

Touchdown: An American Obsession Goes Global

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The American game of football has long been the most popular sport in the United States. Each autumn season, local communities flock to high school games on Friday nights, cheer on their regional college favorites on Saturday, and tune in to telecasts of their professional teams on Sundays. This was a norm for years; but football has so overwhelmed the American sportscape that games are now televised virtually every night of the week, and even high school contests are broadcast to a national audience. Both college and professional teams play abroad in search of new markets and this quintessential American sport is now played in more than 100 countries (<http://ifaf.org>).

How did such explosive growth and interest come to pass? Surely the internet has been a factor, as the chapter “American Football and the Media” demonstrates, but this book intends to take a more comprehensive exploration and analysis of this global phenomenon, from its historical roots to its global presence. The game evolved from English soccer to rugby; but assumed its current form in the college rivalries of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The professional variety emerged when an urban athletic club, which had bet large sums of money on the outcome of its annual game with a rival team, paid a former All-American from Yale to bolster its chances of winning. Extensive gambling on games resulted in increasing numbers of talented players being paid, eventually resulting in entirely professional teams. This book covers the history of such developments in the chapters “American Football” and “College Football,” as well as the establishment of youth football programs in “High School and Youth Football.”

Football had already become a big business by the 1880s as Harvard, Princeton, and Yale had to rent New York arenas to accommodate their legions of fans that flocked to the big rivalry games. When Harvard erected its own stadium in 1903, other schools were obliged to follow. Such games captured the national interest as entertainment spectacles, long before the Super Bowl and the Football Bowl Series for the national collegiate football championship became commercial bonanzas, as recounted in the chapter “The Super Bowl: An American Institution.” The National Football League has become a capitalist behemoth, where millionaire players argue with billionaire owners over how best to divide the overflow of riches, and “The Economics of American College and Professional Football” shows us how this has happened.

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Although NFL Europe, an initial attempt to capture the European market, could not displace the entrenched attraction to soccer, discussed in “American Football in Europe,” the NFL continues to make concerted global efforts to grow the game and its revenue with games in London, Germany, and Mexico. A Mexico City game in 2005 drew 103,467 spectators to the game (<http://www.cbssports.com/nfl/news/nfl-games-in-mexico-or-germany-could-happen-by-2017/>). Yet that figure pales in comparison to the 120,000 who showed up to witness a clash between two high school teams in Chicago in 1937. College stadiums presumably can no longer hold the multitudes who seek a seat at campus venues. A temporary football field was constructed within the Bristol Motor Speedway to accommodate 156,000 fans for a game between Tennessee and Virginia Tech on 10 September 2016. The previous Saturday, the Texas-Notre Dame encounter drew 11 million television viewers, a new record (*TV Guide Magazine*, 19–25 September 2016, 20). In Texas, where football has assumed the status of a secular religion, high schools have built stadiums at a cost well in excess of \$60 million (Chad 2016). A sport economist examines the commercial ramifications of such developments for readers in “The Economics of American College and Professional Football.”

The spirit and atmosphere of the game is further portrayed in the chapter “Imagining Football Fandom in the United States: Home of the Free or the Branded Pursuit of Belonging?” which takes on the rabid fan culture, with its mascots, chants, cheers, painted and costumed bodies, symbols, and rivalries. Such local, regional, and national implications are rampant in the popular culture, often depicted in movies, books, and oral histories that sustain interest over generations. As detailed in “Football Warriors: The Archeology of Football Movies,” football movies have been prominent for nearly a century, since the infancy of American film-making.

The chapter “Football and Social Change” shows us how football has been and continues to be a social force relative to racial, ethnic, social class, and gender issues. The Carlisle Indian School football teams, featuring Jim Thorpe (recognized as the world’s greatest athlete at the 1912 Olympic Games), used football to dispel notions of white racial superiority. Few know that Fritz Pollard became the first black quarterback in the NFL in the 1920s, long before Jackie Robinson desegregated Major League Baseball. One of the early professional teams founded in 1901, the Columbus Panhandles, was manned by the six Nesser brothers, working-class boilermakers. It became one of the original members of the NFL, along with other industrial teams that fueled the aspirations of working-class men and sustained the perception of sport as a meritocracy.

Masculinity and militarism have been tied to the game since its modern origins in the nineteenth century. It served as a surrogate form of warfare between the Civil War and the Spanish-American War in which young men might display their courage and fighting skills. The early rules, still evident in the game of rugby, required the ball carrier to “touch down” the ball in the opponent’s end zone to score points. A “maul in goal” might result if a defender could wrestle the ball away before the ball carrier earned the points. The early game was considerably rougher than the current version. Players wore no helmets and grew their hair long for some padding. A ball carrier might be brought down by “throttling” or choking him by the neck. Opponents could even slug their foes three times before being expelled from the game. Broken bones and even deaths were not uncommon, which eventually

resulted in the formation of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in 1906 to regulate the game among college teams (Gems 2000).

A brief linguistic analysis of football terminology (such as a long pass known as a bomb, linemen fighting it out in the trenches, or linebackers “blitzing” the quarterback) give some indication of the militaristic links to the game. Promoters and even the US government deemed the sport a means to develop leadership skills and it was readily established at the military academies. Only males were allowed to be school cheerleaders because it was assumed that no male spectators would follow the directions of a female. During and after World War I, the Rose Bowl game was contested not between colleges, but between military teams in 1918 and 1919. By the onset of the Korean War in 1950, the US Navy counted eighty admirals who had played the game and the US Army numbered ninety-eight generals as former players (Gems 2000, 100). More recently, the tragic death of Pat Tillman (1976–2002), who eschewed his career in the NFL to fight with the US Army in Iraq and Afghanistan, has been much discussed and commemorated. The NFL alliance with the US military is regularly acknowledged in pre-game and halftime rituals. The violence and aggression that accompanies game play is often highlighted in the media, and the New Orleans Saints were even penalized for a bounty system that rewarded players for injuring their opponents between 2009 and 2011. What do such things tell us about American culture? This book intends to provide some answers.

As shown in “Concussions: Medical and Legal Controversies in Football,” the violence and aggression that permeates the sport have produced health and economic concerns as injuries, particularly concussions and brain damage that portend life-threatening debility have become a major concern, as are the scandals, controversies, and issues that occur in players’ increasingly public lives. Scandals and imbroglios in football are longstanding, as revealed in “Scandals and Controversies in Football.” And while the NFL began tying itself to the military and a nationalistic spirit in the 1980s, that synergy backfired after the 2016 season when Colin Kaepernick, quarterback of the San Francisco 49ers, failed to stand for the national anthem in a protest against racial injustice. A multitude of players joined in the crusade in the 2017 season, incurring the wrath of President Donald Trump and nationalistic supporters who perceived their actions as un-American.

American football appears to be a very gendered, masculine game; but few know that professional women’s leagues have been in existence for decades. The game is even more popular among women in many other countries outside of North America, as explored by one of the top scholars in gender studies in “Challenging the Gender Order: Women on the Gridiron.”

In “Playing Football,” an autobiographical account by a distinguished scholar Michael Oriard, who played the game at all levels, from youth sport to the NFL, provides some insight into the psychology that drives participants, as well as the personal and national identity affiliated with the sport.

The second part of the book provides an extensive account of the growth of American football around the world. Throughout the twentieth century, American military forces brought the game to foreign shores, creating their own leagues, but also introducing the game to local populations that both adopted and adapted it to their own cultures. A group of prominent international scholars have contributed separate chapters on Canada, Latin America, Europe, China, Japan, and the Pacific Region to show the historical introduction of football to various areas of the globe

and its current status in each. Things change quickly in American football - contact the publisher or check the authors' blogs or Twitter feeds for recent information. The growth of American football in such regions and the capitalist quest for global markets suggests that the sport will eventually encompass several continents, similar to the American sports of baseball and basketball. Regional professional leagues and an eventual world championship, not unlike the World Baseball Classic, seem inevitable. The International Federation of American Football (IFAF) has been organizing world championships since 1999, including a women's championship initiated in 2010 (www.ifaf.info).

The articles in this anthology cover the sport in both the broad scope of its contents and the depth of its coverage in a manner accessible to both knowledgeable fans and interested neophytes. The stimulating explication and insightful analysis presented in this collection is intended to bring greater understanding to a global audience as to why football remains an American obsession.

Further Reading

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The NYT goes through great lengths trying to explain why the world population goes into recess and outright decline, without ever mentioning covid and its nefarious deadly agenda. "Though some countries continue to see their populations grow, especially in Africa, fertility rates are falling nearly everywhere else. Demographers now predict that by the latter half of the century or possibly earlier, the global population will enter a sustained decline for the first time." Why would the fertility rate suddenly go down in "developed" countries? Because people realize that to save the planet, the world needs fewer, much fewer "eaters" and consumers? - Or rather does it have something to do with the widely coerced false covid "vaccines"? - see Dr. Mercola's video below. Touchdown: An American Obsession Paperback € Illustrated, 31 March 2019. by Gerald Gems (Editor), Gertrud Pfister (Editor). See all formats and editions Hide other formats and editions. Touchdown: An American Obsession is a readable, authoritative guide for Americans as well as an introduction for people around the world. Read moreRead less. Previous page. Touchdown tells the story of the rise and importance of American football in the USA and beyond. Covering the game from youth to professional leagues, the role of gender, economics and globalization. The editors are world leading sport historians and Gems and Pfister have assembled an all-star cast to deliver a comprehensive analysis of the USA's most followed sport. -John Nauright, editor of SportsWorld: Global Markets and Impact of Sport. Two esteemed sports historians bring an academic perspective to the most popular of American sports.