

## Book Reviews

ORIARD, MICHAEL. *King Football: Sport and Spectacle in the Golden Age of Radio and Newsreels, Movies and Magazines, the Weekly and the Daily Press*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. Pp xiv+491. Notes, illustrations, index, bibliography. \$39.95 cb.

This illuminating study examines how Americans viewed football from the 1920s as it attracted a national audience and firmly established itself as a central feature of college life to 1960, a period of dramatic transformation. By exploring what football meant to the public during these decades, Michael Oriard provides significant insight into changing conceptions of masculinity, collegiate and high school culture, eroticism in sport, and, above all, the mass media's role in promoting and shaping football. It is not always clear, however, how the various audiences received and reinterpreted the media's messages.

Oriard carefully analyzes football coverage in a broad range of media, including the rapidly proliferating radio and newsreels, the expanding newspaper sports sections, mass circulation magazines, and the ethnic and radical press. By the 1930s, the mass media had made the college game, where elaborate festivities often overshadowed the gridiron action, "utterly familiar" (p. 11) to large numbers of Americans. In many towns the high school or college football team became the principal unifying force and focus of entertainment. In the post-World War II period, magazine photo-essays identified the pageantry-centered football weekend in such places with an "American Way of Life," equated with consensus and small town simplicity and innocence. In fact, Oriard describes mainstream mass media football coverage as "overwhelmingly benign" (p. 64). Radio, newsreels, and daily newspapers seldom, if ever, commented on college football programs' corrupt practices and ignored racism in the sport.

Oriard considers football's "most fundamental development" (p. 225) during the period examined to be a significant broadening of the social class and ethnicity of its audience and player pool. Beginning in elite colleges, intended to toughen upper-class

youth, preparing them for future leadership, football became increasingly inclusive, drawing participants and spectators from a multitude of white ethnic groups and from the working class. Football helped the second generation European American to acculturate, and after World War II sport fiction celebrated the football team as melting pot. Even the Communist Party organ *Daily Worker* presented college football favorably for providing some working-class youth the opportunity for a college education—which Oriard could have indicated marked a sharp break with how the earlier socialist movement viewed the sport.

Oriard applies the trendy "whiteness" interpretation to football. He argues that by the 1950s second and third generation European Americans had come to be regarded as "white," rather than ethnic, with only African Americans marginalized. Yet what is striking about football is coaches' and players' frequent highly visible promotion of Christian prayer sometimes as a team activity. This practice, in which African Americans are often prominent, makes outsiders of Jews and other non-Christians.

Oriard devotes considerable attention to racial discrimination in football and to the efforts of the African-American and radical press to expose it. He also examines, although not always satisfactorily, racial stereotypes concerning athletic performance. If, as Oriard claims, physical ability was considered less important on defense than "will and character," (p. 318) in which whites believed themselves superior, how did blacks assume such importance in the defensive secondary? After all, quickness, speed, and the ability to jump, which many whites considered "black" traits, are critical for cornerbacks, and the position's obscurity also made it seem more suitable for blacks. Oriard might also have considered whether end zone dances, which he seems to view favorably, as part of "African American expressive culture," (p. 320) reinforce traditional racial stereotypes, for which the Harlem Globetrotters, for example, are often condemned. And does such narcissistic display belong in a team sport where plays succeed only if several teammates properly execute and coordinate their assignments?

During the 1950s, as many worried that unprecedented prosperity would make men soft and unable to meet Cold War challenges, the media celebrated football, especially the rougher pro game, as an affirmation of traditional masculinity. Women had always had more of a role in college football, as much a social event as a game, and Oriard discusses the eroticization of cheerleading, which women entered in the 1920s, and bowl parades. The 1950s cheerleader, like Marilyn Monroe, combined innocence with voluptuousness. Oriard might have examined more fully how such factors as more rigidly defined sex roles, the South's increasing influence in football, or possible homoerotic undertones on the gridiron shaped this development.

These criticisms aside, Oriard's extensive research in a wide range of media sources enriches our understanding of football in a period when public interest in the sport at all levels expanded enormously.

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