

## Film, Media, and Museum Reviews

*Go Tigers!* (2001). Written and directed by Kenneth A. Carlson. Produced by Sidney Sherman and Kenneth A. Carlson. IFC Films in association with Triple Play. 103 mins.

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For more than half a century, Massillon, Ohio, an industrial city of roughly 30,000, has been one of the most famous Football Towns in the U.S. Until not too long ago, western Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Texas were renowned as the motherlodes of high school football talent; today, the best players seem to come from Florida. A Football Town, however, is known more for its collective passions than for its talented players. Odessa, Texas, and Valdosta, Georgia, likely come first to mind today, due to H. G. Bissinger's *Friday Night Lights* (1990) in the first case and a fairly recent *Sports Illustrated* story in the second.<sup>1</sup> Until the documentary under review, Massillon belonged more to an earlier era, when football was preeminently a rustbelt sport.

Massillon was among the small Midwestern towns where professional football got its start early in the twentieth century, but unlike several of its Ohio rivals—Canton, Akron, Columbus, Dayton, Cleveland—Massillon did not become part of the early National Football League. Its status as a Football Town really dates from 1932, when Paul Brown became the football coach at Washington High. Brown coached in Massillon for nine years, before leaving for Ohio State, then in 1946, after a wartime stint at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center, becoming the founding coach of the Cleveland Browns, with whom he transformed professional football. In those nine years in Massillon, Brown won six state

championships, along with two putative national titles, while he also, as the team's official Web site puts it, "transformed high school football into a city-wide social event, complete with pep rallies, parades, bon fires and a fast-stepping, high-kicking band. Back in those days, no other team in the nation (college or pro) displayed as much color and pageantry as Massillon High. The tradition was born."<sup>2</sup>

That tradition is the subject of the wonderful documentary *Go Tigers!* For male Massillonians, the tradition begins at birth, when a member of the booster club deposits a pee-wee football in the bassinets of each newborn boy. This is how the film opens, after which a montage of brief portraits—including the mayor, high school principal, and a booster-club member explaining, a little defensively, how important high school football is in Massillon; the local undertaker describing all the features of his Massillon Tiger casket; and an elderly woman known as the Tiger Lady showing off her collection of stuffed tigers—makes it clear that for many citizens of Massillon, high school football is a cradle-to-grave obsession.

Included in this opening sequence is some footage from a 1951 newsreel on Massillon as "Touchdown Town." The more conventional epithet from this era was "Football Town," the title of a 1949 story about Massillon in *Holiday* magazine, one of more than a dozen such articles in popular magazines in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Football towns were small communities whose pride and identity centered on the football team, the professional club in Green Bay but the high school team everywhere else. Football town was a Norman Rockwell kind of place, despite the odd inversion of having adolescent boys serving as the gods, priests, and ritual scapegoats for the adult community.

"In Massillon, scholastic football is a communal hobby, which has upgraded an educational system, rebuttressed family life by stimulating greater interest in kids, and eliminated much of the juvenile delinquency generally identified with industrial towns."<sup>3</sup> These were the words of the writer in *Holiday* in 1949, uncannily anticipating issues raised in *Go Tigers!* At the center of Kenneth A. Carlson's film are the team's three captains: quarterback Dave Irwin, linebacker Danny Studer, and defensive lineman Ellery Moore. Moore emerges as the star of the film as well as the team (he was Ohio's Defensive Player of the Year in 1999), a documentary filmmaker's dream. A very large African-American young man, Ellery Moore is thoughtful, articulate, and charming; he loves the camera as much as it loves him. He also, however, spent his freshman year in prison, for a rape he (convincingly) insists he did not commit, while admitting that he deserved jail time for doing just about everything else wrong while growing up in a badly-broken home in the roughest part of town.

It is impossible not to root for Ellery Moore, another grim statistic waiting to happen except for the hope that football offers him and for his obvious personal resources to create a future for himself. Some of Ellery's charm seems inherited from his father, who loves the camera as much as the son does, but whose charm seems the pose of a con man looking for an angle. (Moore, Sr., also appears responsible for his son's wrongful imprisonment.) Ellery alone among the players speaks eloquently about what football means to him, to his teammates, to Massillon. He is good enough to be recruited by Joe Paterno, but he has not yet achieved a minimal score on the ACT exam. Whether Ellery and his fellow captains will win scholarships, whether the Tigers will come back from a miserable 4-6 previous season

(capped by a loss to archrival Canton McKinley in the 105th game of their rivalry), and whether the school bond levy to be voted on three days after the McKinley game will pass and save the school district from financial crisis—these constitute the film's main plots. The impending school levy provides the overarching narrative.

*Go Tigers!* tells these stories without a narrator, a key decision by Carlson to which I would attribute much of the film's success. The absence of a narrator deprives the viewer of certain kinds of information: Massillon's twenty-one state championships between 1935 and 1970 but none since then; its average attendance, even in non-championship years, of roughly 12,000; the frequent turnover of coaches (in 1999, Rick Stepas is the sixteenth since Paul Brown). "After five years a coach has outlived his usefulness," the president of the school board told *Sports Illustrated* in 1985 (after the most recent coach sued over his dismissal with a record of 79-16-2 for nine seasons).<sup>4</sup> What is also lost is a gain for the viewer: the tidy resolution of competing narratives dramatized throughout the film.

The accompanying documents sent me with the DVD (the press kit sent to reviewers for the popular press) include a synopsis of the story, with this paragraph:

As the election approaches, the Tiger players come to realize that the fate of the levy and the future of their town seems [*sic*] to rest on their success, creating a pressure-filled atmosphere. Faced with obstacles on and off the field, the Tigers must endure criticism, accusation and self-doubt. Taking on these challenges, THREE YOUNG STARS emerge to carry the burden of the town they love into an uncertain future. Entering the final game of the season against mortal enemy Canton McKinley, these young men and their coaches come to understand the power of tradition, the depth of their character and the undeniable force of destiny.

If this is the story Carlson actually thought he made (rather than calculated clichés for a dumbed-down press), the lack of a narrator is particularly fortuitous, for it created a more subtle and complex one.

*Go Tigers!* brings to mind other popular stories about high school sports, particularly *Hoosiers* and *Friday Night Lights* with their common focus on the community, rather than *Hoop Dreams*, the documentary to which some might compare it. *Hoosiers* raises some hard issues early but abandons them in the feel-good final triumph of the plucky farm boys over the big-city bad guys. In *Friday Night Lights*, Odessa, Texas, is the ultimate anti-Football Town, as Bissinger's judgment that football is more a collective pathology than a community ritual shapes his account. In *Go Tigers!* high school football is an obsession for both good *and* ill, as the un-narrated film forces viewers to sort out their responses to what they see. In one hilariously appalling scene, a player at a post-game party vomits in three great gushers onto someone's living-room carpet after chugging what appear to be three full cans of beer, a bleak reminder of what a youthful football culture can look like from the inside. Viewers can sympathize with the alienated anti-jock students who speak of escaping from Massillon at the first opportunity, and with the English teacher (it's always the English teacher in this role) who bemoans the distorted priorities behind the practice of holding back eighth-graders for an extra year of maturation before they start high school football. The Football Town articles in popular magazines always ignored these troubling complications.

On the other hand, it would be hard to dismiss the sense of community spirit that arises from a common passion; and the scene of citizens celebrating over several city blocks, into the twilight, following the triumph over Canton McKinley, can make the Norman Rockwell vision of small-town America at least briefly seem real. Before he became wholly disillusioned, Roger Angell used to write about the importance of *caring* that Major League Baseball could arouse in its fans. A baseball team might be a trivial object for such caring, Angell acknowledged, but in a world in which we care, and care collectively, for so little, the act of caring in itself was precious. *Go Tigers!* implicitly makes this point about high school football in Massillon, Ohio.<sup>5</sup>

The film does not end with this scene of final victory and community celebration. Three days later, the levy passes after several previous failures, and the film suggests that the resurgent Tigers created the good will that swayed voters. I am uncertain how fully to believe this, but if there is truth here, and the film makes it plausible, that proof is appalling. How wrong for seventeen- and eighteen-year-old kids to bear that burden! How skewed for the football program to matter most to the city's voters! (And the first-rate football facilities that viewers cannot fail to notice, from 19,700-seat Paul Brown Tiger Stadium to the state-of-the-art weight room, suggest that a sizable portion of school funding goes to the team.)

The film does not quite end with the passing of the school levy. Just before the credits roll, the three captains appear one last time for where-are-they-now snapshots of the sort that often conclude such films. Irwin and Studer won scholarships to Northern Michigan, but Ellery Moore, after failing four times on his ACT, had to give up Penn State for a prep school in Pennsylvania. The final scene of triumph for both the team and the community—itsself complicated by the extraordinary importance placed on football played by children—is thus complicated further by the best and most needy player's personal defeat. (A little searching on the Web revealed that Moore was a sophomore defensive lineman at the University of Kentucky in 2002, not a belated affirmation of the Norman Rockwell vision but a relief to me.)

Viewers are likely to watch *Go Tigers!* from the perspective of their own communities. Where I live, in a small college town in Oregon, football is a no-cut sport at my son's high school, where the varsity and junior varsity together attracted about forty players this year. For kids, Corvallis is a soccer town, as are many other suburban communities and small cities, particularly university towns where parents begin preparing their children for college in kindergarten. But soccer has no hold on the adult community in Corvallis, or on the two high schools' student bodies, comparable to the football obsession in Massillon, Odessa, Valdosta, and many other places—working-class communities more often than ones full of middle-class professionals. What's been lost in Corvallis and similar towns is a sense of both community and school spirit that is perhaps possible only when centered on the high school football or basketball team. Among the gains is a sense of belonging available to all students, a sense of diverse opportunities for achievement, and a sense of life more richly varied for both students and adults.

Massillon, Ohio, is a throwback to that time memorialized in James Wright's haunting poem, "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio," in which football in Ohio mill towns is a rite enacted by the sons of proud but shamed steelworkers and their love-starved wives,

sons who "Therefore / . . . grow suicidally beautiful / At the beginning of October, / And gallop terribly against each other's bodies."<sup>6</sup> That simple "Therefore" is the knife in the reader's heart. As Wright's poem suggests, that time was not as simple as the Football Town features in popular magazines declared. *Go Tigers!* provides an opportunity for weighing the costs and benefits of preserving a rich tradition from that earlier era.



<sup>1</sup>H. G. Bissinger, *Friday Night Lights: A Town, a Team, and a Dream* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1990); Geoffrey Norman, "Winnersville U.S.A.," *Sports Illustrated*, 31 October 1988, 69-82. A very different view of football in Odessa—the sport as a character-builder—can be found in Regina Walker McCally's *The Secret of Mojo* (Fort Worth, Tex.: R.W. McCally, 1986).

<sup>2</sup>Phil Glick, "Massillon—City of Champions . . . City of Tradition," 2002 Massillon Tigers Cyber Revue—History, <<http://www.massillontigers.com/massillontigers/history.html>>, [January 14, 2004].

<sup>3</sup>Carl Biemiller, "Football Town," *Holiday*, November 1949, 72.

<sup>4</sup>Jack McCallum, "A Mauling in Tiger Town," *Sports Illustrated*, 1 July 1985, 39.

<sup>5</sup>The theme of caring runs through much of Angell's writing on baseball. See his *Five Seasons: A Baseball Companion* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977) and *Late Innings: A Baseball Companion* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982). I discussed Angell's view of caring in greater detail in "An Appreciation on Roger Angell's Silver Anniversary," *Arete: The Journal of Sport Literature* 5 (1987): 35-54.

<sup>6</sup>James Wright, "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio," in *The Branch Will Not Break: Poems* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1963), 15.