

The Psychology of the Football Game

By Frederick W. Coburn

NOT fewer certainly than a million Americans, and probably as many more Englishmen, are today viewing football games with howls of glee and execration. More spectators have gathered for the annual combat between Harvard and Yale than ever trooped into Elis to witness Olympian contests. Anglo-Saxondom is at the height of its annual football frenzy. No inclemency of the weather dissolves the fringe of eager onlookers arrayed about the gridiron field. The departure of crowds from New York and Boston has left two great cities deserted.

The sport is a leveller. Going to the game and sitting, or standing, it through, all classes rub elbows familiarly. The modern Chesterfield lifts his faultless hat upon his walking stick with savage huzzas, when his side blocks the foeman's advance. Anaemic clerks, stolid artisans, "townies" who have eluded the vigilance of official regulations that seek to confine the game to college men, these all "root" lustily for the local team. Most enthusiastic of the crowd are the women, not always comprehending the technique of the game, but astir with excitement from start to finish of the spectacle.

The ethics of this annual furore has often been made the subject of professional discussion and editorial homily; the psychology, more rarely. What is the effect, physical and psychological, of the football game upon the onlookers? Why do they enjoy it enough, in spite of manifold discomforts, to attend another year? Why do many attend, even while they do not altogether approve?

Emotional exaltation—debauch if you like—appears to be the guerdon of the

spectator's labors at the game. "Labors" may be said advisedly, for the onlooker works harder for his fun while looking at football than for his livelihood while watching the office clock. The performance is wearing, even if pleasurable. To live a lifetime in an hour; to clench fists, wave arms and umbrellas, spring from the bleachers; to be vividly conscious of nervous excitations started from every ganglion of the vaso-motor system; to experience overflow of the stream of sentiency upon the arid fields of ordinarily uncultivated reaction—that is football. The general tone for an afternoon becomes properly a "vibration"; it is at least no longer monotonous. Motor imagery has been stimulated to fullest capacity. We circle and plunge with the halfbacks; the thud shakes us as our little quarterback falls heavily to earth, tackling a powerful runner. Creative imagination is stirred, the entire consciousness projected upon the plane of a different existence from that determined by the cardinal points of our own personality. We become for the hour disembodied spirit; triumphant Yale, glorious Harvard, courageous Dartmouth, undaunted Princeton or peerless Pennsylvania.

In becoming impersonal, we acquire inhumanity. Ethical-minded philosophers, like Rev. E. P. Powell, assert that the football mob is cruel; that the mob-mind reverts to the type of the savage's soul, less amenable to the ordinary rules of reason, more prone to sudden uncontrollable gusts of passion.

In a large measure they are right; though "cruel," as implying deliberateness, is perhaps a wrong term to apply to the over-individual soul of the football

crowd; it is inhumane rather than inhuman. The gentler passions, at all events, the superstructure imposed by civilization, have given way. There remains only the primeval foundation. Such indifference to human pain and danger as we display on the bleachers arises from no diabolical desire to witness suffering, but simply from involuntary inhibition of Christian sentiment. "Is one of the enemy hurt? Good; that betters our chances." "Lies one of our fellows prostrate upon the frozen sward?" "Never mind; we have as good a substitute. Shame that the play must be delayed so long. Onward the sport. The game's the thing."

This imaginative participation in the contest is probably the prime motive speeding us to the arena on November afternoons. How mistaken those critics, who allege against the football game the passivity of hunchbacked spectators! More ordinary it is to come away from the field with strained throat and weary eyes. Women and girls emerge black and blue from thumps and nudges administered quite unconsciously by their escorts. Even more violent than the physical is the psychical exercise—the incessant alternating play of emotions of hope and fear, dread and doubt, anger and thankfulness. Physical manifestations, even at a great game, must be somewhat inhibited out of mere regard for life and limb of our fellows; upon inward emotionality no check is imposed.

There are in fact no passive spectators. If I attend a football game between institutions both utterly indifferent to me, it is certain that before the first half has closed, I am violently championing one or other of the sides. Some slight circumstance of prejudice determines my attitude, which, once assumed, steadily becomes more partisan.

Above all, must be taken into account the hallucination of the onlooker, that his "rooting" is somehow part of the game. Having no share in the contest, he creates one for himself. The cheering at a game often has artistic unity—one which results from simultaneous stimulation of the creative impulses of a concourse of people. Organized rooting, doubtless, as is generally stated, has little or no effect upon players them-

selves; to the rhythmic beat of the 'rahs they fail, through absorption in their duties, to react. But to this truth, admitted by nearly all football players, the simple faith of the football enthusiast gives no credence. He believes that breath somehow helps the ball over.

Though this act of participation is mainly responsible for our attendance at games, various minor motives influence us. The attractiveness of the mob is not to be underestimated. Twenty thousand—perhaps fifty thousand—people settling down upon the bleachers; brilliant flags and banners tossed against the sky, and over all a bevy of swaying advertising kites; laughs, titters, horseplay, singing—all this, apart from the game itself, fascinates.

Then there is opportunity for renewal of acquaintance. The college man finds at the game practically all of his own kind who live within a radius of a thousand miles. Great men are present—possibly the President and a few cabinet officials with governors galore, a sprinkling of distinguished literary people and artists, clergymen and philanthropists. The well-known personage graciously receives the cheering adulation of the crowd as he walks to his seat; the little man who sits next him experiences exalted self-respect from the company he is keeping. Each man holds his head high and talks big during the intervals between plays. His mishaps, misdoings, debts and incumbrances are forgotten while he chats to old friends or to a new acquaintance. The mob in its quiescent state is highly self-respecting; indeed abnormally conceited and complacent, just as it is self-forgetting and brutal when aroused.

Besides natural attractiveness of the crowd, social fiat that the game, though democratic, shall be attended by those who make pretence of belonging to sweldom helps immensely to increase the numbers. To go to the game in a drag, wearing Persian lamb and bedecked with chrysanthemums, comprises the society girl's happiness.

Above all, the alma mater sentiment is incarnate in the football crowd. College loyalty is stronger with many graduates and undergraduates than party or church affiliations. It is a blind in-

instinct surviving from days when enthusiastic adherence to the tribe was a condition of existence. The instinct is ordinarily somewhat weakened these days, but at football time it is regularly recrudescents. All that the old college (which may be youthful Chicago) ever stood for seems to be embodied in the eleven giants fighting for its fame and name. Our men, we are convinced, represent what is best in American life; as for the others, they are manifestly the product of wrong social and moral circumstances. Only through exercise of considerable self-restraint do we refrain from calling them "muckers" before the game starts; during its progress we are not accountable for language or acts.

If we win, what welling over of tribal emotion! The very air breathes our spirit, and, the humorist would add, our spirits. Our college color has been imparted to the empyrean. In the words of that inspired doggerel of Arthur Cumnock's day:

"When starting one morning from Cambridge,
Bright blue was the sky overhead,
But when the sun set over Springfield,
'Twas changed to a glorious red."

For how much of the susceptibility to football mania the November air and sky are themselves responsible is subject for conjecture. On such afternoons as our American autumn affords, when even to sit and shiver is pleasure, the mob enjoys the exhilaration of the vital breeze, the tang of which is pleasantly recalled in subsequent days in steam-heated office and flat.

We are conscious furthermore that it is worth while even to suffer from the cold, while we worship at the shrine of physical heroism. Exhibition of robust manhood delights—naturally, when such prowess is created by temperance and self-mastery. On every team appears at least one hero, adapted to live as well as build the lofty rhyme, personification of vim and virtue, one whom the mob singles out instinctively for favor, hanging upon his word and deed; the moral leader, he, of the team if not its captain. Half a hundred names of such men come to mind in a flash. In their day they were greater, from the standpoint of the newspapers, than senators, bankers or poets. After their day, traditions began

to gather about their names, so that their contemporaries now go forth to view these latter-day contests, sceptical if the younger men can be in any way the equals of the old-time Agamemnon. No performer before the public is better remembered than the football player. The fiery intensity of struggle causes pictures of the popular hero, in his characteristic action of punting or breaking through, to be pyrographically seared upon the memory of the crowd.

This hero-worship is perhaps not to be regarded merely as a recrudescence of barbaric respect for brawn. The game has its intellectual appeal. Strength controlled by the alert mind, the high purpose, the indomitable grit makes a winning team. True that in the actual progress of the game the players use but little thought. Their reactions have become automatic. Long drill has made the interference reel off as from a machine. The dodging and squirming are as instinctive as the motions of cunning animals. One may not stop to think when the fumbled ball is within grasp; to grab it and run is the only thing to do. Perfection of team work in a football aggregation seemingly justifies the dictionary definition of a team: "Two or more animals working together."

Yet in the weeks leading to the contest of the year, thought enough has been expended by players and coaches to make the play of the team a finished artistic creation. That game is best worth seeing upon which most pains have been spent; for which both teams have been skillfully brought on edge, encouraged and chidden into perfection of form, inspired to display of dash. A long period of expectancy has nerved the players to determination to do their best; the spectators have already acquired familiarity with the personnel of the elevens.

The ideal game would thus be one preceded by intelligent, conscientious and strenuous work. A fancy picture of the resultant contest that from the spectators' point of view should be of the highest possible interest may be drawn.

The teams, plainly, must be evenly matched, and scoring be done by both sides, not once, but repeatedly, for noth-

ing more irritating ever occurs than the game in which neither eleven crosses the other's goal line. Suppose, however, that instead of a series of deadlocks in the middle of the field, as sometimes happens, our side scores thrice, the enemy once, during the first half, amid spectacular incidents of long end runs and hair-raising tries at goals from the field. During the interval between halves we cheerily sing our college parodies of "The Director" and "Everybody Works but Father." Yet we experience a sinking feeling all the while.

Our team leads, but the other side forces the play during the first part of the second half. For the renewed contest starts off badly. Within three minutes our little quarter has fumbled the ball, and a fleet tackle from the other side snatching it up goes speeding sixty yards for a touchdown. Again the elevens line up, but the life has gone out of the defense of our team. From end to end the line leaks. Plays come through wherever the antagonist directs them.

Five yards at a time the ball advances toward our goal. On the three-yard line a fierce stand keeps the ball stationary for two hopeful minutes, but a mighty shove that the strongest team ever togged in football attire could not have withstood, gives the foeman their third touchdown. The score has been tied.

No; they lead, for a difficult goal has been kicked.

But the game is not lost. Twenty-five minutes of play remain, nearly half an hour of gruelling struggle, in which our aroused offence proves itself almost superhumanly aggressive. Inch by inch the other team is forced down the field, only to recover the ball near its own goal line and kick far back into our territory. Ahead by a single point, they have only to resist our tireless onslaughts, until time is called. The minutes are fleeting. Our favorite halfback runs in with a kicked ball from the center of the field to the other side's twenty-yard line. Our husky fullback hurdles through for five yards more. Then a series of short gains brings the ball to the five-yard line. But the time! the time! The referee, watch in hand, looks warningly at our quarterback, who signals for a kick. The fullback scoops in the low quick pass, with both ends thundering upon him. He steps adroitly to one side and boots the leather.

Does it go over? Well, this is not fiction, so that the story does not have to come out. The crowd at all events got the worth of its money in sensations. Supposing the kick is successful and the game is won in the last minute of play, it will not be strange if our players, like the Princeton men after Poe's celebrated goal from the field, march off the gridiron piously singing the Doxology.

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