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## **Grassroots and Above: Thoughts on American Football in Germany**

This paper will outline the emergence of American football in Germany and its grassroots development during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The paper presents some preliminary thoughts on the subject as part of the early stages of a dissertation that examines German American football in the context of the development of cultural, economic, and political power relations between the United States and Germany. The study ties in with the scholarly debate about Americanization and/or globalization, which started in the first half the 1990s.

Thus far scholarly debates on the so-called “Americanization” of sport have often centered on the profit-driven spread of sports and associated products through measures of market expansion by American based companies like the National Football League. While this is obviously an important area of analysis, it tends to overlook two critical aspects: how many “American” sports were initially appropriated by local people for non-commercial purposes in the “host” culture; and how local entrepreneurs were have been actively involved in the commodification of gridiron football.

The objectives for this paper are threefold: first, provide a brief summation of the scholarly context of the larger study; second, present some thoughts on the historical context and

German youth cultures and popular images associated with *Amerika* and American popular culture; and finally, describe the initial growth of the sport beginning with the formation of the first clubs in the late 1970s. My reconstruction of the early days of the sport in Germany is based on the examination of guidebooks, magazines, and local and national newspapers. Further evidence has been collected from interviews with German and American pioneers of the sport.

The findings of this study support the thesis that American football was actively appropriated by those Germans who started playing and watching the sport in the late 1970s and early 1980s, ten years before the arrival of the American-owned World League of American Football. While the emergence of American football was certainly influenced by a larger influx of American popular culture, it was not the direct result of NFL marketing strategies. The introduction of gridiron football was the outcome of coincidences and personal initiatives rather than the results of cooperate marketing.

However, the presence of American military personnel was critical for the initial development of the sport in Germany. While Americans have provided leadership on the field and on the sidelines since the first days, Germans immediately began to organize the activity in customary structures of sport clubs and federations. The fact that American football became organized in this fashion reveals that Germans were actively involved in adapting and adopting the American game into their sporting culture.