

## Review Article

# *Writing and Reading American Football: Culture, Identities and Sports Studies*<sup>1</sup>

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While many historians of sport have lamented the apparent preoccupation with baseball in American sports history, a number of recent studies focusing on football are welcome additions to the literature on the history of modern sport in the USA. As recently as 1988, historians of sport were hard pressed to find detailed academic analysis of what had become the USA's most popular spectator sport. In a 1995 bibliographic essay on the historical writing on American sport dealing with the 1850-1920 period, Steven Riess identifies only one PhD thesis, one journal article and the National Football League's (NFL) official history as material dealing with professional football and only two books and a handful of articles on college football.<sup>2</sup> While this only covers the period to 1920, it is representative of the dearth of material on American football when compared with the hundreds of studies on baseball's history. As Michael Oriard points out in *Reading Football*, in searching for academic analyses of football, 'even the sport historians had little to say about football. It seemed to me that televised football played a role for men today comparable to the role of romance novels for women, yet while romance fiction had become a conspicuous topic in cultural studies, football was ignored.'<sup>3</sup> Although focusing on the emergence of intercollegiate sport in general, Ronald Smith's *Sports and Freedom* (1988)<sup>4</sup> heralded a new focus in the 1990s by American historians of sport on the development of sport at American universities, of which football has been of overwhelming significance in terms of spectator appeal and revenue generated. While professional football assumes a prominent role in the weekend lives of millions of Americans, along with college football,<sup>5</sup> the bulk of academic work on American football focuses on the formative years of football as a mass spectator sport in the

late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By the 1920s, college football had become a mass public spectacle across the nation followed by millions. And, as Oriard rightly suggests, discussion of football's cultural role has been virtually non-existent.

While the study of football by sports scholars in the USA is relatively underdeveloped in comparison with baseball and other topics, it is worthwhile examining the themes highlighted in a series of recent books that attempt to place football in the context of American history and society. Academic studies by Lester, Oriard, Sperber and Umphlett all concentrate on the pre-World War II history of college football while more popular, but nevertheless well-constructed, books by journalists such as Bissinger and Gildea focus on high school and professional football in more recent times. This essay seeks to draw these books together with the previous scant literature in an analysis of the main themes that have emerged in the study of American football in the 1990s and links them to broader questions about the role of sport in identity formation and in popular culture. Additionally, suggestions for further areas of focus and comparative possibilities are discussed.

### **The 'Founding Fathers' and the Rise of Intercollegiate Football**

Most academic studies in recent years have focused on one or more of the 'founding fathers' of college football, those handful of men who played crucial roles in the shaping of American football as a distinct sport and mass spectacle. Walter Camp, the acknowledged 'father' of American football is omnipresent in most of these works, while other key figures such as Amos Alonzo Stagg, who coached at the University of Chicago from 1892 to 1932; John Heisman, who coached at several universities in the midwest, south and east and after whom the Heisman Trophy for the top collegiate player is named; and Knute Rockne, great player and coach at Notre Dame, appear almost larger than life in several accounts.

American football emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century and resembled rugby, also developing in the same period. A form of football was played at elite east coast universities such as Harvard by the 1840s. Initially used for the hazing, or initiation, of freshmen by upperclassmen, administrators attacked the game in the 1860s for its brutality. Students soon turned their attention to the possibility of intercollegiate contests. The first of these games took place between Rutgers and Princeton in 1869. Teams were quickly formed at

east coast universities and contests between nearby universities began to occur in the early 1870s. Yale, Princeton and Columbia agreed in 1873 to follow Yale's rules of association football. Harvard refused to agree and was forced to play against McGill University from Montreal, Quebec, in 1874. McGill followed the English rugby rules of the newly formed Rugby Football Union (1871)<sup>6</sup> and Harvard's rules were similar enough that the two agreed to play a game under each set of rules. The Harvard men were attracted to rugby and ultimately won over men from Yale, Princeton and Columbia who all came together to form the Intercollegiate Football Association in 1876.

It is from this background that several academic historical studies have proceeded to discuss how football spread from its exclusive beginnings. Oriard, a former player in the professional NFL and a professor of English, takes the broadest view and goes further than other historians of American football in attempting to understand the cultural meanings and centrality of football. Additionally, Oriard shows how this cultural significance was created by the early 1900s in the media and through the self-promotion of leading football coaches, in particular Walter Camp. Oriard's *Reading Football* is the best historical work on the meaning of sport in American culture and society since Donald Mrozek's *Sport and the American Mentality 1880-1920*.<sup>7</sup> Oriard's book is not a conventional history of sport, but rather concentrates on the creation of meaning in his reading of football as a cultural text. Through analyses of newspaper reports and writings by leading figures in football's early history, Oriard successfully reconstructs how football became one of the dominant forms of public culture and mass spectacle in American society by the early 1900s. Oriard concentrates on the period from the founding of the Intercollegiate Association in 1876 to the advent of the forward pass as a major offensive strategy in 1913. Oriard's approach offers much for the historian and cultural analyst of any sport and merits a close reading by any scholar interested in the history and cultural meaning of sport. Although we do not know enough about the history of football in general, Oriard both supplies excellent detail and superb analysis, thus blending history and theory in a manner that would satisfy both the general reader and academic specialists.

While Oriard examines football as a cultural text, he does not seek to ascribe any one meaning to a single text. Rather, as with much cultural studies work over the past several years, Oriard agrees that a

multiplicity of meanings existed that were not merely created by authors and absorbed by a mass, undifferentiated audience. Oriard argues that football is more of a social cultural activity than many other forms of popular culture that has been examined in cultural studies. The central point about football, he argues, is that it is a social activity, watched and experienced vocally in groups compared with novels read in private or movies watched in public, but experienced silently. Oriard argues that football's function is 'to tell stories, and in such a way that no movie or novel can be, the stories football tells are "real"'. Here, ultimately is the source of sport's cultural power.<sup>8</sup> Oriard further argues for a special intensified narrativity for football (and baseball) compared with the European sports of soccer and cricket. Baseball has many permutations, as does cricket, but its shorter duration often heightens its dramatic qualities. American football, Oriard argues, has greater narrative qualities than soccer or rugby due to its greater number of stops in play and set plays. He goes on to state that 'more important, the granting of the ball to one team until it scores or is stopped creates a kind of narrative intention absent from soccer and rugby'<sup>9</sup> This comment may be unfair to rugby and rugby league, both of which could also claim a heightened sense of narrativity based on Oriard's proposition about American football. The assertion of one sport's relative narrativity over another may be hard to determine, but is another area ripe for comparative analysis if we are to more fully understand why particular sports become more widely popular than others. A sport's cultural centrality is only partly influenced by existing power structures, rather, a wide range of cultural, social, economic and political dynamics impact upon the development of any sport's broader place in society. Narrativity and aesthetics in sport are worthy avenues for research, especially when situated within a cultural studies approach such as that used by Oriard.

Two rule changes in the period between 1876 and 1882 identified by Oriard were crucial in making American football unique and distinct from rugby union. American football had more officials and, most crucially developed the line of scrimmage from where the ball was put into play after a stoppage. Other than the absence of off-side rules in Australian football and Gaelic football, the scrimmage line was the most distinctive early innovation in the hybridisation of football codes from rugby or Association rules.<sup>10</sup> The lack of any great sense of tradition, Oriard contends, led to a celebration of the national genius for

circumventing the rules which was expressed in an American democratic ethos, a dialectical sense of 'fair play embracing both 'sportsmanship' and 'gamesmanship', quite different from the British model.<sup>11</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, in the adoption of rugby union in colonial settings, locals were not shackled with the same sense of traditionalism with many early innovations in the game coming from New Zealand and South Africa.<sup>12</sup>

Academic studies of football history are largely representative of most sports history that has been written in the United States and present problems in analysis caused by a narrow focus, or an 'Amerocentrism'. A repeated assertion of the uniqueness of the USA and American experience appears in most studies while little reference to other settler societies appear. While American university sport operates on a level that is truly unique (in September 1996 over

107 000 fans packed into Nieland Stadium at the University of Tennessee to see Tennessee's game against the University of Florida), historians of American sport must look beyond their borders to other settler societies to gain a broader perspective on the development of modern organised sport. Too frequently, historians working on sport in settler societies such as the USA, Australia, New Zealand or South Africa have ignored the international and comparative context.

Transnational migration was quite common in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and such migration had significant influence on the development of sport. In Argentina, British sailors, miners, businessmen and labourers established the games of soccer and rugby union in the late-nineteenth century. In the American context migrants played important roles in American-invented sports. Sperber, in his study of the rise of Notre Dame football, discusses that Irish migrants helped establish baseball as dominant over cricket and football over rugby and soccer through their hatred of things British, particularly after the Fenian revolts of the 1860s. Many early football stars, such as James Hogan of Yale University were of Irish descent. Besides their dislike of British sports, many Irish-Americans held little regard for the British upper-class generated cult of amateurism and saw nothing wrong with receiving payment for play.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, migration between settler societies was common in the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Umphlett briefly discusses the career of Patrick O'Dea who grew laying Australian football in Melbourne and who excelled

punting and kicking goals for the University of Wisconsin between 1896 and 1899.<sup>14</sup> In one game against the University of Minnesota, he is reported to have punted a ball 110 yards. O'Dea went on to coach Notre Dame for two seasons after his playing career at Wisconsin finished. While many soccer players, some rugby players and Darren Bennett from Australian football have played for universities or in the NFL in the USA in recent years, O'Dea's case shows that international sporting migration began in a much earlier period when migration in general between and amongst European and settler societies was much more fluid than today. Australian soldiers and miners took Australian football to South Africa where records exist of games being played during the 1890s and early 1900s. Cricket and baseball were harder games than football codes to promote cross-culturally and some form of football was played virtually all over the world by the 1920s. We need many more studies to help us understand how football codes were globalised and how local variations emerged.

A further example of Amerocentrism in the books comes in discussions of reactions to the violence in football, particularly the crisis of 1905 over the number of deaths in the game. Similar concerns were voiced about rugby union in New Zealand, Britain, South Africa and Australia in the 1890s and following decade. Comparative analyses may show that there was an overall concern in Western societies with violent sports in the immediate years after 1900. While many critics complained about violence in sport, this period was also one of promoting masculinity through sports. President Roosevelt in the USA argued for the 'strenuous life' and English critics worried about the decline of English manhood through increased numbers of sporting defeats by colonials. English critics urged a renewed focus on sports, especially rugby union, amongst elite boys.<sup>15</sup>

Another limitation in the writing of football history and some other sports history studies in the USA is the misuse, and, in the case of Wiley Umphlett's book on John Heisman, the overuse, of the terms, such as 'democracy' and 'democratisation', in describing the expansion of football to universities outside the original eastern elite colleges. While the game spread to virtually every American university by the early 1900s, it did not develop into a democratic institution. On the contrary, control of the game became further and further removed from those who played it, a process that has accelerated in Australia in the

1980s and 1990s. Oriard does not fall into this trap as he rightly points out, 'fewer than a dozen young men, all representing elite universities and relatively privileged classes, controlled the game during these crucial early years of its development'.<sup>16</sup> Smith makes a similar point arguing that 'the push for excellence and winning had evolved at an extremely early time'. He also points out, though less forcefully, that in no period did intercollegiate sport possess the virtues that have been attributed to them.<sup>17</sup>

Walter Camp, more than any other figure, shaped the early history of intercollegiate football. Camp played at Yale from 1876 to 1882 then served for thirty years as Yale's unofficial coach. From 1878 until he died in 1925, Camp was on football's rule committees, mostly serving as secretary. He brought in the scrimmage rule in 1880 and the 1882 rule that a team must advance the ball five yards in three plays or 'downs'. He argued for the reduction of player numbers from fifteen to eleven. He also advocated low tackling in 1888 but resisted the proposal to legalise the forward pass in 1906. Camp wanted to control the development of the game and he opposed any radical changes once his early rules were adopted. Camp also selected his personal All-American teams from 1889 onwards. Camp's All-America team became an annual feature in *Collier's Weekly* magazine from 1898. Camp's influence on American football merits comparative analysis with the role of other administrators and officials who played key roles in the early development and organisation of a particular sport. Perhaps no other figure in the USA had such a profound effect on one sport, though Albert Spalding played a crucial role in the expansion of baseball and attempts to market it internationally at about the same time as Camp exerted his influence over football.<sup>18</sup>

### **Football as Play and Work**

While the American version of football became highly commercialised and developed into a mass spectator sport, it retained nearly all the vestiges of amateurism, at least in theory and rhetoric. Professional coaches appeared by the 1890s, though their influence on game day was controlled. In 1892 coaches were barred from coaching from the sideline and a 1900 rule forbade coaching during a game by anyone not playing on the field. In 1914 all persons were banned from walking along the sidelines and it was only in 1967 that the sideline coaching we recognise

today was officially sanctioned. Oriard argues that Camp viewed English rugby as chaotic play and thought of American football as purposeful work with the game moving from primitive physicality toward reason and order.<sup>19</sup> Hard training developed in the 1890s and one University of Chicago player stated in 1897 that 'I have no more fun in practice games. It isn't amusement or recreation any more. It is nothing less than hard work.'<sup>20</sup> Despite such evidence, American historians of sport have failed to apply Marxist theory and discussions of sport as work in any sophisticated manner. Many commentators, coaches and administrators believed that football emulated the development of capitalism in the USA and, as it emerged as a commercial enterprise, it seemed impossible to ignore the links between the game and capitalism. It is from notions of football as hard and purposeful work that several authors characterise football's role in a rapidly industrialising America of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Oriard shows that Camp generated a narrative of football with a distinct plot:

the rationalisation and tactical development of the game's action, driven by the object of winning, developed in young men the character and experiences essential for success in America. Camp's master metaphor for football in all of his writings was the hierarchically structured, efficiently run industrial corporation.<sup>21</sup>

Camp interpreted football meaning in essentially managerial and technocratic terms. Umphlett and Lester show that Heisman and Stagg respectively viewed football in the same terms as Camp. Thus football's early leading coaches linked football's narrative to that of industrialising America arguing that football represented the drive for success in wider society. It was not difficult to point out the links between competitive sport and competitive capitalism as the basic structures were very similar. Modern sport, despite some idealistic assertions to the contrary, has from the beginning been about winning and losing, often at virtually any cost. Sperber argues that:

One of the enduring myths about intercollegiate athletics is that they were originally innocent and pure. In reality, because they began during the highly corrupt era in American sports that culminated in the Black Sox scandal of 1919, and because they were connected to the brawling and gambling sports subculture, dishonesty and unethical practices marked

their first period. The large football schools of the East and in the Western Conference were particularly adept at pioneering new forms of fraud and hypocrisy.<sup>22</sup>

Players shifted regularly between universities, some professional players appeared in big games and eligibility rules were initially very flexible. As coaches were paid for success, they frequently manipulated the rules to win games against nearby rivals and top schools from other regions. As spectator interest increased, emphasis on success also advanced.

In the 1880s and 1890s football went from a game to a spectacle. Large stadia began to appear by the early 1900s. In 1903 Harvard's stadium could hold up to 50 000 and in 1914 the Yale Bowl opened with a capacity of 78 000. Other grand facilities soon appeared all over the country. In 1924 over 90 000 people witnessed the game between Stanford and the University of California. In 1937 the annual championship game between public and Catholic high schools in Chicago attracted 120 000 fans. Steven Riess suggests that this game constituted 'the largest crowd for a team sports event in American history'.<sup>23</sup> Sperber's account, however, shows that the 1927 Notre Dame versus Southern California game at Soldier Field in Chicago attracted over

120 000. The demand for tickets to the Notre Dame-Army game of the same year was so great that a reported 100 000 ticket requests had to be rejected.<sup>24</sup> Despite a decline in attendances during the 1930s due to the Great Depression, college football's place as a mass spectator sport was secured by the end of the 1920s.

Nowhere was the transformation of football from game to spectacle more dramatic than at the University of Chicago. Established by an endowment from John D Rockefeller in the early 1890s, Chicago's first president, William Rainey Harper, identified football as crucial in establishing a wider reputation for the new university. Harper hired Amos Alonzo Stagg in 1891 as a tenured Associate Professor of Physical Culture and Football for the unprecedented salary of \$2500. Stagg's appointment was the first of its kind both in physical education and in coaching. Robin Lester charts the rise of football at the University of Chicago and its later demise in a well-researched study of the internal politics of the university, inter-university relations, alumni interests and the local media in *Stagg's University*. Stagg, with Harper's full support, created a successful program which rapidly sparked wide spectator interest. In 1893, Chicago's second season, the university initiated an

annual Thanksgiving Day game against the University of Michigan. About 3000 spectators were present for the inaugural game, but for the 1905 match, 27 000 people attended, tickets were being scalped for the unheard of sum of \$20 and an estimated

\$50 000 had been wagered on the outcome.<sup>25</sup> For the 1922 game against eastern power Princeton, Chicago received over 100 000 requests for tickets. The game soon became the leading football game in the midwest, often for the regional championship until the 1920s. In 1905, Chicago became the first midwestern university to win the 'national championship'. Notre Dame matched this feat in 1924 and became so successful that its 1926 season generated a profit of \$251 000.<sup>26</sup> Ironically, in a society obsessed with winners and losers, college football still lacks a playoff system to determine the national champion, but rather journalists or coaches vote in polls and the team with the most votes wins the mythical championship.

### **Spectacle, Passion and the Media in the Making of American Football**

By 1900 most universities had football programs and rivalries with nearby institutions. In many areas, the two leading universities within the same state developed vicious rivalries not only on the field but off it as well. In South Carolina, the University of South Carolina and Clemson University played at the State Fairgrounds in Columbia, home of South Carolina during the State Fair each year from the 1890s until the 1960s except for six years in the early 1900s. In 1902, South Carolina defeated Clemson for the first time in five years. Clemson cadets, offended by some of the Carolina celebrations tried to march to the edge of Carolina's campus. Carolina students erected barricades and armed themselves with pistols. Violence was narrowly averted and, in the aftermath, Carolina officials broke off football contact with Clemson until 1909.<sup>27</sup> Such confrontation was rare, however, the incident illustrates the importance of football by the early 1900s in other parts of the country and not just in the northeast. While not attributable to local rivalries, Notre Dame games periodically drew hostile reactions from opposing team's fans, as Sperber demonstrates. Several games against the University of Nebraska were marred by anti-Catholic incidents with local fans antagonising Notre Dame players and fans. Newspaper headlines in Lincoln, Nebraska such as 'Horrible Hibernians Invade Today fomented these feelings. A 1925 half-time show by Nebraska

students officially mocked Notre Dame's famed Four Horsemen backfield of the early 1920s. Soon after this event Notre Dame ended the series. Sperber argues that such behaviour was not normal in the 1920s, but Notre Dame was linked directly to the anti-Catholic sentiments promoted by the Ku Klux Klan amongst other groups.<sup>28</sup>

The Thanksgiving Day game became the major feature of most college football programs in the 1890s and early 1900s. The annual Thanksgiving Day game in New York City, emulated elsewhere, has been referred to by numerous authors as crucial to the emergence of football as a national spectacle. Oriard points out, though, that the game in New York took place only eleven times and it was only at the end of the 1880s that it became a major social event.<sup>29</sup> The game was a catalyst for generating a popular audience for college football as much more than just a sporting contest. The elevation of football in popular consciousness through the Thanksgiving Day games, however, was largely produced by the sensationalist reporting that appeared in American newspapers by the late nineteenth century.

It is quite well known that Henry Chadwick was the first sports reporter in the USA. He was hired in 1862 to cover baseball for the *New York Herald*. Chadwick played a crucial role in the promotion of baseball. It was not until 1883, however, that Joseph Pulitzer created the first sports department at a major newspaper after he bought the *New York World*. Oriard points out that the *World's* circulation went from 15 000 in 1883 to 60 000 by 1884, 150 000 by 1885 and 250 000 in 1887. By 1892 the *World* claimed to have two million readers. The *World* and the *Evening World* begun in 1887 used illustrations and began sensationalised reporting. Sensational journalism increased after William Randolph Hearst bought the *New York Journal*, thus creating a sensationalist competition. Oriard argues that the mass audience for college football that spanned the range of social classes was generated primarily by the daily press. The majority of football's mass audience discovered it through the newspapers and not through attendance at games.<sup>30</sup> By the 1920s every major daily newspaper devoted four or five pages to sport during the week with even greater coverage in the Sunday editions. The 1920s, however, saw the rise of 'gee whiz' journalism whereby sportswriters uncritically spun fantastic stories about coaches and players. Many reporters were paid by coaches and officials to serve as promoters and even as referees. Knute Rockne at Notre Dame frequently hired

Walter Eckersoll<sup>31</sup> of the *Chicago Tribune* to referee Notre Dame football matches in the 1920s.<sup>32</sup> Oriard points out that while Camp and his colleagues from Harvard and Princeton gave football its narrative structure, 'the daily press then taught the public how to interpret the game, how to read it as a cultural text'<sup>33</sup> One of the crucial narratives of football which coaches, administrators and politicians constantly used, and continue to recite today through a largely uncritical media has been that of football's role as a manly game. While numerous analyses of constructions of masculinity have been undertaken by sociologists of sport, Oriard's discussion of manliness is one of the few on masculinities that has appeared in a historical study.<sup>34</sup> Jim McKay and Iain Middlemiss demonstrate in the Australian context how the media actively shape constructions of hegemonic masculinity in the presentation of violence and mythical depictions of events surrounding State of Origin rugby league matches, though we know little of how such presentations have evolved over time.<sup>35</sup>

### **Masculinity and Violence in the Early History of Football**

Oriard examines how football and concepts of masculinity interacted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Coaches, journalists, university officials and President Theodore Roosevelt (1901-09) spoke frequently about football's role in making tough men who could face the hard challenges of life. Oriard explains that 'a preoccupation with the male body and a shift toward a more muscular ideal arose toward the close of the century when physical prowess ironically had become largely irrelevant to real economic power'.<sup>36</sup> Coaches such as Stagg and Heisman believed that individual success in sports measured a man's worth both on and off the field.<sup>37</sup> The promotion of football as developing masculine qualities was not without difficulties in the late 1890s and early 1900s. Many critics spoke out about the violent nature of the game, particularly the large number of injuries and deaths caused by new formations such as the 'flying wedge'. In 1905, the debates about football's role in society came to a head as a record number of players died. A significant number of men called for the game to be banned completely. University of Chicago Divinity Professor Shailor Mathews argued that 'football today is a social obsession—a boy-killing, education prostituting, gladiatorial sport'.<sup>38</sup> Many shared the sentiments of Mathews, but football had a powerful ally in President Roosevelt, a vocal advocate for the 'strenuous life'. Roosevelt condemned the violence in the game during

1905 until he realised that many officials were moving towards banning the game. Roosevelt summoned a member of the University of Pennsylvania's Board of Athletic Control to the White House for a meeting on the issue and used him to pronounce the ultimate value of football in making men who were strong and able to compete in a dynamic society arguing that brutality in the game should be treated as it was in boxing. Roosevelt stated that 'it would be a real misfortune to lose so manly and vigorous a game as football'.<sup>39</sup> The sport survived as rules were changed and the numbers of deaths began to decline.

Recently, some young women have been allowed to play high school football. Any injury, however, leads to hysterical reactions about football being 'too rough for girls to play. In an excellent analysis of sport, gender, society and the role of sports in the United States, Mariah Burton Nelson, in *The Stronger Women Get, the More Men Love Football*', persuasively argues that men are too weak to play football, the game itself is too violent. On average eight boys die from football-related injuries each year, the average life expectancy of former NFL players is fifty-six years and 78 per cent of former NFL players have some permanent physical disability from football-related injuries.<sup>40</sup> While the game may not be as violent as those of the flying wedge formation of the early 1900s, football is still a violent sport in which severe injuries and death remain risks for players. More historical research into violence and football is needed and on the responses of various groups to issues of death and injury in the game to generate a more complete sense of football's role in 'making men', indeed in 'making violent men'. Finally, as Burton Nelson shows, football is now one of the very few cultural and social activities whereby men still try to separate themselves from women either as players or spectators.

### **Nostalgia, Identity, Masculinity and Football in America**

Football's role in national consciousness was cemented by Hollywood in 1940 in the film *Knute Rockne: All-American*. While the film drew on the life of Rockne and his Notre Dame football teams, it glossed over many actual events, perpetuated several myths and idealised the game of football through a nostalgic recollection of Rockne's life as coach of Notre Dame. The film remained in popular consciousness particularly in the 1980s when President Ronald Reagan, who co-starred in the film, repeatedly referred to the film and the values it supposedly portrayed. Sperber discusses in detail how the film came into being and the series of

myths about Rockne and Notre Dame that the film invented or perpetuated.<sup>41</sup>

William Gildea's book, *When the Colts Belonged to Baltimore*, focuses on a later time from the histories of college football's development and concentrates on the role of a professional football team in one community.<sup>42</sup> Gildea, a sports journalist with the *Washington Post*, returns to the Baltimore of his youth when the Baltimore Colts NFL team were the most popular celebrities in town and succeeds in portraying a sense of what Baltimore life was like in the 1950s. As the book's overtly nostalgic blurb states, 'Gildea evokes the spirit of 1950s America, when professional athletes were workaday neighbors and community was more than a political slogan ... This is a story, too, about the geographies of the heart: why something so simple as a team can arouse such emotional attachments.' Gildea's book is an important contribution to the understanding of football's meaning, at least in 1950s American east coast cities. Gildea's book reads very much like Warwick Roger's 1991 recollection of the 1956 Springbok tour of New Zealand, *Old Heroes*,<sup>43</sup> and is nostalgic in nature, yet also vividly recaptures the feelings generated by the Baltimore Colts and its leading players.

While college football is more widespread and evokes emotional responses from fans, professional football has done the same particularly in its heartland of northern and midwestern industrial cities. The loss of the Baltimore Colts to Indianapolis in 1984 and the relocation of the Cleveland Browns to Baltimore in 1996 were traumatic to fans and to the cities, though the city of Cleveland had won the right to keep the name and history of the Browns. Gildea's book is not only a discussion of a time, but of a particular kind of spectating, when players were closer to the communities in which they played and working-class people could afford to attend games on a regular basis. Memorial Stadium in Baltimore had a particular 'feel' and atmosphere which will be quite different in the new \$200 million-plus stadium with large numbers of corporate boxes. Indeed supporters of the Baltimore Stallions who played briefly in the Canadian Football League competition in 1993-95 winning the Grey Cup championship in 1995, remarked that watching the Stallions at Memorial Stadium in \$12 seats reminded them of the 'good old days' of watching the Colts before corporate boxes and televisual football took over. The Save Our Stallions group fought against the move of the Stallions after the owner of the NFL's Cleveland Browns, Art Modell,

decided to move his team to Baltimore for the 1996 season. Though ultimately unsuccessful, the Save Our Stallions group provide active evidence of the arguments made by Gildea in his discussion of the feeling of community in Baltimore in the 1950s and 1960s that gelled around the Colts. The Baltimore Sun reported on the Stallions last game as a scene out of 1955 not 1995: 'It evoked the community's long, lost relationship with the Colts ... It's football in a time warp, No luxury boxes. No club seating. No permanent seat licenses. No guilt. You can reach out and touch the Stallions. The same won't be true of the NFL Browns ... this team was a reflection of one Baltimore.'<sup>44</sup>

Nostalgia is a powerful emotion in sport studies and deserves greater attention, perhaps in the context of exploring geographies of the heart.<sup>45</sup> Australian football supporters in Melbourne are certainly familiar with such emotions as Fitzroy Football Club disappeared from the Australian Football League competition after the 1996 season, amalgamated with Brisbane over 2000 kilometres away, while there have been doubts about the future of Footscray, Richmond, St Kilda, Hawthorn and Melbourne in recent years. The possible collapse of individual clubs or merger proposals have evoked widespread emotional responses based on deep senses of community and identity based largely on nostalgic recollection. The concept of 'geographies of the heart' allows us to think of nostalgia as place — as well as temporally-based. All temporal activities occur spatially and studies of sport and local identities need to take this into careful consideration.<sup>46</sup>

While many people may be nostalgic for the forms of spectating dominant in the 1950s in North America, Britain and in Australia, we need more insights such as those in Gildea's book and Roger's on New Zealand, and the 1950s in general need much greater attention from sports historians, The 1950s seem to have been largely lost between the history of sport which too often stops at 1914 or 1945 and the sociology of sport which picks up somewhere around 1968. While the two disciplines certainly overlap and have much to offer each other, present debates notwithstanding, scholars in both areas would do well to take a more thorough look at the 1950s.

American football is not only significant at professional and university levels. High school football is just as important and in some smaller communities, even more significant in the maintenance of local identity. Harold Bissinger, an investigative reporter with the *Chicago*

*Tribune*, spent the 1988 football season in Odessa, Texas with the Permian High School Panthers football team who regularly drew 20 000 fans to their games. Odessa is a small city in the West Texas desert and oil fields region with periodic bouts of high unemployment, racial tensions, but these largely disappear, at least for about three months of Friday nights between September and December. Bissinger paints a vivid picture of Odessa and the football team, drawing attention to the emphasis on the team and how this affects the players, their families, the fans and young women in the school who are relegated to cheerleading roles on the cheerleading squad or as Pepettes, senior year girls who form the school spirit squad and are responsible for making signs for senior year players and wear white jerseys with the number of their player on it. They make food, bring beer and other gifts to the players which often develops into a stressful competition between Pepettes.<sup>47</sup> Bissinger also follows the trials faced by the players and how devastating an injury can be to a player hoping to win a college scholarship and perhaps to make it to the NFL one day. Bissinger's book, along with Darcy Preys study of inter-city basketball and the documentary movie *Hoop Dreams* and the accompanying book by Ben Joravsky, powerfully point out the ways that thousands of high schools athletes have their dreams of receiving a college scholarship or making the pros shattered each year in an annual version of the 'survival of the fittest and luckiest'.<sup>48</sup>

### Conclusions

The history and sociology of American football, while not being written as fervently as baseball, is now receiving serious attention by academics interested in the historical development and meaning of sport in American society. High quality popular books such as Gildea's nostalgic recollection of the Baltimore Colts and Baltimore society in the 1950s and Bissinger's *Friday Night Lights* also add to our understanding of football in American society. Sports studies' scholars working on other sports and in other national contexts would be well served by following the approach taken by Oriard. We know much about the specific history of various sports, but little sophisticated analysis of the meanings of particular sports as Oriard has provided for the early history of American football or as Richard Gruneau and David Whitson did for Canadian hockey in their *Hockey Night in Canada*.<sup>49</sup> Local studies of sport and community as well as textual analyses of writing about sport in particular periods of time are both needed in much greater number in Australia and many more of

these studies should also be undertaken in North America.<sup>50</sup> Both the books by Lester on the University of Chicago and Sperber on Notre Dame provide excellent examples of the rewards possible from thorough research and localised studies. Comparative studies of the early development of football codes in the late nineteenth century in settler societies of North America, Argentina, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa will also provide valuable insight into the ways that sporting cultures and practices changed in specific contexts and what influences these societies may have had on each other.

### NOTES:

- 1 Major books discussed in this review are: Harold Bissinger, *Friday Night Lights: A Town, A Team, and a Dream*, HarperCollins, New York, 1991; William Gildea, *When the Colts Belonged to Baltimore: A Father and a Son, a Team and a Time*, Tickner and Fields, New York, 1994; Robin Lester, *Stagg's University: The Rise, Decline and Fall of Big-Time Football at Chicago*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1995; Michael Oriard, *Reading Football; How the Popular Press Created an American Sporting Spectacle*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1993; Murray Sperber, *Shake Down the Thunder: The Creation of Notre Dame Football*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1993; Wiley Lee Umphlett, *Creating the Big Game, John W Heisman and the Invention of American Football*, Greenwood Press, Westport, Ct, 1992.
- 2 Steven A Riess, *Sport in Industrial America 1850-1920*, Harlan Davidson, Wheeling, Il, 1995, pp. 198-9, 201.
- 3 Oriard, *Reading Football*, p. xvii.
- 4 Ronald Smith, *Sports and Freedom: The Rise of Big-Time College Athletics*, OUP, New York, 1988.
- 5 In the USA, college and university are often used interchangeably, thus 'college football' refers to football played at institutions of higher learning called university or college, such as Notre Dame University and Dartmouth College.
- 6 For an understanding of the rugby union ethos on which football developed, see Timothy J L Chandler, 'The Structuring of Manliness in the English Public Schools and Oxbridge 1830 - 1880', in John Nauright and Timothy J L Chandler, eds., *Making Men: Rugby and Masculine Identity*, Frank Cass, London, 1996; and J A Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School*, CUP, Cambridge, 1981.
- 7 Donald Mrozek, *Sport and the American Mentality 1880-1920*, University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, 1983.
- 8 Oriard, *Reading Football*, p. 9.
- 9 Oriard, *Reading Football*, p. 23.
- 10 It is worth investigating how virtually every football code in the world was codified with an emerging pattern of distinct rules between 1859 and 1884 (with the hybrid games of rugby league and Canadian football being much altered later from roots in rugby union).
- 11 See Chandler, 'The Structuring of Manliness', for concepts of 'fair play' and 'sportsmanship in the English context.
- 12 John Nauright, 'Sport, Manhood and Empire: British Responses to the New Zealand Rugby Tour of 1905', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, vol. 8, no. 2, May 1991, pp. 239-55; 'Colonial Manhood and Imperial Race Virility: British Responses to Post-Boer War Colonial Rugby Tours', in Nauright and Chandler, eds., *Making Men*, pp. 121-39.

- 13 Sperber, *Shake Down the Thunder*, p. 10, though Sperber wrongly attributes the founding of the Gaelic Athletic Association (in 1884) to the failure of the Fenian revolts. He argues that 'in Ireland after the abortive 1860s Fenian revolts against British rule the nationalists created the Gaelic Athletic Association'. Again an example of an American scholar not utilising the now quite well-developed literature on the early development of the GAA.
- 14 Umphlett, *Creating the Big Game*, p. 61.
- 15 For a discussion of this in the American context, see Mrozek, *Sport and the American Mentality*, for the British and colonial context, see Nauright and Chandler, *Making Men*.
- 16 Oriard, *Reading Football*, p. 30.
- 17 Smith, *Sports and Freedom*, pp. ix-x.
- 18 For information on Spalding, see Peter Levine, *A G Spalding and the Rise of Baseball: The Promise of American Sport*, OUP, New York, 1985.
- 19 Oriard, *Reading Football*, pp. 41-2.
- 20 Lester, *Stagg's University*, p. 32.
- 21 Oriard, *Reading Football*, p. 37.
- 22 Sperber, *Shake Down the Thunder*, p. 11.
- 23 Steven Riess, *City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1989, pp. 155-6.
- 24 Sperber, *Shake Down the Thunder*, pp. 264, 267.
- 25 Lester, *Stagg's University*, p. 68.
- 26 Sperber, *Shake Down the Thunder*, p. 222.
- 27 Lester, *Stagg's University*, p. 32.
- 28 Sperber, *Shake Down the Thunder*, pp. 200-203.
- 29 Oriard, *Reading Football*, p. 92.
- 30 Oriard, *Reading Football*, p. 61.
- 31 Eckersoll, who died in 1930, was a former great quarterback at the University of Chicago, though his academic performance was so poor that he eventually was excluded from the University, though his coach, Amos Alonzo Stagg tried everything he could to keep him eligible. For more on this, see Lester, *Stagg's University*, pp. 55-63.
- 32 Sperber, *Shake Down the Thunder*, p. 192.
- 33 Oriard, *Reading Football*, p. 85.
- 34 Nauright and Chandler, *Making Men*, is the first book to examine masculine identity in one sport from an historical perspective.
- 35 Jim McKay and Iain Middlemiss, "'Mate Against Mate, State Against State": A Case Study of Media Constructions of Hegemonic Masculinity in Australian Sport', *Masculinities*, vol. 3, no. 3, Fall 1995, pp. 28-45. Also, see Nick Trujillo, 'Hegemonic Masculinity on the Mound: Media Representations of Nolan Ryan and American Sports Culture', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, vol. 8, 1991, pp. 290-308, for an analysis of how the American media represented one particular player as a masculine hero.
- 36 Oriard, *Reading Football*, p. 190.
- 37 Umphlett, *Creating the Big Game*, p. 71.
- 38 Lester, *Stagg's University*, p. 65.
- 39 Quoted in Lester, *Stagg's University*, p. 75.
- 40 Mariah Burton Nelson, *The Stronger Women Get, the More Men Love Football: Sexism and the American Culture of Sports*, Harcourt Brace and Company, New York, 1994, pp. 77-8.
- 41 Sperber, *Shake Down the Thunder*, pp. 464-83.
- 42 There are virtually no academic studies of professional football history, though some good local histories exist. There is a good two volume history of the early

- Green Bay Packers, the USA's only publicly-owned professional sports franchise, see Larry Names, *The History of the Green Bay Packers: The Lambeau Years, Part One*, Angel Press of Wisconsin, Wautoma, WI, 1987; and *The History of the Green Bay Packers: The Lambeau Years, Part Two*, Angel Press of Wisconsin, Wautoma, WI, 1989.
- 43 Wawick Roger, *Old Heroes: The 1956 Springbok Tour and the Lives Beyond*, Hodder and Stoughton, Auckland, 1991. For a discussion of the book and the role of nostalgia see, John Nauright, 'Reclaiming Old and Forgotten Heroes: Nostalgia, Rugby and Identity in New Zealand', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 10, no. 2, May 1994, pp. 131-9.
- 44 *Baltimore Sun*, 13 Nov. 1995.
- 45 For examples, see John Nauright, 'Reclaiming Old and Forgotten Heroes'; John Nauright, 'Rugby and the Nostalgia of Masculinity', in Nauright and Chandler, eds., *Making Men*, pp. 229-52; John Nauright, "'A Besieged Tribe": Nostalgia, White Cultural Identity and the Role of Rugby in a Changing South Africa', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, vol. 31, no. 1, Feb. 1996, pp. 69-89; John Nauright and Philip White, 'Sport, Nostalgia, Nation and Community in Canada', *AVANTE*, in press; and Joseph Maguire, 'Sport, Identity Politics and Globalization', *Sociology of Sport Journal*, vol. 11, no. 4, 1994, pp. 398-427.
- 46 The work of John Bale is useful here, but few geographical studies of sport exist. See John Bale, *Landscapes of Modern Sport*, Leicester University Press, Leicester, 1993.
- 47 Bissinger, *Friday Night Lights*, pp. 45-6.
- 48 Darcy Frey, *The Last Shot: City Streets, Basketball Dreams*, Touchstone, New York, 1996; Ben Joravsky, *Hoop Dreams: A True Story*, HarperCollins, New York, 1996; see also Rick Telander, *The Hundred Yard Lie: The Corruption of College Football and What We Can Do to Stop It*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1990; and Ken Denlinger, *For the Glory: College Football Dreams and Realities Inside Paterno's Program*, St Martin's, New York, 1994.
- 49 Richard Gruneau and David Whitson, *Hockey Night in Canada: Sport, Identities and Cultural Politics*, Garamond, Toronto, 1993. Also see Nauright and White, 'Sport, Nostalgia, Nation and Community in Canada'.
- 50 A good popular account that captures a sense of meaning in Australian football, though more from the inside of a specific club is Martin Flanagan, *Southern Skies, Western Oval*, McPhee and Gribble, Melbourne, 1994. The first real examination of the social history of one football club in a community has just been published and is reviewed elsewhere in this journal, Andrew Moore, *The Mighty Bears! A Social History of North Sydney Rugby League*, North Sydney Rugby Leagues Club, North Ryde, NSW, 1996.