
ORiard, MICHAEL. *Reading Football: How the Popular Press Created an American Spectacle*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993. Pp. xxv, 319. Notes, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$29.95 cb.

Visitors passing through the Yale Bowl's memorial arch learn something about the origins of football when they read the words chiseled on the wall: "Given by American Colleges and Schools, uniting with Graduates of Yale to honor WALTER CAMP and the traditions of American College Sport which he exemplified." Built in 1927, with the support of universities, small colleges, and secondary schools, the pillared gate is a reminder of the progressive values that Americans once found in football. Today it is hard to think how such a monument could be built on one institution's home field, and harder still to imagine educators, coaches, and alumni collectively endorsing the sport's transcendent values. But early in this century, it was hard to imagine anything less being done to acknowledge the importance of football's cultural role.

In considering this role, Michael Oriard focuses on the years between 1890 and 1910, the period during which intercollegiate football became the object of widespread public interest. Beginning with a discussion of the sport's evolving rules and structure, Oriard moves quickly to his argument: that the rise of sports writing in urban newspapers expanded and shaped football's appeal. Although

Reading Football is not an institutional history of the sport (the standard work has yet to be written), its analysis of how football was represented in the press is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand the game's continued pull on American imaginations. Oriard's consideration of football's mythic presence sometimes recalls an older generation of American Studies methodology. However, this is scholarship purposefully cast as cultural studies, which here means moving away from the "reductiveness of both myth and traditional ideological criticism toward a model of a diverse, contested, yet still ideologically freighted American culture" (p. 16). Trained as a literary critic, and following Clifford Geertz, Oriard does not only read sports writing for what it can reveal of social and political conflict; he extends these reading skills to the sportswriters themselves, arguing that football was a "multiply interpreted cultural text" (p. 19) that generated a diversity of second-order "narratives" which competed to fix the social meaning of the game.

Because Ivy League teams first dominated college football, these narratives were primarily about middle- and upper-class youths. "About," however, is an understatement since journalists leavened their accounts of games with descriptions of spectators, schools, coaches, and players. These accounts linked masculine prowess to social and economic success. *Reading Football* adds to the now familiar portrait of middle-class men building character through roughness, Teddy Roosevelt-style, by highlighting the varieties of "manliness" written into the game. Some commentators underscored the moral lessons to be learned in the sport, while others, with metaphors drawn from business and war, stressed leadership skills and teamwork. Even when critics agreed on football's constructive effects (not all people did), patrician and middle-class notions of manhood competed for sway. The sensational treatment that Pulitzer's and Hearst's New York papers gave to football games in the form of headlines, lavish illustrations, multi-page coverage, and increasingly formulaic reporting, leads Oriard to speculate that the real action took place off the field, where a socially diverse readership learned how to "read" the sport as a uniquely modern social ritual. Despite the absence of reader responses, Oriard skillfully gauges the class tensions that accompanied football's emergence as a mass spectacle. In turning to the satiric football stories published in the *National Police Gazette*, he shows that working-class men—whose favorite sport, prize fighting, was illegal—resented the elite classes' ability to sanction a sport that could be as violent as boxing.

By the 1920s, these differences subsided when football, now established as a game for all classes and a topic in daily newspapers, became the nation's quintessential modern sport. One of this book's achievements is to identify Walter Camp as a crucial agent in the construction of football as a progressive force. Oriard presents Camp as both the innovative coach who brought scientific efficiency to the football field, and a prescient anti-modernist who, in dozens of articles and treatises written between 1888 and 1912, envisioned the football star as "swash-buckling hero" and "corporate manager" (p. 55). In promoting football's paradoxical blend of bureaucratic individualism, Camp articulated the values that transformed Ivy League universities into training grounds for businessmen, lawyers, engineers, and doctors.

Long after their dominance on the gridiron ended, Ivy League institutions continue to educate “future leaders” of the nation, while the professionalization of football proceeds apace. Given the staying power of Walter Camp’s vision of success, Oriard’s claim that football “neither reinforces nor undermines existing power arrangements” seems hopeful. In spite of his argument that football lacks a “single master narrative” (p. 282), the evidence in this book suggests that some football stories remain more compelling than others.

—TIMOTHY B. SPEARS
Middlebury College