

GRIDIRON AS MEASUREMENT

By Phil Allen

Over this past summer's Fourth of July weekend, the evening news profiled the "Susan Maersk," typical of a new breed of super-large merchant ship, whose fabulous length was measured at "several football fields." Regina Maorsk, a sister ship built in 1996, was" . . . nearly as long as four football fields, and can carry 70,000 twenty-foot containers."

Hardly a week goes by, but that we are greeted, however slyly, by something on the magnitude of a ship, bridge, or rocket, whose size is quickly sketched in the public mind by what has perhaps become, in the last half-century, the most prominent informal unit of measure, the football gridiron. Both its length and area can figure in this rule-of-thumb reference to human creations of such immensity, so that only a unit of measure with deceptively-low figures - 2, 3, 4 - can convey their size. And this is a relatively modern phenomenon.

Although fixed in size since 1912 at 100 x 53 1/3 yards, it was not until well into post-war America that the imprinting of the football field's size in the cultural mind (largely by television broadcasters), and the arrival of large objects easily recalled by this dimension, brought about this popular metaphor that mixes grand play with grand work. Since January 1997, I have noted every reference to the gridiron as a unit of length or area when heard on the news or read in the paper, and have come up with about 20 occurrences. In that span, any reader could have compiled a similar list using entirely different examples.

Here is a rundown of my list. Opening the section on moving things are ships: USS (carrier) Carl Vinson's flight deck 3 1/2 football fields (which will be understood in each following example) (date 1-14-97); rider line to the ferry during recent BART strike: 2 (9-8-97); the Grand Princess cruise ship, longer than: 3 (6-8-98); tuna-catching purse-skein nets are several fields in area (9-27-98); the space station shown on a recent special on John Glenn gives its area as but a single football field (10-28-98). And, according to NBC News: "Officials used a football field to show the effect of a cruise missile. If one landed on the fifty-yard line . . ." (11-12-98).

On to the immovables. Who has not been acquainted with the fact that the Great Pyramid in Egypt has a base whose area covers about 12 football fields? According to The Building of Manhattan author Donald Mackay, a caisson (footing) for the Brooklyn Bridge was "about a third the size of a football field". The twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York are said to occupy "an area of 16 acres, approximately the size of 16 football fields".

For some miscellaneous references to the gridiron: on 6-24-98 KRON-TV reported that San Francisco Airport's new International Terminal roof "spans a field and a half without support" (6-24-98); in an item on 3-7-98, it was said that the length of the front porch of the Grand Hotel on Mackinaw Island, Michigan, staggers the mind: "It's long enough to figure on football fields - 880 feet." For a few examples of area, let's begin with the SAGE computer of the 1940s at MIT, it covered "one field, as does the typical family farm in China" (12-21-96). But twice as wide, is the proposed World War II memorial on The Mall in Washington D.C. (5-24-97).

Over the years a number of patriotically-inspired super-large flags have appeared. Among the recent is a 150' x 300' American flag made by the Dixie Flag Company of San Antonio, ordered by an outfit that presents halftime shows at bowl games. A gridiron-sized flag could, I suppose, even be painted on the field. And now the question that all this has been leading up to: Who can identify the "oldest" reference to the football gridiron as a unit of measurement?