

**Punt or Bunt:  
A Note on Sport in  
American Culture  
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It is now widely acknowledged that professional football has replaced baseball as the national pastime. For several decades of this century baseball held nearly a solitary claim to this seemingly coveted title. But slowly since the end of World War II and the coming of televised sports, football has infringed on this undisputed territory. Then in the decade of the sixties the excitement over pro football reached a fever pitch, Vince Lombardi became the national philosopher, and the TV football widow became a national folk character. Throughout the decade baseball men were on the defensive trotting out World Series TV ratings and overall attendance figures in a last ditch holding action. Perhaps the final word on the subject came early in the seventies when George Gallup and Louis Harris offered their form of proof that pro football was the new national pastime. This was especially convincing to a people and to fans mesmerized by statistics.

There have been many reasons put forward to explain the surge in popularity of the Sunday (and now Monday) gridiron pageant. McLuhan has offered theories concerning the suitability of the two sports for television, and Jack Scott and his disciples have pointed to the violence of both pro football and American society. Certainly these and other suggestions have validity. It is also possible that David Reisman's *The Lonely Crowd* may offer at least partial explanation for this phenomenon of the rise of professional football to a near national obsession. (Baseball having lost out more in relative than absolute terms).

Reisman deals with the changing American character and he sees in the post-car world a shift from what he terms the inner-directed to the other-directed character type. The other-directed man is a newer form and appeared first in the north-eastern urban-industrial areas and spread from there to other urban-industrial centers. He is clearly a product of urban culture, perhaps more properly urban post-industrial culture. In the last third of the twentieth century he is the dominant

character type in American society. Before the arrival of the other-directed man on the American scene, the dominant character type had been the inner-directed man. In the new urban culture the inner-directed man is in decline, as is the culture that produced him.

In the inner-directed society “the source of direction for the individual is ‘inner’ in the sense that it is implanted early in life by the elders and directed towards generalized but nonetheless inescapably destined goals . . .”<sup>1</sup> The resulting character is one which is highly individualized. What is important to the inner-directed man is what he can accomplish, not what others think of him. Therefore “loneliness and even persecution are not thought of as the worst of fates. Parents, sometimes even teachers, may have crushing moral authority, but the peer-group has less moral weight . . .”<sup>2</sup> The inner-directed man has internalized his standards and goals. In terms of the sports world the inner-directed player will be basically immune from the pressures of the organization, the press, the fans and his fellow players in any attempts they might make to shape his goals, values or behavior. Reisman also claims that in the inner-directed society work is thought of in terms of non-human objects, not of people. The inner-directed man is not interested in people, as he finds physical nature to be the main challenge, and “. . . to alter and adapt it required that he becomes hard and self-reliant.”<sup>3</sup> Outside the realm of work Reisman describes the inner-directed man as an “acquisitive consumer” who having been successful on the “productive front” could do whatever he pleased on the “pleasure front.” He was “much less susceptible than men are today to the requirement that he be liked for his recreations and loved for his vices.”<sup>4</sup> The contrast between Babe Ruth and Joe Namath in this context comes immediately to mind.

The hallmark of the inner-directed man seems to be his rugged individualism, and the inner-directed society seems to bear many of the markings of American rural culture. In the early 20th century many of these inner-directed rural men were being transplanted into urban America. They carried their rural values within themselves into the new environment. These values were in turn institutionalized in the symbolic forms of Horatio Alger and Teddy Roosevelt. At about the

<sup>1</sup>David Reisman, *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven 1950), p. 15.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 123.

same time baseball was coming forward to lay its claim as the national pastime. This convergence may have been more than coincidence.

Baseball, although a team sport in the sense that there are nine players on a side, in many respects is more a game of individual skills. The great exploits of baseball (with the exception of the double-play) are those of the great hitter and the great pitcher. The home run, the no-hitter, the great catch are basically acts of individuals, and frequently individuals pitted against one another. The center of action is home plate where it is batter against pitcher, man against man, skill against skill, wit against wit, to the delight of the spectator who understands all of this in terms of some sort of titanic struggle. One of the great complaints is that baseball has too many dead spots, but to the initiated it is precisely during these dead spots, where one man stares at another, that some of the most intense, although internal, action is taking place. As Douglass Wallop has written :

baseball gave the nation the brilliant exploits of brilliant performers, fierce rivalries, illustrious World Series closely contested by great players and master-minded by great managers. It was the age when John McGraw pitted wits against France(sic) Chance and Connie Mack; when Mathewson pitched against Honus Wagner, Cy Young against Nap Lajoie. It was the age when Walter Johnson, perhaps the greatest pitcher of all time, tried to blaze his fast ball past Ty Cobb, doubtless the greatest batter-dream encounters, and yet in that era something that could be watched on an ordinary weekday afternoon.<sup>5</sup>

Dream encounters, indeed, but encounters between individuals not teams, and it is in that fact that lies one of the major differences between baseball and football. Many players, fans and commentators have addressed themselves to this difference. One player, Eddie Collins, who was a star in both sports was keenly aware of the difference. In 1927 Collins, in an interview, pointed out that baseball offered many more possibilities for individual achievement than football. Football stars, he said, achieved their fame only in part on the basis of their individual brilliance, while a Ty Cobb would be great on any team and Walter Johnson was a consistent winner with a team

<sup>5</sup>Douglass Wallop, *Baseball An Informal History* (New York, 1969), pp. 123-124.

that was a hopeless tail-ender.<sup>6</sup> In more modern times ex-pro-football, Bernie Parrish, made a similar observation.<sup>7</sup>

Also what was important in the golden age of baseball was what a player could accomplish, not his image either on or off the field. There were few cardboard cutouts on the field, few organization men in their grey flannel traveling uniforms. More typical of the golden age were baseball's characters like Rube Waddell :

In the lore of baseball, Waddell is famous for chasing fire engines (once during a game he vaulted the center-field fence to chase one) and for the day he called in all three of his outfielders and all his infielders except the first baseman and made them all stand by while he struck out the side.

. . . Once when he was scheduled to pitch and failed to show up, he was found wearing a white apron, tending bar. Lost to the Athletics for three days, he returned as the drum major of a band marching up Main Street.<sup>8</sup>

In the age of the organization man in professional sports this sort of thing would hardly be tolerated—Joe Namath's pantyhose to the contrary notwithstanding. In the inner-directed society it was not only tolerated but for many it was part of the deal.

Off-the-field conduct was also less subject to censure. Babe Ruth's drinking habits were legendary and his life-style anything but a model for youth. Despite all attempts he was never really tamed. Equally striking is an incident that occurred between Judge Landis, the Commissioner of Baseball, and Rogers Hornsby of the St. Louis Cardinals. Hornsby had a passion for the horses and one day Landis admonished him that such a passion constituted gambling and should be stopped lest it endanger the integrity of the game of baseball. Hornsby responded that this happened to be his form of recreation. He then inquired of the Judge if he were playing the stock market. Landis said yes. Hornsby pointed out that this too constituted gambling. The end result was that Hornsby went on playing the horses and pounding the pitchers.<sup>9</sup> For a contrast in the new age of sport it is only necessary to recall the Namath-Rozelle encounter involving Namath's part ownership in

<sup>6</sup>"According to Billy Evans," *The Sporting News*, March 3, 1927, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup>Bernie Parrish, *They Call it a Game* (New York, 1971), p. 43.

<sup>8</sup>Wallop, *Baseball*, pp. 134-135.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 193.

Bachelor's III, in which the individual was made subservient to the image of professional football.

In the other-directed society of modern urban-industrial America a new character type has emerged. David Reisman describes other-direction in the following passage :

the peer-group . . . becomes much more important to the child, while the parents make him feel guilty not so much about violation of inner standards as about failure to be popular or otherwise to manage his relations with these other children. . . . What is common to all the other-directed people is that their contemporaries are the source of direction for the individual—either those known to him or those with whom he is indirectly acquainted, through friends and through the mass media. This source is of course “internalized” in the sense that dependence on it for guidance in life is implanted early. The goals toward which the other-directed person strives shift with that guidance: it is only the process of striving itself and the process of paying close attention to the signals from others that remain unaltered throughout life.<sup>10</sup>

One of the basic characteristics of this other-directed man is that he is people minded. He derives his values from those around him and holds their opinions of him in very high regard. He is group oriented, the perfect organization man — a real team man. The success of his group is almost as important as his own success. He lives in a society that in fact is dependent on this type of behavior if it is to function properly; a society which in its technological hardware symbolizes other-direction. Assembly lines, computers, automated factories with their intricate precision movement of parts, mirror to man his society and his expected life-style. Professional football is this man's game. With its intricate and precision movements of eleven men, each one of whom must perform his small task so that the team can succeed, it reflects the ideals of the other-directed society. Individual dazzling performances are still exciting, but success in professional football comes only to those teams that work as a unit.

In his book, *Instant Replay*, Jerry Kramer provides an excellent portrait of professional football as an other-directed game and the Green Bay Packers as an other-directed society. Kramer examines the importance of team togetherness and the other-directedness of the individual player. In regard to team

<sup>10</sup>Reisman, *The Lonely Crowd*, p. 21.

togetherness Kramer provides a look at the methods of Vince Lombardi. According to Kramer, Lombardi liked to compare the Green Bay Packers to a large corporation like General Motors, IBM, or Chrysler, in which, said Lombardi, mistakes could not be tolerated.<sup>11</sup> The Packers were trained by their coach to think of themselves as a unit, and one of the techniques he used to foster togetherness was group singing. On one occasion after a loss Lombardi verbally whipped his team. The players were left extremely depressed. Then following dinner the coach employed the group singing technique. Its effect was, according to Kramer, that “the whole atmosphere changed, the whole mood of depression lifted. We were a team again.”<sup>12</sup>

Another measure of the importance of the team over the individual can be seen in Kramer’s comments concerning a victory over the Rams for a Western Conference Championship:

I was misty-eyed myself I felt so good. I felt so proud, proud of myself and proud of my teammates and proud of my coaches. I felt I was part of something special. . . . It’s a feeling of being together, completely together, a singleness of purpose, accomplishing something that is very difficult to accomplish, accomplishing something that a lot of people thought you Couldn’t accomplish. It sent a beautiful shiver up my back.<sup>13</sup>

The other-directed man is also extremely sensitive to those around him, to those David Reisman terms his “antagonistic cooperators.” That Kramer had this kind of sensitivity he leaves no doubt. There was a rookie in the Packer training camp that year by the name of Dick Arndt. Kramer liked Arndt and he came from Kramer’s home area. But Arndt was competing for the jobs of Kramer’s friends, neighbors and teammates. Kramer wanted to help Arndt out but in the process Kramer worried that if he helped too much his teammates would “start looking at me out of the corners of their eyes.”<sup>14</sup> In a similar vein Kramer writes:

We’re all different. We all have our own interests, our own preferences, and yet we all go down the same road, hand in hand. Maybe, ultimately, we’re not really friends, but what I mean is that no individual on this club will go directly against another individual’s feel-

<sup>11</sup>Dick Schoop (ed.), *Instant Replay: The Green Bay Diary of Jerry Kramer* (New York, 1969), p. 41.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 44.

ings, no matter what his own opinion is.<sup>15</sup> No one ever gets into an absolutely contrary position.

It is difficult to image Dizzy Dean having written this sort of thing about the Gas House Gang. And in more recent times the Oakland A's have demonstrated how unimportant harmony and togetherness is to success in baseball.

The setting of the inner-directed and other-directed societies is also considerably different. Inner-direction was more common in the rural world of an earlier America, while other-direction is clearly a by-product of the urban-industrial world. The pace of life in these societies is vastly different and the two games tend to reflect these differences. Baseball is oblivious to time. There is no clock, no two minute drill. The game flows in a timeless stream with a rhythm of its own. In addition the season has a rhythmic cycle which runs parallel to the cycles of nature. There is the hope of spring, which is generated for even the worst of teams. The hope is sustained into the early days of the season, sometimes spurred on by a brief winning streak in those first days or weeks. But slowly as the weeks and months pass dissolution sets in. First for the worst teams, and ultimately for all but the pennant winners. Final defeat comes in the fall as the last hopes of the contenders fade. Some had already been overcome by the heat of August, a month of legendary proportions in baseball, which only the most fit survive. Finally the colorful spectacle of the World Series arrives in early October. And finally in the winter the game moved off the field to the Hot Stove League for rest, repair and preparation for the coming spring when the cycle would begin again.

One only need recite the patterns to feel how out of place they are in the urban-industrial world or at a professional football game. Contemporary culture is more concerned with the sensate, the bursts of energy, the orgasmic. The significance of time and the speedup of time loom heavily in our urban society. Similarly the clock looms large in professional football and the two minute drill alone made Sonny Jurgenson and John Unitas legendary. As for the pattern of the game one need only watch for a brief time to see that the action comes in short five-to-ten second spurts with thirty to forty-five second intervals. The beauty of instant replay of course is that it can double or triple the number of energy spurts per game.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 82.

What is hopefully being suggested here is that professional football is more in tune with urban-industrial America, than is baseball. Our society is clearly becoming an other-directed one, and this in part may explain the rise in popularity of the game which more adequately reflects other-directedness. It is not being suggested that professional football is without its inner-directed players or coaches, or that baseball lacks other-directed players and coaches (in fact this may be the biggest problem that baseball has, i.e. other-directed players in an inner-directed game). Nor is it to suggest that this is the only explanation or the only factor which explains the emergence of professional football as the new national pastime. Obviously it is not. However, if it is held that sport tends to reflect other aspects of culture, then perhaps the shift from baseball to football in part reflects the shift from the inner-directed to the other-directed society.