

ORIGINS

The Cradle of QBs Is the Pacific Northwest

By Gary Wright

Meriwether Lewis and William Clark would be proud. Today, scouting reports on the Pacific Northwest include more than just glowing reports on the beauty and potential of the region—abundant forests, streams, rivers, lakes, the Pacific Ocean, mountains, wheat fields, and apple orchards.

Talk of the Pacific Northwest now leads to NFL quarterbacks such as Drew Bledsoe, John Friesz, Chris Miller, Warren Moon, and Mark Rypien, among others.

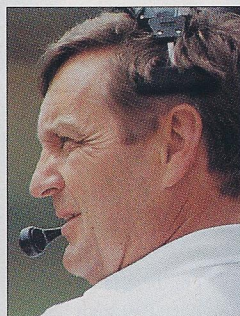
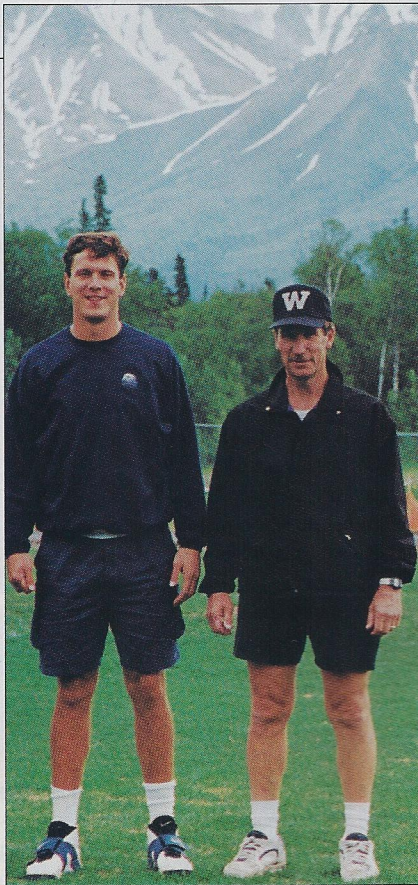
Washington, Oregon, and Idaho have a combined population of more than 9 million, which is approximately the same as Los Angeles County, yet 13 quarterbacks currently in the National Football League grew up or played college football in the region.

Throughout the NFL's 75-year history, the Pacific Northwest has produced quarterbacks (Norm Van Brocklin and Dan Fouts, for instance) but never like now.

In addition to New England's Bledsoe, Washington's Friesz, the Los Angeles Rams' Miller, Minnesota's Moon, and Cleveland's Rypien, Northwest quarterbacks include Mark Brunell of the Green Bay Packers, Chris Chandler of the Rams, Will Furrer of the Arizona Cardinals, Billy Joe Hobert of the Raiders, Hugh Millen of the Denver Broncos, Bill Musgrave of the San Francisco 49ers, Doug Nussmeier of the New Orleans Saints, and Doug Pederson of the Miami Dolphins.

And that doesn't count three others who have played in the NFL within the last two seasons—Cary Conklin (Washington), Timm Rosenbach (Arizona), and Erik Wilhelm (Cincinnati).

Darrell (Mouse) Davis, Atlanta Falcons quarterbacks coach and the father of the Run-and-Shoot offense, thinks the reason for the quarterback boom is the weather.



■ Davis (above), Drew Bledsoe (far left), and Bennett (left) extol the virtues of playing in the region.

The rainy Northwest?

"Even though it rains," says Davis, former head coach at Portland State, "they have great summers and falls in the Northwest and never too much cold weather.

"The good weather is conducive to off-season programs and summer camps. The weather has helped lead to a great growth of summer quarterback camps.

"Kids in the Northwest grow up throwing the ball. High school, junior high, and even grammar school kids get a real opportunity and the ones that can do it get a jump on things."

The rain even can be considered an advantage to the passing game.

"It is difficult to play pass defense on a

slippery field," Davis says.

"The only problem throwing the ball in the rain is if the quarterback has small hands, and you must keep the ball dry by changing after each play. You need to have big enough hands to have a real grip on the ball.

"You still can run good routes with the defense slipping. The worst type of weather is wind coupled with cold."

Mac Bledsoe, Drew's father and a longtime high school coach in Washington, agrees with Davis about the summer camps.

This past summer, Bledsoe completed his twenty-third year assisting Shorty Bennett, the head coach at Spokane, Washington's Whitworth College, at the All-Northwest Football Camp, which specializes in working with quarterbacks and receivers.

"It's the longest running quarterback/receiver camp in America," the senior Bledsoe says, "and I know it had a major impact not only on Drew, but a number of quarterbacks from the Northwest."

Bennett and Bledsoe have brought in

NFL quarterbacks such as Moon, Jim Plunkett, Ken Stabler, Jim Zorn, and Neil Lomax to work with the youngsters in past years.

From age one, Drew and his brother Adam have stood at the foot of some pro quarterback and had their picture taken every summer. Now Drew's the pro quarterback.

"The camp has been a regular event in our family," Drew says.

In addition to players learning techniques, 30 to 40 local area high school coaches also are schooled in the passing game each year.

"I have to believe the camp is a major reason why there are so many pro quarterbacks from the Northwest," Bledsoe says. "There's one coach for every six players and they are there to learn and pick up things, too."

Bledsoe jokes that the running game isn't completely overlooked during the summer.

"At the close of camp each year, the prospect on a demonstration. Pat Chaffey [of the New York Jets] was our running back this year, and he was running routes out of the backfield, play after play, and then on the final play of the demonstration, Drew turned and handed the ball off to Pat. Everyone just laughed."

In Mac Bledsoe's eyes, everyone wants to be a quarterback.

"Parents, coaches, and players all want to see the ball thrown," he says. "If that's the model, then the eight- and nine-year-olds imitate what they see on the field."

"While the high school kids are on the field throwing the ball, the young ones are out playing behind the field doing the same thing."

Bledsoe also emphasizes good coaching.

"If they learn to throw properly at a young age, then they never will have to overcome bad habits," he says.

Davis was a frequent camp visitor when he was coaching at Portland State.

"I used to go to Shorty's camp a lot," Davis says. "It seemed like he had 500 quarterbacks with a batch of receivers. If you have that many, you'll find the ones that can do it."

"The whole Northwest is pass oriented," Bennett says. "The West is more wide-open offensively. Other parts of the country run the option, but here we're more one-back and no-back with the emphasis on passing. Everybody just cranks it up." ■

Al Messerschmidt