
FILM, MEDIA, AND MUSEUM REVIEWS

The College Football Hall of Fame

Rick Knott

DEPARTMENT OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION
BETHEL COLLEGE

C. Keith Harrison

DEPARTMENT OF KINESIOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

The College Football Hall of Fame, 111 South St. Joseph Street, South Bend, Indiana 46601. Wheelchair accessible. Open daily 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. Closed Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day, and New Year's Day. Educational tours, group rates, gift certificates, and annual passes are available. General admission: Adults \$7.00, seniors \$5.00, children 6-14 years \$4.00, children under 6 years free. Telephone: (219) 235-5720. Website: <http://collegefootball.org/>

Besides being commercial enterprises, sports halls of fame (HOF) perform a public educational service. Although they primarily serve sport enthusiasts, they also provide the general public with a type of historical information. Certainly some HOFs are better sources of information than others, but one must remember that their mission is to promote the particular sport and that they therefore should be assessed in light of their stated mission. The mission of the College Football Hall of Fame is to mobilize "the constructive forces of amateur football, at all levels, for the benefit of society as a whole"¹ namely, to promote football and the positive values of "character-development," "amateurism," "will to win," and "fighting spirit" that football is said to embody.²

Like college football, the Hall has been forced to operate in the commercial sector, which seems incongruent with the amateur values it embraces. The commercial nature of both college football and the Hall is immediately apparent to the critical observer. On the circular descent to the lower-level exhibit hall, a sign is strategically placed that recognizes Burger King (which has an on-site restaurant), Alka-Seltzer, the U.S. Postal Service, and Coca-Cola as proud

sponsors. Although the National Football Foundation makes significant contributions to the Hall (approximately \$1 million in the last two years), ticket sales have still fallen short of expenses.

On the exhibit level, a theater made in the form and shape of a football stadium is fully equipped with statues of fans, hot dog vendors, reporters, cheerleaders, coaches, and players. The statues have voice chips and enact a mock Saturday afternoon event. Sitting in the bleachers, visitors are treated to a kaleidoscope of college football images on eleven giant screens, choreographed to music in a way that is meant to evoke great excitement. The theater experience has two themes: the historical evolution of the game is evoked with choreographed film clips and still photographs, and the atmosphere of the game is magnificently re-created, from the pre-game coin toss through the playing of the national anthem, the kick-off, action, sounds of referees' whistles, half-time band music, and the gunshot to signaling the end of the game. The experience can be emotionally draining.

Busts of the inductees enshrined in the Hall are displayed in the Hall of Honor, which is just outside the theater on the main exhibit level. The busts are arranged chronologically by decade. Nearby computers access biographical sketches, photographs, and action highlights of Hall of Honor players and coaches. The theater and computers exemplify the highly interactive nature of this museum. The football skills test is physically demanding, and many teenagers leave the Hall with shirttails untucked, dripping with perspiration from the challenge. A quiz area tests armchair coaches' knowledge of football strategy against that of major college coaches. Nostalgia buffs enjoy the films of pep-talks on the values of football by several famous coaches presented on film in a room resembling a locker room, and the sound booth where they can record their own play by play call of some of the most memorable plays in college football history.

The Hall makes a serious attempt to place football in a broader historical context. Integrated throughout the Hall of Honor are displays telling the story of college football with artifacts and photographs. The railroad and telegraph are given credit for spreading the popularity of college football in the early years, and radio and television in the later years. The history of football equipment is chronicled alongside technological developments in American industrial society. The growth of the sport's popularity paralleled the growth of higher education and increased exponentially with the G.I. Bill. A timeline which documents many significant newsmaking events outside the world of football weaves through the Hall of Honor.

The Hall has a groundbreaking and enlightening feature all too often missing: a celebration of academics that balances athletic accomplishments. Televised games often display players' grade point averages and majors beside their photographs, but academic issues are more frequently discussed in a negative connotation such as ineligibility, nonqualifying, and cheating. However, scholar-athletes are prominently showcased in the Hall. Notions of the "dumb jock" crumble in the face of the accomplishments of players, such as Paul Robeson (Rutgers) and Jerome "Brud" Holland (Cornell).

In the 1995 inaugural year, the Hall inducted 13 former student-athletes. Each inductee's oral history ends with their accomplishments after football. For example, Jim Brown is an actor, inner-city program director, and consultant to the Cleveland Browns, and Paul Robeson has been a lawyer, actor, singer, and social activist. The subsequent careers of student-athletes is an issue often neglected.

The Hall presents landmark games, notable coaches, and other athletic achievements by players and teams. But the exclusion of certain issues and moments is equally significant. The story of the University of Chicago and other schools that withdrew from major college football due to criticism or scandal may never be told in the Hall because on the surface it does not promote the game. Amos Alonzo Stagg and the University of Chicago football program receive a great deal of attention, but there is no mention of the university's later abandonment of their football program. This is unfortunate because there is more to the story than one school that no longer saw football as being compatible with the mission of higher education. Robin Lester found that "the story of football at Chicago demonstrate[d] the tension in American higher education between egalitarian and elitist viewpoints, which, in turn, but mirrors one of the most significant tensions of the modern democratic state."

Recognition of the tensions between egalitarian and elitist values may be critical for the Hall as well as for college football's future success. Ronald Smith also recognized this when he wrote of Chicago's hiring college football's first professional coach. In 1891, hiring a professional coach (at a staggering \$2,500 per year) was a violation of the amateur ideal. Since then college football, through recruiting, scholarships, tutors, extensive training, and now corporate sponsorship, has so violated the historic definition of amateurism that it seems hypocritical to retain the term in the mission statement of the Hall. Considering that the values embraced by the historic definition of amateurism are rooted in an English class system that was inherently elitist, it seems incongruent with the egalitarian and democratic values espoused by the sport. This uncomfortable contradiction could be resolved if the National Football Foundation and Hall of Fame drop the pretense of amateurism from their mission.

The struggle for the control of college football is also not mentioned. The sport emerged originally as a student-initiated activity, but since then, faculties, university presidents, trustees, students, and alumni have struggled to gain control of college football. Today it is difficult to recognize the threads of power in college athletics. One thing is certain: the students and faculty no longer control the activity. More power has been given to inter-institutional organizations such as the NCAA, and it would be difficult to exaggerate the power alumni have to influence decisionmaking.

An attractive display recognizes some of the most famous college football rivalries, but a more careful examination of these phenomena could be done. Rivalries are often rooted in geographic, class, religious, ethnic, or racial differences. A wonderful exhibit might be one that explores a rivalry from the segregated South, such as that of Grambling and Louisiana Tech during the

respective reigns of James Harris and Terry Bradshaw, two great college quarterbacks at successful programs divided along racial lines. Likewise, the story of the integration of football in the Southeastern and Southwestern Conferences is missing from the Hall. Very little about the desegregation of the South and the turbulent sixties even appears on the time line. It is unfortunate that much of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam war protests are ignored. What role did college football play in the broader culture at that time? Was football a conservative or a liberating force?

The Hall could be a voice for diversity and cultural understanding through examining contributions to college football by black males (or other ethnic or marginalized groups). African Americans' contributions to sport have often in part been deemed stylistic and aesthetic.³ Since the integration of college football, high fives, dancing, and other athletic affirmations that originate from black culture (e.g., pumping of the hand toward the ceiling comes from black churches) have become common. African American males expressing themselves in football is discussed in the works of Michael Dyson, Thomas Kochman, Etta Hollins, and Byron Hurt's forthcoming film, *I Am a Man: Gender Construction and the Dilemma of Black Masculinity*.⁴ Free expression has led to colorful celebrations in football, flamboyant dunks in basketball, and stylistic performances in baseball. This issue raises two important questions: Why is sport today a means self-expression and self-esteem for African American males, while academics seem to have lost importance? What social and historical forces led to this paradigm shift away from the valuation of academic achievement upheld by early football pioneers Bobeson, Holland, and many others? In the HBO special *The African American Athlete*, historian Al Tony Gilmore answered the second question best: "The early black student-athletes understood that they were a model and to get all they could."⁵ As Nelson George states, "the reality is the existence of African Americans in the twenty-first century depends not merely in re-channeling the energy of their male offspring into non-athletic activities, but taking the strangest, richest aspects of an aesthetic and translating it into actions that run counter to capitalist standards."⁶ An exhibit tracing the influence and contributions of the African American football player would not only to raise public consciousness but would be groundbreaking for a museum.

Although there is room for improvement, the College Football Hall of Fame appears to recognize the social and historical context better than most institutions of its kind. The coverage is balanced, although the Hall did experience some difficulties obtaining suitable artifacts in good condition from the formative years of college football. For those years, the Hall relies more heavily on photographs. The Hall depends very heavily upon the NCAA and cooperation from member schools. Some exhibits are changed every six months and others, such as bowl and individual award winners, are changed every twelve months. Future exhibits may demonstrate still greater social awareness and give more attention to other important issues as football scholarship advances. Currently the Hall maintains a small, albeit growing historical collection and library. The Hall is seeking out private collections to add to its current materials. It hopes to develop into a center

for football research, a role similar to the one the Baseball Hall of Fame fills for baseball writers and scholars.

The Hall is a celebration of the positive values of football as promoted through college athletics. Bruce Kidd, Eldon Snyder, and others have examined the meaning of nostalgia in our collective identity, as well as the place halls of fame have in shaping those nostalgic feelings.’ As Harry Edwards once wrote, “Alumni have traditionally found sports activities to be the strongest, or a[t] the most universal, symbolic link between themselves and their college days.”⁸ Certainly one function of the College Football Hall of Fame is to evoke positive feelings about the past for alumni and fans. The Hall attempts to preserve and create a past that will establish and maintain the position of football in higher education, and as an integral part of American popular culture.

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1. The National Football Foundation and College Hall of Fame (pamphlet), *The National Football Foundation and College Hall of Fame; 50th Anniversary, 1947-1997, 1997*.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Similar to college football, Nelson George captures the essence of African Americans integrating sport: “It would be wonderful to say 100 years after basketball’s inception and several decades after Blacks began their dominance that Jordan represents the culmination of this story and that and that this Black aesthetic—our music put into physical motion—has forced European-Americans to give Black men their due respect.” Nelson George, *Elevating the Game: Black Men and Basketball* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 240.
 4. Michael Dyson, *Between God and Gangster Rap* (New York, 1996); Thomas Kochman, *Black and White Styles in Conflict* (Chicago, 1981); Etta Hollins, *Culture in School Learning: Revealing the Deep Meaning* (New Jersey, 1996); Byron Hurt’s film *I Am a Man: Gender Construction and the Dilemma of Black Masculinity* (forthcoming).
 5. HBO’s television special, *The African American Athlete*, 1996.
 6. George, 240.
 7. Bruce Kidd, “The Making of a Hockey Artifact: A Review of the Hockey Hall of Fame,” *The Journal of Sport History*, 23 (1996), 328-334; Eldon E. Snyder, “Sociology of Nostalgia: Sport Halls of Fame and Museums in America,” *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 8 (1991), 228-238.
 8. Harry Edwards, *Sociology of Sport* (Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press, 1973), 248.