and Chicago Bears Coach Lovie Smith were making history as the first black coaches in the Super Bowl, it seemed to Briscoe like the stars were aligning at just the right time.

"The thing that struck me was when [Dungy and Smith] said that without these pioneering black quarterbacks, they

wouldn't have gotten the opportunity to coach," he said. "Black quarterbacks proved that they could think, throw and lead on that level."

A quarterback from childhood all the way through his great career at Omaha South High School, Briscoe knew it was the position he wanted to play in college. However, the major schools that were interested in him weren't going to let him.

That's when Omaha Coach Al Caniglia stepped in and gave Briscoe the shot he had earned.

"Coach Al, he promised me that I was going to get an opportunity to play the position that I coveted and he made good on his promise," he said. "It was the best decision I ever made as a young kid, was to come here."

When the Denver Broncos drafted Briscoe in 1967, it was common for pro teams to pick up black quarterbacks from college and switch them to different positions.

On Caniglia's advice, though, Briscoe had the Broncos agree to give him a three-day tryout at quarterback.

Briscoe, who held 22 school records and was named a first-team NAIA All-American his senior year, impressed the Denver coaches so much that when the starting quarterback was injured three games into the season, he got the nod.

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photo by Michelle Bishop

Harlan Aden (right) greets Marlin Briscoe as John Beasley looks on. The three were teammates during Briscoe's college years.

Though he only played one year at the position, Briscoe finished the season with a Bronco rookie record 1,897 yards in total offense and 14 touchdown passes, and proved that a black quarterback could be successful.

The following year, four black players were drafted into professional football as quarterbacks.

Actor John Beasley, a college teammate and lifelong friend, was one of many former Omaha University and UNO players on hand to salute Briscoe and his accomplishments.

"For Marlin to have a great rookie season like he did, it's just like with

[Dungy] winning the Super Bowl. Now you can't say that a black can't lead a team to the Super Bowl," Beasley said. "[Marlin] opened the door for everybody -- your Michael Vicks, your Steve McNairs, your Doug Williams -- all those guys."

Beasley was so inspired by his friend that he obtained the rights to Briscoe's story and is in the process of developing a movie based on his life.

Briscoe also received some attention last year as the namesake of a fictional high school in a series of Nike commercials that featured Vick and a number of NFL stars.

Despite all the recent interest in his legacy, though, Briscoe said many of today's black quarterbacks don't fully understand what he and the other pioneers went through.

Growing up in the ethnic melting pot of South Omaha, Briscoe said he was always accepted as a quarterback, there and at Omaha University.

But once he hit the pros, the stakes got higher.

"When the opportunity came to me ... to prove that a black man could do that, could do the job," Briscoe said, "then I realized the significance of it and the fact that I had to succeed or the naysayers would have said 'I told you so.'"