

The Superpower of a Super Sport

The Power of Sports

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Football is America's civil religion. Keith Allison/ Flickr CC 2.0

If anthropology's job is to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange, then what should anthropologists make of sports like American football? The approaching Super Bowl, the annual championship spectacle of the National Football League, which will take place Sunday, February 5th, is familiar to most Americans, but may be strange to many anthropologists. In either case, its broader meaning gets easily overlooked. In the US, football is **King of Sport** in a way like never before, casting a long shadow over other sports, informing the way we think about sports more

generally. Should the NFL enjoy such an elevated place in our society? When we watch the game this Sunday, the biggest battle in the most super of all sports, we will be looking into a mirror, but what will we make of the reflection? This is the first in a column entitled, “The Power of Sports,” and with the Super Bowl upon us, I can think of no better time to begin reflecting on the intersections between anthropology, power, and sport.

Football’s cultural superiority begins with money, **especially broadcast rights**. This year the NFL sold the Super Bowl broadcast rights to Fox, and Fox will pass along its costs to corporate advertisers, which will pay **millions of dollars per 30-second ad spot**. These rights are just the beginning: **ticket sales, merchandising**, and general **economic activity** round out the revenue for the biggest sport’s biggest game. The NFL is now estimated to earn upwards of **\$13 billion per year**, and the Super Bowl is its crown jewel. What marketers call “**fan avidity**” drives this economic activity; die-hard fans teams routinely structure their Sunday afternoons, autumn weekends, and **even their entire lives around football**, and will gladly shell out hundreds if not thousands of dollars for **tickets** and apparel.

At the same time, the NFL has ascended to such profit by exploiting a power relationship that I—and what appears to be an **increasing number** of others—find hard to condone. Fans are becoming more aware of the various challenges facing the league, and our role in creating them. For example, the inherent physical violence of the game takes an enormous toll on the players, both in the moment and long after a player’s time in the spotlight. The PBS Frontline documentary, “**League of Denial**,” reminds us that our choice to watch these games has real life consequences. The untimely death of Mike Webster proves a stirring example. Webster was the first person to be diagnosed with a disease caused by repetitive blows to the head, now known as **Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy or CTE**, the significance and severity of which the NFL arguably too long denied. Big-hits fuel the league’s profit margins, catching the eyes of viewers and leading the highlight reels of the nightly sports shows, and this reality increasingly irks even the most die-hard fans.

Still, too few fans—and anthropologists—realize that their eyeballs fuel this economic ecosystem and its consequences. **The few who do are beginning to question football’s aggressive enticement to watch**, as well as its invitation to gamble. Sports betting is a huge industry, which the **Internet made larger** by enabling fans to place bets on just about every aspect of games through overseas (and therefore legal) “gaming” portals. **The ascent of fantasy football** has only intensified and expanded this wagering between familiar friends, as it has since the 1970s, to now include farflung strangers through “daily” fantasy football. In my forthcoming research on fantasy football, I’ve found that “fantasy football team managers” find the game variously social, competitive, intellectual, and

something that they can “control,” unlike work and family life. The prospect of winning money makes this an entertaining oasis from the “real world.” A few years ago, one manager told me:

To me, fantasy [football] is something I have control over. It’s an escape. I don’t have to go to sleep thinking about work. I can go to sleep thinking about my fantasy football team. [My] job search sucks because there’s all these people you have to schmooze with, but with fantasy it’s just you and the computer.

Yet the same manager confided recently that he was beginning to sour on televised sports, saying: “I do like watching sports, but I’m starting to *care* less and less.” I confess that I watch football and play fantasy football and enjoy both, partly for their sociality, which allows me to stay connected with my childhood friends. But, I admit that I play with ambivalence on account of serious misgivings I have about the state of the sport today. I know that gluing my eyeballs to the game only drives its growth, and therefore contributes to the potential injury of others. I am very uncomfortable with this fact.

Like the US itself, the NFL is now embattled. Fans’ concerns about the sport’s inherent violence have challenged the NFL to **implement sensible policy on concussions**, not to mention **players’ conduct** on and off the field, **team relocation**, **daily fantasy sports**, and a host of other issues, including **racial equality** and the **recent uproar surrounding Colin Kaepernick’s silent protest of the national anthem**. Football is clearly anything but a frivolous activity. In fact, one might say that football is **our national civil religion: the billion dollar stadiums, which we all pay for**, are our nation’s most opulent if not holiest places of worship. To make familiar this strange new land, shouldn’t anthropologists begin to ask, “What can we learn from these **believers**, and from the **apostates**?”

This Sunday’s Big Game will undoubtedly bring family and friends together, to eat, drink, and, if their team wins, to be merry. And since **football is an escape that many want to remain apolitical**, football will continue to **appear** less important than issues such as the economy, education, gender, or race. Yet this “game” **implicates them** all, so perhaps anthropologists ought to pay closer attention. Even if they don’t, this inherently anthropological question will remain long after the final whistle: In exchange for escape, ritual sociality and a sense of eternal belonging, what does it mean to forgive football’s excesses at a time when there is so much else at stake?

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In this monthly column, "The Power of Sports," Miller considers the social and political nature of sports in American society, with an eye toward opening the minds of readers to the seriousness of these so-called escapes.

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