

Marlin Briscoe: Omaha U. football magician

Part two of a four-part series highlighting UNO's African-American sports legends

The Associated Press published the following on Oct. 1, 1968:

Denver, Colo. (AP) — Coach Lou Saban of Denver said Monday, Marlin Briscoe, the first Negro ever to see action at quarterback in the American Football League, would start Sunday in a home game against Cincinnati.

A week earlier, at 3 p.m. CST, on Sunday, Sept. 29, 1968, Marlin Briscoe stood on the sidelines watching Jim LeClair take the snaps for his Denver Bronco team. By 5:30 p.m. he was in the game, behind center, the first African-American quarterback in the AFL. (Willie Thrower, Michigan State's African-American QB played in one game with the 1953 Chicago Bears.)

In his 10 minutes of work, Briscoe dazzled the Boston Patriots' defense with fancy footwork.

"It was a historic day," Briscoe said in a telephone interview. "I completed my first pass and the crowd went crazy. I had only taken six snaps in practice all season, but I wasn't even nervous. I was just out there having fun. We marched 80 yards down the field and I scored on a 12-yard scramble."

He also earned the shot as starting signal caller the next week against the Bengals.

Marlin Briscoe was drafted by the Denver Broncos in the 14th round of the 1966 NFL Draft. He was the 357th overall pick and was slotted to play quarterback, wide receiver and/or defensive back. At 5-foot, 10 inches and 173 pounds, Briscoe was thought of by the "experts" as too small to be a quarterback. Coach Saban thought differently.



From the sports desk

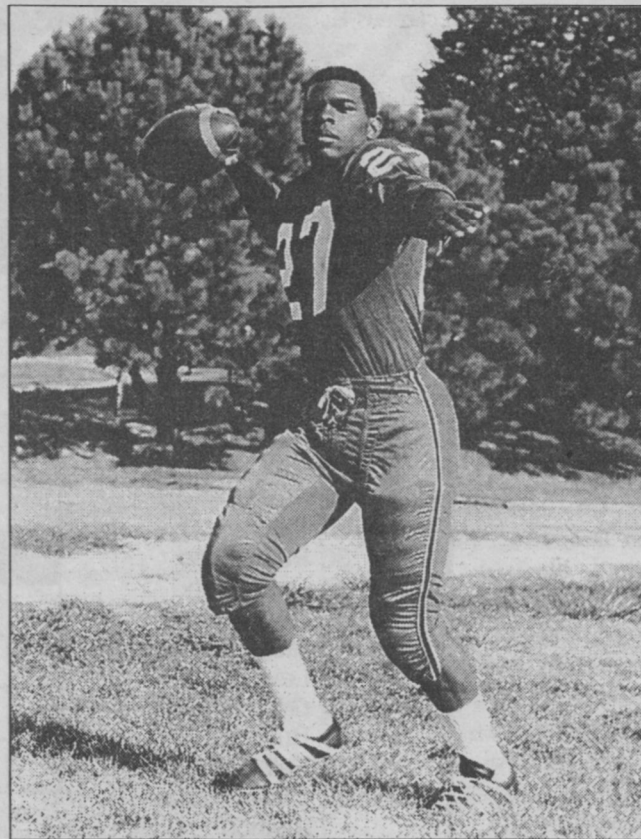
column by David Johnson

By year's end, he had thrown for 14 touchdowns, tops on the team. His stats weren't enough to keep him in town, however, and he found himself in a Buffalo Bills uniform the next year, primarily playing wide receiver. Briscoe led the league in 1970 with 57 pass receptions.

Size was never an issue for Marlin Briscoe. During his years at South High School, he excelled both on the gridiron and on the basketball court. Unfortunately, he played during a time when high school records and stats weren't always kept. He graduated in 1963 and signed on to play collegiately for Coach Al Caniglia and the Omaha University Indians.

By 1964, Briscoe (now nicknamed "The Magician") was in control of the OU football team. Racking up 1,309 yards of total offense, he led the squad to a 5-4 record and was named the team's "Outstanding Back of the Year."

The Magician pulled a few out of the hat in 1965, guiding the Indians to a 8-2 record and the Central Intercollegiate Conference title. Named team captain for 1966, Briscoe saw the magic disappear. OU's record fell to 1-9.



Former UNO football player Marlin Briscoe became the first African-American quarterback in the AFL.

Everything changed his senior season.

Briscoe caught fire from the quarterback position. Completing 140 passes out of 252 attempts, The Magician tossed for 2,283 yards and a school record 25 touchdowns. By season's end, he had amassed 21 OU football records, some which still stand. Briscoe was named to the All-Division, All-Black, All-America team in 1967.

"Coach Caniglia was the most influential person in my life," Briscoe said.

"I didn't know my father. When I got drafted, Coach did a lot of background investigation about the Broncos. He told me their practices were all open to the public and the media, so I had written into my contract a provision I would get a three-day tryout at quarterback. The press gave me rave reviews. I signed as a corner back and emergency quarterback."

Life in the AFL started shakily for the magic man. A pulled hamstring in pre-season 1968 hobbled him for a while. A trade to Buffalo meant a change of position. But ... perfection was soon to come.

Acquired by the Miami Dolphins, Briscoe played wide receiver, holder, kick returner and quarterback during the perfect 17-0, 1972 season.

"Playing for Denver and Buffalo," Briscoe said, "I had my best games against the Dolphins. When my options ran out in Buffalo, Coach Shula told me if he couldn't beat me, he was going to sign me."

During that perfect season, Briscoe was 3-3 in passing from the wide receiver reverse option for 72 yards. As a wide out, he hauled in 16 passes for 279 yards and four touchdowns, including the first Miami scoring toss that year.

Those accolades put Briscoe, along with his Miami teammates, into the Florida Sports Hall of Fame, class of 2000. This was "old hat" for "old No. 27", since he had already been elected into the Nebraska Hall of Fame in 1996, the UNO Hall of Fame, and was one of four elected to the inaugural class of the UNO Alumni Hall of Fame.

Today, Marlin Briscoe is the Assistant Project Manager for a Boys and Girls Club in Los Angeles helping kids find the "magic" in their lives.

UNO file photo