



**Football, Flags, and Flyovers: American Nationalism and the Violent
Spectacle of the NFL**

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“Hard work pays off – hard work beats talent any day, but if you're talented and work hard, it's hard to be beat.” – Robert Griffin III

Abstract

The goal of this paper is to explore the relationship between the National Football League (NFL) and American national identity, and to also examine professional American football's profound impact on the country's visual culture—particularly during times of warfare and tragedy. Surprisingly, the NFL—despite its status as a cultural juggernaut—has largely evaded substantial critical analysis over the past 50 years, and very few scholars have focused their attention specifically on the intrinsic link between nationalism and the institution of professional football. By examining the federal pomp and circumstance incorporated into NFL games, broadcasts, and merchandise—as well as the brutality of the game itself—this paper aims to fill a gaping hole in the literature surrounding sport and national identity in the United States.

Introduction

When asked to recollect upon his playing days, Paul “Tank” Younger—the first player from a historically black college to play in the National Football League (NFL)—proclaimed, “My inspirational speech was when they played the National Anthem. That really got me fired up...Shit, when they sang ‘*o’er the land of the free and the home of the brave,*’ I’m ready to go knock the *hell* out of somebody.”¹

As the former running back’s comments illustrate, patriotism and professional American football² have long gone hand in hand. From the singing of the national anthem to jet flyovers, fireworks, flag waving, military band marches—and, of course, the selling of patriotic merchandise—representations of American identity have been strategically woven into the very fabric of NFL pageantry. Each year, these rituals are played out in supreme fashion during the Super Bowl championship game—a multi-million dollar extravaganza described by one former NFL commissioner as “the winter version of the Fourth of July celebration.”³

There is no doubt that the majority of American citizens would describe the NFL’s red, white, and blue displays as “patriotic” rather than “nationalistic.” While patriotism draws upon the same ideological principles and strategies as nationalism, the latter is considered to be more virulent, exclusionary, and state-constructed. Thus, it is often rebranded as patriotism or “superpatriotism” in order to make it seem a more banal and positive phenomenon.⁴ Although

¹ Michael MacCambridge, *America’s Game: The Epic Story of How Pro Football Captured a Nation* (New York: Random House, 2004), 457.

² The use of the term “football” throughout this paper is a reflection of its distinct meaning in the United States, whereas the word “soccer” is used in reference to the international game of football.

³ Ira Berkow, “Once Again, It’s the Star-Spangled Super Bowl,” *New York Times*, January 27, 1991, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/01/27/sports/sports-of-the-times-once-again-it-s-the-star-spangled-super-bowl.html> (accessed March 5, 2014).

⁴ Claire Sutherland, *Nationalism in the Twenty-First Century: Challenges and Responses* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 64.

nationalism has long been considered a “dirty word” by many Americans, it is undoubtedly the more appropriate term to describe the characteristic national feelings imbued within American political and sporting culture.⁵ Ultimately, the nationalistic pageantry of pro football has had both positive and negative consequences, and the profound connection that has developed between the NFL and the US Armed Forces simply does not fall under the auspice of benign patriotism.

Over the years, the NFL has increased the integration of the American military into the institution of professional football, and the nationalistic rituals ingrained within the sport’s visual culture have fluctuated over the years depending on the country’s political climate. As with other major sports leagues in the United States, the NFL’s propensity to attach itself to American nationhood has been particularly strong in the wake of national tragedies, as well as at the onset of war. Professional football stadiums across the country have consequently evolved into what Tricia Jenkins describes as large-scale “patriotic theaters”—stages upon which American national identity is aggressively played out in front of a global audience.⁶

⁵ Minxin Pei, “The Paradoxes of American Nationalism,” *Foreign Policy* 136 (2003): 31

⁶ Tricia Jenkins, “The Militarization of American Professional Sports: How the Sports-war Intertext Influences Athletic Ritual and Sports Media,” *International Journal of Sports Media and Social Issues* 37, no. 3 (2013): 247.



Figure1.1: 70,000 Green Bay Packers fans create a coordinated American flag display on September 8, 2011, as military jets from the 115th Fighter Wing of the Wisconsin Air National Guard zoom over the stadium.⁷

The integration of militaristic imagery into American football is understandable given the intrinsic link between nationalism and professional sport. However, the ways in which the NFL has harnessed nationalist sentiment, packaged it, and sold it to the American public is most certainly unprecedented. Surprisingly, this cultural phenomenon has largely escaped substantial scholarly criticism.⁸

To be sure, there is no dearth of material available when it comes to the history of American football, and titles ranging from *Football and Philosophy: Going Deep* to the ever-depressing *Oiler Blues: The Story of Pro Football's Most Frustrating Team* can currently be found at a Barnes

⁷ Chris Chase, "Packers Crowd Gets Patriotic with Huge American Flag Display," *Yahoo! Sports*, September 8, 2011, http://sports.yahoo.com/nfl/blog/shutdown_corner/post/Packers-crowd-gets-patriotic-with-enormous-Ameri?urn=nfl-wp6750 (accessed December 13, 2014).

⁸ Thomas P. Oates and Zack Furness, eds. *The NFL: Critical and Cultural Perspectives* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2014), 4-5.

and Noble near you. Conspicuously absent from the bookshelves and journal archives, however, are texts pertaining specifically to the sport's profound connection to nationalism in the modern-day United States. This is because none currently exist.

Although various academics have drawn attention to football's strong association with militarism, so far none have attempted to provide an overarching historical examination of the NFL's role as a vehicle for parading American national identity. While the existing literature regarding the NFL's relationship with the military is exceptional, there is far more to nationalism and pro football than the League's partnership with the US Armed Forces. Ultimately, this paper is a humble attempt (by an admitted fan of the problematically-named Washington Redskins) at making some headway in this direction.

Over the past few years, it has become abundantly clear that in order to fully understand nationalism in the United States—particularly in the post 9/11 era—it is first absolutely necessary to understand the culture of pro football, and the indelible impact that it has on its enormous audience. As former tight end Jamie Williams once declared, “Baseball is what America aspires to be, football is what this country is.”⁹

⁹ MacCambridge, 454.

Part 1

No Guts, No Glory: The NFL's Bloody Past Catches Up to its Present

“How does football explain America? It’s the violence of the sport, the violence of the sport attracts us to the game.” – Troy Aikman¹⁰

“Football is a violent sport. Somebody’s going to get hurt. It’s the game.” –Ndamukong Suh¹¹ (voted “dirtiest NFL player” by his peers)¹²

*“Unity is ever achieved by brutality.” –Ernest Renan, *What is a Nation?*¹³*

It is no secret that American national identity is a somewhat fragile construction. Due to the ethnic mix and fluidity of American society, major sporting events have been considered particularly significant tools for reinforcing ideals of patriotism and democratic participation.¹⁴ Consider sports, if you will, the cornstarch needed to thicken America’s metaphorical melting pot.

Unlike European countries, the United States has had to forge a collective identity through civic nationalism rather than ethnic nationalism, meaning that nationhood in the US has historically been defined by a shared belief in American democracy and freedom rather than ethnic superiority.¹⁵ Thus, the nationalistic displays and rituals exhibited at professional football games (saluting the flag, commemorating the nation’s war dead, honoring veterans) have helped make American citizens—including those not born on US soil—feel as though they are an integral part

¹⁰ Sal Paolantonio, *How Football Explains America* (Chicago: Triumph Books, 2008), 188.

¹¹ Scott Taylor, “A Man Named Suh: Nice Guy, Dirty Football Player,” *The River City Sports Blog*, September 12, 2013, <http://www.rivercitysportsblog.com/a-man-named-suh-nice-guy-dirty-football-player/> (accessed March 1, 2015).

¹² Terrence McCoy, “Why Detroit Lions’ Ndamukong Suh, the ‘NFL’s Dirtiest Player,’ Can’t Stop Playing Dirty,” *Washington Post*, December 30, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/12/30/why-detroit-lions-ndamukong-suh-is-ranked-as-footballs-dirtiest-player/> (accessed February 13, 2015).

¹³ Ernest Renan, “What is a Nation” in *Nations and Identities: Classic Readings* by Vincent P. Pecora (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell), 174.

¹⁴ S.W. Pope, *Patriotic Games: Sporting Traditions in the American Imagination, 1876 – 1926* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), 117.

¹⁵ Pei 31.

of society. These traditions have also perpetuated what Benedict Anderson dubs the “imagined community”—a nation (or symbolic construct) in which most inhabitants will never know their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them—yet, where “in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”¹⁶

Some scholars, such as social historian Eric J. Hobsbawm, have pointed to the rise of “invented traditions” such as festivals, ceremonies, anthems, “statuomania,”¹⁷ and sporting contests to explain the ways in which nationalism can be spread. These proponents of “top down” nation-formation argue that nations are essentially a fabrication of elite social engineers—planned and placed together by the ruling class, with no room for the emotional or moral will of the masses.¹⁸

On the other side of the coin are ethno-symbolists like Anthony D. Smith, who argue that nation building and the spread of nationalist ideologies are not merely the result of a singular ethnic construction or deliberate inventions, but rather the reinterpretation of pre-existing cultural ideologies. In other words, they believe that nationalism can only be understood “through an analysis of cultural identities over *la longue durée*” (the long duration).¹⁹

The history of American professional football ultimately lends weight to each of these perspectives. The continued reverence of the game’s inherently violent nature—and its profound connection to American nationhood—supports the ethno-symbolists’ viewpoint. Despite

¹⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 6.

¹⁷ “Statuomania” refers to the proliferation of public sculpture, particularly in Europe prior to the First World War. This phenomenon, according to Neil McWilliam, “represented perhaps the most conspicuous arena in which government, as well as municipal and private organizations, intervened to develop national consciousness.”

Neil McWilliam, “Culture and Nationalism” in *Nations and Nationalism: A Historical Overview*, by Gunthram H. Herb and David H. Kaplan (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2008), 410.

¹⁸ Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 88.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

football's Ivy League origins, professional football has emerged as one of the United States' most important vehicles for harnessing and expressing bonds of cultural affiliation. And, while the NFL has undoubtedly witnessed its fair share of racial controversies, it is also true that pro football can transcend ethnic and socioeconomic divisions. Even in its early days, the culture surrounding pro football (unlike college football) was ethnic, Catholic, and working class, and some pre-1920s rosters included blacks and Native Americans.²⁰

The “top down” interpretation put forth by Hobsbawm's camp can also be seen through the massive entertainment apparatus that pro football has become. Sport in the US has historically been deployed by elites as a tool of social reform and “cultural pedagogy,”²¹ and such practices have been brought into sharper focus by the modern-day NFL. After all, there is perhaps no greater example of an “invented tradition” than the Super Bowl, which has evolved from an under-watched championship game into a full-blown national holiday. Moreover, those who control the NFL have continuously made clear that the uber-nationalistic rituals and ceremonies that have come to characterize the sport will retain a significant place at games and during televised broadcasts—both during war and in peacetime.

Writing in *The American Journal of Psychology* in 1904, Professor G.T.W. Patrick observed, “The game [of football] acts as a sort of Aristotelian catharsis, purging our pent-up feelings and enabling us to return more placidly to the slow upward toiling...The intense passion for such games is in itself an indication that they answer to some present need.”²² Indeed, as

²⁰ Benjamin G. Rader, *American Sports: From the Gilded Age of Folk Games to the Age of Televised Sports*, 6th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2009), 261.

²¹ Mark Falcoux and Michael Silk, “One Day in September/A Week in February: Mobilizing American (Sporting) Nationalisms” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 22 (2005): 448.

²² G.T.W. Patrick, “The Psychology of Football,” *The American Journal of Psychology* 14, no. 3/4 (July – October 1904): 116-117.

immigrants poured into the United States at rapid speed during the early 1900s, institutionalized sports like football effectively merged disparate social groups into a reasonably unified national community, and provided the masses with something “real” to latch on to.²³

Although it took several years for the NFL to surpass Major League Baseball in terms of popularity, the eventual domination of football in the public arena was likely inevitable, since so many elements of the sport embody qualities often deemed to be “quintessentially American.”²⁴ In 1961, Ty Cobb—considered one of baseball’s all-time greatest players—lamented in his autobiography that pro football “threatens to replace baseball as our No. 1 sport. For shame.”²⁵

The primary reason for this degradation, in Cobb’s view, was that professional baseball players no longer exhibited masculine qualities of “toughness,” a “fighting dedication,” or a willingness to endure pain.²⁶ Four years after he penned his memoirs, the acclaimed pitcher’s fears came to fruition. In October of 1965—for the first time in American history—the Louis Harris polling agency reported that professional football had officially surpassed baseball as the nation’s favorite sport.²⁷

According to historians, the game that is now widely recognized as modern American football was originally conceived in the late 1880s, when Ivy League students from Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Rutgers, Columbia, and McGill transformed the rules of rugby—and, to a lesser extent, soccer—into a new sport with eleven-man teams.²⁸ According to Walter Camp, the oft-called “Father of American Football,” the rules of rugby were “all right for Englishman who had been

²³ Pope, 10-11.

²⁴ Alan Bairner, *Sport, Nationalism, and Globalization: European and North American Perspectives* (Albany: State University of New York, 2001), 105.

²⁵ Al Stump and Ty Cobb, *My Life in Baseball: The True Record* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), 199.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 57-58.

²⁷ MacCambridge, 212.

²⁸ Robert W. Peterson, *Pigskin: The Early Years of Pro Football* (New York: Oxford UP, 1996), 13.

brought up upon traditions as old and as binding as the laws themselves,” but presented a problem for the Ivy League’s American sportsmen, who loathed the lack of regulations in both rugby and soccer.²⁹ Preferring a written code, one of the major modifications the early American players made to football was the institution of judges and referees.

This prevailing emphasis on rules remains a critical component of football, both at the college and professional level. As former Pittsburgh Steeler and Super Bowl-winning head coach Tony Dungy explains, “Football is America’s game because it is aggressive, and Americans are aggressive people. Being aggressive is not bad, so long as it happens within a structure of rules.”³⁰ Indeed, to this day, the NFL maintains a “small army” of officials, and the rules of the game are so incredibly complex and detailed that few are able to fully understand them.³¹ This fact was made all too clear during the disastrous tenure of “replacement refs” during the 2012 NFL referee lockout. During the contract-driven debacle, the poor quality of officiating by the replacement refs prompted an exacerbated reaction from President Barack Obama, who tweeted, “NFL fans on both sides of the aisle hope the refs lockout is settled soon.”³²

Another diversion from the British ideal of sportsmanship was the American players’ emphasis on winning. As Gerald Gems notes, “Americans adhered only to the letter of the law rather than the spirit, often circumventing both in their zeal for victory.”³³ While early football players depended on rules in the absence of tradition, the ability to circumvent them also was seen

²⁹ Michael Oriard, *Reading Football: How the Popular Press Created an American Spectacle* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 30.

³⁰ Gregg Easterbrook, *The King of Sports: Football’s Impact on America* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2013), 271.

³¹ Oriard, *Reading Football*, 28.

³² Michael David Smith, “President Obama Weighs in on NFL Lockout” *NBC Sports*, September 25, 2012 <http://profootballtalk.nbcsports.com/2012/09/25/president-obama-weighs-in-on-nfls-referee-lockout/> (accessed December 11, 2014).

³³ Gerald R. Gems, *For Pride, Profit, and Patriarchy: Football and the Incorporation of American Cultural Values* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2000), 20.

as a celebration of national genius, and was even considered to be an expression of Yankee ingenuity.³⁴ If he had brushed up on his history, perhaps New England Patriots Head Coach Bill Belichick could have offered this excuse after his team was found guilty of intentionally deflating footballs just before the 2015 AFC Championship game.³⁵

Over the years, NFL moguls have experimented with rule changes in order to increase scoring and improve the sport's marketability on television. In 1978, for example, the League adopted a radical rule change in pass blocking that permitted pass defenders to extend their arms and open their hands to protect the passer. Previously, offensive linemen had sought to hit the rushing defender, move their feet and recoil—they could neither open their hands nor extend their arms. Within three years of this change, passing yardage nearly doubled, and NFL football consequently became an even more exciting spectacle.³⁶ Most recently, in an effort to “add excitement to every play,” the NFL has flirted with idea of eliminating extra point kick attempts, no doubt to the supreme dismay of the League's placekickers.³⁷

Although American football looks exceedingly different now than it did at the dawn of the twentieth century (Belichick jokes aside, rule circumvention is no longer tolerated—at least theoretically) one thing that has not changed over the years is the remarkably violent nature of the game itself. When the sport first began to take hold in major universities on the east coast, many early observers were shocked by its extreme brutality, and it was often denounced in popular

³⁴ Oriard, *Reading Football*, 30.

³⁵ Rachel G. Bowers, “What is the ‘Deflategate’ Controversy?” *Boston Globe*, January 20, 2015, <<http://www.bostonglobe.com/sports/2015/01/20/what-deflate-gate/z0DJ1t5cmjeliqGLvSiu3L/story.html>> (accessed Feb. 22, 2015).

³⁶ Rader, 269-270.

³⁷ Marc Sessler, “NFL Considering Proposal to Abolish Extra Points,” *NFL.com* under “Around the NFL” January 21, 2014 <http://www.nfl.com/news/story/0ap2000000315779/article/nfl-considering-proposal-to-abolish-extra-points> (accessed March 14, 2015).

newspapers and magazines. The cynics' concerns were not unfounded—in 1909 alone, 30 young men died from playing the game, and 216 more suffered from critical injuries.³⁸



Figures 2.1 and 2.2: Death is portrayed at the “Twelfth Player in Every Football Game” on the dramatic cover of the *New York World* on Sunday, November 14, 1897.³⁹ Similarly, in 1905, Cincinnati’s *Commercial Tribune* published a cartoon entitled “The Grim Reaper Smiles on the Goal Posts.”⁴⁰

Following an infamous (albeit arguably overstated)⁴¹ intervention by US President and sports aficionado Teddy Roosevelt, the game saw continuous structural changes that ultimately

³⁸ Marc S. Maltby, *The Origins and Early Development of Professional Football* (New York: Garland, 1997), 17.

³⁹ Oriard, *Reading Football*, 204.

⁴⁰ John Sayle Watterson, *College Football: History, Spectacle, Controversy* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 98.

⁴¹ Katie Zezima, “How Teddy Roosevelt Helped Save Football,” *Washington Post* under “The Fix,” May 29, 2014 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2014/05/29/teddy-roosevelt-helped-save-football-with-a-white-house-meeting-in-1905/> (accessed February 13, 2015).

resulted in far fewer fatalities over the years. For those who are morbidly curious, the last on-field hit to result in death in the NFL occurred during a preseason game in August of 1963, when Olympic athlete and Kansas City Chiefs rookie Stone Johnson tragically suffered a broken neck injury while blocking during a kickoff return against the Oakland Raiders.⁴²

Despite the substantial drop in collision-related deaths, anyone who has witnessed a modern-day NFL game knows that violence remains an inextricable component of pro football, and it is a feature of the sport that has become hot-button issue in recent years. Revelations of the brutal toll that the game can have on former players has led many observers to question the future of the NFL, and football-bashing has consequently become something of a fashionable trend among journalists and medical experts. When confronted with some of the first cases of football-related brain damage, Joseph Maroon, a longtime neurological consultant to the Pittsburgh Steelers (and current medical consultant on the NFL's controversial Head, Neck and Spine Committee) declared, "If only 10 percent of mothers in America begin to conceive of football as dangerous, that is the end of football."⁴³

More recently, in a 2014 interview, one of the game's most well-known detractors, Canadian author and *New Yorker* writer Malcom Gladwell, dramatically decreed American football as a "moral abomination," and predicted that the NFL would soon "whither on the vine."⁴⁴

⁴² Mark L. Ford, *A History of NFL Preseason and Exhibition Games: 1960 to 1985* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 37.

⁴³ Mark Fainaru-Wada and Steve Fainaru, *League of Denial: The NFL, Concussions, and the Battle for Truth* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2013), 206.

⁴⁴ "Malcolm Gladwell: 'Football Is a Moral Abomination'" *Bloomberg.com*, Bloomberg, November 13, 2014, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-11-13/malcolm-gladwell-football-is-a-moral-abomination-.html> (accessed February 19, 2015).

(These remarks did not necessarily come as a surprise, as Gladwell had previously compared the sport to dogfighting in 2009.)⁴⁵

While most American football fans would likely argue that Gladwell goes too far out on a limb (or vine) with his assertions, there is certainly no doubt that similarly-minded beliefs have become increasingly mainstream. Much like the concerns put forth by the aghast citizens of yesteryear, the football-related issues currently plaguing the American media are not unfounded, as recent scientific research has shown that the sport can indeed have incredibly devastating long-term physical and mental effects on NFL veterans and former players—namely, the generative brain disease chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE).

Discovered in 2002 by Nigerian-born forensic pathologist Bennet Omalu (a man who, incidentally, knows very little about American football)⁴⁶ CTE occurs when repetitive head trauma produces abnormal proteins in the brain known as “tau,” which form tangles around the brains’ blood vessels, thus interrupting normal functioning and killing nerve cells. NFL players who suffer from less advanced forms of CTE experience mood disorders, depression, and bouts of rage, while those with advanced cases often experience memory loss, confusion, and dementia.⁴⁷

Shockingly, of the 79 deceased players whose brains were examined by scientists at the Department of Veterans Affairs’ brain repository in Bedford, Massachusetts (the nation’s largest

⁴⁵ Malcom Gladwell, “Offensive Play: How Different Are Dogfighting and Football?” *The New Yorker*, October 19, 2009 <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/10/19/offensive-play> (accessed February 19, 2015).

⁴⁶ *Frontline*, “League of Denial: The NFL’s Concussion Crisis,” PBS (originally aired on October 8, 2013, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/league-of-denial/> (accessed February 14, 2015).

⁴⁷ Scientists are also researching the potential link between CTE and suicide.

“brain bank”) 76 of them were found to have CTE.⁴⁸ This issue has prompted the League to initiate various rule changes to protect players, including a ban on hits with the crown of the helmet.⁴⁹

Although the goal of this paper is not to take sides in the NFL’s concussion crisis, it is also an unavoidable subject, since the no-holds-barred aggression associated with professional football has long played into its profound connection to American nationhood—not to mention American masculinity. As Mia Fischer notes, the sport has long been considered a “bastion of men’s culture”—one that has “celebrated excessive forms of hyper masculinity...mirroring society’s intensive remasculinization and pervasive belief that war and violence are specifically related to manhood, a masculine activity at its core...which also importantly glorifies heroism, bravery, aggression, and family values.”⁵⁰

From a historical perspective, pro football came about at a time when intellectuals feared that American culture had become “feminized,” and serious concerns about the nation’s “manliness” justified the sport’s considerable dangers.⁵¹ Ultimately, little seems to have changed. To this day, prominent media personalities continuously express concerns about the potential loss of football’s brutality, even in the name of player safety. In mid-September of 2014, for example, uber-conservative radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh lamented that improvements to the game’s

⁴⁸ Jason M. Breslow, “76 of 79 Deceased NFL Players Have CTE,” *Frontline*, PBS, September 30, 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/sports/concussion-watch/76-of-79-deceased-nfl-players-found-to-have-brain-disease/> (accessed February 11, 2015).

⁴⁹ “New NFL Rules Designed to Limit Head Injuries,” *NFL*, July 26, 2012, <http://www.nfl.com/news/story/09000d5d81990bdf/article/new-nfl-rules-designed-to-limit-head-injuries> (accessed March 3, 2014).

⁵⁰ Mia Fischer, “Commemorating 9/11 NFL-Style: Insights Into America’s Culture of Militarism” *Sport and Social Issues* 38 no. 3 (2013): 205.

⁵¹ Oriard, *Reading Football*, 191.

safety were nothing but a sign of America's cultural decline, and that the NFL's recent policies have been "feminizing" and "chickifying" the game—and, subsequently, the United States itself.⁵²

In many ways, such views are emblematic of American nationalist culture. As Anatol Lieven points out, many Americans "have a natural tendency in the face of any disagreement to adopt harshly adversarial stances and...when confronted with opposition...feel impelled to take up positions of fear, hostility, militancy, intransigency and self-righteousness: in other words, classically nationalist positions."⁵³ Moreover, he notes that this radical strand of American nationalism "continuously looks backward, to a vanished and idealized national past."⁵⁴

Despite the concerns of Limbaugh and other fans harboring such "classically nationalist positions," NFL franchises have historically prided themselves on the unabashed brutality that is inflicted upon players, and the culture surrounding many teams remains as fierce as ever. The Green Bay Packers and Chicago Bears in particular have been keen to invoke their working class origins, and both organizations often extol the rugged masculinity required to play pro football. This is also unquestionably true of the Pittsburgh Steelers, a franchise whose ruthless emphasis on blood and guts has arguably been the determining factor in their six Super Bowl wins (an NFL record).⁵⁵

The consequences of the NFL's continued culture of brutality has been explored in-depth by ESPN reporters Steve Fairanu and Mark Fainaru-Wada in their groundbreaking book *League*

⁵² Erik Wemple, "Rush Limbaugh Laments the 'Feminizing' and 'Chickifying' of Football," *Washington Post*, September 12, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/erik-wemple/wp/2014/09/12/rush-limbaugh-laments-the-feminizing-chickifying-of-football/> (accessed October 15, 2014).

⁵³ Anatol Lieven, *America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004), 90.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁵ Abby Mendelson, David Aretha, and Jim Wexell, *The Steelers Experience: A Year-by-Year Chronicle of the Pittsburgh Steelers* (Minneapolis, MN: Quarto, 2014), 200.

of *Denial: The NFL's Concussion Crisis*. Putting the world of football-related scientific and medical research into layman's terms, the authors use the city of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, as a prototypical blue-collar American backdrop, and effectively paint a disturbing picture of the virulent brutal culture imposed upon those who have worn NFL jerseys—both inside and outside of the nation's Rust Belt.

Describing the media-made images of pro football's violence as seductive yet deceptive, the authors of *League of Denial* point out the gruesome reality that lies behind the NFL's consumer-friendly façade. Their research confirms that NFL veterans will often become shells of their former selves after years of rigorous play, and personal interviews with the wives and family members of CTE sufferers effectively illustrate the ways in which previously amiable men can evolve into hot-tempered, unpredictable drug addicts upon retirement.

To be sure, the rampant substance abuse of former players with CTE is unsurprising, given what many of these men endured on the football field during their careers. In one of the book's most disturbing yet memorable passages, Fairanu and Fairanu-Wada write:

Like war movies, the images soften and glorify the violence to the people who watch. The reality, like war itself, is far different. Those who get close to the NFL battlefield are left in awe of its ferocity and speed, the sheer sound of it, as memorable as giant waves crashing repeatedly on the shore. Andy Russell, the Steelers great, broke into the league as a third-team linebacker in 1963. In his first game, the starter, John Reger, collapsed after a brutal hit and swallowed his tongue. Reger went into convulsions on the field, like a man having a seizure. The team doctor searched frantically for a tool to pry open Reger's jaw. Unable to find one, he chipped out his front teeth with a pair of scissors. Blood sprayed everywhere—onto the grass, the doctor, Reger's white jersey. He left the stadium in an ambulance. A few plays later, the second-string linebacker sustained an ankle injury that also put him out of the game. Thus began Russell's 12-year career.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Fairanu and Fairanu-Wada, 320.

Given this account, it is a wonder that many still condemn President Obama for admitting that he would not want his metaphorical son to play football.⁵⁷

The scene described by the Fairanu brothers is clearly a far cry from the NFL's whitewashed interpretation of football's violence, which it has described in official publications as an "atavistic spectacle" and a "thrilling art, an art against odds...the powerful grace of modern dance put to a purpose against a background of impending pain."⁵⁸



Figures 2.3 and 2.4: Editorial cartoonist Adam Zyglis of *The Buffalo News*⁵⁹ and Pulitzer Prize winner Mike Luckovich of *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*⁶⁰ offer scathing interpretations the NFL's ongoing concussion crisis.

To be sure, Reger's plight is merely one shocking example of what can happen on the football field when the cameras cut to a commercial break. While the Pittsburgh Steelers have done possibly more than any other team to emphasize and perpetuate the "Americanness" associated

⁵⁷ David Remnick, "Going the Distance: On and Off the Road with Barack Obama, *The New Yorker*, January 27, 2014 <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/27/going-the-distance-2> (accessed February 13, 2015).

⁵⁸ Bob Oates Jr. and David Boss, eds. *The First Fifty Years: A Celebration of the National Football League in its Fifty-Sixth Season* (New York: National Football League Properties, 1969), 26.

⁵⁹ "Adam Zyglis: Head Injuries," *The Cagle Post*, September 20, 2013, <http://www.cagle.com/2013/09/head-injuries/> (accessed January 22, 2015).

⁶⁰ "Mike Luckovich, "Today's Mike Luckovich Cartoon 2/03," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* <http://www.ajc.com/news/news/opinion/todays-mike-luckovich-cartoon-0203/nWDK9/> (accessed January 22, 2015).

with pro football's violence, the NFL itself (until very recently)⁶¹ has often gone out of its way to explicitly link the game's overt brutality to the American nation—even going so far as to argue that the sport's fierceness serves as a necessary unifying force for a divided country.

This was especially true in the years following the contentious AFL-NFL merger of 1965, as the newly unified League took great pains to argue for its position as an institution reflective of American culture.⁶² Consider, for example, the telling introduction to *The First Fifty Years*, a glossy coffee table book produced by the NFL's Creative Services Division (the League's in-house ad agency) in 1969. Dedicated to the "American spirit," it reads in part:⁶³

The game challenges a man to discover the very source of his competitive spirit, forcing him through pain, adversity, and the despair of defeat. The very difficulty of the game is a call to excellence, an invitation for a man to express himself violently and powerfully while achieving the acclaim of victory. The professional football player uses the gridiron as a stage, performing with a courage and skill raised above savagery only by the meaningful purpose and inner discipline of civilized man. His is a spectacle of flashing, brutal magnificence and the great stadiums that dot this nation fill with resounding congregations of the American people who create the ebbing, flowing masses of sound through which the game is played. For the spectators, it is an exhilarating experience...There are marching bands, flags, posters, cheerleaders, and community excitement. Victory is the goal, an identification of community excellence...To the winners, the nation is grateful the ways it knows how. A victorious player attains the success of the American dream: money, recognition, glory, status, acceptance. This gratitude is lavish because the professional athletes occupy an important position in the psyche of an unsettled and generous nation.⁶⁴

This passage extensively and repeatedly illustrates the NFL's proclivity to attach itself to American nationhood, which the book quite dramatically claims is "cracked...into millions of tiny

⁶¹ As Fairanu and Fairanu-Wada also point out, the concussion crisis prompted ESPN (at the NFL's request) to discontinue the image of two helmets crashing that had preceded *Monday Night Football* broadcasts for more than twenty years. Similarly, CBS stopped running its "Pounder Index" pregame segment, in which analysts measured the biggest hits of the previous week on a 10-point scale.

⁶² Travis Vogan, *Keepers of the Flame: NFL Films and the Rise of Sports Media* (Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 46.

⁶³ The full dedication reads: "Dedicated to the American spirit, which has invented this most courageous, complex, and creative game to reflect and to challenge itself."

⁶⁴ Oates Jr. and Boss, 23.

parts, each man alienated from most others.”⁶⁵ The authors of *The First Fifty Years* also declare that the contained violence of pro football unites the nation by distracting it from real-life violence occurring domestically and abroad, including “upheavals of racial and educational factions at home” as well as an “unwanted war in Asia”—a reference to the then-ongoing war in Vietnam.⁶⁶

Some of the most interesting pages of the book showcase the thoughts of NFL players themselves, who offer their insights on pro football’s innate violence. “Let’s face it,” Dallas Cowboys tackle John Niland puts bluntly, “most of the people in our society enjoy watching one guy knock down another one.”⁶⁷ Carl Lockhart of the New York Giants, taking a nobler approach, proclaims, “You go with pain because you know you have a job to do...As football players, we have something more important to us than our own selves.”⁶⁸

In the book, these quotes are somewhat bizarrely interspersed with those of various authors, scholars, and philosophers. The NFL’s decision to include this one from Austrian ethologist Konrad Lorenz is particularly telling: “There is, in the modern community, no legitimate outlet for aggressive behavior. To keep the peace is the first of civic duties, and the hostile neighboring tribe, once the target at which to discharge phylogenetically programmed aggression, has now withdrawn to an ideal distance, hidden behind a curtain, if possible of iron...The main function of sport today lies in the cathartic discharge of aggressive urge.”⁶⁹

As the contentious 1960s morphed into the radical 70s, American fans yearning for a “discharge of aggressive urge” flocked to their local bookstores for *The Fifty First Years*. The book

⁶⁵Ibid., 24.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 23.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 69.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 93.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 62. In the book, Lorenz’s name is misspelled “Lorentz.”

ultimately proved to be a hit, selling nearly a quarter of a million copies and paving the way for dozens of similar lavish NFL publications. The man behind the book, David Boss, went on to design the League's logo, helmet icons, stylized posters, as well as a literary football magazine. In the words of Michael MacCambridge, Boss's work was significant in that it "helped inject elements of an artistic sensibility into the game" and "increased the League's prestige and profile with aesthetically pleasing products."⁷⁰

As Scott A. Davidson notes, the public's ultimate acceptance of violence within the culture of American pro football presents quite the quandary. "For players, the moral danger involves the very real possibility that they will compromise their own moral character by intentionally participating in violence that is unnecessary to achieve any greater good... For fans, there is a moral danger in rejoicing in violence for its own sake, which is certainly morally wrong in itself and also contributes to dangerous levels of desensitization."⁷¹

The NFL's artistic "desensitization" efforts have continued unabated over the years—beginning with Boss's follow-up to *The Fifty First Years*, entitled *The Pro Football Experience*. Though less popular than its predecessor, this massive book further ties the sport's violence to American heritage. Clocking in at nearly five pounds, it warns, "Football is not a smiling game,"⁷² and features oversized portraits of gruesomely injured players. One section in particular, entitled "The Price," includes a paragraph stating that "To be a football player is to understand the meaning of danger and the truth of pain... The sight of blood is not unfamiliar."⁷³ (How colorful.)

⁷⁰ MacCambridge, 288-289.

⁷¹ Michael W. Austin, ed. *Football and Philosophy: Going Deep* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 73.

⁷² David Boss, *The Pro Football Experience* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1973), 11.

⁷³ Boss, 188.

By mid-season, everybody's hurting all the time. But the training room can be a cruel place. Athletes are very hard. They are all in pain and if you miss games, you are damaging the team. If you are out a couple of games with a bad leg, they'll come in and say, "How long you going to ride that horse? You're going to wear that horse out."
George Menefee, trainer,
Los Angeles Rams

A football player must learn to accept pain. It is a very competitive life and you are judged solely on performance. I believe that through discipline and mental conditioning, a man can learn to accept pain as part of his endeavor. In fact, I think each man needs pain, because if he hasn't the discipline to endure pain and continue, something is lacking in his emotional make-up. That's not to say you should go out and get hit by a car. But every man must find his appropriate pain.
Bernie Casey, flanker, Los Angeles Rams

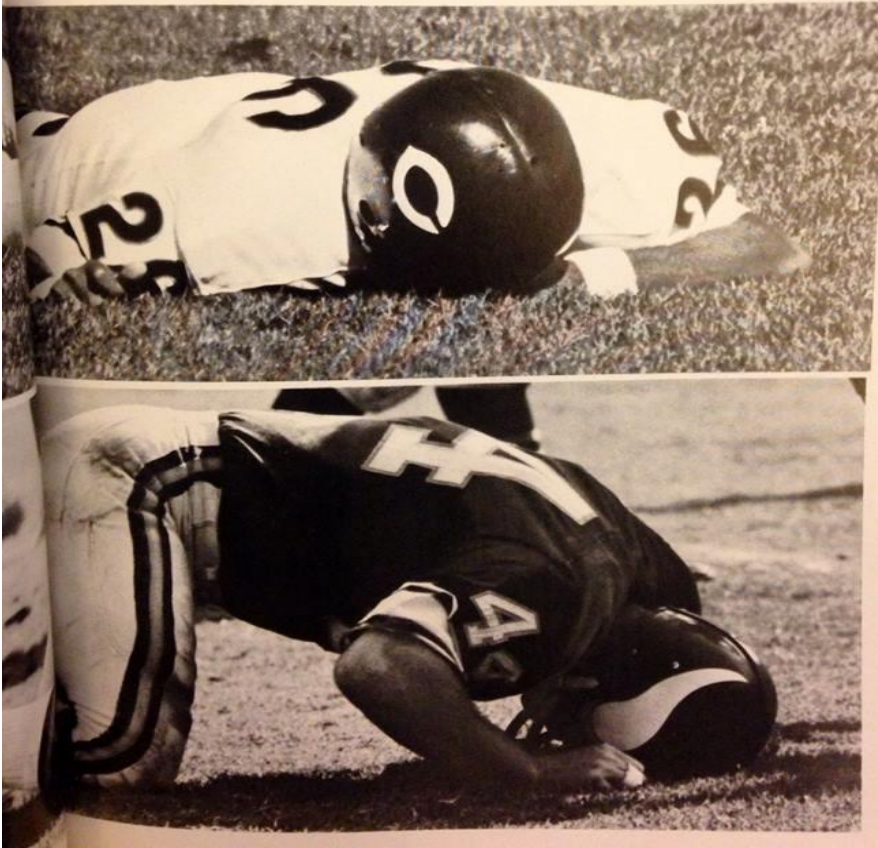


Figure 2.5: A page from *The First Fifty Years: A Celebration of the National Football League in its Fiftieth Season*. Images of injured players are commonplace throughout the book, as are players' thoughts on pain, violence, and teamwork.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Oates Jr. and Boss, 77.

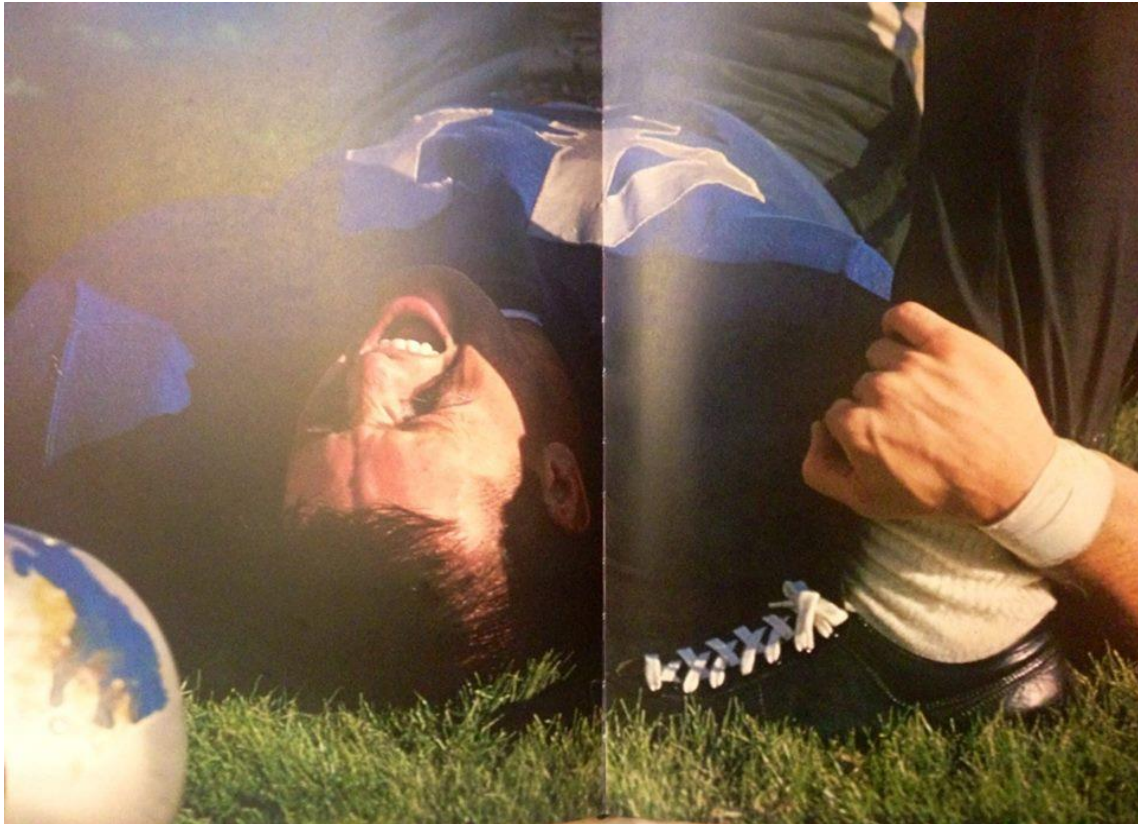


Fig 2.6: A section of David Boss's *The Pro Football Experience* entitled "The Price" features this shot of Detroit Lion's Terry Barr, who—according to the photograph's caption—is "beyond comforting as doctors study his injured knee in a game at Los Angeles."⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Boss, 188-195.

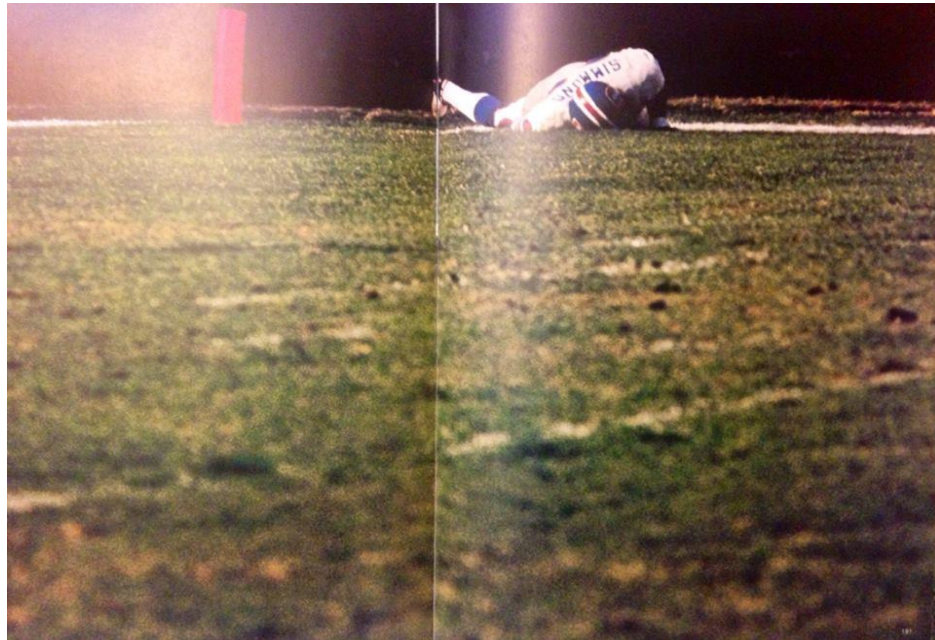


Figure 2.7: Resembling a lone fallen soldier on the battlefield, Denver Broncos wide receiver Jerry Simmons lies “stunned in the end zone, the victim of a collision that robbed him of a touchdown reception.”⁷⁶

Of course, Boss was not the only individual responsible for making the violence of football more palatable for the average American consumer. Perhaps more so than anyone else, the efforts of a man named Ed Sabol and his son Steve would convincingly desensitize, romanticize, package, and sell the violence of football to the American nation.

In 1962, the elder Sabol founded Blair Motion Pictures, which was brought in-house by Commissioner Pete Rozelle in 1964. The company was subsequently renamed NFL Films, and has since been described by *Sports Illustrated* as “perhaps the most effective propaganda organ in the history of corporate America.”⁷⁷ Since its humble beginnings, NFL Films has worked to dramatize the connection between professional football and the American way of life. According to Rozelle,

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Vogan, 1.

the goal was to use the studio as “promotional vehicle to glamorize the game and present it in its best light.”⁷⁸

And glamorize it the Sabols did. The gritty origin stories of the modern-day NFL, as portrayed by NFL Films, have served to authenticate the past in the present, and they place essential meaning around birth of the NFL as a cultural institution.⁷⁹ “Big Ed” aimed to portray pro football with a dramatic flair, the same way that Hollywood blockbusters depict fiction. His son Steve, a former player at Colorado College, complemented this approach by bringing the experience of playing the game to viewers’ living rooms.⁸⁰ The result, in the younger Sabol’s characteristically melodramatic words, was the creation of “the soul of the NFL.”⁸¹

Perhaps the most astute description of the studio’s work, however, can be attributed to Travis Vogan, author of *Keepers of the Flame: NFL Films and the Rise of Sports Media*. Vogan states that, “Pro football, as NFL Films depicts it, is an intense, violent, beautiful, and sometimes humorous sport where heroic men band together to overcome adversity and reach a common goal. It is an institution that expresses what it means to be an American and embodies teamwork, manliness, perseverance, courage, discipline, sacrifice, and leadership—sporting characteristics that, in part because of NFL Films’ pervasiveness, are now clichés.”⁸²

⁷⁸ MacCambridge, 287.

⁷⁹ Daniel A. Grano, “The Greatest Game Ever Played: An NFL Origin Story” in *The NFL: Critical and Cultural Perspectives* by Thomas Furness and Zack P. Oates (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2014), 16.

⁸⁰ Vogan, 11.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁸² Vogan, 5.



Figure 2.8: A screen grab from *They Call it Pro Football*, a 1966 NFL Film described by Steve Sabol as “the Citizen Kane of football films.”⁸³ NFL Films have long been heavily reliant on militaristic imagery and the “cult of the warrior.” As Michael L. Butterworth notes, these early productions “paved the way for the militarism that characterizes the NFL, and sport in general, today.”⁸⁴

Of course, the glorification of football’s violence and its connection to American nationhood is not limited to the NFL Film reels of days gone by. As Lieven points out, a defining feature of many nationalisms has been the “desire for a return to an idealized past.”⁸⁵ In the midst of the ongoing concussion crisis, commentators on ESPN and other sports networks have been prone to wax nostalgic about the ruthlessness of the “good old days” of the late 1960s and 70s—the so-called “golden age” of the NFL⁸⁶—when “men were men” and “football was football.” In 2010, beloved player-turned-analyst from the game’s golden age, former Dallas Cowboys Quarterback Rodger “The Dodger” Staubach, lamented in 2010 that the NFL’s newly implemented

⁸³ Ibid., 19.

⁸⁴ Michael L. Butterworth, “NFL Films and the Militarization of Professional Football” in *The NFL: Critical and Cultural Perspectives* by Thomas Furness and Zack P. Oates (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2014), 222.

⁸⁵ Lieven, 90.

⁸⁶ As Susan Reyburn notes, the 1970s has been regarded as a golden age for the NFL as it built on its breakthrough in the 1960s.

Susan Reyburn, *Football Nation: Four Hundred Years of America’s Game From the Library of Congress* (Harry N. Abrams, 2004), 208.

safety policies had turned pro football into “kind of a wussy game.”⁸⁷ The following year, one NFL Network commentator similarly sighed, “Way too much love and friendship in today’s NFL. Nowadays you can basically see guys giving each other high fives for making it through the day. In the 70s and late 60s, you *knew* who the enemy was.”⁸⁸

Although it almost goes without saying, a quick glance at the injured reserve lists from the NFL’s most recent season will show that, despite various rule changes (which, as noted above, are distinctly “American” in and of themselves) football remains anything but a “wussy game.” Nevertheless, the League continues to capitalize upon its brutal—albeit heavily airbrushed—past.

This has been especially evident in the NFL Network’s popular *Top Ten* series. In 2008, one episode of the show highlighted the “Top Ten Gutsiest Performances” in League history, and the hour-long countdown program was dedicated to celebrating players who had stayed in the game long after suffering from serious injuries—including cracked ribs, a torn ACL, and an amputated thumb. The number one gutsiest performance was attributed to the (fittingly named) Los Angeles Rams quarterback Jack Youngblood, who somehow managed to play throughout the entire 1979 playoffs and in Super Bowl XIV on a broken leg. Though his team ultimately lost the big game, Youngblood—with a fibula still snapped above the ankle—flew to Hawaii the very next week and played in the NFL Pro Bowl. “I thought it was my responsibility,” the disconcertingly modest former QB told the cameras.⁸⁹

⁸⁷Mike Florio, “Roger Staubach Thinks Rule Changes Make NFL a ‘Wussy Game,’” *NBC Sports*, September 15, 2010. <http://profootballtalk.nbcsports.com/2010/09/15/roger-staubach-thinks-rules-changes-make-nfl-a-wussy-game/> (accessed December 12, 2014).

⁸⁸*Top Ten*, “Things We Miss About Football,” NFL Network (originally aired July 31, 2011). <http://www.nfl.com/videos/nfl-network-top-ten/0ap2000000274087/Top-Ten-Things-We-Miss-about-Football> (accessed October 14, 2014).

⁸⁹*Top Ten*, “Top Ten Gutsiest Performances” NFL Network (originally aired on September 20, 2008).

Writing for NFL.com in November of 2013, Alex Gelhar featured Youngblood's broken leg in his "Pro Bowl Flashback Friday" column. "File this one under 'Manliest Moments in NFL History,'" he suggests, "Perhaps even 'Manliest Moments in *History*'.... Youngblood triumphed in the Pro Bowl...giving fathers across America a story to tell their wide-eyed youngsters as they yearned for more football knowledge."⁹⁰

The NFL's continued veneration of Youngblood and his injured colleagues unquestionably demonstrates the significant historical correlation between professional football and American masculine identity. While ties between men's organized sports and socially acceptable forms of masculinity are obviously not limited to the United States, American professional football is exceptional in that it has successfully produced and replicated a very narrow definition of the term, which it explicitly links to national identity. Moreover, by conferring nationalist meanings upon wounded bodies, the NFL also plays an important role in materializing otherwise abstract ideals of American patriotism and nationhood.⁹¹

It is worth noting, however, that not every NFL player on the field is normally subjected to the brute force of, say, an offensive lineman. The players on special teams—specifically kickers and punters—are often ridiculed by sports analysts who view their jobs as weak, ineffectual, or unnecessary. Significantly, these highly lambasted positions are also some of the few roles in American football that are likely to be filled by non-American players. In one particularly

⁹⁰ Alex Gelhar, "Pro Bowl Flashback Friday: Jack Youngblood's Broken Leg" NFL, November 13, 2013, <<http://www.nfl.com/news/story/0ap2000000285834/article/pro-bowl-flashback-friday-jack-youngbloods-broken-leg>> (accessed December 22, 2014).

⁹¹ Mary G. McDonald, "Imagining Benevolence, Masculinity and Nation: Tragedy, Sport and the Transnational Marketplace" in *Sport and Corporate Nationalisms*, by Michael L. Silk, David A. Andrews, and C.L. Cole (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 129.

memorable episode of *The Simpsons*, Homer decries Springfield's proposed immigrant deportation bill by asking, "Who will kick our field goals?"⁹²

According to ESPN commentator (and seasoned carnival barker) Skip Bayless, the alleged problem with kickers began when Hungarian-born Cornell player Pete Gogolak launched the first soccer-style field goal in 1961. Bayless, no stranger to controversy, maintains that Gogolak kicked open a "Pandora's box" that allowed a "parade of soccer refugees" to enter the sport:

Not that I truly wish harm on any of the football subspecies known as place-kickers, but what player or coach or fan hasn't wanted to strangle one of these wimpy wackos?...Giant, gifted men battle their guts out playing a violent game, and the outcome is all too often decided by some former soccer player who has absolutely nothing to do with football. No football talent. No football heart. No football mind...Soccer permanently contaminated football.⁹³

Although Bayless's sentiments are characteristically extreme, they are also indicative of the overall treatment of placekickers and punters—particularly those from outside the United States. In 1966, after Cyprus-born Armenian Garo Yepremian launched six field goals to give the Detroit Lions a narrow victory over the Minnesota Vikings, the opposing head coach, Norm Van Brocklin, was asked how he planned to stop the kicker. Van Brocklin angrily replied, "Tighten the immigration laws!"⁹⁴

⁹² Dan Greaney and David S. Cohen, "Much Apu About Nothing," *The Simpsons*. Fox. 5 May 1996.

⁹³ Skip Bayless, "Football Isn't Just For Kicks," *ESPN*, September 29, 2005, <http://sports.espn.go.com/page2/story?page=bayless/050929> (accessed October 19, 2014).

⁹⁴ Rick Gonsalves, *Placekicking in the NFL: A History and Analysis* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2014), 168.



Figure 2.9: Although he would ultimately go down as one of the greatest placekickers in NFL history, Garo Yepremian also represented the presumed ineptitude of both kickers and non-American professional football players. During this play in Super Bowl VII, the Hungarian native committed one of the most notorious gaffes in NFL history, when—following a blocked field goal attempt—he threw the ball straight into the hands of opposing Washington Redskins defensive back Mike Bass, who ran 49 yards with it for a Redskins touchdown.⁹⁵

In general, popular American football commentators have been known to voice similarly volatile reactions when discussing the role of placekickers, who have come to occupy an increasingly important position within the NFL. Foreign-born kickers first began pouring into the League during the 1970s, as the American straight-on style of kicking gradually became replaced by the far more effective European soccer-style kick.⁹⁶ Up to 2009, there were 56 kickers from 28

⁹⁵ Richard Whittingham, *Hail Redskins: A Celebration of the Greatest Players, Teams, and Coaches* (Chicago: Triumph, 2004), 230.

⁹⁶ As Rick Gonsalves notes, after Mark Moseley of the Cleveland Browns retired in 1986, there would never be another conventional placekicker in the NFL.

countries around the world who had kicked in an official regular season NFL game—each of whom had originally played professional soccer in their native country.⁹⁷

The subtly nationalistic, pro-masculine tone that surrounds the conversation on kickers can be perhaps best observed within NFL Network productions. One episode of *Top Ten*, for example, awards “Special Teams Mishaps” the number three spot on its countdown of greatest football “follies.” The show’s omnipresent deep-voiced announcer declares, “The foreign customs of kickers have helped the NFL gain international appeal,” as a montage featuring scenes of Ellis Island, a random Sikh man in a turban at a Green Bay Packers game, and a Hispanic Cleveland Browns fan play in the background. Commentator Peter Schrager opines, “It’s a given if you’re on special teams you’re probably going to screw up doing something physically active and athletic at least once a game.”⁹⁸

As Schrager’s comment demonstrates, the overriding negative attitude exhibited towards kickers is often attributed to the lack of physicality involved with the position rather than an overt disdain for international players. Yet, as Christopher González points out, “There is a certain invisibility of kickers that goes hand in hand with the invisibility of Latinos in the NFL’s history. We only notice the kickers—Latino or otherwise—when they either win or lose the game, or if they do something extraordinary, such as which Bill Gramática injured his kicking leg *after celebrating* a successful kick with the Arizona Cardinals...it cannot be mere coincidence that the

⁹⁷ Gonsalves, 168.

⁹⁸ *Top Ten*, “Top Ten Football Follies” NFL Network (originally aired on May 15, 2009). <http://www.nfl.com/videos/nfl-network-top-ten/09000d5d8181be94/Top-Ten-Follies-Special-teams-goofs> (accessed February 13, 2015).

most unobtrusive position in the NFL is where you find the majority of Latinos who've played the game."⁹⁹

When it comes down to it, the virtue of sacrificing one's body for the good of the team has long been considered part and parcel to the culture of American pro football,¹⁰⁰ and it is a truism that kickers and punters simply do not put up the same physical sacrifice that their teammates do. This is also, of course, a primary reason for these players' longevity in the League. Overall, the average NFL career lasts just three and half seasons, and even successful careers rarely last for more than ten years.¹⁰¹ Yet, while the typical running back in the NFL may have a short shelf life, more than half of NFL teams currently field a kicker over the age of 30—the oldest of whom is 42-year old Adam Vinatieri of the Indianapolis Colts.¹⁰²

Ultimately, the glamorization of injury-raddled players as heroes—and the contempt shown for weak, internationally-born kickers—could be considered one the more blatant manifestations of American nationalism within the culture of pro football. Regrettably, because domination, physicality, and toughness remain essential values of American masculinity, the long-term consequences of injuries faced by the more physically invested players are often disregarded by coaches and even team doctors. Former Packers Offensive Lineman Jerry Kramer once joked

⁹⁹ Christopher González and Frederick Luis Aldama, *Latinos in the Endzone: Conversations on the Brown Color Line in the NFL* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 62-63.

¹⁰⁰ Alexia Greivous, Jimmy Sanderson, Maggie Tehan, Melinda Weathers, and Samantha Warren, "A Hero or Sissy? Exploring Media Framing of NFL Quarterbacks Injury Decisions," *Communication & Sport* (2014): 2-5.

¹⁰¹ Brian Billick and Michael MacCambridge, *More Than a Game: The Glorious Present—and the Uncertain Future—of the NFL* (New York: Scribner, 2009), 61.

¹⁰² Josh Planos, "Adam Vinatieri and the Golden Age of NFL Kickers," *The Guardian*, January 17, 2015, <<http://www.theguardian.com/sport/2015/jan/17/adam-vinatieri-and-the-golden-age-of-nfl-kickers>> (accessed February 22, 2015).

that a team physician would probably tell you you're alright "if you broke your neck during a close game."¹⁰³

In a recent study of NFL veterans, Katie Rodgers found that when masculine identity is perceived to be at stake, most players will voluntarily choose to "play through the pain," and those who do manage to return from injuries are often lavished with public attention and widespread praise.¹⁰⁴ This is no surprise, given Americans' inclination to equate teamwork, sacrifice, and physical suffering with heroism and sporting glory.¹⁰⁵ After all, without such "heroic" returns, fans would not be able to partake in a shared memory of blood and sacrifice—both of which are constitutive of national identity.

Although the consequences of the shocking concussion-related medical revelations—and the NFL's subsequent Big Tobacco-esque attempts to quell them—have yet to fully play out, the mere fact the concussion crisis has prompted such an enormous response demonstrates the continued significance of pro football's profound connection to American society and nationhood. Moreover, the desire to return to the "good old days" demonstrates what Michael Billig calls "collective amnesia"—a phenomenon first espoused by French philosopher Ernest Renan, in which a nation simultaneously remembers and forgets certain aspects of its past by overlooking what is "discomfiting."¹⁰⁶ Indeed, if asked to expound upon the golden age of pro football, most

¹⁰³ Stephen H. Norwood, *Real Football: Conversations on America's Game* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 14.

¹⁰⁴ Katie Rodgers, "I Was a Gladiator": Pain, Injury, and Masculinity in the NFL" in *The NFL: Critical and Cultural Perspectives*, by Thomas P. Oates and Zack Furness (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2014), 145-154.

¹⁰⁵ Eric Anderson and Edward M. Kian, "Examining Media Contestation of Masculinity and Head Trauma in the National Football League," *Men and Masculinities* 15, no. 2 (2012): 153.

¹⁰⁶ Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995), 38.

fans will think fondly back to the patriotic mythology put forth by NFL Films and broadcasts—not of John Reger swallowing his tongue.

When it comes down to it, the beauty of a Super Bowl ring is in the eye of the beholder. For many players—even former champions—the long-term physical toll of the game can far outweigh the short-term monetary benefits garnered during a career on the gridiron. Perhaps nothing exemplifies this more than the recent actions taken by San Francisco 49ers linebacker and standout defensive rookie, Chris Borland. In March of 2015, Borland announced his retirement at the ripe old age of 24, due to personal concerns about concussions. Although many players have retired at similarly early ages citing “health concerns,” Borland rather explicitly told the press, “I just thought to myself, ‘What am I doing? Is this how I’m going to live my adult life, banging my head, especially with what I’ve learned and knew about the dangers?’”¹⁰⁷

Indeed, despite the NFL’s recent attempts to mitigate some of the lasting physical risks associated with football, it remains—beyond a shadow of a doubt—the most violent of America’s four major spectator sports. It is worth considering yet another of Renan’s astute proclamations:

A heroic past, great men, glory...this is the social capital upon which one bases a national idea... More valuable by far than common customs posts and frontiers conforming to strategic ideas is the fact of sharing, in the past, a glorious heritage and regrets, and of having, in the future, [a shared] program to put into effect, or the fact of having suffered, enjoyed, and hoped together. These are the kinds of things that can be understood in spite of differences of race and language.¹⁰⁸

The “heroic past, great men, glory” and suffering described by Renan can all be found within the lionized history of the NFL. For years, professional football has helped to tie Americans

¹⁰⁷ Dan Hanzus, “San Francisco 49ers’ Chris Borland Retiring from NFL,” *NFL.com* under “Around the NFL,” March 17, 2015 <http://www.nfl.com/news/story/0ap3000000479460/article/san-francisco-49ers-chris-borland-retiring-from-nfl> (accessed March 17, 2015).

¹⁰⁸ Renan, 174.

of different races, creeds, and socioeconomic backgrounds together as they collectively suffer, enjoy, and celebrate the “heroic” physical sacrifices of players who deliberately put themselves in harm’s way on the field.

To be sure, the significance of this unifying role has not gone unnoticed by the players themselves. As Redskins Hall of Fame Quarterback Sonny Jurgensen explains in the *First Fifty Years*, “I’ve always considered myself a group therapist for 60,000 people. Every Sunday I hold group therapy and the people come and take out their frustrations on me. If I fail, it magnifies their failures, and if I succeed, it minimizes them.”¹⁰⁹

Acclaimed Denver Broncos Quarterback Peyton Manning echoes Jergensen’s sentiments, and further stresses the importance of football fans in cultivating and maintaining the American nation: “There is only one way to answer that question of how football explains America and it sounds hokey but it’s true—it’s the fans...It’s a sense of belonging—to a team, to a city, to the country...wherever you go, you can feel it each and every Sunday. I think that defines what the game is and how it explains America.”¹¹⁰

Whether because of—or in spite of—its continued brutality, many modern-day fans will happily argue that the aggressiveness associated with pro football is a major reason why the game captures the essence of the nation’s spirit. For better or for worse, the violence imbued within the sport is as American as apple pie, and it has served as a unifying force for decades. When football’s popularity first began to spread across the United States, the outcry against its brutality was great, but the possibility of an emasculated American manhood proved to be greater.¹¹¹ As illustrated

¹⁰⁹ Oates Jr. and Boss, 70.

¹¹⁰ Paolantonio, 193.

¹¹¹ Oriard, *Reading Football*, 191.

above, little seems to have changed. Recently, current NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell opined, “There is so much about our game that captures the spirit of our country [and the] same values that are at the core of our national spirit...I don’t think there’s much question about it. You can look at football and see the heart of America.”¹¹²

The efforts of Commissioner Goodell and those currently working for the NFL—both at NFL Films and elsewhere within the League—continue to invite Americans to revel in the sport’s glorious yet carefully modified past, and to live vicariously through the daring athleticism of its current “heroes.” More importantly, they ensure us that the institution of pro football will not be going anywhere anytime soon, and that the League will do whatever it takes to retain the so-called “heart of America”—no matter what the cost may be.

¹¹² Paolantonio, 186.

Part 2

Heroes, Homeland, and Hullabaloo: TV, Militarism, and the Historical Consequences of the NFL's Transparent Nationalism

“Football is an incredible game. Sometimes it’s so incredible, it’s unbelievable.” –Tom Landry¹¹³

“We’re all proud to be living in this country. We wouldn’t have the opportunity to play this great game in this country if it wasn’t for the people that were fighting for us. And those jets and the national anthem, every time that’s played, that’s a reminder to us.” – Nate Kaeding¹¹⁴

“Baseball is what we were, and football is what we have become.”¹¹⁵ – Mary McGrory

Back in 1995, when *The Simpsons* was still worth watching, a seventh season episode treated viewers to a flashback of Homer Simpson’s early childhood. The scene takes place in January of 1969, with Grandpa Abe—Homer’s father—being asked by his wife if he thinks their son looks “cute.” Seated on the couch in front of the TV watching football, Abe absent-mindedly replies, “Probably. I’m trying to watch the Super Bowl. If people don’t support this thing, it might not make it.”¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Geert Hendriks and Keith Gilbert, *Collected Insights from the Field of Sport Volume 1: Football and Society* (Lausanne, Switzerland: International Academy of Sports Science and Technology, 2014), 6.

¹¹⁴ *Salute the Sky. NFL*. NFL Films. <http://www.nfl.com/videos/nfl-videos/09000d5d80924c91/Salute-the-sky> (accessed September 20, 2014).

¹¹⁵ David G. McComb, *Sports: An Illustrated History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 100.

¹¹⁶ David Silverman and Richard Appel, “Mother Simpson,” *The Simpsons*, Fox (originally aired November 19, 1995).



Figures 3.1 and 3.2: As the United States’ longest-running sitcom, *The Simpsons* has long provided colorful commentaries on the nation’s favorite sport. The episode “Mother Simpson” illustrates the importance of the 1969 NFL Championship—the first game officially deemed the “Super Bowl.” (Interestingly, although Super Bowl III represented a major cultural turning point in the game’s history, it also had the lowest TV rating of all the NFL Championships.)¹¹⁷

As Abe’s response suggests, the NFL—much like *The Simpsons* itself—was not always the cultural juggernaut that it is today, nor did it always boast an expansive international audience. To be sure, it is virtually impossible to overemphasize the impact that television has had on American football (and vice versa). In the late 1960s, Commissioner Pete Rozelle became determined to turn the NFL Championship game (the first two Super Bowls did not have the “Super Bowl” moniker, let alone a roman numeral after them) into an uber-patriotic national spectacle.¹¹⁸ Celebrations of American nationhood within pro football—at stadiums, during televised broadcasts, and on official NFL merchandise—have subsequently become as commonplace, and they have helped transform the League into the multibillion dollar force that it is today.

As many scholars have pointed out, consumer culture can be an extremely powerful nationalizing force. Although consumption can potentially create barriers to the outside world, in

¹¹⁷ Michael Oriard, *Brand NFL: Making and Selling America’s Favorite Sport* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 21.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 21-23.

the US it also helps to hold the 50 states together.¹¹⁹ Over the years, the NFL has become especially adept at capitalizing upon the nation as a source of collective identification, and it has successfully promoted its brand as one that is explicitly patriotic. In order to observe the League's desire to attach itself to American national identity, one need not look further than its current logo.



Figure 3.3: The NFL Logo, which was altered in 2008, is now bolder, thinner, has fewer stars (eight, representing the number of divisions in the League), and includes a football that no longer resembles a “hamburger.”¹²⁰

The NFL's red, white, and blue shield has changed very little over the years, and its resemblance to Old Glory is brazenly obvious. As Hobsbawm notes, a nation's flag is one of the major symbols through which a country proclaims its identity and sovereignty, as it “commands instantaneous respect and loyalty.”¹²¹ The desire of the League to visibly link itself to the flag is thus unsurprising, and the logo currently appears on everything from NFL stadiums to players' gear, uniforms (in three separate places), licensed merchandise, playing fields, and fan wear.¹²² By

¹¹⁹ Orvar Löfgren, “The Nationalization of Culture: Constructing Swedishness,” *Studia Ethnologica* 3, (1991): 112.

¹²⁰ Michael McCarthy, “NFL to Revamp Shield with Redesigned Logo” *USA Today*, August 31, 2007, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/sports/football/nfl/2007-08-30-shield-change_N.htm (accessed March 25, 2014).

¹²¹ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 11.

¹²² McCarthy.

incorporating American imagery into its insignia—and therefore the majority of its broadcasts—the NFL is able to effectively highlight the enduring relevance of the nation as a source of identity and differentiation,¹²³ and it continues to profit handsomely by doing so.



Figures 3.4 and 3.5: A Detroit Lions “Americana” women’s shirt and an Oakland Raiders “Faded Glory” shirt—both of which are currently sold under the NFL’s popular Stars and Stripes Collection. Because clothing is highly symbolic as an expression of national identity, the incorporation of the American flag into NFL fanwear contributes to the “vast matrix” of national belonging described by Tim Edensor,¹²⁴ and further ties the League to American nationhood.

While the logos of the United States’ other major sports leagues also reflect a national distinctiveness, none of them hold the cultural or economic weight of the NFL. Although the League currently boasts a financial curtain more impenetrable than a top-notch offensive line (Redskins-in-the-late-1980s strong) the numbers that are available speak for themselves.

¹²³ Silk, Michael L., David L. Andrews, and Cheryl L. Cole, “Corporate Nationalism: The Spatial Dimensions of Sporting Capital” in *Sport and Corporate Nationalisms* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 7.

¹²⁴ Tim Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 108.

Analyses by *Forbes* provide the most comprehensive estimation of the prominent American sports leagues' financial data. The magazine approximates that the NHL generates around \$3 billion in annual revenue, the NBA \$5 billion, and MLB roughly \$7 billion. The NFL far surpasses these earnings, bringing in an astronomical \$9 billion each year—70 percent of which stems from the League's network TV contract.¹²⁵ Thanks to some intense lobbying by Commissioner Rozelle back in the early 1960s, Congress passed Public Law 87-331, which granted the NFL an anti-trust exemption. Rozelle's efforts therefore allowed the League to negotiate a single television contract with the TV networks.¹²⁶

As a result, the relationship between pro football and television has been a match made in marketing heaven. And, because the majority of the NFL's most significant games take place in the dead of winter, it is the one major American sport in which the advantages of watching at home on TV are the most pronounced.¹²⁷ Even fans who do choose to brave the cold weather and attend games are able to watch close-up televised images, commercials, and slow motion replays thanks to stadiums' enormous jumbotrons—the largest of which (located at the decidedly not-so-cold EverBank Field in Jacksonville) is an astounding 362 feet long and 32 feet tall.¹²⁸

Despite the advent of social media, NFL games remain one of the few programs that mass audiences prefer to watch live on television, rather than record via DVR and fast-forward through

¹²⁵ Neil Longley, *An Absence of Competition: The Sustained Competitive Advantage of the Monopoly Sports Leagues* (New York: Springer, 2013), 19.

¹²⁶ Reyburn, 201.

¹²⁷ Michael Mandelbaum, *The Meaning of Sports: Why Americans Watch Baseball, Football, and Basketball and What They See When They Do* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), 177.

¹²⁸ Christopher L. Gasper, “‘Jumbotrons’ Keep Getting Bigger – and Better” *Boston Globe*, August 10, 2014 <http://www.bostonglobe.com/sports/2014/08/10/jumbotrons/5420Vprn9bsqdfC6M4tPCM/story.html> (accessed March 26, 2015).

later.¹²⁹ This, of course, explains the highly competitive and expensive rat race that corporations participate in to obtain ad space during the regular NFL season. In 2015, companies shelled out a record-breaking \$4.5 million-per-ad figure¹³⁰ for Super Bowl XLIX.¹³¹

Thanks to the incredible technological advances of various media delivery forms over the past few decades (satellite, cable, webcast, etc.), the NFL, like many of its prominent advertising partners, has had the invaluable opportunity to formulate and broadcast its own interpretation of what defines the American nation.¹³² By engaging in this type of corporate nationalism, the League has effectively contributed to the contemporary definition of American nationhood. Consider this passage from *The Fifty First Years*, which serves as a testament to the book's timelessness:

The new America of monster cities and exploding technology has cracked society into millions of tiny parts, each man alienated from most others... From this empty isolation, hundreds of thousands of people escape to the mass fraternity and emotional involvement of a Sunday at a pro football game. Millions more tune in on television, establishing unity with their fellows through common experience and joint hero-worship. A big televised football game is a cross-country talking point, connecting millions the way news of a young boy's first deer used to connect tribal members.¹³³

Random deer hunting references aside, television has indeed become a means by which Americans in local contexts can feel as though they are part of a shared national experience each and every Sunday during football season. This type of virtual camaraderie now takes place on Monday nights as well, and—as of 2006—on Thursday nights, much to the disdain of the

¹²⁹ Brent Schrottenboer, "NFL Takes Aim at \$25 Billion, but At What Price?" *USA Today*, February 5, 2014 <http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nfl/super/2014/01/30/super-bowl-nfl-revenue-denver-broncos-seattle-seahawks/5061197/> (accessed February 22, 2014).

¹³⁰ Nathalie Tadema, "Super Bowl Ad Prices Have Gone Up 75% Over a Decade," *The Wall Street Journal* under "CMO Today," January 12, 2015 <http://blogs.wsj.com/cmo/2015/01/12/super-bowl-ad-prices-have-gone-up-75-over-a-decade/> (accessed March 13, 2015).

¹³¹ The American nationalism exuded in Super Bowl advertising campaigns is undoubtedly a subject that warrants its own paper. As anyone who has witnessed the media hoopla surrounding the Super Bowl well knows, companies will often go above and beyond to link their brands to American national identity, and many Super Bowl commercials have subsequently become part of American contemporary folklore.

¹³² McDonald, 130.

¹³³ Oates Jr. and Boss, 24-25.

physically exhausted players themselves.¹³⁴ The League's set schedule contributes to what Tim Edensor deems "everyday nationalism," or the ways in which ordinary people produce and reproduce national identity in their routine activities.

By the early 1970s, televised pro football had truly evolved into a cultural phenomenon, and *Monday Night Football (MNF)* broadcasts had become a temporal national gathering point. After its official debut on September 21, 1970,¹³⁵ the show became required viewing for many Americans, lest they be socially ostracized in the office or at the plant on Tuesday mornings.¹³⁶ During one remarkable *MNF* airing on December 9, 1974, John Lennon told ABC's Howard Cosell that the spectacle of American football was "...an amazing event and sight, it makes rock concerts look like tea parties."¹³⁷

Thanks to the "amazing event and sight" of pro football, movie theaters across the country were often found empty on Monday nights starting in the early 70s. Conversely, American bar owners reveled in the new surge of football-hungry crowds, and Tuesdays—rather than Mondays—became the most common day for sick calls among Detroit's autoworkers.¹³⁸

Subsequently, the NFL's popularity spread rapidly, and (in stark contrast to the low-rated Super Bowl III) the fourth Super Bowl in January of 1970 drew in more than 60 million viewers across the country—a number that topped Neil Armstrong's historic moon walk less than a year

¹³⁴ Many players maintain that their bodies are not able to effectively heal from the intensity of a Sunday game until the following Friday or Saturday.

Robert Klemko, "Thursday Night Football: 'It Feels Horrible,'" *Sports Illustrated*, December 3, 2013 <http://mmqb.si.com/2013/12/03/thursday-night-football-injuries-robert-klemko/> (accessed March 10, 2015).

¹³⁵ Wesley Hyatt, *Kicking Off the Week: A History of Monday Night Football on ABC Television, 1970 – 2005* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2007), 40.

¹³⁶ Reyburn, 208.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ MacCambridge, 280.

earlier.¹³⁹ Policymakers on Capitol Hill took notice, and to this day American politicians operate around the League's schedule when deemed necessary. In the fall of 2011, for example, the White House chose to reschedule a major speech by President Obama so as not to conflict with the first game of the NFL season.¹⁴⁰

Thanks to the miracle of television, the NFL has evolved into a cultural touchstone that influences the ways in which Americans invest their time and attention. As Edensor explains it, "In the sphere of leisure there are many allotments of routinised time when, for instance, sporting or theatrical occasions can form part of weekly or monthly timetables... The potency of the ways in which television and other media forms shape space and order time is evident when familiar schedules and rituals are disrupted—for instance, when the programmes are cancelled."¹⁴¹ This has been especially true in the case of pro football, as the games are rarely cancelled even in the most extreme of circumstances.

There have, of course, been notable exceptions over the years in the wake of tragedies, and the importance of these cancellations cannot be overstated. Thanks to their supreme social standing, major athletic institutions in the United States are in a unique position to instill a sense of unity and commemoration among grieving citizens. And, because pro football has served as the country's most popular sport for the past fifty years, the NFL has found itself at the forefront of the nation's healing process on more than a few occasions.

As some scholars have pointed out, sporting institutions in the United States follow a certain trajectory in the wake of major national tragedies. They first react by cancelling games,

¹³⁹ MacCambridge, 274.

¹⁴⁰ Reyburn, 200.

¹⁴¹ Edensor, 96-98.

then restarting them to signify a return to normalcy, and then, finally, by incorporating military and patriotic symbols (or more so than usual) in order to foster a sense of national unanimity.¹⁴² Following the al Qaeda terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the NFL took the lead in cancelling its upcoming Sunday games, and Commissioner Paul Tagliabue released the League's decision to postpone them on the morning of Thursday, September 14.

Subsequently, nearly every other major sports organization followed suit, with the NHL, MLB, college football, Major League Soccer (MLS), the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA), NASCAR, and INDYCAR all postponing their games, tournaments, and races.¹⁴³ At the time, Thomas Boswell of the *Washington Post* observed, "The NFL acted first, which is appropriate since it is clearly America's dominant game, as well as a worldwide symbol of the country...when America is too sad, too mad and too serious to watch a touchdown...that's a very bad sign for the bad guys."¹⁴⁴

Indeed, in the years following 9/11, the NFL reached its apex as a vehicle for parading American national identity. The League would never have attained this status, however, if not for the efforts of Commissioner Rozelle during the Vietnam War era. While football games have long been home to displays of patriotism and militarism, the blatantly visual relationship between the NFL and the US military dates back to 1968, when Air Force fighter jets performed the very first flyover above Miami's Orange Bowl Stadium at the start of the second Super Bowl.¹⁴⁵ NFL championship games have consequently morphed into exceedingly militarized mega-events,

¹⁴² Robert S. Brown, "Sport and Healing America," *Society* 42, no.1 (2004), 37-41.

¹⁴³ MacCambridge, 424.

¹⁴⁴ Thomas Boswell, "A Situation Much Too Serious for Any Games," *Washington Post*, September 14, 2001.

¹⁴⁵ Kimberly S. Schimmel, "From 'Violence-complacent' to 'Terrorist-ready': Post 9/11 Framing of the US Super Bowl," *Urban Studies* 28, no. 15 (2011): 3278.

thanks largely to the initiatives first put forth by Rozelle, who once described the League's newfound federal pomp and circumstance as "a conscious effort on our part to bring the element of patriotism into the Super Bowl."¹⁴⁶

Unlike Major League Baseball, which has no halftime or pregame shows, pro football has both the time and space for nationalistic spectacles including elaborate salutes to the flag, the Statue of Liberty, and Uncle Sam. It is thus unsurprising that since the mid to late 1960s, some have argued that professional football serves as a symbolic enactment of American imperialism.¹⁴⁷



Figure 3.6: Air Force jets soar over Qualcomm Stadium before the start of a San Diego Chargers game. Although the federal budget cuts of the 2013 sequestration temporarily put the beloved tradition of military flyovers on hold, the practice has since resumed. As Steve Sabol proclaims in the NFL Film *Salute the Sky*, "Perhaps the most impressive moment of the NFL pregame pageantry is the shock and awe of the flyover...A flyover can symbolize pride in the nation, or a rallying call from tragedy."¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ Michael Oriard, "Flag Football: How the NFL Became the American War Game," *Slate*, under "Sports Nut" http://www.slate.com/articles/sports/sports_nut/2009/11/flag_football.html (accessed November 3, 2014).

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *Salute the Sky*.

With its militaristic displays and ever-visible connection to the US Armed Forces, the NFL has never bothered generating a compelling counterargument to this perception. On the contrary, the League and its corporate sponsors have never shied away from drawing parallels between the “heroes” on the football field and the men and women of the US military. This has arguably been a relatively uncomplicated endeavor, since the prolific actions of self-sacrifice displayed by football players on the gridiron have long been seen to exemplify the American devotion of service to the nation.¹⁴⁹ In the early 1940s, for example, American newspapers predicted that US troops would be especially adept at using hand grenades “because of their skill in throwing a baseball or a football...as the Germans will learn.”¹⁵⁰

Although some philosophical descriptions of pro football are a bit extreme (“The football is a flawed shape, an oblong representing American perception of decidedly imperfect conditions...”) ¹⁵¹ there is absolutely some validity to the notion that the game is reminiscent of a battle, and the visual parallels between the two are blatantly perceptible to those who are familiar with the sport. As early as 1893, Teddy Roosevelt declared that, “for the virtues which go to make up a race of statesmen and soldiers...there is no better sport than football.” ¹⁵²

As the twenty-sixth president’s comment suggests, the similarities between American football and war (and politics) are indeed uncanny, and they have served as the fodder for much scholarly debate over the past fifty years. Like warfare (and politics), football defies the elements,

¹⁴⁹ Craig A. Forney, *The Holy Trinity of American Sports: Civil Religion in Football, Baseball, and Basketball* (Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 2007), 28.

¹⁵⁰ Reyburn, 97.

¹⁵¹ Forney, 48.

¹⁵² Gems, 86-87

as it is played nonstop in rain, sleet, hail, snow.¹⁵³ Even in extreme temperatures, games usually continue unabated, with the 1967 NFL Championship, or “Ice Bowl,” being the most notable example. In that game, the Packers and Cowboys battled it out in temperatures of –15 degrees Fahrenheit, with a wind chill of –44.¹⁵⁴ During the game, TV analyst Frank Gifford infamously commented, “I think I’ll take another bite of my coffee.”¹⁵⁵

The NFL’s fervent continuance of games in such inclement weather stands in stark contrast to baseball, where even the slightest drizzle can cause a delay or cancellation. More importantly, the continuation of games in these elements has provided invaluable material for the melodramatic masterminds at NFL Films. Although the studio’s cinematographers initially abhorred the rain, snow, and fog that would often sabotage their efforts, they eventually began praying for bad weather in order to accumulate stunning shots of warrior-like players.¹⁵⁶

Combined with gladiator music in the background and the “martial poetry” of God-like narrator John Facenda, NFL Films portray players as muddied soldiers battling it out in the elements—men who, in the words of former Kansas City Chiefs offensive lineman-turned-scholar Michael Oriard, appear to be “trudging to the line like Napoleon’s forces before the gates of Moscow.”¹⁵⁷ As Vogan explains in his exhaustive history of NFL Films, these productions “routinely glamorize football’s warlike elements, equate masculine violence to heroism, and use the gridiron game to promote nationalist and American exceptionalist attitudes.”¹⁵⁸

¹⁵³ Mandelbaum, 122.

¹⁵⁴ *America’s Game*, “The Ice Bowl,” NFL Network, <http://www.nfl.com/videos/nfl-films-american-game/09000d5d821e1541/America-s-Game-The-Ice-Bowl> (accessed March 4, 2015).

¹⁵⁵ MacCambridge, 243.

¹⁵⁶ Oriard, *Brand NFL*, 18.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ Vogan, 31.

The NFL's propensity to incorporate militaristic rhetoric into its films and broadcasts has thus created what Michael L. Butterworth describes as a "hypernationalistic environment," since the League regularly invokes military terminology, yet invites viewers to think "only in terms of pageantry."¹⁵⁹ Innumerable examples of this practice can be observed in films from the game's golden era, as well as in those of more recent years. Additionally, televised pre-game footage frequently likens players to soldiers who are preparing for "combat,"¹⁶⁰ and in the off-season NFL draft rooms are sometimes referred to as "war rooms."¹⁶¹

Many scholars have taken an interest in the war-like rhetoric that is often featured during broadcasts. Samantha King notes that, during games, quarterback heroes throw passes called "bombs" while the robust warriors of the defensive line operate in the "trenches" and aim to "blitz" the offensive line. Such terminology extends to gameplay itself—a series of successfully completed passes is dubbed "an aerial attack," kickoff teams "blow up" kick returners, and tied games can result in "sudden death" overtimes.¹⁶² Militaristic jargon is also routinely applied to individual players and positions. As Butterworth points out, Facenda equated Pittsburgh's storied running back Franco Harris to "a Sherman tank in a Steeler suit"¹⁶³ in the NFL Film highlights of Super Bowl IX, and Jerry Kramer of the '67 Packers once described his team's punt returners as "kamikaze units."¹⁶⁴

Significantly, the connections between pro football and the battlefield are not merely rhetorical, nor are they limited to the confines of game day sound booths. The NFL's instant replay

¹⁵⁹ Michael Butterworth, "NFL Films," 205.

¹⁶⁰ Butterworth, "NFL Films," 216.

¹⁶¹ Jenkins 255.

¹⁶² Samantha King, "Offensive Lines: State-Sport Synergy in an Era of Perpetual War," *Cultural Studies Critical Methodologies* 8, no. 4 (2008): 529.

¹⁶³ *Super Bowl IV*, NFL Films Collection.

¹⁶⁴ Norwood, 7.

video technique was borrowed from the playing field for US military operations during the war in Vietnam, and the League's video technology served as an integral training feature for pilots.¹⁶⁵ More recently, during the Persian Gulf War in 1991, General "Stormin'" Norman Schwarzkopf memorably likened the strategic plan of the coalition ground war to "the Hail Mary play in football," and the first American pilots returning from bombing raids in Baghdad described their military action to reporters as being "a football game where the defense never showed up."¹⁶⁶



Figure 3.7: Because war and memories of war are fundamental elements of national identity, the NFL's ongoing relationship with the US Military has strengthened the League's status as an American cultural institution. In 1991, the use of football metaphors served to heroicize and mythologize the Persian Gulf War. Patriotic displays along with Whitney Houston's stirring rendition of the national anthem provided a catharsis for Americans who had grown weary of Operation Desert Storm, and served to draw the country together during a time of crisis and uncertainty.¹⁶⁷ Yet, as Bob Morris of the *Orlando Sentinel* wrote at the time, "Tampa Stadium wasn't the setting for a football game as much as it was a giant pep rally for America and, like it or not, our decision to go to war against Iraq...And it seemed fitting that the colors for both New York and Buffalo were red, white and blue."¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵ Dylan Mulvin, "Game Time: A History of Managerial Authority of the Instant Replay," in *The NFL: Critical and Cultural Perspectives* by Thomas P. Oates and Zack Furness (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2014), 48-55.

¹⁶⁶ Sue Curry Jansen and Don Sabo, "The Sport/War Metaphor: Hegemonic Masculinity, the Persian Gulf War, and the New World Order" *Sociology of Sport Journal* 11 (1994), 3.

¹⁶⁷ Michael Gavin, *Sports in the Aftermath of Tragedy: From Kennedy to Katrina* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2013), 8.

¹⁶⁸ Bob Morris, "America Gets Needed Break at Superbowl," *Orlando Sentinel*, January 28, 1991 http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/1991-01-28/news/9101280240_1_bowl-xxv-super-bowl-bowl-eve (accessed March 02, 2015).

In *The Meaning of Sports*, Michael Mandelbaum further examines the near seamless relationship between football fields and the battlefield. He points out that football, like warfare, involves the deliberate use of force to obtain possession of a given territory. It also simultaneously combines the order and chaos of the frontline, where both individualism and teamwork are vital for success. Wars have battles, football has downs. Armies have generals who devise complex offensive and defensive tactics, NFL teams have offensive and defensive coordinators who draw up complicated game plans.¹⁶⁹

Consequently, it has been argued that by watching televised games football fans are able to emotionally experience brutality, danger, and domination without becoming physically invested in—or experiencing the real-life consequences of—direct participation in conflict.¹⁷⁰ The authors of *The Fifty First Years* would certainly not disagree with such observations. They dramatically describe the football field as:

...an artificial plain, flat and spare, the focal point of a monumental stadium of concrete and steel. It is an area for war, with the rules and unwritten ethics of classing warring places, and on any autumn Sunday, the field is occupied by two dedicated and disciplined armies. Outfitted in the distinctive armor of the gladiator, twenty-two athletes, eleven to a side, cross the boundaries to test one another in the most primordial manner—hand to hand combat. Other societies have had their symbolic wars...In her turn, America has created her own vicarious warfare, nurtured by the technology which is this land's hallmark and tuned to the needs of this peoples spirit. Professional football is basically a physical assault by one team upon another in a desperate fight for land...The most basic possession, land, is the issue in football and the most basic weapon, the body, is the means of acquiring it.¹⁷¹

This emphasis on land and territory is crucial in understanding the game's connection to American nationalism. While there are countless disagreements amongst scholars regarding the

¹⁶⁹ Mandelbaum, 128-132.

¹⁷⁰ Carl Stempel, "Televised Sport, Masculinist Moral Capital, and Support for the U.S. Invasion of Iraq," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 30, no. 1 (2006): 88.

¹⁷¹ Oates Jr. and Boss, 23.

elements that ultimately constitute nationalism, there exists a general consensus that the notion of nationhood is intrinsically linked to physical territory and borders. As Smith explains, "...the nation—a community in possession of its territory, and distinguished by its own history and destiny—undoubtedly provides the most popular and usable framework for political solidarity."¹⁷²

Significantly, the likeness between pro football, territorial possession, and war has made it all the easier for hawkish politicians to incorporate football-related metaphors into the nation's political discourse, especially during contentious times. For example, during the conflict in Vietnam, President Richard M. Nixon (who, it should be noted, is a leading contender for the title of "biggest presidential pro football fan") dubbed the offense against the South Vietnamese "Operation Linebacker,"¹⁷³ chose to go by the CIA codename "Quarterback," and often incorporated football strategies into his political maneuverings.¹⁷⁴ He even placed "bad boy" New York Jets Quarterback Joe Namath on his enemy list. (Interestingly, Namath was the only athlete ever attributed this honor.)¹⁷⁵

In 1969, St. Louis Cardinal Dave Meggyesy offered his thoughts on Nixon's football fandom. The linebacker provocatively surmised, "Politics and pro football are the most grotesque extremes in the theatric of a dying empire. It's no accident that the most repressive political regime in the history of this country is ruled by a football freak."¹⁷⁶

¹⁷² Smith, 154.

¹⁷³ This was a deliberate deviation from the Pentagon's version, which coined the offense "Operation Iron Hand."

¹⁷⁴ Robert Lipsyte, *Sportsworld: An American Dreamland* (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co, 1975), 13.

¹⁷⁵ Reyburn, 206.

¹⁷⁶ Lipsyte, 12.



Fig. 3.8: President Richard “Tricky Dick” Nixon did not hesitate to mix pro football and politics. An ardent fan of the Washington Redskins, he befriended Head Coach George Allen, and even gave a pep talk at Washington’s new training facility at Redskins Park in 1971, when the team was struggling mid-season.¹⁷⁷ Speaking at length to the players, he drew parallels between their struggles and those of great military units in the nation’s past.¹⁷⁸ Nixon declared, “Old pros, I’ve heard those boos...In any week, almost any team in pro football can beat another team.”¹⁷⁹

Although the Vietnam War gave American politicians plenty of room to incorporate “sports speak” into their rhetoric, sports imagery has maintained a prominent place in the country’s war discourse over the past five decades. Unsurprisingly, some keen observers maintain that the use of football metaphors in the realm of international politics has cast the American public into the role of subservient fans—one that discourages conversation and promotes pre-emptive military action.¹⁸⁰ This was especially evident in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, when the

¹⁷⁷ Michael Richman, *The Redskins Encyclopedia* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2008), 80.

¹⁷⁸ George Allen, *What Washington Can Learn From the World of Sports* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2010), 5.

¹⁷⁹ Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks to Members of the Washington Redskins Professional Football Team During a Practice Session at Redskins Park.” Redskins Park, Loudon County, Virginia, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States* (1973), 1134-137.

¹⁸⁰ Andrew C. Billings, Michael L. Butterworth, and Paul D. Truman, *Communication and Sport: Surveying the Field*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2015), 171.

relationship between the US government, military contractors, and the NFL gave a new meaning to the term “problematic.”

In the months and years following the al Qaeda terrorist attacks, the NFL, like other major sports leagues, stepped up its efforts to promote its brand as being explicitly patriotic. In conjunction with the US government and military, the League intensified its marketing campaigns, as it aimed to capitalize upon the nation as a source of collective identification. As Alan Bairner notes, although myth making and the invention of tradition are important factors in the construction of a national identity, the myths themselves can sometimes become destructive and lead to harmful consequences if they are “perpetuated as a result of artificially sustained ignorance or are used to enforce a morally unacceptable state of affairs.”¹⁸¹ This is arguably what occurred during the run up to the invasion of Iraq, when the NFL’s partnership with the Bush administration resulted in an unprecedented militarization of American public space.

This phenomenon can be explained by the country’s tense post-9/11 atmosphere. As Hobsbawm explains, “The imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people. The individual, even the one who only cheers, becomes a symbol of the nation himself.”¹⁸² Because the NFL brand is one that blatantly screams “USA,” the very act of buying a team jersey or a ticket to a game can generate a sense of national belonging amongst fans. This was especially true in the wake of the al Qaeda terrorist attacks. The NFL, like other major sporting institutions, was forced to reconcile with the responsibility of aiding in the nation’s healing process while still adhering to its financial bottom line.¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ Bairner, 5.

¹⁸² E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 143.

¹⁸³ McDonald, 130.

Ultimately, the League accomplished both. As alluded to earlier, the magnitude of the events had compelled Commissioner Tagliabue (who once worked at the Pentagon as a policy analyst)¹⁸⁴ to take the initiative and cancel the games scheduled for week two of the regular season. At the time, many speculated that Tagliabue did so for fear that he would face the same condemnation that Commissioner Rozelle did in 1963, when he allowed football games to continue unabated on the Sunday following President John F. Kennedy's assassination. Not wanting to make the same mistake twice—and with the ruins of the twin towers still smoldering within sight of the Jets' and Giants' stadium—it was decided that games would not resume until Sunday, September 23.¹⁸⁵

According to Mary McDonald, “The conjoining of hegemonic (heterosexual) masculinity with nationalism and a type of sporting militarism was readily apparent with the resumption of play.”¹⁸⁶ Indeed, for the first games following 9/11, the League provided more than one million small flags to fans who braved the uncertain security climate to support their team, and pamphlets with the words to *The Star Spangled Banner*, *God Bless America*, and *America the Beautiful* were distributed to those in attendance.¹⁸⁷ In this way, football stadiums across the country served as cathartic spaces for citizens (or at least, it did for those able to afford NFL tickets)¹⁸⁸ and the return of the sport ultimately helped many Americans cope with the most tragic event in recent memory.

¹⁸⁴ Geoffrey Colvin, “Lessons from the Commish: Why the NFL’s Paul Tagliabue is a Genuine Hall of Fame Executive,” *Fortune*, April 7, 2006 http://archive.fortune.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/2006/04/17/8374352/index.htm (accessed March 14, 2015).

¹⁸⁵ MacCambridge, 424.

¹⁸⁶ McDonald, 134-135.

¹⁸⁷ Gary Mihoces, “Patriotism Abounds as NFL Makes Emotional Return,” *USA Today*, September 24, 2001, <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/sports/nfl/stories/2001-09-23-patriotism.htm> (accessed March 13, 2015).

¹⁸⁸ McDonald, 132-133.

Following the resumption of games, ESPN's Chris Berman declared, "Football's heroes honored America's real heroes by playing, and playing hard."¹⁸⁹

While the flags, commemoration ceremonies, flyovers, and military appreciation events that took place during the post-9/11 games were nothing new, they were massively intensified compared to previous years. Following the terrorist attacks, the NFL ramped up its association with the Armed Forces, and—in a far less observable move—partnered with US government counter-terrorism agencies and private contractors to develop various security-related practices.¹⁹⁰

Kimberly S. Schimmel, who has written extensively on this partnership, notes that, "In the post-9/11 era, military flyovers are still a part of game-day tradition, but are now joined by active fighter jets from the Continental US North American Aerospace Defense Command Region, Black Hawk helicopters, Citation jets, Midnight Express interceptor boats, Northrop Grunman [sic] HD-1 robots and tactical weapons and SWAT teams."¹⁹¹ Far more disconcerting, however, has been the NFL's implementation of various covert Super Bowl security changes. According to Schimmel, these have included the installation of permanent surveillance cameras, the spontaneous use of biometric face-matching technology on unsuspecting fans, the allowance of federal immigration dragnets at the Super Bowl (which were used to arrest undocumented workers and game-day volunteers), and expanded powers of urban police forces.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ *NFL Primetime*, ESPN, September 23, 2001, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N5ukZxZE9Gc> (accessed April 9, 2015).

¹⁹⁰ Kimberly Schimmel, "Protecting the NFL/Militarizing the Homeland: Citizen Soldiers and Urban Resilience in Post-9/11 America," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 47, no.3 (2012): 343.

¹⁹¹ Kimberly Schimmel, "From 'Violence-complacent' to 'Terrorist Ready': Post 9/11 Framing of the US Super Bowl," *Urban Studies* 28, no. 15 (2011): 3279.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

By the time the delayed Super Bowl came about in February of 2002, a flagrant visual bond between football and the US military had taken hold in NFL telecasts, and major television networks were given the opportunity to broadcast copious productions of “national fantasies.”¹⁹³ Perhaps nothing epitomized this trend more so than the Fox network’s three-hour pregame show for Super Bowl XXXVI, which boasted the (now eye roll-worthy) title of “Hope, Heroes, and Homeland.”

Introduced on television by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, the “Hope, Heroes, and Homeland” program was a blatant example of what Michael L. Silk describes as “a forced inflection of American-ness.”¹⁹⁴ During the show’s climactic “Tribute to America” segment, NFL players, Hollywood stars, and political leaders took turns reading from the Declaration of Independence, while all the living former US presidents recited portions of historic speeches by Abraham Lincoln.¹⁹⁵ Portions of the show were also broadcast live from Kandahar, Afghanistan, where US troops on active duty were gathered (or rather, “strategically placed”) to watch the game.¹⁹⁶ Strikingly, at one point during the broadcast, a cyber proposal took place between an American serviceman and his girlfriend, with the former using a hand-grenade ring used in lieu of a traditional jeweler’s ring.¹⁹⁷ The overriding hyper-masculine narratives embedded in the “Hope, Heroes, and Homeland” theme continued throughout Fox’s half time segments and postgame show, and ultimately paved the way for similarly jingoistic NFL broadcasts in the future.

¹⁹³ Falcous and Silk 452.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 451.

¹⁹⁵ Oriard, *Brand NFL*, 23-24.

¹⁹⁶ Mark Falcous and Michael Silk, “Manufacturing Consent: Mediated Sporting Spectacle and the Cultural Politics of the ‘War on Terror,’” *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics* 1, no.1: 60.

¹⁹⁷ Falcous and Silk “One Day” 455.



Figure 4.1: Bathed in nationalistic displays, Super Bowl XXXVI remains the only sporting event in American history to have ever been designated a National Special Security Event (NSSE) by the US government. As the Irish rock band U2 performed at half time, a massive video screen displaying the names of every 9/11 victim scrolled in the background. Interestingly, Super Bowl-winning teams are billed “world champions” even though no other countries compete. This tradition, according to Michael Billig, “is a cultural pattern which well fits a nation seeking world hegemony.”¹⁹⁸

Seven months after the grenade ring proposal, the NFL commenced its first annual “Kickoff Live” event in New York City’s Time Square. Hoping to make Kickoff Live a preseason equivalent of the Super Bowl, the League billed its newest venture as “the world’s biggest tailgate party,” followed by a Thursday night concert.¹⁹⁹ The second Kickoff Live festival proved to be far more ostentatious than the first, as it took place on National Mall in Washington DC—a space long considered hallowed ground by many American citizens.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁸ Billig, 151.

¹⁹⁹ Michael Oriard, *Brand NFL*, 183.

²⁰⁰ Erika Doss, “Mall Talk,” *Reviews in American History* 39, no. 2 (2011): 322.

After the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the NFL channeled its post-9/11 community outreach away from disaster relief programs and tourist promotion (it had previously founded the NFL Disaster Relief Fund and made a multimillion-dollar commitment to encourage tourism in New York City) and instead chose to focus its efforts on far more militaristic ventures.²⁰¹ Teaming up with the Bush administration once again, the League participated in Operation Tribute to Freedom—an initiative designed to “reinforce the bond between the citizen and the military.”²⁰² It was under the auspice of this program that the second NFL Kickoff Live was able to take place between the Washington Monument and the US Capitol grounds. This massive event represented the first and last time in the history of the United States in which a private company was given permission to take over the National Mall. As Erika Doss notes, outrage over the NFL’s “extravagant misuse of the nation’s front lawn” prompted Congress to swiftly pass a measure banning any further commercial advertising on the Mall.²⁰³

Although the Pentagon itself is strictly prohibited from participating in corporate promotions, it was able to do so through Kickoff Live, since the festival had been cleverly folded into the Tribute to Freedom Program. The Department of Defense shipped in 25,000 troops and their families to contribute to the crowd of more than 300,000 spectators, who watched performances by Mary J. Blige, Aerosmith, Britney Spears, and “The Queen of Soul” Aretha Franklin, who sang the country’s National Anthem.²⁰⁴

²⁰¹ King, 535-536.

²⁰² Ibid 536.

²⁰³ Doss 324.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

Three years after the Kickoff on the Mall, Carl Stempel surveyed 1,000 American citizens and provided empirical evidence that this type of “televised masculinist sport-militaristic nationalism” contributed to the American public’s support for the invasion of Iraq. “Level of involvement in masculine sports on television,” he concluded, “is robustly associated with strong feelings of patriotism and with support for the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Bush doctrine of preventive attacks....televised masculinist sports constitute a central institution in producing and reproducing militaristic nationalism, surpassing social class, religion, age, gender, family structure, and region in explanatory power.”²⁰⁵



Figure 4.2: Cheerleaders for the Atlanta Falcons dance in camouflage uniforms during an NFL “Salute to Service” game against the Seattle Seahawks on November 10, 2013.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ Stempel 102.

²⁰⁶ “2013 NFL Cheerleaders: Best of Week 10,” *NFL.com Photos*, NFL, <http://www.nfl.com/photos/0ap2000000277926> (accessed March 31, 2015).

Clearly, the NFL and the Bush administration capitalized on the ability of pro football to transcend such differences. Fox’s “Hope, Heroes, and Homeland” and the NFL’s subsequent Kickoff Live campaigns are merely a few examples that effectively highlight the League’s desire to reassert American nationhood in the post-9/11 era. Both Kickoff Live events were overtly militaristic productions that presented the country as being “more united than ever,”²⁰⁷ and they espoused selective “shared” American histories, ideals, and values. According to Silk and Mark Falcoux, these shows amplified a period of “hot” nationalist passion in the United States, and stood in stark contrast to the everyday “banal” nationalism described by Edensor and Billig.²⁰⁸ Thus, football itself was—in their words—reduced to “a myopic expression of American jingoism, militarism, and geopolitical domination.”²⁰⁹ More importantly, however, these broadcasts also demonstrated the modern-day NFL’s burgeoning propensity to focus on the “American hero”—a practice that continues to this day.

There is no doubt that American nation building is rich in “myths, commemorations, and heroes.”²¹⁰ More so than many other sports, pro football has the capacity to make the heroic seem possible.²¹¹ This is due in part to the pure physicality imbued within the game, but it is also largely a result of the NFL’s brand image, which—thanks to strict enforcement of its intellectual property rights—it exerts near total control over.²¹² The League and its media partners’ tight grip on

²⁰⁷ Mark Falcoux and Michael L. Silk in *The Impact of 9/11 on the Media, Arts, and Entertainment* by Matthew J. Morgan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 223.

²⁰⁸ Falcoux and Silk “One Day” 453.

²⁰⁹ Ibid 464.

²¹⁰ Sutherland, 66.

²¹¹ Oriard, *Reading Football*, 56.

²¹² Jacob Dittmer, “The Ochocinco Brand: Social Media’s Impact on the NFL’s Institutional Control,” in *The NFL: Critical and Cultural Perspectives* by Thomas Furness and Zack P. Oates (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2014), 63.

recorded game content enables the NFL to “suppress unpopular/conforming narratives for the sake of maintaining a consistent, mainstream (therefore conservative) narrative about itself.”²¹³ It has thus been able to showcase belligerently patriotic spectacles during contested or troubled times (like the immediate post-9/11 era), and then pull back on such displays as needed depending on the country’s political climate.²¹⁴

Before public opinion took a decided turn against the Bush administration’s decision to invade Iraq, football fans witnessed the drama-ridden saga of Arizona Cardinals defensive back Pat Tillman. No discussion of nationalism and American football would be complete without an examination of Tillman’s peculiar odyssey—which, even a decade after his death—is a story that is as tragic as it is disconcerting.

In June of 2002, Tillman turned down a \$3.6 million NFL contract extension to serve as a US Army Ranger. Although Tillman repeatedly declined to be interviewed about his decision, both the Bush administration and American media outlets consistently lauded the player’s selfless patriotism.²¹⁵ As journalist Mick Brown acutely observed, ““No scriptwriter in the Pentagon press bureau could have devised a more persuasive poster boy for the war in Iraq or for army recruitment.””²¹⁶

Nevertheless, nearly two years after his enlistment, Tillman was killed in Speyrah, Afghanistan. The Pentagon hastily declared that the former Cardinal had died while attempting to save the lives of fellow soldiers during a mountain ambush by the Taliban. On April 30, 2004, an

²¹³ Ibid., 65.

²¹⁴ Oriard, *Flag Football*.

²¹⁵ Kyle W. Kusz, “From NASCAR Nation to Pat Tillman: Notes on Sport and the Politics of White Cultural Nationalism in Post-9/11 America,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 31, no. 1 (2007): 85.

²¹⁶ Jenkins 257.

official Army press release proclaimed that, prior to his death, Corporal Tillman had been storming up a hill to take out the enemy as he "personally provided suppressive fire with an M-249 Squad Automatic Weapon machine gun."²¹⁷ For his heroic actions, the military announced that Tillman would posthumously receive the prestigious Silver Star Medal, the third highest decoration for valor awarded by the US military.

In an overt attempt foster a sense of national unity amongst fans, the NFL implemented its very own day of commemoration for the fallen player, during which every team in the League wore a memorial decal on their helmets in his honor. President Bush offered a video tribute to Tillman, and his jersey was ceremoniously retired at an Arizona Cardinals game.²¹⁸ Additionally, the square surrounding the University of Phoenix Stadium was renamed Pat Tillman Freedom Plaza, and an eight-foot tall bronze statue—the aesthetics of which are remarkably unpleasant, to say the least—was erected in his honor to “cement the mythologizing of his death.”²¹⁹ Quite tellingly, despite the Bush administration’s strict ban on media images of dead American soldiers returning in coffins, Tillman’s funeral was broadcast live on ESPN, and at the NFL draft in the spring of 2004, fans put aside team loyalties to chant “U-S-A...U-S-A...U-S-A” while the player-turned-soldier was remembered at the event.²²⁰

²¹⁷ Frank Rich, *The Greatest Story Ever Sold: The Decline and Fall of Truth from 9/11 to Katrina* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 124.

²¹⁸ Jenkins 258.

²¹⁹ Michael L. Butterworth, “Militarism and Memorializing at the Pro Football Hall of Fame,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 9, no. 3 (2012): 252-253.

²²⁰ Kusz 85.



Figures 4.3 and 4.4: Pat Tillman’s statue, sculpted by Gary Tillery and Omri Amrany, now stands in “Freedom Plaza” outside the University of Phoenix Stadium, where the Arizona Cardinals play their home games. Of the memorial, Tillman’s brother opined, “...It’d be really neat to have a statue of Pat where he’s laughing his ass off. You want to make him a myth? Go ahead and make him a myth. Just be accurate about it.”²²¹

Despite the media-fueled brouhaha, shortly after the US Army’s initial press release, the Pentagon reluctantly acknowledged that Tillman’s death was likely not the result of a heroic Rambo-esque stampede, but was rather the result of “friendly fire”—in this case, an accidental gunshot wound caused by one of Tillman’s fellow soldiers. Before this scandalous admission, both the Tillman family and the American public had been sufficiently duped regarding the circumstances surrounding his death. To make matters worse, it was later revealed that the US

²²¹ *The Tillman Story*, DVD, Directed by Amir Bar-Lev (The Weinstein Company, 2010).

military had intentionally burned Tillman's personal diary rather than return it to his relatives—ostensibly to suppress his criticisms of the war on terror.²²² At one point, Tillman had allegedly declared, “This war is so fucking illegal.”²²³

Despite these shocking revelations, the NFL has continuously maintained that Tillman was a truly noble American hero, and even ten years after his untimely death, the League continues to honor his memory and pay tribute to the “ultimate sacrifice” he made.²²⁴ Conversely, Tillman's own family members, have railed against the decision to “turn his dead body into a recruiting uniform,” and have consistently decried the US military's decision to use Tillman's legacy as a tool to promote warfare.²²⁵

When it comes down to it, Tillman's fratricide and its subsequent cover-up by the Pentagon ultimately resulted in seven investigations, two congressional hearings, and an indefinable amount of nationalistic propaganda for the NFL. The League's continued veneration of Tillman—along with on-field enlistment ceremonies, reunions between troops and their family members, demonstrations by parachute troops and skydiving teams, military band performances, and countless other elements of militaristic commercialization—have ultimately afforded pro football fans the comfort of symbolically supporting the US military and its “heroes” without having to contemplate the consequences of their actions overseas.²²⁶

As essayist William Deresiewicz notes in a poignant op-ed for the *New York Times*, this ubiquitous call to “support our troops” has not only resulted in the canonization of unpretentious

²²² Jenkins 258.

²²³ Gavin, 89.

²²⁴ Butterworth, 253.

²²⁵ *The Tillman Story*.

²²⁶ Butterworth and Moskal 419-425.

American servicemen and women, but has also diminished the actions and bravery of the nation's true heroes. "Do we really 'need heroes?'" he asks rhetorically. "What we really need are citizens, who refuse to infantilize themselves with talk of heroes and put their shoulders to the public wheel instead... What we really need, in other words, is a swift kick in the pants."²²⁷

Over the past fifty years, the institution of American professional football has survived more than a few swift kicks to the pants. Indeed, to claim that the NFL has come under fire in recent seasons would be a colossal understatement, as football-related headlines continue to give new meaning to the idiom "when it rains it pours." From domestic violence cover-ups to the ongoing concussion crisis to the politicized debate over the Washington Redskins' racially insensitive mascot, the League continues to find itself in front of a social media-spawned moral firing squad—one that has garnered an astonishing amount of attention both in the US and abroad. Although it often goes unacknowledged and underappreciated, the underlying historical phenomenon that ties each of these controversies together is American nationalism.

The public's tendency to view the NFL as being part and parcel to national identity is quite palpable year-round, and the League's role as a vehicle for parading American nationhood does not appear to be dissipating any time soon. The NFL's ongoing relationship with the US Armed Forces—though recently (and perhaps superficially) re-examined by the Pentagon during a recent domestic violence scandal²²⁸—remains as strong as ever, and nationalistic tributes to the country's military "heroes" are as commonplace as they were during Commissioner Rozelle's day.

²²⁷ William Deresiewicz "An Empty Regard" *New York Times* under SundayReview|Opinion, August 20, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/21/opinion/sunday/americas-sentimental-regard-for-the-military.html?_r=0 (accessed March 19, 2014).

²²⁸ Starr, Barbara. "Defense Sec. Chuck Hagel Asking for Information about Military Ties to NFL." *CNN*. Cable News Network, September 19, 2014 <http://www.cnn.com/2014/09/19/politics/hagel-and-nfl/> (accessed March 19, 2015).

In *The Pro Football Experience*, David Boss writes, “A man once held a watch on a professional football game. When it was over he announced that the ball had been in actual movement only 12 of the games official 60 minutes.”²²⁹ That was 42 years ago. More recent estimates show that the ball is in play for merely 11 minutes per NFL game, even though typical televised broadcasts of games can last for well over 185 minutes.²³⁰

Over the years, these minutes have been increasingly filled with nationalistic, militaristic, chauvinistic, jingoistic, and every other “istic” type of propaganda that academic observers harbor in their linguistic arsenal. If anything, the continued popularity and power of pro football proves that Americans never have been—and probably never will be—sufficiently distracted by the game itself, no matter how brutal or atavistically pleasing it might be.

The question that remains, then, is what consequences will the impact of America’s favorite sport have in the future? If the Bush administration’s partnership with the NFL could help launch the country into a misguided foreign war, what more damage could potentially be done in our increasingly globalized world? Perhaps it is not the NFL players who are concussed after all. Perhaps it has been us viewers all along.

²²⁹ Boss, 188.

²³⁰ David Biderman, “11 Minutes of Action,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 15, 2010, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704281204575002852055561406> (accessed March 20, 2015).



Figure 4.5: Fans participate in a card stunt during the National Anthem prior to the start of the Green Bay Packers and Arizona Cardinals game on Sunday, Nov. 4, 2012, in Green Bay, Wisconsin.²³¹

²³¹ "Lambeau Field - Thank You Military Picture at NFL Photo Store," *ReplayPhotos.com*, NFL, 2012, http://nflphotostore.nfl.com/nflphotostore/2012-season-print/cardinals-packers-football_968089.cfm (accessed March 27, 2015).

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²³² Mark Stewart, *The Washington Redskins* (Chicago: Norwood House Press, 2008), 38.

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