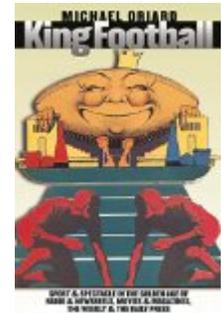


Michael Oriard. *King Football: Sport and Spectacle in the Golden Age of Radio, Newsreels, Movies & Magazines, The Weekly & The Daily Press.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. 491 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2650-8.



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Published on H-Arete (July, 2003)

King Football is Michael Oriard's second volume examining the historic role of football in American culture. The first was *Reading Football*, the much acclaimed examination of football in its formative years prior to World War I. This much-anticipated second volume, covering the period 1920 to 1960, will not disappoint those who were captivated by *Reading Football*.

As suggested in the extended title, Oriard has moved beyond the print media in order to follow popular media where technology had taken it, in the period from 1920 to 1960. In these four decades football was transformed from within, and had moved to a premier position among spectator sports in America. Although the central focus of the volume continues to be the college game, Oriard examines the emerging professional game, high school football, and some significant appendages to football.

This is much more than a history of football, and in fact should not be described as such. It is really a history of the transformation of American popular culture in the period of 1920 to 1960, as seen through football culture in popular media. It

is an examination of the meaning of football as a consumer product in the emerging consumer age.

The book is divided into two sections, entitled, "The Kingdom of Football" and "What We Think About When we Think About Football." The entire book might just as easily been given the title of the second section, as Oriard's primary focus is on the meaning of football, as people experience it through the media.

The larger issues to be addressed are spelled out in the Introduction, including Oriard's claims that football during this period is "locally rooted," and is "a powerful source of community identity and pride"; that it offers an idealized model for middle class life; that it is an agent of Americanization and democratization; that it is encrusted with issues of male identity and authority; that the popularity of professional football is tied to both the Cold War and post-war affluence; that as a commercial spectacle it produced "irresolvable ethical issues" for institutions of higher learning; and that mass media had the most powerful force in the construction of football culture.

Oriard is more or less successful in demonstrating these claims, although his arguments will seem more persuasive to some than others.

The opening chapter examines the tremendous growth of football's presence in the press, where coverage would increase by fifty percent in the first two decades of the twentieth century, and then double again during the third decade, by which time sports coverage was the major reason that men bought newspapers. A central figure in this press was the featured local columnist, who became a fixture in the American newspaper. Ethnic interests produced "tribal football," with the Jewish team at CCNY, the immigrant's team at Notre Dame, and various Catholic teams around the nation.

Radio expanded the audience for football in a different format. There were 12M homes with radios in 1930, and by 1940 that figure doubled. The first Rose Bowl was broadcast in 1927 and by 1930 25M people listened to that game. College football on Saturday was standard fare by the 1930s. Football announcers developed their own voice and constructed a radio culture of the game.

As for the newsreels the ten-minute feature was a fixture in most theatres by the mid-twenties and football was a part of the newsreels from the beginning. In the area of feature films, there were standard football plots, biographies, and even a surge of football musicals in the 1930s. In the emerging mass circulation magazines, there was a focus on the "inside dope," on celebrity players and coaches. Magazines also carried fiction in the form of short stories and serials. Oriard offers an insightful analysis of this growth, and identifies Francis Wallace as "one of the most influential shapers of the ways Americans thought about football in the 1930s" (p. 57).

Central to the growth of football culture were covers, illustrations, cartoons and advertisements in these new mass circulation publications. The *Saturday Evening Post* and *Collier's* had 113 football covers between 1920 and 1960, and many of

the other magazines followed suit. The covers "created indelible images of the handsome hero, his lovely admirer, the strong-willed coach," along with fans, cheerleaders, pep rallies, and "the winsome kids-lots and lots of kids-mimicking every aspect of this big-time football world." The pulp magazines in turn offered "heroic football stars and furious, violent action" (p. 59). The most influential artist in this area was J. C. Leyendecker, whose work gets Oriard's attention.

The chapter on "Local Football" examines the power of both high school and college football. Oriard notes that the importance of football was "inversely proportional to the community's size and status." In cultural deserts like Nebraska football had no competition for attention, and in small towns high school football often provided the most important and exciting public events of the year. Oriard also saw in local football a playing out of the "competing values of the modern and the antimodern." He sees football as providing identity for a mobile urban population, as well as for those caught in rural small town life. He finds football fans to be different from baseball fans, as college football always retained an air of elitism, while baseball crowds were heterogeneous.

In looking at boosterism and the college game, Oriard discusses the role football played in the growth of universities across the country. Small religious schools moved to national prominence through football fame, as did a number of private and state institutions. It might also be noted here that intercollegiate athletics in general was seen by some Catholic religious institutions as a means of gaining acceptance in the hostile Protestant world.

Oriard discusses the role of football booster clubs, the loss of control over football in universities to outside forces, academic transgressions, and the general lack of interest in the press over ethical and educational questions. The call for

university reform would surface, but for the most part the media had no interest in these issues.

The one point Oriard neglects is that in seeking to enhance the national reputation of their universities through football, university presidents were also enhancing their own careers. By the 1920s, university administration had emerged as career-track positions, within a definite career ladder. The same could be said of coaches and athletic administrators.

On the question of whether football is a players' game or a coaches' game, Oriard sees, at least the college game, as a coaches game. At the same time, the culture of the game stresses the heroism and achievements of the players. The mass media, however, has tended to portray the coach as the central figure. At the college level coaches are cultivated by the media, and at times develop a proprietary relationship with the press. The players were seen as children and the coach as the only other adult on the scene, and therefore sportswriters must develop special relationships with the coaches.

In college sports it is also true that the coach is the one stable figure on the team, in which players come and go in a four-year cycle. Coaches often became part of the landscape. Oriard sees the coach as father figure, authoritarian or kindly, and gives examples of the various images in which the football player is portrayed as either hero or dumb jock. Football also emerges as a rite of passage for males to prove their virility. Oriard's use of *Leyendecker* magazine covers in this section is both brilliant and instructive.

Chapter Five explores football as spectacle with three areas of consideration: the action on the field, the pageantry in the stadium, and the surrounding spectacle in which the fans themselves play a special and fundamental role. Football was central to student life and attracted the fraternities and sororities into its vortex. It had the elements of hedonism combined with school loyalty, and bound the community together in

ways nothing else could. It was at the heart of college spirit.

In the context of football as a spectacle, Oriard offers a fascinating history of cheerleading, and the emergence of the female cheerleader beginning somewhere in the South during the 1920s. This is a topic about which too little is known, and one that could be a gold mine for future research. The evolution of cheerleading by females, and their role in football, offers Oriard some rich material. The magazine covers again offer special insight in this analysis. Football was part of the emerging celebration of youth, which was so much a part of popular culture during the 1920s.

In the final chapter of the book's first section, Oriard explores the emergence of the professional game, and the beginning of its move to center stage in the late 1950s. Here football players are portrayed as adults for the first time with much more of a focus on the brutality of the game with a quality of "controlled savagery." There are no more lessons for life, but now the focus is on "fantasies of personal power." Here Oriard misses a reference to the CBS special "The Violent World of Sam Huff," which offered the violence of game as its central attraction.

Oriard rightly ties this focus on violence to social concerns over "softness" in the society seen the President's Council on Physical Fitness promoted by both Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy. It is unfortunate that Oriard's coverage period ended here as this is a subject that could be deeply enriched by heading into the Sixties foreign policy obsessions of JFK and LBJ and their rich and graphic gendered vocabularies of foreign policy.

Oriard sees professional football in the Fifties as offering an escape from the rat-race of life in the post-war period, and from David Riesman's "other-directed conformists." Of course professional football could also be seen as a celebration of Riesman's other-directed society, in which individuals were subsumed in the larger body of in-

terrelated parts to achieve the goals of the group over the individual. Indeed McLuhan's observations on football as a television game might be applied here.

In the second section of the book, "What We Think About When We Think About Football," the rich analysis continues, as Oriard sets his analytical powers on the subjects of class, ethnicity, race, and masculinity. Although all of these topics had been approached in the first half of the book, they now come under closer scrutiny. Again the exercise is rewarding.

Oriard acknowledges the elusiveness of class in American society and the unwillingness to acknowledge its existence. Beginning as an Anglo-Saxon gentleman's sport, the story of football in the first half of the Twentieth Century is its transformation into a classless multi-ethnic sport. Although I would agree that football came to symbolize the American melting plot, I don't think I would agree that football helped to democratize higher education. It seems to me that the G.I. Bill and the attitudinal shifts of post-WWII America were more significant than football although the democratization of football and other sports have a significant symbolic importance.

Central to this chapter is a discussion of how class, especially in college football, is masked by the discussions of other issues like subsidies, scholarships, and standards. At the heart of this issue is the American defense of amateurism which has its origin and in its essence in class. In my view Oriard does not make a strong enough statement of the English upper class origins of amateurism and the absurd American defense of the standard based upon the cash nexus.

The examination of ethnicity begins with the fascinating University of Michigan study "Racial Traits in Athletes" reported over three issues of the American Physical Education Review in 1922. What now appears startling material was fairly common until at least the 1960s, and is a reminder of how much our perceptions have

changed in the last half-century. Oriard shows how football was a stage for the entrance of the old and new immigrants into mainstream America, and how racial and religious stereotypes were expressed in the sport.

Ethnicity is clearly linked to class and that relationship is explored, as well as the connections between Americanization and football, both from the viewpoint of the immigrant and the established society. Oriard's use of the ethnic and immigrant press makes this a particularly valuable section. He also points out that the assimilation of ethnic groups was essentially a story of "racial alchemy," during which Europeans "become Caucasians" (p. 282). I would however question Oriard's assertion that ethnicity fades from significance in the 1950s.

Ethnicity is also clearly linked to race, as the author's chapter on "Race" effectively shows. Oriard uses the story of Carlisle University and Haskell Institute to provide an insightful discussion of Native American and football.

The place of African Americans in football is reflective of their marginalization and exclusion in larger society. Of the 130 *Post* and *Collier* covers on football that were printed between 1920 and 1960, not one contained a black face, and of the 120 feature-length football films produced during this period, only one had a black star and only two had black characters in minor roles. The portrayal of black football in the popular press was also satirical, suggesting the mental shortcomings of athletes, in the same manner blacks were generally portrayed in popular white press.

The violence directed against blacks in college football, the controversies surrounding interracial competition, and the stereotyping of the black athlete is detailed in this section. Oriard finds a tendency to attribute the success of star black athletes to the genius of their white coaches. He tracks the beginning of the changes in the 50s, and theorizes the cultural invention of a "black style" in football. Although not entirely successful

in locating the origins of such a style, he does probe some interesting possibilities.

The last major chapter of the book examines what Oriard sees as a defining characteristic that is fundamental to the game: masculinity. First and foremost football is touted as "no game for sissies." It sets a standard against which all young males were tested in their masculinity, and it acts as protective force, against society's potential feminization. It is an antidote to the softness of modern life. These claims have been present since the beginning of intercollegiate football, and if anything have only intensified throughout the twentieth century. Oriard is particularly eloquent and effective here.

Tied Oriard's discussion of the game's obsessive concern is a look at reactions to the entrance of women into football as players, and the definition of women's roles as adjuncts to the game. The role of cheerleader, drum major, and adoring fan/supportive wife are treated in this context. Oriard concludes with some instructive observations on the hysteria created when women seriously assert their right to play football, and thus challenge the given that "football was inherently masculine and that masculinity was unambiguously demonstrated in football" (p. 363).

Michael Oriard has written a second rich volume on the place of football in American culture that sets a very high standards for future students of the game. One can only hope and wait for what I presume will be volume three in the series.

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Citation: Richard C. Crepeau. Review of Oriard, Michael. *King Football: Sport and Spectacle in the Golden Age of Radio, Newsreels, Movies & Magazines, The Weekly & The Daily Press*. H-Arete, H-Net Reviews. July, 2003.

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