

A Farewell to Faculty Football

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Soccer's time has come! It's not only Pele and Chiniglia and Beckenbauer and the Cosmos. Just go to Texas, that most football of states. The prairies within and around Dallas abound with soccer balls and little soccer leaguers with eyes on an eventual World Cup. And what Texas casts its eyes upon... It's hard to believe. Anyone who grew up playing soccer in mid-century America--a member of that class of athletes called by college sports editors the thickclads--is bound to see the sports world as the fiefdom of the thickclads. The weight they had to throw around! The large allowances regularly assigned them in the school budget. The stadiums they played in and the crowds they attracted! The cheerleaders. Although it was Athletic Department wisdom to play the two fall sports at different times of day and on different and separated fields, one knew who was on prime time. We often enough found ourselves running ragged before a sparse and polite--a cheerleaderless--band of spectators while in the distance we could hear the roar of the crowd--a completed pass, a twenty yard gain, a goal line stand, even a dog on the field.

That soccer was something to roar about or could even be played in great stadiums didn't occur to me until in my junior year in college. I saw some films of European games. Why, soccer could produce powerful emotions, attract crowds even without cheerleaders! Maybe football wasn't more in the nature of man than soccer. Or maybe it was just European man. The American folkheros, Mike Fink and Davy Crockett and Paul Bunyan, still seemed archetypal football players to me.

It's hard to live in a thickclad culture without developing a secret interest, even admiration, for the heavyweight activities of your time. Perhaps that's why I was so easily persuaded to join the Faculty Football team at Dartmouth College. of course, even though soccer was my high school and college sport, no different than any other American I had tossed or caught lay share of footballs in many a pickup game. After my college years, in graduate school and when I began to teach I tried to continue soccer with local teams. But it got to be harder and harder to keep in the kind of shape that soccer requires with its almost constant running and its periodic bursts of speed. Football, at least touch football, at least touch football of the faculty variety, is easier to play in your mid and upper thirties and even into your forties. You run a lot. But you also stand around a lot catching your breath. Anyway the Faculty football team was the best available and manageable team exercise. Besides the invitation was somehow flattering--it touched some old chords of envy and grudging admiration...a football player at last!

Those were the Kennedy years and the pickup games in the backyard at Hyannisport or MacLean lent powerful associations to our exercises---the sport of Presidents and Attorneys General and Senators, as it were. But the vigorous

competitive athleticism of our generation of professors wasn't just the politic thing. It was also a matter of calories and cholesterol, of reliving old playing field glories, of denying time's swift chariot with swifter moves yet. And it was important to escape an exclusively cerebral view of things. A sound mind in a sound body.

Dartmouth is a place that believes more than most that the mind-body problem can be vigorously **Error! Bookmark not defined.** wasn't only in chess or bridge that the faculty presented an intramural team--but in football, basketball, tennis, baseball, hockey and skiing. There was no undue respect for mind on the playing fields however, and in most of these sports the faculty ended up in, the bottom half of the teams competing. The undergraduates were polite but they hit hard. After all, the faculty didn't pull their punches in grading papers and exams. only in baseball was the faculty triumphant--thanks to the chaplain. A native of the midwest Bible and softball belt, he had the snakey arm of an orangutang. He whipped his pitches effortlessly by the rascally undergraduates while his colleagues camped around in the field, arms folded, in speculative discourse. We won one or two to nothing, often in extra innings.

The only sport that ran the year around, a foot or more of snow excepted, was touch football played every Sunday noon by this small band of devotees who had been at it with some turnover in bodies but no change of mind since the first years of the Kennedy administration. These muscular devotions, on the seventh day we exercised, attracted over the years some of the best and the brightest of the younger faculty: an art historian who was surely one of the finest scrambling quarterbacks on the roster of the American Association of University Professors, a highly competitive organic chemist and infallible wide receiver, a radio physicist still making the college try well into his late thirties, a colonial historian who was one of the most imaginative playmakers since Daniel Shays or the Swampfox, and an overweight toxicologist, one of New Hampshire's and Dartmouth's original blocks of granite.

I don't recall which of these "effete snobs," as they came to be called in the Nixon years, detected my "secret admiration" for the sport of presidents but they persuaded me to show up one Sunday noon. For the next decade, until I threw my arm out, I provided the quarterbacking for the second team, most often the radio physicist, the toxicologist and I, the anthropologist, and any transitory bodies we could recruit. Though they were the better, the number one team, we beat the art historian, the colonial historian and the organic chemist and their cohorts often enough to make every Sunday noon numinous with uncertainty ... a betting proposition.

I remember all those Sunday afternoons played on North Country fields vividly. And in my mind's eye I now see ourselves in the landscape particularly on those September and October days beneath the flaming red and gold of turning maples. But I recall also chill December days on frosty ground with a light sprinkling of snow where we etched out play patterns for all to see...or those uncertain late winter or early spring days of April and May where we played

between pools of water on slowly draining fields. Our sweaty struggles had their pantheistic moments.

But as for the game itself I had a lot to learn. And some things I never learned. One doesn't, as it turns out, move easily from the mentality and coordination of the thinclad to that of the thickclad. Somehow with all the satisfactions of that decade I now recognize there to have been in me in that game incoordinations of mind and body which provoke more thought than was ever intended in such exercises.

There is the fact, for example, that soccer is in constant ebb and flow and that playmaking emerges more or less spontaneously ... the application of practiced patterns of player relationships which can never be quite the same as in that practice. In football it's stop and go thinking all the time. And there can be a more perfect application of practiced patterns. Football for the quarterback is about as mental a sport as there is--despite its reputation for mindless brutalities--short of the sedentary sports played vicariously with cards or pieces, such as bridge or chess. If you stop and think about it, as you must after every play in football, the mind boggles at the variables involved. With five-man faculty-type teams, not to mention elevenman teams, where players have, as faculty tend to have, the possibilities of play independently, not to say randomly, in relation to each other, there are five to the fifth or 3125 possible combinations.

No doubt the mathematics of it overestimate the possible patterns of playmaking...a purely academic calculation. But the number captures my frustration. For I never developed into a good playmaker. I took years developing a repertoire of plays but even then had difficulty using them imaginatively, wisely. I was often second-guessed by teammates who sensed my confoundment--the 3125 possibilities perhaps--and who squabbled with me in the huddle or, at times, took the playmaking away. I began to mass the relative spontaneity of soccer and often enough felt like saying, "let's all run deep and we'll see who gets free" or "let's sweep it around left end and block anybody you see" ...hardly heads-up football!

In soccer you work on play patterns during the week, on 5-3-2s or 3-4-3s, you sleep on your thinking and incorporate it in a general mind-bcdy set, and you hope for the best and for fellow players in the right positions. During the game there is little time for reflection. Wind and weather, the physical condition of the contestants, and the tide of partisan emotions running in a friendly or alien field determine whether the body can put the week's plays together or not. If your mind is turning over the probabilities it is mostly at a sub-conscious level. You are trying to take advantage of emergent and not very well planned possibilities.

In football you should be trying to keep all the probabilities before you. You are trying to plan your play and play your plan. You plan it. You play it... You look at the results and you plan another. Thinking all the time. I began to miss what to me was an essential component of sport, the source of its recreative powers, its spontaneity relative to the planned order and expectability of everyday life. Of course any sport has the element of controlled spontaneity. You have got to follow the rules but they don't predict results. But football was turning out to be a lot

more controlled and calculating than I found recreational. For me, it was on some days violating a rule of recreative activity: that sports should offer an alternate form of action and expression to those required in the workaday world. My faculty workaday world was a cerebral one. And I was thinking too much those early Sunday afternoons.

My frustrations were accentuated by two other features of football that distinguish it from soccer: the amount of psychological time between play action and the inevitable hierarchical nature of play organization, field generalship as it is called. Given the variables involved and the requirement for recurrently planning and carrying out plays, football produces a managerial elite. Soccer is a more egalitarian and much less managerial sport in the sense that though there are field captains directing overall play --in any case only in a vague way--the flow of action is so constant that at any given moment practically any player will find himself the center of action in directing the attack or the defense. And all other players must be thinking about their relationship to him. No player, much less the coach--and the complexities of modern football put field management more and more in the hand of the coach--can be constantly managing.

In football the quarterback or the defensive captain or, more likely, the coaches for them, direct the attack or the defense. The rest of the team waits to know their assignment and to discharge it faithfully, trusting to the invisible hand of the coaching staff to make the whole thing work out for the best. Only a few players handle the ball and are thus the constant focus of attention. In soccer sooner or later the ball comes to everyone. You must run and you can't hide from ball handling. In fact a chief critique of a soccer player is his lack of aggressiveness in involving himself with the ball... in bringing himself periodically into the center stage of action. And instead of thinking of yourself and your particular assignment, you try to keep an image of yourself in relation with all other players, many of whom, at any one time, are potentially partners in the passing around of the ball.

The fact that ball handling is limited in football, and field generalship even more limited, puts psychological pressure on individuals, particularly on quarterbacks as I discovered, and that pressure builds in the time between plays. For most players, other than the managerial elite, that time is most usefully spent in raising the spirits of one's teammates, on the one hand, or in discomfiting, "psyching out" as it is called, the spirits of one's opponents. That "psyching out" takes many subtle forms in American sports and particularly in football, ranging from dramatic pre-game prayers to some partisan god or another to just heavy breathing and concentrated stares. Other than communicating information from the coach, the offensive and defensive huddles seem to have a largely psychic function. They are the most visible kind of manifestation of a psychologically cohesive and determined male band. Perhaps it is in the mastery of this emotional component that the really good coaches and field generals are distinguished from the average.

Very little of this playful psychology is possible in the constant ebb and flow of soccer though, of course, there is such a thing as emotional

momentum which is palpable in team play. Disconcerting to me was the degree to which the quarterback overtly or covertly had to contribute to that psychology--having not only to be an effective passer and playmaker but an emotional leader as well. Among muscular-minded academics these jocular hostilities, these small putdowns and putups, can take curious form.

Here are the art historian and the colonial historian ambling back from a broken pass discussing a visiting lecture on 19th century American architecture of the previous week. The colonial historian flatly asserts that the art historian had an absolutely wrong definition of a central concept of the **Error! Bookmark not defined.** was all the more surprising in that architecture was his field. ordinarily one wouldn't press a colleague's grasp of a professional matter. such misunderstandings swirl around constantly in the academy...its "raison d'etre" perhaps. The central and organizing concepts of most disciplines are not very clear. But it was a good ploy in that competitive situation to put it straight to the opponent that professionally he didn't have his head screwed on right. We won the game. The art historian's passes didn't connect. The architecture of his play patterns seemed fuzzy. His transmittal of emotional energy to his fellows flagged. I think he was mostly turning that contentious term over in his mind.

As my decade of faculty football wore on, my persisting maladaptation as an adult to a game I had never really played as a child was increasingly disconcerting. There was a persisting disparity between what the mind knew and the body required, and of all the disparities that animate explanation in human experience that must be the primary one. That may have made me the more attentive to those arguments against football of the student generation of the late sixties and early seventies. In the playing fields of Columbus or College Park, it was argued, the imperial wars of Vietnam were begun. The aggressive, aggrandizing ground-gaining nature of football was decried as premonitory of the exercise of imperial power. It was a tough-bodied, tough-minded preparation for the violence necessary for the exercise of that power and the obedience and coordination necessary to its achievement.

The malaise of the Vietnam war was provoking among students a critique of every institution of American life that might account for such a moral disaster. Football--what more American institution--was inevitably included and particularly its managerial elite, the football coaches, with whom an increasingly long-haired student generation was in conflict. There were few priests, pastors or school teachers, it was argued, as influential in smalltown or suburban America as the local football coach. And that influence anchored in the football spectacle fostered a narrow--minded and violenceprone boosterism. Extended to the international arena that worldview spelled jingoism, imperialism and genocide.

No doubt those arguments were a libel on many a good citizen with generous feelings towards the larger world and as distressed by the Vietnam war as any. And while coaches may be lionized and admired, they are probably not very influential even in smalltown America. But in broader terms the linking of a game style with a national style of international engagements was

suggestive, It accorded with longheld anthropological notions that different cultures have different styles of play, some preferring games of pure chance, others of physical skill, and others of intellectual skill, and that these styles accord with views as to whether the world is predictable, can be mastered by human intention or not, and whether that mastery is in the realm of mind or of matter. In such complex societies as the American one with its great diversity of sports and great diversity of subcultures there is no easy correlation between a sport and an American cultural style if any, indeed, can be identified.

Just the same, from the perspective of a soccer player there is, in football, a marked territorial imperative, a grinding back and forth upon the gridiron for yardage and an acute sense of territorial loss and gain. "Push 'em back, push 'em back--harder, harder," as the chant goes. Before the invention of the forward pass and, especially the long bomb, as it is called (the metaphor would have interested the Vietnam student generation), football was almost uniquely a game of slow, virtually geopolitical expansion and contraction of territories. Even with the beginning lineup in soccer and its offside rules, it is a game incomparably less territorial than football. For in soccer the opposing players are interspersed throughout the field. There is no clearcut territory for which one contests--the wresting of yardage for which one is rewarded. Perhaps the students were right and the 1950's John Foster Dulles policy of containment, from which the Vietnam war inexorably descended, corresponded to a football image of the world. We would hold the line against communism until history made it our ball and we could push 'em back, push 'em back, harder, harder.

The geopolitics of sports is heady business though a sporty group of professors was bound to pay attention to students who stood to be drafted out of college playing fields into dubious battle led by very real field generals in the presence of very real bombs. On reflection, a soccer view of the world seems preferable and probably more representative of the truth of the human situation when it is not polarized along frontiers of stark combat. The fact is that any "team"--that is, any worldview--has proponents in other territories with whom one might work to prevent the breakdown of communication and debate about the human condition--with whom one might work to prevent the rise of heavyweight confrontation over territory.

In a truly democratic world unpolarized by territorial imperatives any worldview should be able to lay claim to their moments with the ball to be the focus of attention, and to have the corresponding power to organize play. Such a situation, of course, violates prerogatives dear to an entrenched managerial elite. In soccer at any rate there is no such permanent hierarchy of authority justified, as is so often the case with authority, by the imperative of defending or acquiring territory. The field belongs to all the players and, over time, each may be expected to take his turn in organizing play. Perhaps that is a better model for internal politics and world affairs. The game-world politics metaphor is suggestive, particularly if we have in mind the old adage that upon the playing fields of Eton the imperial wars are won. Our play teaches to be what we are just as it celebrates what we are. But like any analogy it is plagued by looseness of fit ... by all the ways that world politics is not a

game, and by all the ways in which we were manifestly not playing symbolic football in Vietnam. Much closer to hand for an anthropologist seeking explanations for incoordinations of mind and body are facts of human adaptation over the millions of years and facts having to do with the evolutionary fate of gigantism, of the excessive capacity to wreak violence or to defend oneself against it. They are facts having to do with the diminishing returns of an intensifying search for security on the one hand and stimulation on the other.

Of course it is only to be expected that if I was feeling increasingly maladapted to football I should find football itself a maladaptation, a game played, as it were, on a road not taken in human evolution. But the facts behind the argument seem to be clear enough. It is often said of football that it celebrates the primitive in us. It is a paleolithic survival bringing into play brute nature and a primordial robustness. We associate the push and shove, the grunt and groan, the shock of body against body with the popular image of the hulking caveman stooped over his knobby club. It seems to be true that in the late paleolithic a heavily built, bludgeon-hunting physical type developed on the glacial margins of northern Europe where they preyed upon large game. But this physical type is certainly exceptional for the human race and was very probably exceptional for the Western Neanderthal and Cromagnon people with whom it is associated. Allowing for variation by reason of adaptation to hot or cold climates, the physical type of most people of the earth runs to the compact, 65 inches and perhaps 150 pounds. It is a physical type adapted to a millennial lifeway, hunting and gathering, in which mobility and endurance in the pursuit of game were rime requirements. It is a physical tpe neither so tall nor so overburdened with muscle as to pose a problem to the circulatory system and the skeletal structure in prolonged and unremitting running. It is the physical type best adapted to soccer where, as in paleolithic hunting, there are few or no time-outs or substitutions.

It is not surprising that sports which capitalize on exceptional height and weight and musculature are sports of many time-outs and substitutions. This is not only for organizational reasons, to allow the managerial elite to catch their mental breath, but it is because the physical type which plays these sports is too large to keep constant and unremitting pace. If the basketball court were as large as a soccer field, the very tall men now recruited couldn't play the game. And if football were in as constant motion as soccer, behemoths could not compete. Gigantism in sports must be accompanied either by a reduction in the size of the playing field or by a reduction in the time period of effort.

It is a mistake then to look at the gigantic sports and then deduce from the size of the general population that they are not making them as they used to. The fact is rather that these sports are recruiting physical types which are extraordinary not only in respect to the height and weight and strength of the man in the street or on the farm, but extraordinary in respect to the physical type evolved in human evolution. They are still making them like they used to. But these "makes" are the thinclads playing soccer, jogging, running cross country while the mass popular sports, the thickclads, are capitalizing on the penchant for bigness.

