Football in the USA: American Culture and the World’s Game
Peter S. Morris

If baseball is America’s pastime, then football is its passion. Especially after the rise of television, American “gridiron” football has become the country’s premier spectator sport, even though other sports such as basketball, baseball/softball, and soccer boast far more recreational participants. Football also is American culture’s greatest spectacle, the primary sporting focus of homecoming and holiday celebrations and one of the country’s most prominent façades to the world. Through widely-watched events such as the Super Bowl—professional football’s annual “world championship” game—and college football’s various Bowl games on New Year’s Day, football provides a stage for Americans to celebrate local, regional, national, ethnic, collegiate, and other identities, as well as a stage for American corporations and universities to promote themselves and their products. Indeed, no other sport carries as much symbolic baggage as does American football. A violent, rigidly hierarchical, and highly gendered sport—the sporting equivalent of the military—football is often seen by its supporters and detractors alike as the embodiment of everything that is right (or wrong) about American culture and society.

Origins of American Football

As in England, where the sport first developed, early football in the United States was relatively disorganized and often quite violent. Different towns and schools played by their own sets of rules, but they all involved two sides of a dozen or more men on foot rather than horseback—hence the sport’s name—attempting to direct a ball toward goals at opposite ends of the field. With the rising popularity of interscholastic competition, football gradually became more formalized on both sides of the Atlantic during the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1863, English proponents of the relatively non-violent, no-handling version of the game created the Football Association, whose distinctive “soccer” rules have since become the world’s most popular football code. One year earlier, Gerritt Smith Miller established the first formal football club in the United States, Boston Common’s Oneida Club.

The first-ever intercollegiate match in the United States, between Princeton and Rutgers on 6 November 1869, featured teams of 25 men each playing rules more akin to soccer than to the modern American game. (Rutgers won 6 to 4.) But footballers in the United States, like those at Britain’s Rugby school, came to prefer more “manly” versions of the sport, in which the ball could be played and carried with the hands, thus requiring a more violent style of tackling. For example, the Oneida Club preferred the rugby-like “Boston Game,” as did nearby students at Harvard University, whose pair of well-publicized matches in 1874 with rugby-playing McGill University of Montreal did much to popularize rugged handling versions of the sport.

It was at Yale University, however, that the distinctive American “gridiron” game would emerge. In 1872, Rugby alum D. S. Schaft introduced his schoolboy version of the game to the Yale campus. But Schaft’s American classmates, led by Walter Camp—a tireless promoter of both the game and
himself and the so-called “Father of American Football”—soon began tinkering with the rugby code, which the Americans found to be excessively ambiguous and overly reliant on interpretations grounded in British sporting tradition. Eager to develop an unambiguous code of football for intercollegiate play, a rules committee led by Camp gradually developed a more rigid, complicated, and formalized version of football—a game of technical coordination, specialized roles, and scripted plays which resonated with the emerging corporate, industrial society these Ivy League men would soon lead. The most prominent changes made by Camp’s rules committee occurred in 1880 and 1882, when the relatively fluid play and “scrummage” of rugby were replaced by a line of “scrimmage,” a formal play-initiating exchange between a designated “center” and “quarterback,” and ball possession limited by a fixed number of downs and distance—originally, three plays to gain five yards. This down-and-distance system necessitated the horizontal marking of the field at five-yard intervals, hence the “gridiron” name by which the American game subsequently has been called.

**Early Cultural Significance**

American football served the multiple roles of holiday spectacle, promotional vehicle, and symbol of American virtue and vice from an early date. In 1876, for example, the newly created Intercollegiate Football Association played its first championship game in New York City on Thanksgiving Day. This Thanksgiving matchup in New York became an annual event in 1882, and by the end of the decade it had become one of the year’s leading social engagements for the Northeast’s college-educated elite—“more of a spectacle than an athletic contest” according to *Harper’s Weekly* in 1893 (December 9). While the Thanksgiving Day–football tradition remains with us today through the professional ranks, New Year’s Day ultimately became the primary holiday for collegiate football championships, beginning in 1902, when an intersectional game was first made the centerpiece of Pasadena, California’s Tournament of Roses. This “Rose Bowl” football championship became an annual tradition in 1916, and it was followed by imitators in Florida, Texas, and Louisiana during the 1930s.

These holiday football games proved to great commercial successes, as well as outstanding vehicles to promote Sunbelt tourist destinations and real-estate opportunities to college-educated populations of the cold Northeast. The success of one’s football team also quickly became a marketing opportunity for the schools themselves. Baseball was the only other sport at the turn of the century that potentially could rival football for capturing alumni attention, but baseball’s summer schedule and the competition for players from the professional ranks allowed football to become the primary ceremonial attachment to one’s alma mater. Administrators quickly recognized the potential for college football to generate needed revenue—in 1903, for example, Yale received $106,000 from football, equal to the combined budgets of its medical, divinity, and law schools—as well as attention from prospective students and donors. Thus, upon assuming the presidency of the newly endowed University of Chicago, Yale alumnus William Rainey Harper made his first order of business the hiring of Yale legend Amos Alonzo Stagg as the school’s football coach.
More than just promoting the schools themselves, successful college football teams became a vehicle for communities only tangentially related to the schools to celebrate their place in American society. The country’s Irish and other Catholic populations, for example, saw the historic 1913 victory of Knute Rockne’s Notre Dame team over Army, as well as the school’s subsequent victories over other traditional Eastern powerhouses, as a symbolic achievement against the traditional WASP elite. Likewise, when the University of Alabama upset the heavily favored team from the University of Washington in the 1926 Rose Bowl, it was not just the first victory by a southern school in an intersectional football game; it was also widely celebrated throughout the South as both a long-awaited victory over the North and a sign that the region was not backwards and could indeed participate in modern, industrial American society.

Football’s ability to carry this symbolic load was aided by the very nature of the game. From the beginning, football’s proponents argued that the rugged athleticism, the near-savage violence, and the technically demanding teamwork required by the sport provided both a necessary masculine tonic to a post-Frontier American society and a valuable training ground for the future captains of modern industry.

The violence and commercialism of turn-of-century college football, however, was also the source of great controversy. The use of mass-formation plays, most notoriously the “Flying Wedge” introduced at Harvard by Lorin Deland in 1892, led to numerous on-field fatalities. In 1905, for example, eleven years after the Flying Wedge was outlawed, the Chicago Tribune reported an end-of-season count of 18 deaths and 159 additional “serious” injuries. One of these deaths was of a Union College halfback in a game against New York University. In response to this death, as well as to concerns regarding unethical recruiting and payment of players, NYU President Henry McCracken organized a conference of college officials. The result was the founding of the Intercollegiate Athletic Association (which became the NCAA in 1910). With pressure from President Theodore Roosevelt, Harvard and Navy broke ranks with Walter Camp’s Intercollegiate Rules Committee, opening the way for dramatic reforms during the next five years—such as legalization of the forward pass and other rule changes designed to make the game more open and offensive, based less on brute strength and more on finesse. Even with these rules changes, a number of universities dropped the sport, including Columbia, MIT, California, and Stanford—the latter two switching to rugby and its more gentlemanly traditions.

**A Modern Entertainment Industry**

Concerns about commercialism, professionalism, and brutality in college football persisted into the 1920s; in fact, they continue today. But NCAA-led reforms of player recruiting and eligibility standards, and the continuing evolution of pass-oriented, offensive-minded rules and tactics—such as the modern “T-formation” introduced in the 1940s—helped college football further increase and broaden in popularity, well beyond the original core of the college-educated elite.

Equally important during the “Golden Age” of the 1920s, however, was the rise of legendary players, teams, and coaches alongside the heroes such as Charles Lindbergh being created by a new national media. Grantland Rice and others introduced a new breed of sports writing, creating almost-mythical
heroes out of stars like Notre Dame’s George Gipp and the “Four Horsemen,” and on the West Coast, Andy Smith’s “Wonder Teams” at the University of California. To house the burgeoning crowds wanting to watch their new heroes, universities built enormous new stadia; during the 1920s, the nationwide count of facilities able to hold more than 70,000 spectators increased from one to seven. More importantly, fans who were unable to attend the games could follow their heroes’ exploits through new technologies like radio and cinema newsreels.

This process of commercialization and professionalization of college football continued after World War II with the advent of television, “full-ride” athletic scholarships, and expanded regulatory powers for the NCAA, although some schools—most prominently the traditional Ivy League powers—chose not to participate in all of these developments. As a result, college football by the end of the twentieth century had become a two-tiered system: a modern, nationwide sports-entertainment industry for the roughly one hundred schools participating in the NCAA’s Division I-A, and a more traditional spectator sport for the lower-division schools, where the nationwide attention and direct financial benefits are not as great, but the pressure to win among alumni and local fans are just as strong.

Coincident with the rise of college football as a modern entertainment industry was the rise of professional football. The earliest professional football player of record was Yale’s William “Pudge” Heffelfinger, who in 1892 received $500 to play for the Allegheny Athletic Association against heated rival Pittsburgh Athletic Club. Until the 1920s, such semi-pro club competitions remained concentrated in small and medium-sized industrial cities of Ohio and Pennsylvania, and they provided an alternative source of identity and entertainment for the non-WASP working classes. For some, professional football also provided a chance at limited fame and fortune; most notably, Jim Thorpe of the Carlisle Indian School, followed his double-gold-medal performance at the 1912 Olympics by leading the Canton Bulldogs to three straight Ohio League titles for $250 per game.

Modern professional football emerged after 1920, when clubs from four midwestern states met in Canton to standardize rules and form the American Professional Football Association—changed in 1922 to the National Football League. In a real sense, however, modern pro football did not arise until 1925, when George Halas’s Chicago Bears signed University of Illinois star Harold “Red” Grange. The “Galloping Ghost of the Gridiron,” as christened by Grantland Rice, was the most famous of the 1920s college-football heroes, bursting on the national scene with a four-touchdown performance against Michigan—four runs of 45 yards or more, which were replayed to theater audiences nationwide. Working in tandem with promoter Charles Pyle, Grange defied the Victorian “gentleman” ideal that frowned upon college athletes capitalizing financially on their athletic talents. Grange endorsed everything from chocolate to clothing, and in the process, he galvanized public interest in the fledgling NFL—73,000 came to seem him play at New York’s Polo Grounds on a barnstorming tour shortly after signing with the Bears.

The NFL struggled during the Depression years of the 1930s, resulting in the folding of most of the league’s smaller-city teams—all but the Green Bay (Wisc.) Packers. But after the second world war, professional football found a perfect partner in television. In addition to being relatively well suited to the new
broadcast medium—action concentrated in both time and space—football benefited from having a close-knit group of owners who willingly gave centralized control to strong league commissioners: Bert Bell (1946–59) and Alvin “Pete” Rozelle (1960–198?). In contrast to the experience of baseball, Bell and Rozelle pioneered sports television by negotiating centralized contracts with national television networks eager for exclusive, viewer-delivering programming.

The NFL’s television-driven success of the 1950s quickly drew competition—most notably the American Football League, formed in 1959 by a pair of Texas millionaires (Lamar Hunt and K. S. “Bud” Adams), which used money from a $42-million television deal with NBC to lure college talent such as Alabama quarterback Joe Namath. The end result was a merger agreement in 1966, which retained Rozelle as the league chairman and introduced an annual AFL-NFL championship game in 1967, which eventually became known as the Super Bowl.

**Football Today**

Building on turn-of-the-century passions for the game among college alumni, no American sport better capitalized on the opportunities provided by new electronic media than football, in both its professional and collegiate forms. The annual Super Bowl has become late-twentieth-century America’s single-greatest televised sporting event—indeed, its single-greatest television event, period, with workplace water-cooler talk the following Monday as likely to concern the new advertisements debuted in 30-second, one-million-dollar advertising slots as on the game itself. Like the Thanksgiving Day college games in New York during the 1890s, football today is as much a spectacle as a sporting event.

Football is not just a televised marketing and entertainment vehicle, however. While it trails other sports as a recreational activity for youths and adults, football is the cornerstone of extracurricular life at high schools nationwide. In some areas, local “football fever” is so prominent that entire communities’ identities seem to be wrapped up in the local football teams—places like Stark County, Ohio, where the legendary Massillon High School Tigers draw more than 100,000 spectators per year, or Midland-Odessa, Texas, where the annual Permian-Lee rivalry draws more than 20,000 partisans.

Football’s popularity helps make the sport a symbolic battle field in American “culture wars.” For its proponents, football provides the ideal proving ground for young men to test and develop their manhood, instilling values such as teamwork and self-reliance. At the same time, traditional ideas of femininity are promoted in corollary institutions such as cheerleading and pep squads—ideas that are playfully challenged, but also reinforced, by role-reversing “Powder Puff” games. Often these traditional gender roles and “family values” are promoted in an explicitly religious setting, with clergymen of Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, and other faiths being prominent participants in pre- and post-game rituals. Of course, this makes football a target for those less enamored with the social status quo. Football is thus denounced as a promoter of violence, sexism, and greed, with no finer symbol of its problems than football-star-turned-suspected-murderer O. J. Simpson. In short, football at the beginning
of the 21st century, as in the early 20th century, remains one of the country’s most loved and hated sports.

**Postscript: Whatever Became of Soccer in America?**

As soccer rose to global prominence during the first half of the twentieth century, especially throughout Europe and South America, it persisted in North America only in scattered pockets—primarily working-class immigrant communities of the northeast such as Fall River, Massachusetts. Early attempts to establish soccer as a commercial spectator sport were largely unsuccessful. During the 1920s, some early soccer clubs in the United States did produce some noteworthy players—most famously the native-Scot Archie Stark of Bethlehem Steel and the Massachusetts-born Billy Gonsalves, whose New York Yankees memorably beat the touring Scottish champions, Glasgow Celtic, in 1931. But aging stadia and economic depression took their toll during the 1930s, and by 1941, the number of registered clubs in the United States had fallen from over two hundred to just eight. Rather than making soccer a widely followed spectator sport, these early leagues cemented soccer’s reputation in the USA as a “foreign” game played by immigrants and prone to outbreaks of working-class violence.

In 1968, two floundering year-old leagues merged to form the North American Soccer League. The NASL blossomed with the landmark signing in 1975 by the New York Cosmos of the world’s greatest player, Brazil’s Pelé. He soon was followed by other aging foreign stars, and by the time Pelé retired in 1977, the NASL had expanded to 24 teams. This proved to be overexpansion, however, and the 1984 season, with only nine teams competing, was the NASL’s last.

The seed planted by the NASL finally bore fruit on 19 November 1989, when Paul Caligiuri’s late-minute goal against Trinidad and Tobago sent the United States to the 1990 World Cup in Italy. By placing the national team on the world’s premier soccer stage for the first time in forty years, a feat that would be repeated in 1994, 1998, and 2002. Caligiuri’s goal helped establish the national teams, both men’s and women’s, as soccer’s primary vehicle for publicity in the United States, enabling the sport to partially shed its foreign image. This role would be cemented during the 1990s as an ever-more-global United States successfully hosted both the 1994 men’s and 1999 women’s World Cup finals, with expectations surpassed both on and off the field via shattered attendance records, the men’s team successfully moving past the first round, and the women’s team winning a memorable championship over China.

Caligiuri’s landmark goal in 1989 represents another, more important dimension to the development of soccer in the United States. Unlike his predecessors early in the century, Caligiuri learned his soccer in a suburban, middle-class community of Southern California. He thus represents soccer’s rise after 1970 as a popular participation sport among American middle-class youth. Fueled by the fitness craze, the momentary popularity of the NASL, and the rapid rise of girls’ and women’s sports, soccer became a favorite alternative to traditional American sports. Parents liked soccer because it was less violent and cheaper to equip than the traditional sports; kids liked it because it was more active and more welcoming to those shut out of other sports by their size or sex.
By 1995, nearly eight million children under age twelve were playing organized soccer, second only to basketball. The long-term impact of soccer’s popularity as a youth sport and the recent successes of the men’s and women’s national teams remains to be seen. In 1996, yet another attempt at a national professional league, Major League Soccer, debuted with ten teams and enough television and advertising support to carry it safely into the 21st century. Likewise, soccer continues to grow as a participation sport, especially among adults; the number of registered adult players increased threefold between 1986 and 1996. But soccer still has yet to be established as a major spectator sport in American culture, one that can count on front-page coverage in the English-speaking press. For the next generation at least, soccer remains a mystery to most Americans, a somewhat strange activity for kids and “foreigners in funny shorts.”

Additional Reading