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POLITICAL FOOTBALL: SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THE PROFESSIONAL GRIDIRON IN THE UNITED STATES, 1955-1979

A Dissertation in
Kinesiology

by

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ABSTRACT

Politics and political movements appeared in professional football since the sport emerged. However, because the National Football League (NFL) was not yet popular across the country, these issues had little effect on the broader culture. In the second half of the century, the NFL became the most popular consumer sport in the country. Conflicts between labor and capital, between men and women, between races and ethnicities, and between groups associated with the broader counterculture and liberation movements were brought by political advocates into the sport. Nonetheless, throughout this same time, the league had political priorities of its own and endorsed certain political issues while not engaging others.

In this dissertation, I utilize a “multiple histories” approach to analyze the effect of social movements on the NFL and demonstrate the influence of political football in American culture. To do so, I examine how four social movements (Civil Rights, the New Left and counterculture, labor, and the women’s movement) intersected with professional football from the late 1950s through the 1970s.

League representatives had varying reactions each time a social movement appeared on the gridiron. For example, some team owners and coaches supported black athletes fighting to desegregate the game and other areas of society through non-violent protest, but they reacted to the broader Civil Rights Movement by reaffirming notions of white supremacy. While league marketers promoted athletes who endorsed the Vietnam War and other “patriotic” efforts to defeat communism, they avoided engaging with critics (particularly if they were players) who believed football was antithetical to an idealized “American way of life.” League officials also separated from what they
considered “labor radicals” during the labor movement of the 1960s and 1970s, instead reasserting their stronghold over players by officially recognizing only moderate union leaders. League officials endorsed women’s inclusion as spectators and sideline cheerleaders, but discounted attempts of women to play the game themselves. Journalists, moreover, covered the women’s game, but discounted it as not actually sport. Overall, I argue, while players offered undercurrents of opposition to the status quo from the late 1950s through the 1970s, people in the NFL, more often than not, disregarded and delegitimized such views, thus normalizing and popularizing certain political issues while making others seem unreasonably “radical.”
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS** ........................................................................................................ vii

**INTRODUCTION: POLITICAL FOOTBALL, 1955-1979** .................................................. 1
  - Social Movements in the United States ........................................................................ 6
  - Political Football and Sport History ........................................................................... 7
  - Methodologies ............................................................................................................. 12
    - Multiple Histories and Activism .............................................................................. 12
    - Methods of Research ............................................................................................. 14
    - Subjects ................................................................................................................... 15
  - Dissertation Outline and Description of Chapters ..................................................... 16

**CHAPTER 1. A HISTORY OF PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL AS THE NEW “NATIONAL PASTIME” AND A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL MOVEMENTS** ........................................ 20
  - Professional American Football .................................................................................. 20
  - Introduction to Social Movements .............................................................................. 28
    - The Civil Rights Movement .................................................................................. 28
    - The New Left ......................................................................................................... 31
    - Labor Politics ......................................................................................................... 33
    - The Women’s Movement ....................................................................................... 36

**CHAPTER 2. BEYOND DESEGREGATION: THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL, 1955-1967** ............................................................... 41
  - The Civil Rights Movement ...................................................................................... 45
  - Professional Football and Racism ............................................................................. 48
  - Professional Football Players and the Fights for Racial Equality ......................... 50
    - The 1965 AFL All-Star Strike ................................................................................ 51
    - Contesting Off-Field Segregation ......................................................................... 52
    - Jim Brown’s and Roosevelt Grier’s Black Power .................................................. 60
    - Black Power and Gender ....................................................................................... 70
  - White Supremacy in the NFL ..................................................................................... 75

  - The New Left ........................................................................................................... 86
  - The Counterculture ................................................................................................ 88
  - Radicalism and NFL Conformity ............................................................................. 90
  - The New Left, the Counterculture, and Professional Football ............................ 92
    - Leftist Critiques of Football in Society ................................................................. 93
    - Meggyesy, Football, and the New Left ................................................................. 98
    - Meggyesy and the Anti-War Movement ............................................................... 101
  - Counterculture, Sexual Revolution, Drugs, and Communal Living ...................... 105
Oliver and the Anti-War Movement…………………………………….108
The NFL and the Radical Movements……………………………………111

CHAPTER 4. “NOT A MARXIST CLASS STRUGGLE”: CULTURAL POLITICS OF
PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL’S PLAYERS UNIONS, 1966-1970…………………116
Union Politics……………………………………………………………………118
Unions in Professional Football………………………………………………121
Competing Visions for Union Politics…………………………………………126
Bernie Parrish……………………………………………………………………126
Jack Kemp………………………………………………………………………127
Kemp’s Labor Ideals……………………………………………………………129
Parrish’s Union Ideals…………………………………………………………131
Clash of Union Ideals……………………………………………………………134
Approaches to the Collective Bargaining Agreement………………………137
The NFL and Unions……………………………………………………………144

CHAPTER 5. REVOLUTION ON THE AMERICAN GRIDIRON: THE WOMEN’S
MOVEMENT IN PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL, 1971-1979………………….148
The Women’s Movement in Culture and Sport………………………………150
Women Get In the Game (Kind Of)……………………………………………156
Women asConsumers…………………………………………………………..157
Women in NFL Media…………………………………………………………159
Women as Sex Objects………………………………………………………..161
Women Get in the Game (For Real)……………………………………………164
The Women’s Movement and the NWFL……………………………………167
Women’s Football in the Media………………………………………………172

CONCLUSION: THE IMPORTANCE OF POLITICAL FOOTBALL………………178

BIBLIOGRAPHY……………………………………………………………………183
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-A.D.L.
INTRODUCTION: POLITICAL FOOTBALL, 1955-1979

Chip Oliver published his autobiography, *High for the Game*, in 1971. Two years earlier, he had suited up for the Oakland Raiders of the National Football League (NFL), but quit the sport following the 1969 season because, as he believed, professional football “was a silly game.”¹ “I quit pro football,” he said, “because I felt I wasn’t doing anything positive toward making this world a better place to live.”²

Just prior to the book’s release, for unknown reasons, Oliver attempted a comeback. He joined the Raiders in training camp in the summer of 1971.³ During the two years that he did not play, he dreamed of a way he could reform the sport. “I have a vision of a team without coaches,” he wrote, “without silly restrictions or rules.”⁴ He thought professional football had become too authoritarian and reflected negative aspects of the broader society.

In his autobiography, Oliver proposed several alternatives to the current structure of the NFL. First, he envisioned a “communal team where the players would live together, eat only the finest natural foods and practice yoga and transcendental meditation.” Oliver also anticipated putting the athletes in positions of authority.

The entire element of control from coaches would be gone. Each man would control himself so as to be his best. Each man would strive toward the goal of being good, but there would be no punishment for failure except the natural

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² Ibid.


punishment of not being as good as you could be. Success would exclude failure and punishment, and winning and losing would be seen only in a relative sense. The outcome, the decision, of the game would be unimportant. The game itself, in fact, would all but disappear.\(^5\)

Oliver developed his theories as he connected with an ongoing social movement taking place on the American West Coast. Namely, he joined with hundreds of young radicals, most of whom were white, who engaged in the 1960s “counterculture movement.”\(^6\) These “hippies,” as they were often referred to in common parlance, believed that they should disengage from mainstream society, live in communal harmony, and help tear down the capitalist consumer society that had become dominant in the United States throughout the twentieth century. During his time away from the game, Oliver saw the potential to connect this social movement to his previous line of work: professional football. However, he was never able to bring these ideals to the gridiron. Although he did not specify a reason, just three weeks after attempting a comeback with the Raiders, Oliver again quit the sport, this time for good.\(^7\)

When \textit{High for the Game} hit the shelves, NFL officials did not directly respond to Oliver’s ideas, but the media did. In fact, journalists smeared Oliver’s political views. \textit{New York Times} columnist Wilfrid Sheed scoffed that “old Chip couldn’t tell a football from a sunflower” and that Oliver erroneously expanded his political ideals “way, way

\(^5\) Ibid., 91.


beyond football to call on the whole of straight society to repent.”\(^8\) As if one review in
the venerable New York Times was not enough, another referred to Oliver’s work as
“high-school level philosophizing” with a “curiously naïve political tone.” The reviewer
slammed the work for being “a cross between old Utopianism and embryoid Marxism.”\(^9\)
By labeling him a Marxist, during the peak of the Cold War, these journalists effectively
labeled Oliver un-American.

The mainstream media—a group that was largely “in the [NFL] owners’ pockets,”
according to football scholar Michael Oriard—rejected Oliver’s ideas, painting him as a
radical communist yippie, a term for young “hippies” who became political in the
1960s.\(^10\) This illustration of Oliver thus reflected the journalists’ and NFL officials’
feelings toward the social movement in which he was involved. NFL coaches, owners,
and journalists saw Oliver’s political ideals, and consequently the counterculture and
hippy movements, as not worthy of consideration. If the NFL officials and coaches
considered his propositions, no one would know. Still, it seems that they did not respond
nor did they even react (unlike the journalists).

This was not the only time during the era that politics tried to break through the
NFL’s line of scrimmage. Social movements intersected with professional football in
several ways between 1955 and 1979. This time period represents the convergence of
professional football’s ascendancy in the American sportscape and the zenith of social
movements in popular culture.

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\(^10\) Michael Oriard, Brand NFL: Making and Selling America’s Favorite Sport (Chapel Hill: University of
Still, Americans have infused professional football with politics and social movements since the sport appeared in the early twentieth century. As scholars, such as Oriard, have demonstrated, ideas about class, gender, and race have historically influenced how people played and watched football. Particularly in the second half of the century, as the sport became the most popular in the country, politics continued to influence the game.\(^{11}\) Conflicts between labor and capital, between men and women, between races and ethnicities, and between groups associated with the broader counterculture and liberation movements were brought by political advocates into the sport. Nonetheless, throughout this same time, the league had political priorities of its own and endorsed certain issues while not engaging others.

In this dissertation, I analyze the effect of social movements on the NFL and demonstrate the influence of political football in American culture. To do so, I examine how four social movements from the late 1950s through the 1970s intersected with the NFL and the broader culture of professional football. Historian Stewart Burns identifies the “four main social movements” of the era as the Civil Rights Movement, the New Left (and the counterculture), the antiwar movement, and the women’s movement.\(^{12}\) In my analysis, I combine the New Left, counterculture, and antiwar initiatives, as the involved players connected all of these movements. I also add one more movement to the mix: the labor movement. I did so for two reasons. First, the fight for labor freedom during the 1960s and 1970s was one of the most discussed off-the-field issues in the NFL. Second,


other issues—especially players’ rebellions against authority—manifested during this movement. In sum, I analyze the motives and actions of the players who brought these four social movements (civil rights, the New Left and counterculture, labor, and the women’s movement) to the gridiron, and how NFL officials responded—either directly or indirectly—in each case. This is not a comprehensive account of social movements in professional football, but rather an analysis of how some players brought certain political aspects to the gridiron, which created tensions in America’s favorite sport.

League representatives had varying reactions each time a social movement appeared on the gridiron. For example, some team owners and coaches supported black athletes fighting to desegregate the game and other areas of society through non-violent protest, but they reacted to the broader Civil Rights Movement by reaffirming notions of white supremacy. While league marketers promoted athletes who endorsed the Vietnam War and other “patriotic” efforts to defeat communism, they avoided engaging with critics (particularly if they were players) who believed football was antithetical to an idealized “American way of life.” League officials also separated from what they considered “labor radicals” during the labor movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, instead reasserting their stronghold over players by officially recognizing only moderate union leaders. League officials endorsed women’s inclusion as spectators and sideline cheerleaders, but discounted attempts of women to play the game themselves. Journalists, moreover, covered the women’s game, but discounted it as not actually sport. Overall, I argue, while players offered undercurrents of opposition to the status quo from the late 1950s through the 1970s, people in the NFL, more often than not, disregarded and

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13 There were many other social movements during the era, such as the gay rights movement and the Hispanic and Chicano movements. These movements, unfortunately, did not have much (or any) impact on professional football as the four social movements that I study in this dissertation.
delegitimized such views, thus normalizing and popularizing certain political issues while making others seem unreasonably “radical.”

**Social Movements in the United States**

Historians, including Maurice Isserman, Michael Kazin, and Bruce J. Schulman, consider the era I study in this dissertation important because of the social changes that occurred. The United States that had vaulted to a supposedly stable world power following World War II now seemed to be in trouble. Many refer to the 1960s as “turbulent” and the 1970s as the “Me Decade.”¹⁴ Historians have begun to expand knowledge of these eras to show how these decades helped shape culture in the latter portion of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. Throughout the 1960s, for example, “Americans were plunged back into ‘anguished scrutiny’ of the meaning of their most fundamental beliefs and institutions in a renewed test of history,” as Isserman and Kazin argue.¹⁵ Moreover, by the 1970s, posits Schulman, Americans experienced long “malaise- and mayhem-filled years” which transformed the country’s “economic outlook, political ideology, cultural assumptions, and fundamental social arrangements.”¹⁶ As such, these decades produced various social movements that came to encompass, in one way or another, virtually everyone in the United States.

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While professional football players participated in social movements from the late 1950s through the 1970s, they are not considered as part of these movements.17 Most of the players did not specifically align with organizations such as the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the National Organization for Women (NOW), the Women’s Equity Action League (WEAL), or the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BPPSD). Consequently, most studies of social movements do not analyze the football stars of the era (or athletes in general). I do not contend that these athletes specifically were involved in the movements; they were not on the front lines. Rather, they associated with the rhetoric of various elements of social movements and perhaps made them more visible for people who had not yet come into contact with the social issues involved. Whereas social movements intersected aspects of professional football life, each movement has a much broader history than displayed in the chapters of this dissertation.

**Political Football and Sport History**

Studying the connections between social movements and professional football illuminates the relationships between sport, politics, and culture in at least three important ways. First, this study illustrates some of the diverse ways in which professional football players used the game for means beyond simply the love of sport and to make money. As sport historian Richard C. Crepeau maintains, “[t]he culture wars, born in the 1960s, were played out in microcosm on the stage of professional football in front of an audience

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17 Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 7. According to sociologist Sidney Tarrow, social movements are those “sequences of contentious politics” that are “based on underlying social networks” that challenge social norms and “powerful opponents.”
growing in size and intensity.” Yet, some scholars argue that professional football (and the NFL in particular) simply serves the postwar right-winged, conservative, military-industrial complex. Oriard contends that during the 1960s and 1970s, “the NFL positioned itself clearly on one side of the era’s political and generational divide.” They were on the “conservative” and “right-winged” side of the culture wars of the era. As each chapter of this dissertation provides, however, professional football players from across the political spectrum endorsed the sport (and not just the NFL) as a popular way to disseminate their personal versions of “proper” American values, or what they believed was most important in society.

Take professional football player Gloria Jimenez of the National Women’s Football League (NWFL). She played for the professional squad in Toledo, Ohio, (the Troopers) during the 1970s, because she believed in the notion that women had “the equal right to go out and play a sport or game” in the same way their brothers could.

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18 Crepeau, NFL Football, 62.

“You shouldn’t be held back because you’re a woman,” she said. Jimenez saw, in football, a way to advance the cause of women’s liberation.

Or take Roosevelt “Rosey” Grier, who played for the New York Giants and the Los Angeles Rams of the NFL during the late 1950s and early 1960s. He was inspired by Martin Luther King, Jr., but, as he wrote in his autobiography, he “had little idea as to how [he] might help…. or ‘join the movement.’” He reckoned that what he could ultimately do was “try to stand for the principles of love and brotherhood among the people with whom [he] worked—football players.” He did just that. “And so it was that football began to give me opportunities to speak out and to lead. Every time I got the chance, I talked about love.” Grier began to use football to effect social change in ways he found meaningful. In fact, most players studied in this dissertation, like Jimenez and Grier, took a liberal or progressive worldview. By studying these players, we can begin to see football as a sport not just on one side of the generational culture wars.

Second, studying professional football players who partook in liberal and progressive politics advances our understanding of the way the relationships between sport (in general—as opposed to just football) and politics that manifested in the era. According to sport scholar David W. Zang, it was during this time that athletes attempted to revolutionize sport. Traditionally, sport had been “[c]loaked in the mythic mantle of character-building” while it was “an institution bound tightly to tradition and the habit of

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20 Author’s interview with Gloria Jimenez (Toledo Troopers) December 27 2013, Toledo, Ohio, notes and recording in possession of author.

acceptance.” National leaders saw sport as important because they believed it would help boys become men and teach them important characteristics such as teamwork, hard work, and manhood. To make America strong, many believed, people needed to play sports. This train of thought came under fire in the 1960s. Protests and revolts from athletes were, Zang claims, part of a larger “assault on American tradition.” Most of the scholarship on sport and politics concerns college campuses and international sport; professional football remains an understudied area of this body of literature. This study therefore is important for our contemporary understandings of the politics of sport during the era as the NFL was the most popular game in the land.

Third, this topic contributes to recent discussions of professional football as a “cultural industry.” Scholars Thomas P. Oates and Zack Furness argue that professional football is a “site for cultural participation and performance,” where athletes are the performers while everyone else participates, in various ways. Such cultures “are a vital part of the energy and passion” that helped make professional football so popular. As

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24 Ibid., 157.

Oates and Furness contend, “professional football is about more than simple contests staged to attract audiences and generate advertising revenue.” Instead, they say, it is about deeply held connections: friendships, family ties, connections to place, and self-esteem. Ideas about manhood, race, personal responsibility, and collective achievement are exchanged, sometimes with unusually passionate conviction, when the subject is football.26

I add to this by specifically discussing ways that football players and the broader professional football culture (including league officials, fans, and the media) interacted with social movements. To do so, I analyze ways that players became political during their careers, but also how NFL owners, marketers, coaches, and administrators, along with the media, responded, which in turn, affected (or often times reflected) how the public viewed these political athletes and social movements. Oriard’s work on the symbiotic relationship between the press, the public, and sport is important to this point.27

The ways that the press covered sport influenced the broader public. In this case, throughout the era, the press and the NFL had a harmonious relationship; thus, how NFL officials responded to social movements often took place through the press and consequently shaped the public’s ideas about the subject. The political football that these players participated in from the late 1950s through the 1970s helped shape the broader culture of social movements.


27 See Oriard’s Reading Football, for the best example. Also see Michael Oriard, King Football: Sport and Spectacle in the Golden Age of Radio and Newsreels, Movies and Magazine, the Weekly and the Daily Press (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001)
Methodologies

I am methodologically informed by historians Simon Gunn and Lucy Faire. As they argue, “[m]ethods matter because the way we study a phenomenon shapes (or may even determine) the knowledge we derive of it.” An awareness of various methodologies, or the different ways of doing history, is important, because as Gunn and Faire explain, methodology “is intimately linked to epistemology, the grounds of knowledge.” As they explain, “few historians use only one method in their work, even if they do not recognize much of what they do as methodological at all.”

Multiple Histories and Activism

As such, I draw on various research methodologies, what some scholars have referred to as a “multiple histories” approach. This tactic demonstrates that studying history in various ways (through archival history, oral history, textual analysis, etc.) sheds light on the contested, multidimensional, and subjective nature of the past. It helps disengage the binaries—that is, deciding “what kind of history we should be striving for?” I could label this study sport history, football history, history of social movements, etc. But I contend it is the combination of these fields that brings the richest

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and most nuanced analysis of our culture’s past. A multiple histories approach shows that history cannot be readily understood through one single discipline or method.\textsuperscript{32} It confirms that a history is not, as argues feminist geographer Janice Monk, “a single complete story.”\textsuperscript{33}

Furthermore, this approach shows how histories “reflect the values, goals, and position of the scholars who write them.”\textsuperscript{34} In that sense, I am personally invested in this dissertation. Sport historian Colin Howell asks, “if history does not have emancipatory potential then what is its value?”\textsuperscript{35} Indeed, I see this dissertation as a piece of political activism. As historian Hayden White maintains, a “historical inquiry is born less of the necessity to establish that certain events occurred than of the desire to determine what certain events might mean for a given group, society, or culture’s conception of its present tasks and future prospects.”\textsuperscript{36} Therefore, I do not reconstruct the NFL’s relationship with social movements of the late 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Instead, I am interested in examining the culture of professional football during and after players attempted to bring certain social movements to the American gridiron. Teasing out how the NFL changed (if at all) during that era demonstrates how certain politics (mainly those that are read as “radical” in modern language) have predominantly failed to affect

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{32} Multiple Histories: Culture and Society in the Study of Rajasthan, eds. Lawrence A. Babb, Varsha Joshi, and Michael W. Meister (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2002).
\item \textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Colin Howell, “Assessing Sport History and the Cultural and Linguistic Turn,” Journal of Sport History 34, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 461.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Hayden White, “Historical Pluralism,” Critical Inquiry 12.3 (1986): 487.
\end{itemize}
the sport. This allows us to understand the NFL both in terms of its history and why certain issues in the league continue today.

Methods of Research

One way to analyze social movements and professional football through multiple histories is to draw on numerous methods of historical research. In the chapters that follow, I study political football in various ways. Following a literature review, I utilize textual analyses of autobiographies in chapters two and three. As John Bale warns, autobiographies sometimes have an “over-emphasis on sporting aspects” of the athletes “at the expense of social, economic, and political happenings.” However, these volumes also provide what Jeffrey Hill refers to as “active texts” of players’ identities and worldviews left unexamined by mainstream portrayals or other available sources (such as the media).

In chapter four, I employ archival research and textual analysis, using research done at two archival locations and various online periodical databases. Finally, in chapter five, I rely on media interpretations of the NFL marketers’ and administrators’ treatment of women to assess the mainstream portrayal of women’s involvement in the league. I also draw on a series of oral history interviews to study women who played professional football during this time in the NWFL. These interviews are important, because as historian Joan Sansgter explains, “traditional sources have often neglected the lives of

women.”39 Indeed, those traditional sources that I study in the first part of that chapter do not even consider women as possible football players. The minimal media portrayals of the NWFL also discounted their sporting efforts. Ultimately, I look at professional football through a range of sources, with the help of a variety of methods and disciplines, constructing a complex, nuanced, and multi-narrative history of the sport, which allows reflection on the modern-day role of political movements in football.

Subjects

Finally, in this dissertation, I focus on specific subjects. As stated earlier, I do not provide a comprehensive analysis of football players who engaged politics or even social movements. Instead, I choose players who were the most open during their playing days about the political nature of their football careers. Jim Brown, Roosevelt Grier, Leonard Moore, Dave Meggyesy, Chip Oliver, and Julie Sherwood did so through specific language that aligned with the social movements. Other athletes, including Jack Kemp, Bernie Parrish, Mitchi Collette, Pamela Schwartz, Carla Miller, Olivia Flores, Gloria Jimenez, Laurel Wolf, Kim Waggoner, and Jan Hines, did this more implicitly, discussing tenets of social movements while playing professional football, yet not entirely connecting with or marching with political organizations. In both cases, though in different ways, social movements played a central role in these players’ identities. Thus, I read the reaction of NFL officials to the emergence of social movements by examining how the league responded to a specific group of players that made both politics and football a central part of their identity.

Dissertation Outline and Description of Chapters

The remainder of this dissertation includes five chapters. Chapter one provides a brief overview of the emergence of professional football as the new American pastime and pays close attention to the ways in which the sport grew as a cultural force by the time of the late 1950s. This chapter also briefly introduces the historiography of the four social movements. The discussion is limited in this review chapter as analyses of the social movements are also woven into each succeeding chapter.

I take a chronological approach to studying these four social movements. In chapter two, I begin in 1955 when Grier, a black man, entered the league. It was an interesting time for Grier and other black players as the league had desegregated just nine years earlier after a period of strict, though unwritten, Jim Crow. Grier’s autobiography, along with those of fellow African American players Leonard “Lenny” Moore and Jim Brown, provide unique “active texts” of 1960s NFL race relations. I argue that Grier, Moore, and Brown brought much needed attention to issues of racial discrimination in U.S. sport and society. League officials’ response, though, illuminated the continuing racialized terrain of professional football. League officials opened more space for black players, but in a limited and still very restricted way. NFL owners and coaches allowed black players into the league, but adopted a quota system. They segregated, or “stacked,” players to certain positions. They refrained from hiring black coaches or administrators. And they either appropriated aspects of black culture, or changed the rules (i.e. celebration rules) to keep “blackness” out of the game. Long after intersecting with the Civil Rights Movement, the NFL remained a racialized terrain.

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40 Hill, Sport and the Literary Imagination, 26-27.
As league owners and coaches grappled with the implications of the black freedom struggle, ramifications of the broad New Left and the budding counterculture and hippy movement also permeated the professional gridiron. Specifically, I focus on what historians, such as Van Gosse, call the “white New Left.” As opposed to black Americans who fought for civil rights, thousands of college-aged students, who were a majority white, took up the causes of the New Left and counterculture movements. To study this, in chapter three, I again draw on autobiographical studies by considering Dave Meggyesy’s *Out of Their League* and Chip Oliver’s *High For The Game*. The two autobiographies, in the words of sport historian Matthew Taylor, illuminate the “subjective identity and self-representation” of the players that was lost in mainstream media accounts. In their works, Meggyesy discusses his time with SDS, whereas Oliver waxed political philosophies in line with those student protesters or counterculture “hippies.” I contend that Meggyesy and Oliver represented an undercurrent of opposition to the “American One Way” in professional football. That dominant motif, as described by Zang, promoted professional football as representational of American nationalism in the 1960s that sat opposite of the cultural revolutions and civil wars of the era. While these undercurrents existed in the sport, NFL league officials increased connections with nationalistic politics, connecting with the American military and citing conformity as

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more appropriate for the sport than radicalism. Meggyesy and Oliver, finding little room for their political ideals, left the game.

Whereas NFL officials dealt with the New Left and counterculture by silencing or ignoring such political ideas, league owners were forced to engage the labor movement more specifically in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the fourth chapter, I draw on archival research from the Library of Congress on AFL Players Association president Jack Kemp, along with the autobiography of Bernie Parrish, the NFLPA’s vice president. I study the transformations of ideas about unions in professional football in the late 1960s, and how it affected the union idea in the early to mid-1970s. For much of their history, professional football players had little, if any, success in unionizing. Though rife with disagreements in their own ranks, a small number of labor idealists brought new ideas to the sport. Some wanted minimal change. Others wanted broader systematic shifts. This chapter mainly focuses on two such individuals: Kemp, who wanted moderate advancements, and Parrish, an ardent union activist (who worked with the Teamsters). As a result of the tension wrought by these individuals, the NFL owners eventually reacted to the union movement by marginally accepting its existence. The NFL players union grew at the heels of the NFL owners and management in the 1970s because of the political engagement of players and union reps of the late 1960s. Owners ultimately made space for those who believed unions deserved recognition in professional sport leagues, although in a relegated fashion.

In the same way, NFL officials responded to women. My fifth chapter examines the tensions created by the women’s movement in the 1970s and in professional football. The women’s movement also has a long history, dating to the eighteenth and nineteenth
centuries. Nevertheless, scholars often situate the late 1960s and 1970s as the peak of postwar feminist activism. Indeed, during that time period, feminists also became involved in professional football. Most women, though, had trouble becoming a part of the NFL’s culture. This chapter mainly analyzes how NFL officials did not promote the women’s movement. While they brought more women into the league as ticket-buying spectators and television viewers, they did so in a way that did not promote women’s equality, but instead reasserted a male over female hierarchy. What league marketers missed were the hundreds of women who actually took to the gridiron during that decade. In that sense, I also study the women of the 1970s NWFL who became a part of the women’s movement through their football playing. NFL administrators disregarded the NWFL and the media did not follow them as a serious sport, underscoring football as a male preserve.

The intersection of social movements and professional football ultimately illuminates that under currents of opposition toward racial hierarchies, authority, management’s power, and sexism appeared from the late 1950s through the 1970s. While I focus most specifically on players and their political movements, the responses, or lack thereof, from NFL officials and the resulting political tensions show the broader political culture of professional football in the era. The sport continually normalized and popularized certain political issues while making others seem “radical.” In doing so, the NFL continued to be a strong player in the center of American culture.

44 See for example, Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second-Wave Feminism in the United States, ed. Stephanie Gilmore (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008). Also see Sara M. Evans, Tidal Wave; Stephanie Gilmore, Groundswell: Grassroots Feminist Activism in Postwar America (New York: Routledge, 2013)
In this chapter, I provide a brief introduction to professional football in the United States and to the historiography of the four social movements studied in the remainder of this dissertation. On the one hand, the scholarly study of professional American football has most specifically focused on the growth and transformation of the sport in popularity or the sport as business throughout the twentieth century. On the other hand, the history of social movements mainly discusses the topic from the viewpoint of those most directly associated with the front lines of each movement. (Many histories exist on the Students for a Democratic Society). Therefore, one of my purposes in this work is to expand both areas of historical knowledge. Studying professional football through the framework of social movements looks beyond simply examining the infrastructure of the sport and the league and how it became so popular. Moreover, studying social movements through football shows how each political undertaking had a far wider reach and larger impact than generally accepted.

Professional American Football

The historical transformation of the NFL from a small league to a powerful cultural force in the United States illuminates the context in which the institution of professional football responded to social movements of the late 1950s through the 1970s. Historians and sport scholars have studied professional football from its humble beginnings in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through the years of its growing popularity in the second half of the twentieth century. They have done this
primarily in two ways: 1) the growth and commercialization of the sport; and 2) football’s relation to the popular press.

Professional football emerged out of industrial teams located in cities across the country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As historian Marc S. Maltby illustrates, some small club teams began to pay players in the 1890s in order to persuade better athletes to join their teams. Some club teams paid “ringers”—players who played for a team just once or a few times—to play in certain games. These players did not make a lavish living off of their professional days and often times they were seen as social outcasts.¹ In that era, professional sport was looked down on in society. “Real” athletes were those who played for the love of the game, rather than for profit. As historian J. Thomas Jable shows, the first known player to accept professional money to play football in 1892 never admitted to accepting payment.² Professional football remained a fringe and disrespected sport in its early years and did not have substantial impact on dominant American culture.

Professional football did not become as a cultural force in part because of its place within American class relations. Scholars, such as Craig R. Coenen and Keith McClellan, have illustrated that because more teams appeared throughout the early 1900s, club organizers eventually saw an opportunity to form a league in 1920 that would become the NFL. This early iteration of the league included teams in small cities such as Canton,

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Ohio; Latrobe, Pennsylvania; Portsmouth, Pennsylvania; and Green Bay, Wisconsin. In each city, players came from working-class backgrounds and each team often had a distinctive ethnic makeup. Professional football thus sat on the periphery of American sport culture. It came to represent a working-class, ethnic pastime, as opposed to professional baseball, which, in the early- and mid-twentieth century, remained the most popular form of elite team sport in the country. College football, too, developed into a popular sport for the elite-classes. But professional football remained on the margins. As sport historian Richard C. Crepeau demonstrates, in its “formative years,” the American public did not respect the professional game; instead they saw it as an unruly profession, unlike its high-brow collegiate counterpart.

By the 1930s, things changed. As Crepeau points out, “better athletes were entering the league, and more married men with families were playing in the NFL.” This helped increase the league’s “respectability in mainstream America.” Furthermore, stars of the college gridiron began to play professionally. Most notable, perhaps, was University of Illinois standout Harold “Red” Grange, who shocked fans when he announced that he would leave college to play for the Chicago Bears of the NFL.

Historian John Carroll argues that the influx of star athletes from the college ranks helped legitimate professional football in the minds of American sport audiences.

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Following the end of the Second World War, professional football grew in popularity. As numerous scholars have pointed out, the most important shift occurred because of advancements in television. Writers have described the 1958 NFL Championship game between the Baltimore Colts and the New York Giants as the moment when the sport became a national spectacle.\(^6\) However, Crepeau and others make clear that professional football became profitable and popular long before the famous 1958 game. “Certainly the impact of the [1958 championship] game was great,” but “the National Football League was not ‘made’ by this one game. Indeed the league had been growing in popularity over the previous three decades, and by the midfifties was a force in the sports world.”\(^7\) In any case, by the end of the 1950s, the game had become a successful business venture.

As the NFL became a fruitful commercial enterprise, it also became important for the civic pride of cities across the country, which only bolstered its popularity. Coenen argues that a fundamental shift in the history of professional football occurred as team owners began to move their clubs from towns such as Massillon, Ohio, to bigger metropolitan areas.\(^8\) As teams left or folded in smaller markets they became permanent fixtures in larger urban enclaves. Subsequently, the NFL began to represent big-city life,

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\(^8\) Coenen, *From Sandlots to Super Bowl.*
including metropolitan community pride that led to Americans seeing teams as hometown representatives. Furthermore, according to historian Michael N. Danielson, as teams left small-town America for big-city life, football emerged as a way for cities and communities to proclaim “big-league status,” a signifier that had been held for metropolitan areas with baseball teams throughout the first century of organized team sport in the United States.9

As teams became mainstays in urban America, others began to take notice. Consequently, entrepreneurs across the country tried to mirror the NFL’s success by starting other leagues. There had been earlier takeover attempts, yet rival leagues in the 1920s and 1930s did little to shake the NFL’s burgeoning dominance. In the 1940s and 1950s, multiple leagues emerged to challenge the league’s status. Part of this was because, as Crepeau suggests, the growth of college football in the postwar era created an oversupply of talent. More and more men returning from war went to college because of the G.I. Bill and suited up on the gridiron. This influx in talent inspired wealthy entrepreneurs to start new teams and leagues.10 The All-America Football Conference (AAFC) in the immediate post-World War II era led to higher salaries for players (and to the desegregation of the sport—see chapter two). The emergence of the American Football League (AFL) in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s showed the strength of professional football as a commercial product. Overall, the AFL remains understudied by historians, but as both Oriard and Crepeau maintain, the entrance of entrepreneurs—particularly those in the oil business such as Bud Adams and Lamar Hunt—led to a more


10 Crepeau, NFL Football, 59.
successful marketplace for professional football. Furthermore, the AFL offered to fans a new and more exciting brand of the sport. In the words of Crepeau: “Many perceived the new league to be more daring, more exciting, and simply more fun than the established and conservative NFL.”

The AFL, along with other manifestations of the sport, helped expand football to more than simply “just another sport” in the United States.

Indeed, professional football, as argued by Oriard, appeared as a “brand” in the American marketplace in the post-World War II era. The expansion of the business of the sport, the creation of the Super Bowl, and the conception of football players as celebrities, among other phenomena, helped turn professional football into one of the most dominant cultural forces in all aspects of American society. Still, no other product of professional football better represents the growth of the sport than the expansion of the relationship between football and the media.

Without question, football appeared as a profitable enterprise in the American marketplace because of its association with the press. Oriard’s various works on the media and football suggest that the two institutions have been closely linked since the inception of the sport on American soil. In the late nineteenth century, football emerged at colleges and universities and, as Oriard argues, the symbiotic relationships between the public, the media, and football helped the sport become a national spectacle. These relationships first began when newspapers and other periodicals covered the game and later when radio, newsreels, and television broadcasted football. It was not until the

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second half of the twentieth century that professional football became a commercial giant because of its ties to the media.\textsuperscript{13}

When television found professional football profitable, the game expanded into a lucrative business, but also into a cultural product and a brand in and of itself. As stated, although cultural memory tends to overdramatize the impact of the 1958 NFL Championship game, it did lead to an explosion of media coverage as television companies saw the sport as a way to succeed in the ratings wars of the 1960s and 1970s. More importantly, though, professional football came to represent and reflect mentalities about patriotism, nationalism, democracy, and, overall, what it meant to be an American. To borrow from scholar Clifford Geertz, narratives of football in American culture became “stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.”\textsuperscript{14} The advent of NFL Films in the 1960s, in particular, facilitated the game’s transformation into a cultural force. As sport scholar Travis Vogan argues, documentaries and media practices created and spread by NFL Films in the second half of the twentieth century influenced the current and dominant image of professional football in contemporary America. It was thus around this time when league officials began to become hyper-conscious of its image across the United States.\textsuperscript{15}

Another aspect led to the league managers’ consciousness of their brand—the hiring of Pete Rozelle as the new commissioner of the league. The young Rozelle became


\textsuperscript{15} Vogan, \textit{Keepers of the Flame}.
commissioner following the death of Bert Bell in 1959, who had served as commissioner since the mid-1940s. After deliberations that lasted months, the NFL owners agreed to promote Rozelle to the commissioner role in early 1960. Under Rozelle’s rule, the NFL became one of the leading disseminators in what sport historian David W. Zang refers to as the “American One Way.” Organizers and sport leaders believed that sport represented all things national. Sport, according to Zang, “honored democracy, suburbia, whiteness, middle classness, Christianity, and consumerism.”

Football was one of the leading disseminators of this ideology, and this line of thinking intensified under Rozelle. According to Crepeau, Rozelle was the “quintessential public relations man” and he “placed image at the top of his priority list.” To do so, he “saw himself as the defender of the ‘American One Way.’”

This political ideology was ultimately important because professional football was the new national pastime in the United States by the post-World War II era.

Therefore, its positions on politics had a wide audience across the country.

Thus, when footballers brought social movements to the professional gridiron, they did so in a league that had grown from a small-organization to a powerful force in American culture. Because the league had become so dominant in society by this era, it responded to social movements in specific ways. Likely, NFL leaders—particularly Rozelle—was cognizant of its stance on social movements. As biographer Jerry Izenberg

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17 Crepeau, 74. Crepeau gives special merit to NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle who helped expand the NFL in the 1960s and 1970s. Crepeau ultimately finds that the entrepreneurial ingenuity of the NFL commissioner helped make the game the new national pastime. See specifically pp. 55-152. For specific analysis of Rozelle’s time as commissioner, see Jerry Izenberg, *Rozelle: A Biography* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014).

illustrates, Rozelle created the modern public relations framework for professional sport in the 1960s and 1970s. Through creating NFL Films, debuting Monday Night Football, and closely associating with the mainstream press, Rozelle tightly controlled the NFL’s public image, trying to uphold its newfound force as a brand in American culture.\textsuperscript{19}

**Introduction to Social Movements**

Throughout this dissertation, I draw on the literature of four broad social movements that emerged out of the post-World War II environment: the Civil Rights Movement, the New Left and counterculture, the labor movement, and the women’s movement. These social movements (and others, such as environmentalism and the gay rights movement) were part of a broad liberal response to the culture that emerged with the ending of World War II and the development of the postwar push toward conservative politics throughout the United States. This chapter introduces the historical literature on these topics which will be expanded in subsequent chapters.

**The Civil Rights Movement**

Of the social movements of the late 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, black Americans’ struggle for equal treatment arguably remains the most entrenched in popular memory. Scholars now refer to the freedom struggle as the “long Civil Rights Movement” that “took root in the liberal and radical milieu of the late 1930s,” according to historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall.\textsuperscript{20} Of most importance to this dissertation is the era that became

\textsuperscript{19} Izenberg, Rozelle: A Biography, specifically see page 57.

known as the modern Civil Rights Movement, that is, the fight for freedom that spans from the late 1950s through the 1970s. One needs to only look at the volatility of contemporary race relations, however, to know that the fight continues today.

I engage two bodies of literature of the Civil Rights Movement. In the first, scholars have identified how numerous organizations and groups banned together in the late 1950s and 1960s to fight racial segregation. Those historians who studied this “classical phase,” as historian Steven F. Lawson describes it, of the Civil Rights Movement, looked at individuals such as Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Council. They analyzed John Lewis and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). They looked at women who helped lead the charge for the desegregation of white America. And they studied the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. In general, this area of scholarship seeks to understand how and why the American government began to pass laws connected to issues of racial oppression during the 1960s.²¹

In the other area of scholarship, and one of the most recently studied aspects of this larger social movement pertinent to this dissertation, is the Black Power struggle in the United States. The Black Power movement appeared as a reaction to those involved in the “mainstream” Civil Rights Movement (as discussed above). In various ways, the movement primarily focused on black empowerment. In his 2009 “state of the field” essay on the Black Power Movement in American historiography, Peniel E. Joseph assessed:

Despite efforts to define it both then and today, “black power” exists in the American imagination through a series of iconic, yet fleeting images—ranging from gun-toting Black Panthers to black-gloved sprinters at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics—that powerfully evoke the era’s confounding mixture of triumph and tragedy.22

While most remember these instances as part of the mainstream Black Power movement, scholars have begun to broaden its historiographical scope.

Scholarship on the Black Power Movement began slowly. Early histories in the 1980s illustrated the movement as fragmented from the supposedly mainstream Civil Rights Movement. Later, historians in the 1990s and 2000s penned more nuanced histories. Led by William L. Van Deburg, they connected the Black Power Movement to the “long Civil Rights Movement.”23 Indeed, earlier scholarship on Black Power had delineated the beginning of the movement with two late 1960s events: the 1966 “Meredith March” in honor of activist James Meredith who had recently been shot while beginning a 220-mile “March Against Fear” from Memphis, Tennessee, to Jackson, Mississippi; and the 1967 formation of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense in Oakland, California, and their storming of the California State Assembly in Sacramento to protest a new gun control bill that would have limited their ability of armed self-defense.24


Scholars expanded the Black Power movement to include other facets of the broader African American freedom struggle. Historians associated black radical leaders with transnational movements that linked them with 1930s Pan-Africanism. They studied Black Power not just as a Northern and Western movement, but also one located in Southern cities associated with the “mainstream” Civil Rights Movement. Furthermore, historians made important connections between cultural changes in American society and Black Power, including the black arts movement and fights for more black studies courses on university campuses.25

The New Left

While the Civil Rights Movement progressed during this era, another social movement was ongoing. What might be referred to as the “white New Left,” as historians such as Van Gosse describes it, began on college campuses across the country as thousands of disillusioned students rebelled against the complacency and conservative nature of postwar American life.26 Historians have also referred to this era as simply “the sixties” or “the movement,” including all those involved in liberation movements of the era. Because the subjects in this dissertation did not necessarily identify specifically with any of the organizations, I consider the era of “the sixties” or the “movement” as simply a broader “revolution” begun by young white radicals, primarily from college campuses.


Historians argue over the differences between the New Left, the counterculture, and the antiwar protests. But it was the combination of all of these influences that made the era so impactful in American culture and threatened the already-established American way of life.

Most of the histories of this era identify the 1950s as the inception point of 1960s radicalism. Much of the history of this movement encompasses, in one way or another, college students’ connections to the broader radical movements that emerged from Cold War tensions in the postwar era. For this dissertation, two threads of the white New Left movement are important: the counterculture movement and the antiwar movement (most specifically the Students for a Democratic Society). These movements are still the most remembered aspects of the so-called New Left.

Scholars have written on the student radicals of the 1960s. Particularly, they have studied the student revolts on college campuses with special attention to the University of California, Berkeley. Those student activists sought to demonstrate their power by demanding free speech and, eventually, contributing to the antiwar protests. Another political culture that emerged in the San Francisco Bay Area that had ties to the broader New Left was the counterculture. Scholars have identified the “hippy” movement (or the counterculture) as an important part of the larger political milieu in the 1960s. The “hippies” emerged from the “Beat” generation of the 1950s, a group of young intellectuals and writers who attempted to disassociate with mainstream American life.

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When the 1960s emerged, many combined the Beat life with emerging sex and drug cultures.²⁹

The antiwar movement, most specifically the rise and power of SDS, has also been important to this area of scholarship. Although scholars such as Van Gosse and Andrew Hunt do not see the narrative of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) as fulfilling enough for a complete timeline of the antiwar struggle, the group’s influence from the early 1960s until later in the decade provides an adequate introduction to the impact of this social movement on the American psyche.³⁰ People from the college ranks who, in one way or another, were affected by the radical nature of college and university life across the country eventually joined SDS or became sympathetic to their antiwar cause.³¹

**Labor Politics**

Labor was also an important cultural issue in the postwar era. Throughout the twentieth century, capitalism gave rise to a certain kind of labor politics. That is, for much of the century, anti-union sentiments existed across the country, and, according to historian Lawrence Richards, these feelings specifically contributed to tensions between

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³⁰ Hunt, “‘When Did The Sixties Happen?’”; Gosse, “A Movement of Movements.”

workers and management in the postwar era. President Ronald Reagan famously firing hundreds of striking air-traffic controllers in 1981 over union schisms represented the peak of anti-unionism in the United States. Nevertheless, mounting suspicions toward unions by conservatives, and some liberals, combined with the changing geography of the economy in the postwar era, led to a decline in union acceptance throughout the century.\(^3\)

Workers forming unions has been a part of American culture for hundreds of years. But, it was the late nineteenth century when workers made the most strides. Unions stemming from the expansion of nineteenth-century industries such as steel and the railroads brought together thousands of working-class people who looked to join together to demand better wages and working environments. It was around this same time period when national organizations such as the American Federation of Laborers (AFL) brought together unions across the country to join and combine their efforts against management.\(^4\)

Through the early twentieth century, labor made gains when federal mandates during the Great Depression (particularly the New Deal) provided strength to unions. The emergence of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1933 offered unions more power. The passage of the 1935 Wagner Act, which created the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), helped private sector unions improve their relationships better with management and strengthened the unions throughout the Depression and war years.


Overall, union members across the country grew from five to nine million during that era.\(^{35}\)

In the postwar era, anti-union sentiments in the mainstream seemed to appear. Unions began to be seen as connected to the communists, and in the early years of the Cold War, such communist ties negatively affected labor at the federal level. In 1947, the Taft-Hartley Act tried to decrease unions’ power by limiting their ability to strike. In 1959, many saw the passage of the Landrum-Griffin Act, which allowed more government intervention in unions, as antiunion. Furthermore, as Richards maintains, Americans began to see unions as representing “the ‘haves’ rather than the ‘have-nots.’” They believed that labor groups were out to make money rather than help the poor worker against large business.\(^{36}\) Indeed, this malaise led to some unions adopting more “radical” tactics.

Union membership remained fairly high; even federal employees won the right to unionize in 1962. At the same time, because of the thinking that unions were not for all people and anti-union laws at the federal level, more strikes led by charismatic figures such as Cesar Chaves and A. Phillip Randolph made labor seem “radical” across the country. Even though most unions had ridded of its members with communist ties in the


\(^{36}\) Richards, *Union-Free America*. Specifically see pages 9-13. Richards continues “Prior to the Great Depression, labor was viewed with a good deal of suspicion, if not alarm. Often referred to as the “labor question” of the “social question,” the impression that unions were subversive, potentially insurrectionary, organizations was widespread. Dating from the Great Depression and lasting through the 1960s, the level of approval for organized labor was considerably higher. Instead of being regarded as potential seedbeds of revolution, unions came to be seen as champions of the “underdog,” fighting to achieve justice for low-paid and mistreated workers. Beginning in the 1960s, organized labor again fell out of favor with many Americans. Quotation on page 13.
1950s, residuals still existed.\textsuperscript{37} Furthermore, more unions connected with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, the blue-collar union group that had an association with organized crime, specifically in the post-World War II era.\textsuperscript{38}

In general, labor fell out of favor with people across the country because of the new federal laws and the rise of supposedly radical union tactics. Much of the American public viewed the labor movement as “suspicious.” Indeed, by the 1970s and 1980s, according to historian Nelson Lichtenstein, the union movement was a “disaster.”\textsuperscript{39} By the end of the 1980s, only sixteen percent of workers in the United States were official members of any union.\textsuperscript{40}

The Women’s Movement

Women comprised another social group that intensified its fight for equality during this era. As with other social movements, this historiography on American feminism has grown in recent years. Scholars have studied how women, as both groups and individuals, fought for equitable treatment in the law and employment (a so-called liberal politics), and also how some women have argued for a restructuring of society based on its views on gender, a more radical approach to gender equality.\textsuperscript{41} These fights

\textsuperscript{37} Lichtenstein, \textit{State of the Union}, 212-245.

\textsuperscript{38} David Witwer, \textit{Corruption and Reform in the Teamsters Union} (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 213.

\textsuperscript{40} Schulman, \textit{The Seventies}, 111.

for sex and gender equality comprised to make a “women’s movement” that reached its cultural peak by the 1970s.

Specifically, for liberal feminists, the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the U.S. Constitution became the most important cause of the era. Although it never successfully passed at the federal level, numerous organizations and efforts to pass the law helped galvanize women to better understand the hierarchy of gender in society and helped women gain a political consciousness. Groups such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) and the Women’s Equity Action League (WEAL) sought to pass laws that improved the status of women in society, often from a legal sense.

As historian Sara M. Evans (and others) points out, there were a number of fractures within the larger women’s movement. As she explains, feminisms of the 1970s included “the politico-feminist split, the gay-straight split, the radical-cultural feminist split, the chasm between liberals and radicals, the so-called sex wars, and a plethora of personalized battles within organizations over strategic and ideological choices.” For example, as Evans explains, “feminists in the 1970s formed numerous and highly diverse coalitions across lines of race, class, and political ideology.”

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44 See Evans, “Foreword,” vii.
movements and black women’s labor, moreover, helped broaden historical understandings of this time period.\textsuperscript{45}

Another avenue that departed from the liberal, second-wave feminist movement was what historian Alice Echols and others refer to as “radical feminism.” Instead of trying to pass laws to allow women into equitable positions of society, radical feminists fought to fundamentally transform society and its entrenched gender hierarchies.\textsuperscript{46} Radical and other feminists critiqued the brand of feminism espoused by NOW, WEAL, and other prominent groups as elitist, homophobic, and insensitive to the “multiple jeopardies” that women of color experienced.

Another way that scholars have expanded this body of literature is through studying how women not explicitly involved in the mainstream “women’s movement,” became involved in a diverse array of activities that made up a broader women’s revolution in social rank. Evans first established how the personal choices of women—many of which went against social norms of the era—were choices based on political ideology. The idea that the “personal is political” became grounds for looking at the “everyday actions” of women in order to look at the broad social restructuring of gender in society.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{45} For an example of how scholars have attempted to broaden the scope of the second-wave to include more than just white middle-class women, see Benita Roth, \textit{Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America’s Second Wave} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Anne Enke, \textit{Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism} (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 4.

\textsuperscript{46} Alice Echols, \textit{Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

Historian Finn Enke added to this idea by showing how the women’s movement formed in various places in multiple ways during the era scholars have referred to as “second-wave feminism.” Enke focuses on three metropolitan areas in the Midwest: Minneapolis and St. Paul, Detroit, and Chicago. In understanding women’s widespread involvement in these areas in the public sphere during the 1960s and 1970s, Enke also delves into the “collective politicization of place” and the women’s movements “as a collective, spatial process.” This approach shows how women became active in places such as bars, libraries, playgrounds and athletic fields, women’s health clinics and shelters, and coffeehouses and clubs. The women who “came to call themselves feminists,” but also the “many [who] did not” shows, as Enke argues, that feminism did not develop “by master plan.” Instead, “opportunities and contingencies of daily life and women’s hopes for changes” forged the movement. In general, new studies of the women’s movement have attempted to include the thousands of women who looked to raise their social rank during the 1970s through means that did not necessarily connect with the mainstream organizations in the movement.

In the remainder of this dissertation, I ultimately discuss how the institution of professional American football (particularly the NFL) intersected with these emerging social movements from 1955-1979. For much of its history, NFL officials were tone deaf to large-scale social movements. It was a moderate, if not conservative-leaning institution. It was not until the mid-1940s, for instance, that professional football desegregated. In the late 1950s through the 1960s and into the 1970s, groundswells of

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48 Enke, Finding the Movement, 4.

49 Ibid., 2, 22.
social and political activism swept across the country and shifted the cultural climate. During this same time period, some football players brought social movements to the NFL, forcing the league to explicitly engage them for the first time. League bureaucrats responded to the four social movements in divergent ways. The league’s corresponding reactions showcase the political tensions that appeared as postwar social movements infiltrated the United States’ most popular team sport.
In late July 1957, Leonard “Lenny” Moore and the Baltimore Colts traveled to Westminster, Maryland. In just his second season in the NFL, Moore went to Westminster for the Colts’ pre-season training camp. The Colts practiced at Western Maryland College (now McDaniel College), a small liberal-arts school thirty miles northwest of Baltimore. Moore, along with teammates Jesse Thomas and Jim Parker, all black men, found racism alive and well in the small city of 6,000, where a majority of citizens identified as white.

As Moore recollected in his autobiography, Westminster “was a blatantly racist town where, outside of going to practice once or twice a day, there was nothing for a black person to do.”¹ For example, Westminster’s movie theater upheld a “ban on Negro attendance,” according to the press. Although three years after Brown v. Board of Education supposedly broke down color barriers in public accommodations, establishments, like Westminster’s movie theater, upheld the segregationist line. Towns and cities continued to defy African Americans their legal rights by not serving them in public places. This practice was more common across the South than the North. Maryland was a border state in which some establishments continued their racist practices, whereas others did not. Westminster was of the former.

During the first week of training camp, Moore, Thomas, and Parker decided to take action to desegregate the movie theater. The Westminster Chamber of Commerce held a welcome banquet in the college’s dining hall for the team. The three told the Colts’

upper-management that they would not make an appearance unless they were allowed to enter and enjoy the theater. Westminster theater officials did not oblige, and the three teammates took their dinners to a private room in the basement of the college dining hall, where they ate alone.2 Though unsuccessful in their boycott, Moore and the other Colts players brought the modern Civil Rights Movement to the professional American gridiron.

Moore, Thomas, and Parker were not the only players in the league to challenge racism in society. In this chapter, I consider those black players in professional football who brought the Civil Rights Movement to the NFL in the 1950s and 1960s.3 While the larger African American freedom struggle had been ongoing for over a century, the late 1950s and 1960s represents the peak years—often called the “classical phase”—of the fight for black freedom.4 It was during these years that individuals such as Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, along with organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) and the Black Panthers—in very different ways—fought for equality and against white hegemony. Furthermore, black athletes desegregated football (and white sport in general) in the mid-1940s, but it was not until the 1950s and 1960s that numerous players largely demanded more equality than simply playing time.

Drawing on autobiographies of three black NFL stars of the late 1950s and 1960s—Moore, Roosevelt “Rosey” Grier, and Jim Brown—along with press coverage of the players, I outline how athletes used their football prowess as a platform to effect

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social change in two areas. First, some players, following the popular winds of protest and direct-action politics of the early Civil Rights Movement, used their status as top-tier athletes to try changing society by refusing to participate in segregated and racist settings off of the field. Second, players connected with tenets of the Black Power movement by articulating the need for economic autonomy and freedom of expression. They associated with those who saw fiscal advancement as the means to racial freedom. In both of these areas, football players linked with the broader Civil Rights Movement. However, most did not clearly align with one branch of the struggle or specific activist organizations. That is, players did not explicitly identify with organizations such the SCLC or the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), or label themselves followers of the Black Panthers. Instead, they drew on tactics that fell within the broader freedom struggle. At times, players toed the lines between different movements.

The athletes in this chapter were part of a third wave of the integration of white professional sports. Journalist, and bestselling author of $40 Million Dollar Slaves, William C. Rhoden, identifies these three waves in the post-World War II era. The first wave encompassed athletes such as Jackie Robinson, who desegregated Major League Baseball in 1947, and the professional football players—Bill Willis, Marion Motely, Kenny Washington, and Willie Strode—who, in 1946 and 1947, joined the game after a thirteen-year so-called “gentleman’s agreement” denied opportunities to black athletes.

The second wave was players such as baseball star Willie Mays who became, as Rhoden argues, one of the first bona fide black sports stars in the early 1950s who “no longer had to bear the entire weight of a nation’s race consciousness” because he was not

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the only black man in the sport. Instead, during this era, Mays and others brought a “black soul” to sport. The third wave of integration represents black athletes of the late 1950s and 1960s. This included a greater volume of players who “faced a more discreet form of racism.” Officials in professional leagues, or what Rhoden refers to as a “white-dominated power structure,” attempted to “maintain the black-labor/white profit paradigm.” Players had to deal with de facto racism off of the field and quota systems.6

Many black professional football players, including Grier, Moore, and Brown, entered the NFL (and the AFL) during this third wave. While most black players of the 1950s and 1960s “were disproportionately stars” as Michael Oriard suggests, the number of black players did expand in the years following. In 1959, only 12 percent of the NFL was black; in 1968, it reached 28 percent, and 42 percent by 1975. By 1985, the league had a black majority, reaching 54 percent.7 Yet, as more space emerged for black football players, the NFL remained what sociologist Douglas Hartmann refers to as a “contested racial terrain.” Sport represented “not just a place (or variable) whereby racial interests and meanings [were] either inhibited or advanced but rather where racial formations [were] constantly—and very publicly—struggled on and over.”8 The increasing visibility of black stars in the NFL therefore “creat[ed] a generation of first-class black football players who remained second-class American citizens.”9

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9 Oriard, *Brand NFL*, 213.
To demonstrate the political tensions that blossomed from the intersection of the Civil Rights Movement and professional football, I first discuss the broader freedom struggle and the history of race relations in professional football. I then examine the careers of Moore, Grier, and Brown to illustrate how they brought racial politics to the NFL. Finally, I analyze the new racialized terrain that emerged out of the 1950s and 1960s for black NFL players. In essence, I locate the Civil Rights Movement in professional football in the decades after black players desegregated the white NFL.

**The Civil Rights Movement**

A fight for freedom by people of color has been an ongoing process throughout the colonized world. In the United States, specifically, black Americans struggled for equality and equitable treatment from colonial times in the Americas throughout the twentieth century. After the era of slavery, spanning from emancipation in 1863 to the present, black Americans have fought for equal treatment, safety, and equitable resources for over 150 years. Although, the twentieth century Civil Rights Movement spans from the 1920s and 1930s, according to historian Jacquelyn Down Hall, the “classical phase” of the movement, especially in popular memory, begins in 1954 with *Brown v. Board of Education*. That landmark Supreme Court case purportedly ended formal racial segregation in southern public schools. For the next two decades, Civil Rights Movements occurred across the country.

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Professional football players participated in two broad phases of the Civil Rights Movement. In the first, organizations such as the SCLC, SNCC, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), led by individuals such as King, John Lewis, and Ella Baker, respectively, organized in widespread efforts to desegregate aspects of American life, from lunch counters to bus stops. Devoted to tactics of nonviolent, direct action protest, these individuals put their lives (and their bodies) on the line to try to end apartheid. From marching on Washington, D.C., to grassroots movements forming a political party in Mississippi, to organizing on the streets of New York City and other northern metropolises, black Americans tried to claim space in white America and demanded equitable treatment in the courts and the workplace.\textsuperscript{11} The NFL players studied in this chapter all discussed aspects of this movement in their autobiographies, particularly how King affected them.

In the second major prong of the Civil Rights Movement, NFL players embraced tenets of the Black Power Movement. The Black Power Movement, according to historian Peniel E. Joseph, consisted of “a view of black empowerment . . . [that] held political self-determination as sacrosanct, and called for a redefined black identity that connected black Americans to a national and global political project based on racial solidarity and a shared history of racial oppression.”\textsuperscript{12} Leaders of the Black Power Movement followed the thinking of intellectuals such as Frantz Fanon, the early twentieth century philosopher and revolutionary, who argued that black people had

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\item Joseph, “The Black Power Movement,” 753.
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historically appropriated the experiences of their white oppressors. Because of the racial hierarchy throughout the colonized world, black people, according to Fanon, were pressured to adopt a distinctively white culture, and were subsequently rewarded for it. Thus, individuals such as Malcolm X, Elijah Muhammad, and Stokely Carmichael began to move toward a Civil Rights Movement that focused on control of one’s own identity, rather than assimilating into the conventional white culture, as they accused the “mainstream” (i.e., King and the SCLC) movement of doing in previous years. Although Black Power did not become popular until the late 1960s and 1970s, football players fought for equality through tenets of the earlier movement, namely for economic autonomy and freedom of expression in the early and mid-1960s.

Players brought these two views of the broader Civil Rights Movement to professional football in the late 1950s and 1960s. Scholars have written more on the connections between the movement and college football. But, aside from analyzing desegregation, most historians do not spend much time on the consciousness of professional players who became political during the late 1950s and 1960s. These

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16 Indeed, much scholarship on black athletes focuses on desegregation efforts of athletes or sport organizers. While this work needs to be expanded upon, it was important to the historiography. For example, see Jules Tygiel *America’s Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Charles H. Martin, “Integrating New Year’s Day: The Racial Politics of
players did so, namely, because the institution of professional football, particularly the NFL, was wrought with race/racism issues throughout the twentieth century. After owners barred them from NFL teams in 1933, it was not until the postwar era that black men laced up in the white football establishment. The history of segregation thus illustrates the early years of racism in football.

**Professional Football and Racism**

“Football was created and developed by white collegians, institutionalized initially at overwhelmingly white universities,” explains Oriard. Therefore, “[w]hen young black men took up football . . . they took up a white . . . sport.”17 Black players played professionally in the first few decades of the century. In 1904, the Shelby Blues, of Ohio, signed Charles W. Follis, making him the first black player to play under a professional contract. Frederick Douglas “Fritz” Pollard joined the Akron Indians in
In 1923, playing for the Hammond Pros, Paul Robeson became the first black professional quarterback when he suited up against the Dayton Triangles, a northern city in a region that had a strong football tradition. After entrepreneurs officially formed the NFL in 1920, thirteen black players played in the league until 1933. These players, though, were anomalies as most of the league’s players were white.

During the thirteen-year span following the creation of the NFL, black professional football players experienced racism on and off the field. For example, the white players on the Akron Indians did not allow Pollard into the team’s locker room, so he had to prepare for games elsewhere. On the field, Pollard heard racist taunts from fans and opposing players alike, and routinely had to avoid late hits and other violent racially-charged attacks.19

Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, league officials kept an unofficial quota system to make sure that whites dominated football. There were never more than five black players in the league, and, in many years, there were only one or two. When the NFL shrank from twenty-two to twelve teams in 1927, only one black player, Frederick “Duke” Slater, appeared on an NFL roster. Following the 1933 season, led by the owner of the Boston Redskins (later Washington), George Preston Marshall, franchise owners met and instituted a color line that barred black players from the league; black players would not play in the NFL for the next thirteen seasons.20


19 Ibid.

20 Smith, “Outside the Pale.” Also see Jaime Schultz, Moments of Impact: Injury, Reconciliation, and Memory in College Football (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 74-76.
While talented black collegiate players appeared through this era, most never had a chance to play in the NFL. In the 1940s, a few black players began to break through professional football’s color line. In 1946, owners in a new rival league—the All-America Football Conference (AAFC), helped desegregate the sport. That year, the newly-formed Cleveland Browns signed two black players from Ohio State University, Bill Willis and Marion Motley. This happened for several reasons. Some argue that the Browns head coach, Paul Brown, did not see race as an issue. Others argue that the AAFC was in dire need of players, which opened new space for black athletes. In any case, the NFL also desegregated at this time. Prior to the 1946 season, the Los Angeles Rams signed Kenny Washington and Willie Strode, both from UCLA. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, more black players signed with NFL teams. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the modern Civil Rights Movement gathered momentum, a larger volume of black players were in the sport than in other eras.

Professional Football Players and the Fights for Racial Equality

While NFL owners opened new space for black players, the league did not create an equitable playing field. “Black players were expected to be quiet in the face of the racism they faced,” remarks historian Richard Crepeau, “and never comment on the racial turmoil in society.” When professional players explicitly resisted racism in football as well as society at large, they therefore directly challenged existing power structures. In

21 Ibid.

22 For scholarship on the NFL’s desegregation in the 1940s, see Richard C. Crepeau, NFL Football: A History of America’s New National Pastime (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 41-43; Smith, “Outside the Pale”; Bishop, “A Nod From Destiny.”

23 Crepeau, NFL Football, 79.
the remainder of this chapter, I analyze those players who connected the fight for equality to aspects of NFL culture above and beyond simply opportunity and playing time.

The 1965 AFL All-Star Strike

In 1965, the American Football League (AFL) planned to host its All-Star game in New Orleans, Louisiana. Black players in the league immediately took notice as many had previous negative experiences in the southern port city. As Lenny Moore recalls in his autobiography, “[t]he black players in the League often had problems whenever exhibitions were held in New Orleans.”²⁴ Ongoing racist attitudes in the city reported by the players—such as white taxi drivers who would not drive the black players around—led them to consider a boycott of the game.

Twenty-one black players galvanized in the weeks leading up to the 1965 AFL All-Star Game. Sport historian Maureen Smith argues that many of the players had previous experiences of participating in the Civil Rights Movement while in college, and they had been closely following protests across the country pertaining to the movement. In doing so, they drew on this budding “political consciousness,” she claims, and believed that they could use their athletic capital to effect social change.²⁵

Indeed, when the twenty-one players agreed to protest and forced the AFL’s hand, league officials moved the game to Houston, Texas. As Smith contends, this event was particularly important in the history of sport and the Civil Rights Movement because it provided “a precedent for hundreds of African American athletes who would make

²⁴ Moore with Ellish, All Things Being Equal, 124.
similar use of sport in the latter half of the 1960s.”

The game highlighted the clout of politically-minded professional football players. However, it was not the first time that black professional footballers used their athletic capital to try to effect social change. Since the late 1950s, black players had tried to desegregate areas of society on and off of the field.

Contesting Off-Field Segregation

Players fought for racial equality off of the playing field. Many of these instances appeared in line with the late 1950s and early 1960s Civil Rights Movements, which, like national organizations such as the SCLC and individuals such as King, sought equal access to segregated spaces. In that spirit, many black football players looked for ways to use their status to desegregate parts of football culture other than between the hash marks. While black players could play in the NFL in the late 1950s, many still found Jim Crow intact in the league.

One such player was Rosey Grier, the standout defensive lineman for the New York Giants and Los Angeles Rams from 1955-1966. In 1959, when the Giants traveled to Dallas, Texas, a city not yet with a professional squad, the players met Southern racism face-to-face. As Grier remembered in his autobiography, the Giants, along with the Colts—the defending NFL champions from the previous season—“were sent down there to dazzle the local citizenry and generally arouse interest in the game and the league. . . . where we could be gazed at by local businessmen who might be interested in backing an

26 Ibid., 4

NFL franchise in Dallas.” Grier further recollected on the racism throughout the Texas city.

We black players knew what going to Dallas meant: the white players would stay in one hotel and we would be housed in another one that was presumably more suited to our race. It was always that way in the South. It was awkward, because we had to take a bus to the hotel where the white coaching staff and players were staying for meetings and the like. But, when it came time to eat, we had to get back in the bus and go someplace where it was okay for blacks to eat.\(^{28}\)

Cleary, systematic racism was rampant in the large Texas metropolis.

In response, players took action. Led by Lenny Moore, the Colts asked the Giants black players to skip the pre-game party. Grier, who was a friend of Moore from their time together at the Pennsylvania State University, along with Giants teammates Emlen Tunnell, Roosevelt Brown, and Melvin Triplett, agreed. According to Grier, they told the “black rookies” about the plan and they all followed suit. When the teams were to be picked up by a bus to transport them to the party, the black players allowed the white players to get on, but they stayed on the sidewalk. When questioned by the Giants coach, Jim Lee Howell, Grier remembers responding that they would not attend the party because of racial discrimination in southern housing,

Howell: “But no one ever mentioned anything about this before.”

Grier: “We shouldn’t have ever had to.”

Howell: “I can’t argue with that, but we aren’t trying to change the world, all we’re trying to do is play football.”

Grier: “I’m sorry, coach, but the time has come for us to take a stand.”

\(^{28}\) Grier, Rosey, 119-120.
According to Grier, the Giants owner, Wellington Mara, stood nearby. Upon hearing the conversation between coach and player, he reportedly told Grier:

> We didn’t know you felt like this, and, in the future, I promise we won’t go anywhere we can’t stay together. But if you don’t go to this banquet, you don’t get paid, and you don’t play in this game. That may not bother you, but it may hurt the rookies. For their sake, I ask you to relent this time. I’ve given you my word about the next time.

Grier and the other black players discussed the situation and eventually decided to get on the bus and head to the banquet. When they arrived, they found that Moore and the Colts held their end of the bargain and indeed boycotted the party. (Moore remembers in his autobiography that the Colts black players considered boycotting the game, but eventually decided to play.) Grier reports that Mara kept his word and ended housing segregation for the teams on future trips.

In this instance (and others), Moore and Grier drew on a history of nonviolent protest based on the actions of civil rights leaders in the south in the late 1950s. As historians, such as Thomas F. Jackson, explain, some in the mid-1950s believed that Martin Luther King Jr., was an “American Ghandi,” or a “national and international cause célèbre.” As such, King and his followers inspired generations of young black Americans, including football players, to stand up for their rights. They parted ways with

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30 Ibid., 119-121.

their black predecessors who took what might be considered an accommodationist stance by accepting their segregated fate in the pre-1933 era.

In his autobiography, for instance, Moore explains that when he arrived in Baltimore in the late 1950s, “the city was alive with debate” about the recent King-led Montgomery bus boycott. Grier too reflected on King when remembering his political motives. Grier’s politics, and desire to do more for black Americans than simply play football, evolved because, as he remembers, “things were happening around me that emboldened me, things of which I was becoming increasingly aware.” Grier felt that he and other black athletes “need[ed] to stand and speak for [themselves], and the man who came forth to help us do that was a fellow Georgian named Martin Luther King, Jr.” Grier and Moore both connected the mainstream Civil Rights campaign to the NFL, and they would continue this as the 1960s began.

Again, impacted by the broader Civil Rights struggle, players from the Colts, led predominantly by Moore, participated in a political protest two years later. In 1961, the Colts and the Steelers had scheduled an exhibition match for the second week of August, which would be hosted by the Roanoke Chamber of Commerce at the locally-owned Victory Stadium with the proceeds donated to charity. In the early 1960s, Roanoke’s population neared 100,000, and only about 18,000 of its citizens identified as black. Originally, stadium officials opened its ticket windows to all consumers, hoping to bring in 24,000 fans for $4 a ticket. However, Virginia State authorities quickly stepped in and demanded that the stadium follow the southern practice and law of seating segregation.

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32 Moore with Ellish, All Things Being Equal, 70.
33 Grier, Rosey, 129-130.
This directive brought together the black players on the two opposing teams, the NAACP, and the southern clergy. They all attempted to end segregation at Victory Stadium.\textsuperscript{34}

Working with attorneys Reuben Lawson, George Laurence, and Harry T. Penn, Reverend R.R. Wilkinson, the head of the Roanoke branch of the NAACP, quickly filed a discrimination lawsuit in the State Court of Virginia. Yet, within four days of the game, the courts still had not scheduled to hear the suit. Thus, Wilkinson embraced a different tactic. With overwhelming support from his Hill Street Baptist Church, where he served as pastor, Wilkinson reached out to the black NFL players on the Colts and Steelers. In a telegram to the twelve Steelers and seven Colts, he stated:

The Roanoke Branch of the NAACP is engaged in the struggle for equal rights, the opportunity to become first-class citizens and to abolish segregation. The Chamber of Commerce of Roanoke has refused to sell tickets for the game scheduled for Aug. 12, 1961, on an integrated or desegregated basis. The colored citizens of Roanoke would love to very much to see you play, but we deplore segregation, particularly in a stadium owned, maintained and operated by all the citizens of Roanoke. Won’t you join us in our fight for freedom by refusing to play in a segregated situation?\textsuperscript{35}

Already attuned to the situation through other channels, the Steelers and Colts took action. According to the \textit{Pittsburgh Courier}, the city’s black newspaper, when Steelers coach Buddy Parker heard of the situation, he polled his players who overwhelmingly

\textsuperscript{34} “Boycott Wins! Negroes to Sit all Over Roanoke Stadium!” \textit{Pittsburgh Courier}, August 12, 1961, p. 1.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
responded that “We won’t cross an NAACP picket line, to play in a stadium which segregates Negro fans.” Colts players quickly agreed.36

In response, Wilkinson, Roanoke Chamber of Commerce official Jack Smith, lawyers, and team representatives, including Pittsburgh P.R. director Don Kellett, Buddy Young, and the personnel director of the Colts, met in a downtown Roanoke hotel on the Wednesday before the game. While no minutes of the meeting appear to exist, afterward, the Roanoke officials decided to not abide by Virginia segregation laws for the game at Victory Stadium. NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle announced the agreement, stating:

I feel that because of the charities involved there will be a real benefit to the children of all races and the game is to be played with all players participating. The position of the Rev. Mr Wilkinson of the Roanoke NAACP is appreciated, and it is felt that the segregation law is repugnant to the American way of life. . . . The worthy cause and the hope of early court settlement of matters of this type permits the teams to play. This incident has focused the attention of the National Football League on the unhealthy condition existing in the cities of this type. I am hopeful that in future seasons clubs of the National Football League will not play games to segregated audiences.37

After hearing of the decision, all nineteen players involved agreed to suit up for the exhibition contest, and they, as the Pittsburgh Courier proclaimed the next day, “held jim crow for downs.”38

36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
Although the papers portrayed the story as a triumphant victory for the black players of the Colts and Steelers, and the black citizens of Roanoke, Moore remembers a different tale, as he articulated in his autobiography years later.

[W]hen I went onto the field in the pregame warmup, I looked around the stands and it was obvious that black fans were still sitting in predetermined blocks of seats. I walked down the field, to the end zone, to meet some of the black kids. They were fenced in, like pigs in a pen. I had to reach through the chain-link fence in order to shake their hands. No image had ever made me realize, with such force, just what blacks have been up against all through American history: we have always been on the outside looking in. We are isolated by the spaces we have been allotted, watching society from a distance, given only a partial view of reality.  

Moore’s memories suggest the political tensions that remained in the league, regardless of the coverage of an improving racialized terrain in the league in the postwar era. While the city appeared to respond to the threat of protest from the black football players, in practice, segregation remained.

Nevertheless, these instances of direct-action, nonviolent politics from black players helped make visible the racist cultures inherent in professional football and in cities across the country. Players in the late 1950s and early 1960s departed from earlier strategies of assimilation offered by black players in the years before and following football’s color line. However, some players were not political, suggesting the radical nature of players such as Grier and Moore.

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Certainly, other black players did not so eagerly fight for such freedoms. Star running back from Washington, D.C., Bobby Mitchell, took a more conservative approach to the racialized culture of his sport. Mitchell’s wife, Gwen, was a strong proponent of the Civil Rights Movement, especially when the couple moved to D.C. in 1962. She became involved in the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, but Mitchell, the football player, wanted no part of her activist agenda. When asked about his role in social politics in late 1963, he told a Sport magazine reporter:

I know, that Negroes have criticized me, but I don’t believe in building an image that isn’t a true image of me. With some organizations that ask me to join, I can see their falsity. Others just don’t interest me. As for the NAACP, I just feel I am not ready to be a part of them.  

Mitchell also endorsed a line of thinking that equated opportunities in sports as equal to freedom. “Look at the strides we have made in sports. Tremendous!” he told the reporter. “Everytime [sic] I run down that field, I am doing something tremendous for the Negro race.”

This is similar to previous accommodationist stars, like Jackie Robinson or early black football players, who announced they would let their athletic prowess do the talking.

Another star player, running back Gale Sayers of the Chicago Bears, expressed similar thoughts. Although Sayers participated in demonstrations for racial justice while at the University of Kansas, when he entered the professional ranks his outlook changed, or at least the outlook he expressed publicly. Sayers felt a responsibility to the Bears to

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41 Ibid.
not become involved in any behavior that would look bad for his employer. As he also told a Sport journalist: “Anything I do now, I’m not just doing as Gale Sayers, but as a Chicago Bear and a member of the National Football League.” For instance, when asked by a reporter how he felt about seeing stories of “people cursing and screaming and throwing rocks at the Negroes,” Sayers responded: “It doesn’t bother me at all. Those people live in the United States and they have a right to do whatever they want.”

Players like Mitchell and Sayers also illuminate the political tensions concerning race and racism in the NFL following desegregation. Some players simply wanted to be a part of the game, whereas others strove to use their place as a star athlete and budding celebrity to continue to effect social change. Those players, such as Grier and Moore, saw the value in ending segregation off of the field. However, this was not the only freedom that players fought for. More and more, as the athletes saw their power and influence on the game (particular on the owners’ pocketbooks), they realized the potential they had to fight for more freedoms.

Jim Brown’s and Roosevelt Grier’s Black Power

While players of color found more opportunities in professional football in the 1950s and early 1960s, nearly all of them continued to face harsh conditions inside and outside of the stadium. Most teams did not sign more than a few black players. Many experienced de facto racism on their teams. Others felt that owners restricted their independence based on the color of their skin. This fight for civil rights became

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especially lucid in the form of players who worked for economic and autonomous freedom during their careers.

Black professional football players in the 1960s began to connect with a form of Black Power that emerged out of the broader Civil Rights Movement. The Black Power movement, broadly, took two forms. In the first, activists sought economic freedom. They believed that the best way to gain equality in the United States was through participating (successfully) in the country’s consumer and capitalist system. In the second, many saw identity politics and the search for control over one’s own self as a way to gain freedom.43

Indeed, in the early 1960s, several black professional football players began to radicalize in their fight for economic freedom. While the larger labor movement was already in motion, black players fought for economic freedom in an era when their skills were especially sought after. In contrast, team owners still desired to have more white players on their teams. Black professional football players thus connected with a broad sweeping agenda of people involved in the black freedom struggle—the fight for economic power.

As historian Michael Erza maintains, while many see the fight for economic freedom as part of the late Civil Rights Movement, particularly in the era of Black Power from the late 1960s on, “it is incorrect to assert that civil rights leaders during the 1950s and early 1960s did not have their eyes on the economic prize.”44 Athletes too, such as


boxer Muhammad Ali and baseball player Curt Flood, made business central to their struggle for racial equality.\textsuperscript{45} And some in professional football followed suit.

Jim Brown was one such figure. Brown burst onto the scene in the late 1950s as a recruit out of Syracuse University. A top all-around athlete (some consider Brown also one of the greatest lacrosse players of all time), he quickly became a star in Cleveland as he won running titles and helped the Browns become one of the leading NFL teams and led them to the NFL Championship in 1964. Indeed, some consider Jim Brown the best running back of all time.

While Brown became a star on the field, he simultaneously spoke out for black athletes and he continuously advocated for working-class black citizens in and around Cleveland. He became a public pariah when he endorsed the Black Muslims, following the ideologies of Ali. Brown’s connections to Ali and his discussion of racism, as Oriard explains, along with his “defense of the separatist, antiwhite Black Muslims . . . led Time magazine in 1965 to call him a candidate for ‘Most Controversial Athlete of the Year.’”\textsuperscript{46}

Brown’s politics were a central part of his identity. Initially, though, he did not espouse the significant racialized views for which he came to be known. At first, he seemed to abide by corporate rule in the NFL. For example, in 1960, some began to fear that the Browns’ coach, Paul Brown overworked the running back. As an unidentified source told Sport journalist Larry Klein:


Paul Brown is going to ruin Jimmy Brown. . . . No man, not even a powerhouse like Jimmy Brown, should carry the ball so much. The more he smashes into those big linemen, the more chance he has of getting hurt and ending his career. Sure, let him carry a lot, but at least give him a rest once in a while. He’s not a horse; he’s a human being.\textsuperscript{47}

However, Jim Brown quickly shrugged off this assessment when confronted by the same reporter, telling him “I get paid pretty good money to carry the ball.” Even as a young player, Brown importantly considered the fiscal side of the sport. In that year, Brown made a reported $30,000, a high salary for a professional football player in the 1950s.\textsuperscript{48}

As time wore on, however, Jim Brown grew increasingly discontent with the status quo. No longer willing to play by the rules of the game, he spoke and acted out for himself in contract negotiations and for other poor black people in the greater Cleveland area. Indeed, he made the fight for economic equality a two-fold battle: for himself in negotiations with the Browns’ ownership and for poor, working-class black people in the greater Cleveland area.

Brown differed from Moore and Grier, who sometimes found direct-action, nonviolent protest their avenue of choice for fighting for racial equality (although, as I will show later, Grier also embraces aspects of Black Power). Instead, Brown embraced a tenet of the freedom struggle that trumpeted Black Power. He drew from the political philosophies of Black Power leaders who not only wanted to fight for inclusion into


\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.
white society and a teardown of segregation across the country, but also for power within dominant culture.

His squabble with the Browns’ management over salaries reflects the running back’s focus on fighting for more than simply inclusion in the sport or other parts of white society; he fought for economic freedom. His awakening to the need to demand economic freedom occurred because of his relationship with his coach, Paul Brown. As aforementioned, at first, Jim Brown found solace in conforming to the standard established by Coach Brown, who was known to be quite the disciplinarian. When asked questions in locker rooms after games, the running back noted in his autobiography, that he “usually came up with some kind of scintillating statement that endorsed God, country, and teamwork,” a trifecta of approved football propaganda.49

Yet, his mentality changed within his first few seasons in the NFL. He recalled that at the beginning of a 1959 game versus the New York Giants, “someone kicked [him] in the head” and he “suffered memory loss.” After being looked over by a doctor, Jim Brown sat out, but Paul Brown scolded him in the locker room during halftime. He played in the second half. As the running back later wrote:

I had regained my senses somewhat but I was still in a sort of mental no-man’s land. I was dreamy out there. Sam Huff, the New York middle linebacker, who year after year has keyed on me with such slam-bang tackles that fans imagine we have a personal grudge against one another, was shocked to see me in the game.50

49 Brown with Cope, Off My Chest, 7.
50 Ibid., 8.
Jim Brown resented the coach’s disparagement of him for sitting out earlier in the game, and he claimed that this instance pushed him toward looking for more than simply playing time.

Jim Brown decided that he would “continue to run as hard as [he] could” while saying little, “but only in season.” The offseason became his “time for speaking up, a time for needling Paul.” It became “[a] time for letting him know that [Jim Brown] could be a difficult fellow, and hence a time for announcing to him that he would have to pay through the nose for [his] services.”

In short, if [Paul Brown] regarded me as nothing more than a means to his end, a weapon for victory, I thought of him now as nothing more than a means to my end—more cash. I was willing to die for the dear old Browns, but I would take a lot of their banknotes with me.

Jim Brown’s attitude change reflected his stance on the authoritarian culture in football, a move to push back rather than “get in line.” He routinely entertained offers from other sport industries, specifically boxing and baseball. Promoters from each sport offered Brown large contracts to jump ship. As Brown reiterates throughout his autobiography, he knew he could use these opportunities to fight for higher salaries from the Cleveland Browns. Brown did not just desire inclusion into the white institution of football, but he fought for higher salaries and economic sustainability.
Rosey Grier’s racial consciousness in terms of economics also evolved during his professional career. When Grier entered the league in 1955, he was content with simple inclusion. As he remembers,

back in the fifties, for me to negotiate my contract with the Giants, it went something like this: “I’ve had a good year this year,” I’d say, “what do you want to pay me?” In answer to my question, Wellington Mara [the Giants’ owner] would name an amount that must have been well within his budget and to his liking. And I would respond, “Oh, okay. Good.”

Grier previously never felt the need to negotiate for more money. “When I signed my first contract with the Giants in 1955,” he explains, “it never occurred to me to ask for more than they were offering.” He believes that whenever a player appeared “with a little more savvy” the team’s management “refused to talk to any agent or lawyer.” Owners relied on the old mantra of players playing football for the love of the game. As Grier explains, “[i]nstead of money, our reward, according to management, was in playing the game we loved and hearing the cheers of the fans.”

However, by the late 1950s and early 1960s, he continued, “I was learning.” Grier reports that “there came a day . . . when I refused to say ‘Oh, okay,’ and, instead, I and some of my black teammates on the Giants team took a stand.”

In his autobiography, Grier connects his awakening at the economic opportunities within the broader Black Power movement. For Grier, the Black Power movement

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54 Grier, Rosey, 190.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid., 116.
“helped to call attention, as the [other] Civil Rights Movement had failed to do, to the needs of poor people and to the root of their plight: powerlessness.” He maintained that “it pointed to the need to restructure our nation’s economic and political institutions on the basis of a transformed value structure.” Grier believed he could partially do just that through professional football, but it was his ability to find off-the-field engagements that really led to a feeling of freedom.

Grier found upward mobility through the entertainment industry, and it was there where he meshed his struggle for economic mobility, his celebrity status, and his progressive political views. The defensive lineman—who became well-known for his work with the Democratic Party, especially during Robert F. Kennedy’s run for the White House in 1967 and 1968—found a way to use his status as a famous football player to expand his economic horizons.

Grier began a career as an entertainer while still playing for the Rams in Los Angeles. Black athletes have a long history of taking the stage during or after their careers. Unfortunately, their characters often perpetuated racist stereotypes of black men. They often focused on their strength and brutality, rather than intellect. However, Grier viewed his Hollywood career in a different light. “It’s not a black role and it’s not a white role. . . I’m just myself.” He believed he was “getting away from the old-tap dancing, headscratching stereotype of the black man.”

58 Ibid., 193.


Grier’s off-the-field economic mobility thus stemmed from his capacity to look beyond simple inclusion on the field as a measurement of success in the football establishment. But Grier did not see entertainment simply as a way to financial mobility and autonomy. He also used his status to try to mobilize black populations, especially youths in the L.A. area. In the late 1960s, after leaving the gridiron and entering the entertainment industry full time, Grier organized a group called “The Teammates.” Along with other athletes, including black football players Dick Bass and Ernie Barnes, “The Teammates,” helped establish rapport among young people, both black and white, and show them “the dangers of all drugs,” and to help to bring together young people “from Beverly Hills to Watts” in the L.A. area.61

More extensively, Jim Brown—who would also become a movie actor when he retired after playing nine seasons—began to fight for the freedoms of black citizens at the local level while still in the NFL. Working with boxer Muhammad Ali in the early 1960s, Brown established the Negro Industrial Economic Union.62 The Union’s mission entailed, as he reported to the press in 1966, “bringing the Negro into the full stream of the American economy.” Among various activities to help black Americans, the Union sought to arrange “loans with special attention to the interest rates for Negroes in business and industry.” They opened “guidance clinics and education centers” for young black residents in Cleveland and other urban areas.63


62 Erza, “Muhammad Ali’s Main Bout.” Muhammad Ali also engaged in the creation of unions for black Americans in the 1960s.

In the city’s Hough District, an area bubbling with racial tension, Brown and the Union opened a youth center for black children. As Brown reported to the Sarasota (Florida) Herald Tribune, “We aim to instill pride in the 22 million American Negroes who, I am sorry to say, do not possess enough of it and our entire program is of the self-help type.”

Brown’s and Grier’s ideas about helping black Americans at the local level stemmed from their understandings of social and economic inequalities in the United States. Brown engaged different philosophies in the black freedom struggle. In his later autobiography, Out of Bounds (1989), Brown explained how he disagreed with Dr. King’s vision—that he believed “Economic development is the only way to move up in this country.” He found more practicality in helping black Americans find financial success. “I’ve always worked for the advancement of black people,” he wrote, “always within the system, always preaching the American way.” For Brown, this “American way” included the economic advancement of black citizens. He believed that too many black leaders offered “emotional” approaches to racial uplift. Instead, he believed, “you want your leaders to be expert at economics.” As he wrote:

When black Americans thought black was bad, Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown started saying Black is Beautiful. I needed that. After I have that, what I need is education: what capitalist techniques do I need to know to make money?

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65 “Brown To Devote His Time To Negro Industrial Union.”

Because once I have money in America, if I work with other blacks who have money, I can get power.\textsuperscript{67} Brown simultaneously desired to empower black Americans while providing people tangible help that could improve their lives.

**Black Power and Gender**

Brown’s Civil Rights Movement was part of the broader push by black Americans in what historians refer to as Black Nationalism. As American Studies scholar Amy Bass explains, “a distinctive characteristic of Black Nationalism has been the elevation of race over any other element, including gender.”\textsuperscript{68} Moreover, according to historian Jane Rhodes, the Black Panthers, and subsequently the Black Power and Black Nationalism movements, sought “to produce an exaggerated black masculinity and to insist that patriarchy was essential for the building of a black nation.”\textsuperscript{69} Because of this, gender played an important role within the Black Power movement.

Gender was significant in the dynamics of the Black Power Movement in society, and for some in professional football. According to Joseph, those in the struggle sought to “restore black male assertiveness.” Black Power leader Stokely Carmichael resembled “the kind of male attractiveness” from “early twentieth-century black leaders.”\textsuperscript{70} But, black men felt that their manhood had been contested and torn away because of their

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 98.
\item \textsuperscript{68} Bass, *Not The Triumph But The Struggle*, 215.
\end{itemize}
engagement in the world wars. Many, Joseph asserts, felt that fighting for American
democracy and the freedoms of people around the world while black rights remained in
question in the United States emasculated black American males “making unrest
inevitable.”71 Much of this dissatisfaction led to black males attempting to regain a sense
of manhood that they believed lost.

One way black men did this was through sport, particularly football. Black
football players drew on such ideologies that that promoted male hegemony. In doing so,
they illuminated the widespread nature of black masculinity within the broader
movement.72 Indeed, the fight for racial and economic equality, as historian Steve Estes
argues, was a fight for black manhood, which many deemed had been lost throughout the
era of slavery and Jim Crow in the United States. For black football players, such as
Brown and Grier, racism in the broader society kept them from achieving full manhood.
They could be men on the field, particularly as it was a place where they could
demonstrate their physical superiority, but off of it, they were still stigmatized by the
racialized environment of post-World War II America. Thus, by fighting for freedom for

71 Ibid.

themselves and others, they were able to better demonstrate, in the words of Estes, “control over their own lives and authority over others.”

Grier and Brown fought for a freedom that trumpeted a form of Black Nationalism focused on economic uplift, inclusion into the American capitalist system, and the desire to accrue power in order to be truly free. As the sport historian John Matthew Smith contends, “Brown’s grassroots organization reflected the importance of self-help and racial unity, essential components of the Black Power movement.” But, they rested on a gender ideology that validated an economic patriarchal hierarchy, or a “masculinist rhetoric” that worked to conflate the battle for economic freedom with fights of what it meant “to be a man.”

In fact, another way “to be a man” rested on the fight for freedom of expression, something many also thought lost for black men as they strove to become more engrained into the (white) culture, especially those who suited up in the conservative environment of white professional football in the 1960s. For example, while playing for the Rams later in his career, Grier began to wax philosophically on “love and brotherhood” particularly with his fellow football players. Grier sought to express himself in ways that football players felt uncomfortable. “Every time I got the chance,” he said, “I talked about love.” As he recalls, players did not always respond enthusiastically.

“We love one another on this team,” I would say.

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73 Estes, I Am a Man! 115.


75 Steve Estes, I Am a Man! 7-8.
“What are you telling people we love one another for?” the guys would ask me indignantly. They thought love was a sissy thing.

“Don’t go around telling people we love one another. We’re men,” they would say. 76

Even some of the more famous, and supposedly masculine figures in the league, did not see eye-to-eye with Grier on the topic of love. While taping a Super Bowl comedy special with quarterback Joe Namath, for example, Grier told the Jets’ standout that the L.A. Rams had come together as a team because they “loved one another.” According to Grier, Namath looked at him and said, “I like guys, but I don’t love them. Love is for chicks, man.” 77 Namath’s viewpoint emphasizes a wide sweeping issue for football players and speaks to the culture of homophobia and gender hierarchy rampant throughout the history of the sport. 78

Through his desire to love, Grier found himself as a proponent of the Black Power movement. As he remembers: “We started throwing away hair straighteners and skin bleaches, and began instead to affirm our own culture with joy.” 79

With the advent of Black Power, many shed these items and began to express “black as beautiful.” 80 Like others before him, Grier searched for his own identity and freedom of expression off of the gridiron. As he also searched for economic and autonomous freedom through his

76 Grier, Rosey, 171-173.

77 Ibid.

78 As former player Dave Kopay (who came out as gay following his playing career) explains, “Football surely represents one of the most rigid subcultures in America.” Kopay, David and Perry Deane Young. The David Kopay Story: An Extraordinary Self-Revelation. New York: Arbor House, 1977.

79 Grier, Rosey, 193.

singing and acting careers, Grier found a way to connect with people, trumpet love, and seek to achieve “harmony and peace among the races.”

While some, like Grier, confronted the gendered attitude in the Black Power movement, others embraced it, leading to unfortunate consequences. While Grier expressed himself and his black gendered identity through discussions of love and brotherhood, Jim Brown’s gendered assertiveness included a connection to patriarchy and violence toward women. Several times throughout his playing career (and in the years since his retirement), Brown stood trial for assault and battery toward female partners.

Brown’s domestic disturbances shed light on his version of manhood. In 1965, a court found him not guilty of domestic assault against Brenda Ayers, his eighteen-year-old accuser. According to the court testimony, Brown had forced her to engage in sex in a motel room and then beat her. The media had no sympathy for the alleged victim. A.S. Doc Young, of the *Chicago Daily Defender*, called the trial “one of those nasty things which crop up ever so often to threaten, if not destroy, the career of a celebrity.” And he added, “[t]his girl had brought a nightmare to Jim Brown.” After his acquittal in the courts, the alleged victim filed a paternity suit, which, again, the courts dismissed.

The media continued to side with Brown in future domestic battery cases. In 1968, police found a bloodied Eva Bohn-Chin outside Brown’s house after neighbors called in a noise complaint. Bohn-Chin later told authorities that she had tripped and fell,

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82 Steve Estes, *I Am A Man!*


and authorities dropped the charges. In 1971, Brown allegedly threw two women out of his apartment. Authorities dismissed other charges—ranging from assault, rape, and battery toward women—in 1985, 1986, and 1999. In 2000, Brown served four months in prison for his refusal to attend domestic assault training. Consequently, according to scholar Roberta J. Newman, Brown has become a fallen icon. Throughout his career, he made much headway for black men, but his treatment of women should not be forgotten. His version of Black Power included a sexist and violent form of manhood.

**White Supremacy in the NFL**

Moore, Grier, and Brown all left professional football in the mid-1960s; Brown retired in 1965, Grier in 1966, and Moore in 1967. For twelve years, these three players brought the broader Civil Rights Movement to the NFL. In different ways, they effected social change by engaging, whether explicitly or implicitly, the political process. Their politics illuminated a political tension in the sport. The league desired black talent and celebrated a fictive racial egalitarianism in the years after the beginning of desegregation. Yet, as Moore, Grier, and Brown all highlighted through their repeated protests and race-related activism, football culture was entrenched with white supremacy.

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To be sure, black players who engaged politics beyond desegregation did so in a culture that was slow to change. Many felt that politics had no role on the professional gridiron. Furthermore, NFL owners and coaches attempted to uphold the white qualities of the sport. While black players offered a radical lens for race relations, the sport’s hegemony kept the sport a racist setting. The league responded to desegregation, but by allowing more black players into the league while upholding white supremacy, the league remained a racialized terrain.

A “jockey syndrome,” as William Rhoden defines it, hampered the push toward equality. This term derives from changes in sport during the late nineteenth century when, specifically, white horseracing officials interfered with black jockeys because they had become too successful. White officials also stopped hiring African Americans and did not allow them into the Jockey Club, which essentially forced black jockeys out of the sport. Rhoden argues that when similar threats encroached on other sports, white officials responded in similar ways in order to “maintain control in the face of a perceived challenge to white supremacy.”

In professional football, while black players fought for freedoms in the NFL, repeated efforts to either change the rules or instill racist policies (whether explicit or implicit) maintained unequal treatment and upheld white supremacy. This tension occurred before, during, and following desegregation and the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement in the NFL. The jockey syndrome thus affected black players in the league.

90 Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, 68.

91 Ibid.
First, while black players came into the league, others were left on the sidelines because owners and management desired to maintain a quota system. League officials responded to civil rights on the gridiron by insisting it was a color-blind league, often pointing to the black stars on various teams. However, race remained (and always remains) very much a factor. Locker rooms and lunch tables during training camp stayed segregated, black and white players lived in separate parts of the community because of the rigid color lines that remained in housing, and racial “stacking” on the field helped perpetuate stereotypes about the physiology and intellectual capabilities of the black body. NFL team officials overrepresented black players at positions that many deem as “skill” positions—running back, wide receiver, and corner back. They overrepresented white players at positions deemed to require “intellect,” such as quarterback, offensive lineman, and linebacker.

Through stacking, coaches maintained the quota system. Moore recalls that the Colts only allowed seven black players on the team at a time in the late 1950s and early 1960s. “An eighth black would be shipped out,” he remembers, “it didn’t matter who he was—a mediocre talent or a future all-star—he was gone. It was ruthless.” Stacking and quota systems suggest how NFL coaches (and owners) responded to desegregation and black players becoming more vocal in the sport. By segregating black players to certain positions, teams argued that they were of lesser intellect than white players, and upheld the quota system. Declaring that black bodies were physiologically stronger or more

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92 Levy, Tackling Jim Crow, 148-156. “Stacking” is a term that sport scholars use to describe the overrepresentation of people who identify as a certain race at various positions on an athletic field. For example, in football, black athletes are stacked at the “skill” positions—or those positions that require the most speed—while white players are stacked at the “intellectual” positions—such as center or quarterback.

93 Moore with Ellish, All Things Being Equal, 82.
athletic argued that they did not have the work ethic and the mental fortitude of their white counterparts. These racial stereotypes provided NFL officials a way to discount black footballers’ efforts to play the sport and decentralize their popularity and political appeal. By employing a new version of the jockey syndrome, NFL coaches, general managers, and owners helped keep a white over black hierarchy in professional football.

As another manifestation of this syndrome, the league also maintained white supremacy by keeping coaching and upper-management a white domain. The only minority head coach to work in the NFL prior to 1979 (when the Oakland Raiders hired Tom Flores) was Fritz Pollard in 1928. Art Shell became the first person (since 1928) that identified as African American to be a head coach of a NFL team when the Raiders hired him in 1989. Few minority assistant coaches and no owners appeared in the league during this time. These numbers reflect the pipeline from the so-called “intellect” to coaching positions. The racialized stacking on the field led to a racialized environment in the front offices and on the sidelines.

Finally, officials in the league also responded to the rise of black stars by trying to stop the rise of a so-called “black style” in the sport. According to scholars such as Joel Dinerstein, Rhoden, and Oriard, when black players desegregated the sport, a “black style” emerged both on the field and in society that came from the culture of African


95 Oriard, Brand NFL, 244.
American expression. People began to see a black style in contrast to a “white style” on the field. “In cultural imagination,” according to Dinerstein, “football’s white masculinity was associated with aggression and power while its black masculinity was portrayed in terms of speed, style, evasion, and improvisation.” (As Oriard points out, there was no presumed “white style” in football until a “black style” emerged in popular culture.) The NFL seemed “embarrassed by the changes” and the emergence of the black style. As Dinerstein describes, the style was “antithetical to sport’s valorized ethos of teamwork and traditional white masculinity.”

The jockey syndrome in professional football appeared again as the black style seemed to creep into the sport. Indeed, one way to diminish black culture was to stop the growth of the black style. In the decades following the 1950s and 1960s, the league did just that. Head coaches in the 1970s attempted to “clamp down” on the influence of black culture by punishing or criticizing players who engaged this style in practice or games. In 1984, the league formally banned end zone celebrations. Overall, to keep the game a white domain, the league changed the unwritten and written rules.

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97 Ibid., 187.


League managers responded to desegregation and the push toward equality in the NFL by enforcing a de facto racialized caste system and attempted to abolish (or at least lessen the impact of) the new black style in football. The NFL players who brought the Civil Rights Movement to the league in the late 1950s and 1960s made strides. They forced officials in the NFL to engage racial issues on a larger scale than simply allowing players space on the field. However, the league remained a racialized terrain and a space of inequality in the United States.

Dave Meggyesy played seven seasons at the linebacker position for the St. Louis Cardinals in the late 1960s. He was a starter for much of his career. However, his identity did not conform to the stereotypical football player. Instead, Meggyesy developed ideas connected to the 1960s New Left movement while still actively playing in the NFL. After a professor inspired him to take academics seriously while a student at Syracuse University, he pursued a graduate degree in sociology at Washington University in St. Louis. He soon found himself trading defensive playbooks for the writings of the nineteenth century revolutionary socialist Karl Marx. Ultimately, following the 1969 season, Meggyesy explained to Phil Finch of the San Francisco Examiner, “[w]hen the revolution comes, football will be obsolete.”1 In early 1970, Meggyesy quit his career as a professional football player and made the 1960s New Left movement the focus of his identity.

A few weeks later, a reporter asked the famous coach Vince Lombardi, then of the Washington Redskins, about Meggyesy. “I don’t know what all this revolution stuff is about,” Lombardi replied. “I just know I don’t like to hear such talk. You won’t hear any member of the Washington Redskins talking this way.” The storied coach went on to explain how he contrasted discord from destruction: “I do not question the right of young

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people to dissent,” he explained. “I only question their right to destroy.” Lombardi believed that Meggyesy was trying to abolish football, and consequently the American way of life. “Destruction is anarchy,” the coach remarked.2

The New Left, broadly, consisted of a “series of social movements” that “surged across” the United States from the late 1950s through the 1970s. Also referred to as “the movement,” the New Left came to embody a larger number of individuals and groups who fought for progressive political reform during the era.3 This chapter focuses most specifically on the New Left along with the counterculture movements of the era. A predominantly white movement, the New Left was made up of college student radicals who protested for free speech and against America’s foreign policy initiatives during the 1960s. The counterculture also included college-aged students (some in college, but some not) who rebelled against societal norms.4

These social movements were part of broader political tensions in the 1960s that included fights for civil rights, including the African American freedom struggle, the Chicano movement, the gay revolution, marches for feminisms, and labor reform, among other struggles for human rights and dignity. People involved in these political movements broadly fought against the establishment of postwar American liberalism. People in official political organizations, such as the Students for a Democratic Society

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3 Van Gosse, Rethinking the New Left: An Interpretive History (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 2.

(SDS), and others involved in more tacit political activities, such as those who “quit” society and joined communes, all contributed to a new cultural left in American society.\(^5\)

Sport was not immune from these cultural currents. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, pundits and athletes, primarily from the college and professional ranks, fought against sport’s place among what sport scholar David W. Zang calls the “American One Way.” That is, athletes challenged the notion that sport “honored democracy, suburbia, whiteness, middle classness, Christianity, and consumerism.” They believed that the American One Way “promoted the illusion of an America singularly disposed toward all things social, cultural, intellectual, and moral.”\(^6\) Athletes and intellectuals identified hypocrisy in sport, claiming that it repressed individual growth, promoted racial and gender inequalities, and promoted the military and American imperialism. It was this era when sport began to shed its “no surprises” approach; sport began to appear as a site of cultural contest against the status quo. Prior to this era, according to Zang, many in sport conformed to the standards expected of athletes. In the 1960s, though, athletes stood up for their civil rights in greater numbers, fought against oppression, and questioned where sport stood within American culture.

As established in chapter two, several players fought against establishment norms by bringing tenets of the broader Civil Rights Movement to professional football. However, some players were involved in the movement in other ways. This chapter

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primarily looks at football players who connected with the movement through the New Left or the counterculture and antiwar movements. Drawing on the autobiographies of white professional football players, Dave Meggyesy and Chip Oliver, this chapter shows how select players tried to bring these social movements into professional football, and how NFL officials responded, or in this case, did not respond. By not responding to the more radical voices in professional football, such as Meggyesy and Oliver, the league administrators reinforced its commitment to the American One Way.

There were other players with similar ideas. Take George Sauer, Jr., who played wide receiver for the New York Jets from 1965-1970. He was on the team that won Super Bowl III in 1968 and earned a spot on the American Football League all-star team four times. However, following the 1970 season, Sauer quit. “I am physically able to play so it is hard to retire since I like football,” he told the Associated Press. “But I dislike the present conditions. . . . The whole structure of football is ridiculous.” In an interview with the *New York Times*, he later explained that football was too authoritarian. Professional football tries to “mold you into someone easy to manipulate,” he divulged. While players like Sauer found football in disrepute, he did not publish his thoughts. He reported that he submitted a manuscript on his political ideals and about football to two columnists—and since his death, journalists have discussed his political leanings—but unlike Meggyesy and Oliver, his book never hit the shelves.7

Thus, the autobiographies of Meggyesy and Oliver provide the best glimpse into the radical nature of professional athletes in the late 1960s and early 1970s. First, after quitting football, Meggyesy published *Out of Their League*, an account of his life and his

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athletic career in football, and, more importantly, a critique of the institution of football. Second, in 1971, a linebacker for the Oakland Raiders, Chip Oliver, found a life associated with the counterculture and 1970s hippy movement a better way to live than his professional football career, publishing his *High for the Game*, after he too abandoned the sport. Both players presented an ethos that cut against the grain of the American One Way.

These two players were revolutionaries, but they were also exceptions. Meggyesy and Oliver provided an undercurrent to the broader ethos of the sport that promoted the American One Way. Instead of endorsing Meggyesy and Oliver, league officials belittled them through the media. As the famous New York Jets coach, Weeb Ewbank, said of the two men, “They fell for Communist hogwash and quit football,” adding that “[t]hese are the things that poison our youth.”

League officials instead promoted athletes who endorsed the American military and the patriotic efforts of America’s anti-communist agenda. For example, the NFL media embraced Pittsburgh Steeler Rocky Bleier, who left the team for two years to serve in the Vietnam War where he was injured and received a purple heart.

Moreover, some people associated with the NFL ostensibly embraced New York Jets’ star quarterback Joe Namath, the long-haired, supposedly countercultural figure of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Yet, Namath’s iconoclasm was primarily aesthetic. Specifically, the quarterback reinforced the league’s conservative stance by traveling on

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USO tours during the Vietnam War. Unlike Meggyesy and Oliver, players such as Bleier and Namath (and others) approved of the NFL officials’ nationalistic agenda.

**The New Left**

A New Left emerged in the 1960s as a response to postwar American liberalism, and the context of the ongoing Cold War. Moreover, President John F. Kennedy’s election to the presidency spawned a group of young people who believed that they could change the country, socially and politically. They saw the election as a shift from the conservative complacency of postwar American life. Many of the political movements that have become labeled as the New Left were attributed to white student radical activists across college campuses that organized for a number of issues. From fighting for free speech, fighting against the war in Vietnam, and fighting against corporate America, white student activists came to embody the shift from complacency to radicalism in postwar American life. According to historian John McMillian, people of color “were potent sources of inspiration for the New Left” and that “combating racism was a central component of New Left politics.” Nevertheless, because the 1960s were “culturally and politically segregated to an enormous degree,” black and white radicals, for the most part, “operated more on parallel tracks than on the same track,” thus creating what we now remember as the white New Left.¹⁰

One of the leading organizations and groups in this white New Left, and one with which the football player Meggyesy became involved, was SDS. Although SDS formed in 1960, it was not until 1962 that the group amassed a wide following. Born out of the

activist milieu present at the University of Michigan in the early 1960s, SDS “was a profoundly American movement, inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, and fashioning its early political beliefs from a combination of American radical traditions,” according to historians Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin. SDS and the New Left grew from a political history of “participatory democracy,” including such thinkers as Henry David Thoreau and John Dewey.\textsuperscript{11}

When fifty-nine members of SDS joined to pen the “Port Huron Statement” in June 1963, the organization established itself as a leader of the New Left and particularly the antiwar movement of the mid-1960s. SDS, led by University of Michigan student Tom Hayden, first associated with groups such as the United Auto Workers (UAW) and their fight for labor rights. However, a break away from those more associated with an Old Left—mainly those concerned with social class earlier in the century—occurred in the mid-1960s. SDS was influenced by groups and individuals fighting for black freedom, particularly those organizing in the south such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In fact, SDS members were influenced by SNCC’s freedom rides, an effort to desegregate southern bus stops and their facilities in 1963. Hayden, for instance, who traveled with the freedom riders, saw oppression and inequality as one of the major points of emphasis for SDS.\textsuperscript{12}

During the mid and late 1960s, SDS turned away from simply calling for participatory democracy and instead began to call for an overthrow of the military and a fight against corporate America. Again, the black Civil Rights Movement, particularly

\textsuperscript{11} Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, \textit{America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s} (New York: Oxford University Press), 161.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, 162-163.
the swing toward Black Power in the late 1960s, influenced this position. And although SDS has become one of the leading cultural emblems of the movement, “one of the defining characteristics” of the New Left, according to Isserman and Kazin, “was its high degree of decentralization and spontaneity.”

Many people fought against domestic injustices, such as black civil rights. Others focused more on the antiwar efforts; however, they disagreed on the best way to end the war. Some believed that stopping the war should be left to the more mainstream liberals, such as those in the federal government, whereas others believed in directly stopping the war by any means necessary.

In any case, SDS had a profound impact on American society, and Meggyesy joined the ranks of professional football while white radicals began to appear on the national political stage. At the same time, another movement—the push toward an American “counterculture”—was underway.

The Counterculture

Whereas Meggyesy associated with the New Left and SDS, Chip Oliver allied with what Isserman and Kazin describe as the “making of a youth culture,” that is, the combination of the 1950s Beat Movement along with the 1960s hippy and counterculture movements. Spawning from activity on the west coast in the late 1950s, particularly in the San Francisco/Oakland/San Jose Bay Area, this new counterculture induced thousands of young white radicals to reject societal conventions. Members of the so-called Beat generation refused to conform to authority, experimented with drugs and sex,

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13 Ibid., 163.
14 Ibid.
and grew their hair long. In the process, they represented a “generational gap” between those who saw postwar prosperity of the late 1940s and early 1950s, and those who wanted to get away from a systematic and corporate way of living.\footnote{Ibid., 147-164. Also see W.J. Rorabaugh, \textit{American Hippies} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 21.}

Oliver was immersed in this way of thinking when he went to college at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. More specifically, he joined the “hippy” movement, a term that originated as the Beats moved into places such as New York City’s Greenwich Village and San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury. The movement was an outgrowth of the Beat generation that embraced the new rock and roll music and the LSD culture that proliferated throughout the Bay Area. Many of these individuals flocked to the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood, where they made a community that celebrated all of the counterculture aspects of the youth or hippy movement. Generally, as the historian W.J. Rorabaugh describes, the hippies in the 1960s sought “self-emancipation from the larger culture.”\footnote{Rorabaugh, \textit{American Hippies}, 15.}

One faction of this movement took the rejection of modern society even further by building “self-regulating communities.”\footnote{Isserman and Kazin, \textit{America Divided}, 154. Italics in original.} One example of this was hippy communes. By 1970, communes provided room, board, and work for over 750,000 people in the United States. Most of these included groups of “young people, mostly white, who rejected the norms of ‘straight America.’”\footnote{Ibid., 154-155.} As will be shown, throughout his short
playing career with the Oakland Raiders, Oliver not only rejected standard conventions, but also normative living procedures, by joining a commune.

**Radicalism and NFL Conformity**

When players brought tenets of the white New Left and the counterculture to professional football in the 1960s, they were radical in the sense that for much of its history, professional football players conformed to conservative or moderate expectations concerning political and cultural ideals. Much of the conservative nature of professional football aligns with its connections to war and the military throughout its history.

Football has always had a close association with the military and war. When the sport first emerged on the east coast in the late 1800s, coaches brought warlike strategies to games and practices. The famous “flying wedge” play was based on Napoleonic war tactics.\(^{19}\) Coaches and players had experience in the military in the sport’s earlier years. In fact, during World War II, most teams reserved time each day during practice to run military training routines to keep the men prepared for war. As Crepeau explains, NFL officials wanted to “maintain quality in the face of the military draft” while it continued to provide “sport and relaxation on the home front during the war” for Americans.\(^{20}\) By early 1942, over thirty percent of the NFL players were contributing to the military’s war efforts.

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\(^{19}\) Scott A. McQuiklin and Ronald A. Smith, “The Rise and Fall of the Flying Wedge: Football’s Most Controversial Play,” *Journal of Sport History* 20, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 57-64.

The most notable aspect of the Second World War on professional football, according to Crepeau, was the “significant increase in the regard for football as a training and morale vehicle for the young men of the nation.” More former-military men became head coaches—such as the famous Cleveland Browns coach Paul Brown—and brought with them strict order and a no-nonsense attitude. Even coaches who did not serve in war, such as Vince Lombardi, took to his task with militaristic zeal. Lombardi coach at West Point where, according to biographer David Maraniss, he created his military-disciplinary style on and off the football field.\textsuperscript{21} Coming to the professional ranks in the late 1950s, Lombardi brought “the traditional values and the illusion of stability in a changing world,” according to Crepeau. He “could lead, inspire, and wield authority” in an “old-fashioned way.”\textsuperscript{22}

League marketers continued to associate football with the military and war in the 1960s. The militarization of the sport became one example. Sport, especially football, has always been used as a metaphor for war.\textsuperscript{23} And images of the NFL, such as those presented by the fledgling NFL Films, often showcased the league as a harbinger of American military might.\textsuperscript{24} This culture became dominant in the NFL in the era, and


\textsuperscript{22} Crepeau, \textit{NFL Football}, 87.


moved into the 1960s when Meggyesy and Oliver entered the league. Clearly, their radical political ideals cut against the grain of this political dogma.

While radicalism seemed to have little impact on the NFL, it did influence the college game. “The 1960s,” according to Zang, “brought a steady stream of challenges to authorities in organized sports.” College football became one such spot of political activism.\(^{25}\) This manifested in civil rights protests, such as fourteen black players at Wyoming University staging a protest because the team planned to play Brigham Young University who discriminated against black clergy members.\(^{26}\)

Elsewhere, student-athletes fought for their rights of self-expression. Oregon State University’s Fred Milton refused to shave his mustache, defying the orders of his head coach, who consequently dismissed him from the team. At the University of Maryland, players demanded that their head coach, Bob Ward, resign because they found his style of coaching too authoritarian.\(^{27}\) These were just a few of the incidents in which players across the country protested the authoritarianism so entrenched in college football. Whereas activism seemed to have no place in the NFL, they emerged on campuses, the same campuses where Meggyesy and Oliver began to craft their political ideals.

### The New Left, the Counterculture, and Professional Football

Just as black professional football players were not supposed to comment on race relations, white players were not supposed speak out against the sport’s authority. While

\(^{25}\) Zang, *SportsWars*, 120.


\(^{27}\) Zang, *SportsWars*, 119-139.
radicalism appeared on college football teams across the country, the professional ranks were still largely void of activism. Administrators strived to market the league to the white mainstream public, rather than those who marched with SDS or participated in counterculture movements. What Meggyesy and Oliver brought to the sport created political tensions; as a result, league leaders tightened their control and closed down opportunities for dissent.

Throughout his career Meggyesy attended SDS chapter meetings and worked with the organization in its antiwar efforts. Oliver, on the other hand, promoted the use of recreational drugs, communal living, and the search for greater meaning in the world. Both players endorsed the American radical tradition of the 1960s, but in divergent, and often conflicting ways. In fact, according to journalist Robert Lipsyte, Meggyesy found Oliver’s politics “rather unsophisticated.” Nevertheless, their critiques of the sport offer analysis of the political tensions within professional football in the 1960s.

Leftist Critiques of Football in Society

Dave Meggyesy and Chip Oliver both revolted against a sport that they found oppressive and representative of the ills of American society. In the process, they joined forces with a small number of public intellectuals who, at the same time, began to offer similar critiques of the sport. Writer Paul Hoch, for example, published his *Rip Off the Big Game: The Exploitation of Sports by the Power Elite* in the early 1970s. In it, he compared football to the evils of American capitalism.

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In football, as in competitive capitalist society, the aim is to accumulate assets—in society called capital, in football “points”—by outmaneuvering the opponent or forcing him (in football, yard by yard) off his territory. And in both “games” the end goal is more and more abstract value without upper limit or concern for the competitor.\(^29\)

Moreover, Hoch found that fans in football were encouraged to “not think of [a player] as a human being at all.” Instead, a player was a “position” that could be replaced or removed at any moment “in order to benefit the team’s corporate enterprise of gaining points.” Football reduced people to inanimate objects. “The mask over his face and all the covering equipment reinforce his status of non-humanity,” Hoch argued.\(^30\)

Hoch saw football as more business than sport, and expanded his analysis to the corporatization of the United States in the postwar era.

The most important building block of both football and business is authority, and it seemed to be becoming more and more important in both every day. In both realms a more and more rigid and bureaucratized hierarchy is taking shape and trying to control more and more aspects of the workers lives, both on and off the field.\(^31\)

For some, football came to be seen as an example of (or a cause) of the other negatives in U.S. society. Hoch’s book, and others who wrote critiques of sport such as Jack Scott, provided Leftist intellectuals a space for debate on the role of sport in the United States.


\(^30\) Ibid.

\(^31\) Ibid.
For the next decade, Hoch and Meggyesy (along with others) were lumped together as the deifiers to the American One Way.

Others saw football as a pawn of religion and the government. *Rolling Stone* writer Hunter S. Thompson joked about the connections between sport, the state, and religion. For example, in 1973, he predicted that the Washington Redskins were in trouble. Set to play the Miami Dolphins in the Super Bowl, he criticized the fact that President Richard Nixon endorsed the Redskins. Furthermore, Thompson derided head coach George Allen who had publicized the team’s prayer circles in the lead up to the game. “I decided that any team with God and Nixon on their side was fucked from the start,” Thompson declared.\(^{32}\)

Thompson also decried football followers for their naiveté. “There is a dangerous kind of simple-minded Power/Precision worship at the root of the massive fascination with professional football in this country.” He believed that “sportswriters are mainly responsible for it.”\(^{33}\) Journalists often celebrated all things football, instead of examining its relationship with other aspects of American society.

Consequently, football had great sway on the American public. The ways in which football impacted the masses led former professional player John McMurty to write in 1970 that “[f]ootball comes closer to political fascism . . . in its cultivation of mass hysteria and its fawning idolization of the powerful.”\(^{34}\) To these dissenting voices in popular culture, football represented the negatives of American capitalism and politics.

\(^{32}\) Hunter S. Thompson, “Fear and Loathing at the Super Bowl,” *Rolling Stone*, February 15, 1973

\(^{33}\) Ibid.

\(^{34}\) Quoted from Hoch, *Rip Off the Big Game*, 9-10.
Oliver and Meggyesy aligned with those writers and intellectuals who began to perceive football as a drain on society. During his playing career, Oliver specifically believed that football on the field was fake. “The more I saw of professional football,” he recalled, “the more I realized how plastic and programmed everything about it was.”\textsuperscript{35} He specifically explained the situation through his interactions with fans.

After a game was over, for instance, you had to walk out of the locker room and deal with all the fans standing around and their stereotyped ideas of who and what you were. Many of them were drunk, and I saw fights break out in the stadium parking lot.\textsuperscript{36}

Oliver believed the fans were part of the packaged atmosphere of professional football and attributed their behavior to the broader culture of the sport.

But I realized after a while that it was just a part of the whole culture, a demonstration of where we are at. The violence and mayhem on the field and the fans fighting and shouting outside of the locker room. We’re all in the same consciousness together.\textsuperscript{37}

While some argued that sport helped fans escape the realities of everyday life, football, for Oliver, represented the negatives of society, rather than a release from the broader world.

Like Hoch, Oliver also believed that NFL owners only cared about the bottom line. NFL officials, for instance, placed an “emphasis on the publicity of individuals

\textsuperscript{35} Oliver, \textit{High for the Game}, 82.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
rather than on playing the game.” This led to the game becoming “artificial” and “packaged.” Oliver alleged that players were disillusioned, did not take the sport seriously, and were only in it for the money. “Instead of being a game played by eager young men intent on the joy of bodily movement and contact,” he wrote just prior to quitting the sport in 1969, “football was little more than a grotesque spectacle being staged to collect money.” However, according to Oliver, league marketers promoted the sport as a serious athletic endeavor. As he explained, “the image is all that counts to the people who are selling it. They don’t care if it’s any good as long as they can convince the public.”

Meggyesy also criticized that professional football illuminated harmful aspects of the broader society. He believed that it did not provide Americans with anything tangible, and that a political revolution needed to take place. Contemporary critics envisioned football as part of an American ethos, one that taught young men the traits they needed in order to advance the country. But for Meggyesy, the game was filled with “violence and sadism.” Millions of American watched each weekend “in something approaching a sexual frenzy.” The “militaristic aura surrounding pro football” he continued, was a negative. In all, Meggyesy censured, football was “both a reflection and reinforcement of the worst things in American culture.” He believed that it both celebrated America’s military procedures (particularly in Vietnam) and reinforced racist attitudes that existed both in the culture of professional football and the United States.

38 Ibid., 76.
39 Ibid., 137.
40 Ibid., 77.
41 Meggyesy, Out of Their League, 146-147.
Combined, Meggyesy’s and Oliver’s denigration of professional football stemmed from the connections with the white New Left and the counterculture. Particularly, Meggyesy got involved with the academic study of sport and political organizing. Oliver connected with the culture of the era, particularly the use of recreational drugs and communal living.

Meggyesy, Football, and the New Left

Meggyesy participated in the New Left when he played professional football with the St. Louis Cardinals. In fact, although interested in activism when he majored in sociology at Syracuse University, Meggyesy’s political consciousness matured during his time in the NFL. He remembers he and his teammates became “ politicized” when the NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle decided to not cancel the weekly slate of games in the days following the assassination of President John Kennedy in 1963. Indeed, according to Crepeau, “Rozelle took a beating in the newspapers” and “was described in the most uncomplimentary of terms.”

Meggyesy remembers that the commissioner’s decision resonated in locker rooms as well. “Athletes tend to hold their political views to themselves,” he recalled. But guys were really pissed about that. We all felt out of respect for the President, we should never have played. But the orders came down from Pete Rozelle with the bullshit reason that we had to save the country, that NFL football games

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42 Crepeau, NFL Football, 77.
would bring everyone together. The players heard that and said, “This is a bunch of bullshit.”43

In his autobiography, Meggyesy revealed that most players did not want to play and had a hard time motivating themselves to even take the field. “The players were pretty bitchy and they couldn’t get into it. The fans, too, were listless at first, the quietest fans I’d ever heard anywhere.”44

Yet, soon after the beginning of the game, things changed. “I realized the power of football that day,” Meggyesy pronounced. The fans quickly had “forgotten the national tragedy and were yelling their heads off.” While perhaps the fan reactions affirmed Rozelle’s hope of bringing the country together, Meggyesy had a different interpretation: “It was frightening as hell.”45 He believed that football’s masking of social atrocities suggested that the sport contributed to a sweeping national malaise. Throughout the remainder of his career, Meggyesy tried to look beyond the galvanizing influence of football and instead see it for what it was: a game being played in a nation wrought with socio-political problems.

After playing in the league for a few years—and realizing all the problems with the sport itself—Meggsyey further developed an awareness of social politics and the New Left when he joined graduate school in the School of Education at Washington University in St. Louis. In a sociology seminar, a professor assigned C. Wright Mills’ The


44 Meggyesy, Out of Their League, 145.

Sociological Imagination. Mills had emerged as a leading figure of the movement when he published “Letters to the New Left” in the radical British journal, the New Left Review. SDS later re-published it as one of its core pamphlets to be distributed to people interested in political activism. Without question, Meggyesy framed his political ideals around the readings he did while a graduate student. Meggyesy believed that Mills’ thoughts on the industrial working class—that they “would by necessity be the main force behind any movement for meaningful social change” in the United States—ultimately “influence[d] [his] thinking more than any other” moment at that time. To that end, he became interested in being more than just a football player. He strived to join this emerging social movement and began to think about society, and football, differently.

Indeed, Meggyesy became part of the New Left that “linked young people in the United States to those in many other countries.” Although most of his teammates discredited his political leanings, he often discussed the politics of the day with Rick Sortun, an offensive lineman who also played for the Cardinals. Sortun played in St. Louis throughout the 1960s, and later became involved with the International Socialists at the University of Washington. With Sortun, Meggyesy started going to SDS meetings and became “sympathetic to their political analysis and programs.” Meggyesy thought that the New Left, as Isserman and Kazin described of the movement, “challenged the

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46 Ibid., 175-176.
47 Isserman and Kazin, America Divided, 161-162; Meggyesy, Out of Their League, 175-176.
48 Isserman and Kazin, America Divided, 161.
49 Meggyesy, Out of Their League, 176.
radical orthodoxies of earlier generations.” Meggyesy did not believe that society could change simply by progressive postwar politics. Instead, he called for a radical revolution, all while suiting up for the Cardinals.

Meggyesy and the Anti-War Movement

Most specifically, Meggyesy delved into the organization’s developing antiwar efforts. The American antiwar movement escalated in 1965 when the U.S. government increased the number of troops in South Vietnam in an attempt to squelch the communist uprising in the North. The antiwar movement “was far broader than the New Left” or even SDS, as Isserman and Kazin explain. “There were groups of veterans, and clergy, and trade unionists, and businessmen, and many others who had no use for the extravagant rhetoric of revolutionary cultism.” Still, SDS became one of the leading organizations determined to stop America’s fights against communisms across the world, and particularly in its involvement in the Vietnam War. SDS established itself as the leading antiwar organization when its April 17, 1965, First National March Against the Vietnam War in Washington D.C., brought together upwards of 25,000 people. In the ensuing months and years, SDS helped organize numerous protests against the American military’s international agenda to stop the spread of communism.

During this time, Meggyesy became heavily involved in SDS, although still not an official member. In 1967, working with SDS leader Terry Koch from Washington University and Marty Lenowitz, a graduate student in sociology, Meggyesy formed the St. Louis Mobilization Committee “to organize and finance sending buses from St. Louis

50 Isserman and Kazin, America Divided, 161.
51 Ibid., 175.
for the October 21 march on the Pentagon.” As he described: “I was sort of the treasurer—opening an account in the committee’s name and signing all the expense checks.”

As Meggyesy continued his work with SDS, he became increasingly frustrated with football and the NFL. At an April 1968 SDS meeting, when participants decided to break apart into smaller discussion groups to discuss antiwar strategies, Meggyesy offered up his home and people went there to discuss their next course of action. “I was still working on my study of football,” he explained, “but my community organizing had increased so much I was spending almost all my time working the movement in St. Louis.” Clearly, Meggyesy was bringing a style of politics to football that other players did not endorse or participate in themselves, especially when he began to discuss these issues in locker rooms and with the media. The league began to take notice.

League officials did not respond well to Meggyesy. Coaches, according to his autobiography, noticed his involvement in the antiwar movement, and hired an FBI agent to follow him. Meggyesy believed that team administrators grew tired of his politics when he helped fund a trip that sent antiwar protesters from St. Louis to Washington D.C., in 1967 via bus. Head coach Chuck Drulis told him that the FBI did not have a file on him. Meggyesy believed that the Cardinals changed their story (i.e. they opted to not share their espionage with Meggyesy) because Meggyesy threatened to become more outspoken about the racism on the Cardinals. “There was the incredible racism which I

52 Meggyesy, Out of Their League, 203-204.
53 Ibid., 214.
54 Ibid., 205.
was to see close in the Cardinals’ organization and throughout the league.” As he reported to *Rising Up Angry*, a radical Chicago newspaper soon after his retirement:

> When I was at St. Louis, there was a struggle around racism, because the coaches and owners wanted only a certain number of Blacks on their team. A couple of racist players made it rough by name calling and petty harassment. So the Blacks got together and wrote up a series of demands. They said if the changes don’t come down, we’re going to the media, and there’ll be hell to pay. A bunch of White players got behind them.\(^{55}\)

According to Meggyesy’s description in his autobiography, the Cardinals feared the repercussions if he discussed the racialized issues on the team.\(^{56}\)

> Meggyesy saw the league as complicit in the postwar connections between sport and the military industrial complex in the United States. “In short,” he wrote, “the game has been wrapped in red, white and blue.” He even believed that football represented “the most repressive political regime in the history of this country.” Richard Nixon, who Meggyesy referred to as a “football-freak,” was “trying to make football into a tremendous patriotic spectacle.”\(^{57}\) (Nixon was often known as a big fan of football.)

Meggyesy clearly had different political views than his coaches. He believed he was blackballed for his anti-American ideals. In a more recent interview, Meggyesy explains how a coach took him outside during a meeting and asked, “[d]o you want to

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\(^{55}\) “Dave Meggyesy Takes the Cover Off Professional Football,” (part of an interview with *Rising Up Angry*, a radical Chicago newspaper), article in possession of author.

\(^{56}\) The racialized issues on the Cardinals were confirmed by an article in *Sports Illustrated*. See Tex Maule, “Century Division,” *Sports Illustrated*, September 16, 1968.

\(^{57}\) Meggyesy, *Out of Their League*, 146-147; “Dave Meggyesy Takes the Cover Off Professional Football,” (part of an interview with *Rising Up Angry*, a radical Chicago newspaper), article in possession of author.
play football? I have been told to tell you by the ownership that if you continue to do what you’re doing, you are going to be thrown out of the League.” What he was doing was participating in the antiwar movement. In one particular moment of dissent, he refused to participate in a pregame flag salute. As Meggyesy remembers:

NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle sent an order down to the teams that when the National Anthem is being played, we, the players, would have to hold our helmets under our left arm look up and salute the flag. I found it repulsive that anyone would be telling me and my teammates that we had to salute the flag and how to do so. So I did a low key “Tommie Smith” and held my helmet in front of me and bowed my head. The next week a sports columnist wrote about how reprehensible it was that anyone would refuse to salute the flag. The team didn’t know what to do. They thought that if they would be cool, maybe it would go away. So at the start of our next game, some fans unfurled a big banner that said the Big Red [the nickname of the Cardinals] thinks Pink. It was their way of saying that I was a “pinko” (a communist) and we were a “pinko” team.58

Midway through the next season (in 1969), Meggyesy believed that he was finally benched after passing around an antiwar petition (which he says 37/49 players signed) in the locker room. “Being humiliated and powerless brought it home to me what the nature of the game was.”59 In all, Meggyesy refined his political ideals while a college student

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59 “Dave Meggyesy Takes the Cover Off Professional Football,” (part of an interview with Rising Up Angry, a radical Chicago newspaper), article in possession of author.
in the early 1960s, and brought these philosophies to the gridiron where, because of football’s place in society, they became more central to his worldview.

Counterculture, Sexual Revolution, Drugs, and Communal Living

As Meggyesy developed a political agenda while working with SDS, Chip Oliver became involved in the 1960s social movement through more indirect means. During his playing career, Oliver related with those who desired more out of life than corporate America could offer. After living in Las Vegas, attending San Diego City College, and the University of Southern California, Oliver joined the Oakland Raiders in 1968. Like Meggyesy, Oliver had a background in sociology. While at City College, according to his musings in *High for the Game*, he “did a lot of critical reading that showed [him] where our society was at.”\(^{60}\) Additionally, he was in college in the 1960s, a time when “revolutionary changes were in full swing.”\(^{61}\)

Toward the end of his two-year career in professional football, Oliver became a member of the National Guard because the Raiders encouraged him to join as a way of shielding him from the military draft. This was a somewhat common practice in the late 1960s. Trying to “protect their economic interests,” according to Oriard, “several clubs in the 1960s had special ties to local reserve or National Guard units for sheltering their players from the draft (at a time when these units had long waiting lists).”\(^{62}\)

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\(^{60}\) Oliver, *High for the Game*, 29.

\(^{61}\) Ibid., 31.

\(^{62}\) Oriard, *Brand NFL*, 24; Oliver, *High for the Game*, 120.
It was during this time that Oliver fully realized his disagreements with both football and the corporate United States. He did not think that the league officials actually cared about him as a person; they saw his value as a football player. Thus, when Oliver quit football following the 1969 season, he reported, “I started putting the straight scene behind me. I sold my savings-and-loan stock and mentally discarded the past. I stopped going to the National Guard meetings and let my hair grow. As soon as I woke up and realized where business was at, I told myself it was time to stop shucking and jiving and start being real.”\(^{63}\) In doing so, Oliver “rejected the norms of ‘straight America.’” As Isserman and Kazin argue, he joined with thousands of young people across the country who “took their own path to a separate identity.”\(^{64}\) They did this primarily through drugs and communal living.

Indeed, Oliver engaged the 1960s radical youth movement and brought tenets of those political ideals to the NFL. He became the so-called “hippy radical of the Raiders, often discussing politics and engaging in the culture of recreational drug use,” as he described himself. Oliver, playing just down the street from the famous Haight-Ashbury—one of the centers of 1960s youth culture—often found solace in drugs. He first smoked marijuana while playing for the University of Southern California (USC), explaining that it helped revert to a time when he “didn’t have the mental blocks, the lies and indoctrination, to prevent [him] from seeing things as they are.”\(^{65}\)

\(^{63}\) Oliver, *High for the Game*, 131

\(^{64}\) Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, 155.

\(^{65}\) Oliver, *High for the Game*, 5.
He also experimented with LSD for the first time at USC. “What followed was the beginning of an era that led me to a different awareness of purpose. . . . LSD showed me how far I had slipped from the genuine purity of youthful spirit. It was both crushing and inspiring. I began once again to seriously question my behavior toward the responsibility of life and to develop my potential.”  

Like the young members of the counterculture movement of the 1960s and early 1970s, Oliver used drugs to help raise his consciousness in an era of uncertainty.

Oliver also found comfort in recreational drugs as a way to remove himself from the tribulations that playing professional football brought. Athletes, he argued, used drugs just to get through games. “If Pete Rozelle, the commissioner, put a lock on the pill bottle,” he wrote, “half the players would fall asleep in the third quarter.” Oliver argued that “the increased use of grass and other psychedelics among football players” would ultimately “change the game radically.” Through his discussions and interactions with Raiders players (and others across the league), he found that more athletes were “getting turned on” to the shared experience of drug use as a means to find relief in a hostile environment (that is, playing in the NFL). According to Oliver, drugs were omnipresent in sport, as issue that affected a number of other sports as well.

Many athletes never admitted to drug use, suggesting Oliver’s radicalism (and maybe exaggerations). According to Zang, “[f]ew athletes admitted to an exploration of that kind of sensation.” Most athletes used performance enhancing drugs, instead of the

66 Ibid., 49-50.
67 Ibid., 44.
68 Ibid.
69 In the 1970s, Pittsburgh baseball player Dock Ellis, supposedly threw a no-hitter while tripping on LSD.
recreational variety. “Many athletes,” Zang explains, “drew a moral distinction, seeing therapeutic benefit in performance-related drugs but sneering at the recreational use of marijuana or LSD.” As a football player, if Oliver publicly believed in all of the positive benefits of LSD and marijuana, he was in the minority.

Oliver and the Anti-War Movement

Also breaking away from convention in the NFL, and like Meggyesy, Oliver espoused antiwar rhetoric. During his time with the Raiders, he often discussed this political ideology with coaches and teammates. He believed that others in the NFL were too apolitical. As he wrote:

I bought newspaper clippings [into the locker room] and explained how screwed up politics were and how the government is a pile of shit because of our apathetic attitude toward responsibility. We all had enough money to afford lawyers to keep ourselves out of jail. We all had it made, so we forget about the fact that our government was passing laws to oppress people.

Oliver continued by expressing these thoughts to his teammates. As he remembered, a typical conversation entailed:

Oliver: “Who the hell do they think they are, sending guys halfway across the world to kill somebody?

Teammate: “That’s not murder. That’s not murder.”

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71 Ibid., 104-105.
Oliver: “That’s premeditated murder. Those guys are given guns and told to go kill the enemy.”

Teammate: “Well, if we don’t, they’ll go communist.”

Oliver: “So what? Why don’t we worry about the people. Countries are just artificial boundaries set up by the wealthy so they can manipulate the resources and control the wealth. That’s the whole nationalistic trip.”

Teammate: “You’re a communist.”  

Oliver epitomized these ideals because of his connections to the counterculture and his political motives that ran counter the conventional politics swirling in professional football circles.

Oliver’s disillusionment with the war and professional football ultimately inspired him to leave the game. “Most important of all,” he reported, “football was fun because I wasn’t playing for the money.” Simultaneously, his eccentric and political views began to take a toll on his teammates. “Eventually my behavior got me in trouble with nearly everyone on the Raiders,” he remembers. “Few of the white players had any desire to listen to new ideas.” Instead, the players lumped him in with “Jerry Rubin or Abbie Hoffman,” the two 1960s counterculture figures. They did this “rather than think about what [he] said.” He remembers that instead, they would “call me a hippie about forget about it.” “Once I was branded a radical,” he bemoaned, “I got a lot more political rhetoric and a lot less open discussion.”

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid., 140.

74 Ibid., 102.
Oliver responded by quitting professional football following the 1969 season. Instead of continuing to make money in the NFL (his coach, John Madden, tried to convince him to continue his playing career on multiple occasions), Oliver decided to join a self-regulating community of other like-minded ideologues. He joined a commune that ran the Mustard Seed Restaurant in Mill Valley, California, a city just north of San Francisco. The community, like thousands of others across the country, offered “young rebels,” as Isserman and Kazin describe them, “news ways of living, dressing, working, celebrating, and organizing a family.” Over 30,000 of these “communes” appeared, housing nearly 750,000 people throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. People involved in this movement believed in “an authentic existence,” which included a living environment “free of an addition to the mass market and the quiet desperation of individuals floundering in a harshly competitive society.”75 There was an impulse to live outside of what they considered to be “normalcy.” For Oliver, normalcy was professional football and all it represented.

Oliver’s thoughts on his communal-living experience mirrored that of the larger social movement, and he even explained how a community-type experience could affect professional football. He wrote about his ideal version of “team” football prior to attempting a comeback in 1971, which lasted only three weeks. His “vision” included “a team without coaches, without silly restrictions or rules.” This team “would live together, eat only the finest natural foods and practice yoga and transcendental meditation.” Importantly, the team would be player-ran, and the “entire element of control from coaches would be gone.” Oliver’s ideals demonstrated how he believed there to be a

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different way of playing football than simply aligning with corporate America, as professional sports did in the 1960s. “The members of the team would do the Dance of Football,” he wrote. Oliver believed these ideals and connected with the counterculture movement ongoing in the 1960s. While he tried to bring these tenets to the NFL, his utopian dream never came true.

**The NFL and the Radical Movements**

The late 1960s and early 1970s revolutionaries were the exceptions that proved the rule in the NFL; the NFL remained a place of conformity. Meggyesy and Oliver disagreed on many political ideals. In the weeks following the release of their autobiographies and their exits from the NFL, newspapers ran commentaries. Although journalists often conflated the players’ political musings, Meggyesy made it clear that he had not talked with Oliver. As he told *The Southwestern Missourian* “my analysis of football goes past the conclusion that it’s a silly game.”

Yet, while they disagreed on their political stances, Meggyesy and Oliver nevertheless articulated their consciousness with strains of the white New Left and the counterculture. In spite of the men’s protestations, NFL bureaucrats responded to the 1960s radical movements by censuring any proponents. In its actions, the league either influenced players to change their ways, or continued to promote others who had high-levels of patriotism, rather than the radical philosophies of players such as Meggyesy and Oliver.

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76 Oliver, *High for the Game*, 91.

The mainstream media, following Pete Rozelle’s NFL, always had “their hands in the owners’ pocket,” and largely discredited the political ideals of both of these players.\(^78\) In reviews of the two players’ autobiographies, *New York Times* journalist Wilfrid Sheed wrote, “[b]oth authors stress how football indoctrinates you. But no one seems quite as indoctrinated as they were.”\(^79\) He believed that while each player offered some interesting anecdotes, that really each book only “contain[ed] one possible magazine article surrounded by more padding than an offensive lineman.” Sheed ultimately accused the two of being drug addicts, thereby negating any of their political ideals.

Both [Oliver] and Meggyesy have dropped acid and it sometimes clouds their message in the clichés of *that* sport. LSD may expand consciousness, but it sure as death shrinks vocabulary, and these two different characters sometimes sound as if they’re talking from the same sack.\(^80\)

Sheed assessed that Meggyesy and Oliver talked too much about the “whole straight of society” instead of simply talking about football. Ultimately, Sheed decried, “if we took the exposés seriously, we would simply have to stop watching the game altogether and cease tax-supporting new stadiums. And nobody seriously expects that, not from one reader in a million.”\(^81\)

As Meggyesy and Oliver voiced their discontent with the status quo, league officials increased their relationship with the U.S. military. While “obvious” connections

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\(^{78}\) Oriard, *Brand NFL*, 76-83.


\(^{80}\) Ibid. Italics in original.

\(^{81}\) Ibid.
already were apparent, as Meggyesy pointed out in his autobiography, an increase in direct connections with the military began in the form of United States Organization (USO) Tours of American-military controlled areas. In the late 1960s, the federal government directly asked for more support from famous athletes and celebrities toward the war effort, and NFL officials followed suit. According to Variety, the Department of Defense requested more athletes to be sent to Vietnam. In response, as commissioner Rozelle explained in 1971, “Pro Football is very pleased to cooperate . . . with the USO and the Department of Defense in sending a group of players on a good will visit to American Servicemen in the Far East.”

Players also commented on the connection. For instance, famed Dallas Cowboys quarterback Don Meredith told a reporter from Leatherneck, published by the Marine Corps Association, that “it had been a great honor to be invited to visit Vietnam, and that he was sorry he had not been able to thank every man personally.”

League administrators also responded to the counterculture and white New Left by forcing some players with such “radical” worldviews to change. For example, famous New York Jets quarterback Joe Namath entered the league in 1965 and immediately became an icon. His bravado and long hair persuaded some to view him as a figure of the 1960s counterculture. One ostensibly “radical” aspect of his life was that he owned a sports bar in downtown New York City, called Bachelors III, a venue frequented by athletes, actors, singers, and mafia members. His ownership became an issue for the NFL elites, particularly Rozelle (who was still trying to defend the American One Way), who

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82 “Top Pro Athletes Add Muscles to USO Program for Overseas GIs,” Variety, October 29, 1969, p. 63.


gave Namath an ultimatum: sell the bar or quit professional football (Namath did quit but later changed his mind and sold the bar). In a sense, Rozelle allowed Namath’s “counterculture image”—the long hair and well publicized sexual exploits—to continue as long as he did not harm the league. Owning and running a bar with mafia members in attendance did not sit well with NFL officials, particularly Rozelle.85

Thus, Namath, according to historian John Bloom, “really pose[d] no threat to anybody in power.” His counterculture connection was more focused on promoting “values of consumption” while he ultimately supported the league’s business priorities. Namath really had “political apathy.”86 In kowtowing to the NFL, giving up the bar, and later going on multiple USO tours, Namath is really more representational of the statist leanings of the league. As Oriard maintains, “[w]ithin the conservative football establishment, [Namath] was a transformative figure, but in superficial ways.” Indeed, he aligned with the “hair and hedonism” culture, and some argued that “seemed like a radical statement.” But, that culture was “already defining a new middle-class lifestyle.”87 Unlike Meggyesy and Oliver who actually quit the sport (even though Oliver attempted a comeback, he still ultimately left the game), Namath’s exit from professional football was only temporary. Instead, he thrived in football’s apolitical culture. As Oriard suggests, then, the NFL survived during the era of sixties radicalism by “absorbing its own countercultural force in the person of Joe Namath.”88 Indeed, he became a mega-icon

85 Crepeau, NFL Football, 86.
87 Oriard, Brand NFL, 51.
88 Ibid., 11.
well into the 1970s, shedding his radicalism and actually contributing to the rising popularity of the NFL.

In all, NFL officials responded to the New Left and the counterculture by not really responding at all. By not opening up any room for voices such as Meggyesy and Oliver and by continuing to align with the state instead of “radical” political views, the league administrators and coaches sent their message about 1960s radical politics and its place in the league—it did not belong. The revolution that Meggyesy and Oliver believed might materialize at the end of the 1960s in the sport (and the broader society) did not occur.
In May 1969, Buffalo Bills’ quarterback Jack Kemp penned a missive to Congressman Barry Goldwater, Jr. The son of the firebrand conservative leader and former Republican presidential candidate, the younger Goldwater had recently won his first congressional election to a seat in southern California. In the letter, Kemp explains that he was “a long devotee of the ‘Goldwater’ philosophy” and that he was pleased with the current course of politics in the United States, referring to the recent election of President Richard Nixon. As Kemp neared retirement from professional football (he would leave the gridiron at the end of the 1969 season), he mentioned to Goldwater that he was currently “representing the AFL players in their corporate relations with the pro football establishment.” Indeed, Kemp, a future Republican Party leader himself, was the president of the American Football League’s Players Association (AFLPA). Throughout his tenure he forged a unique position, merging his right-winged political ideals while being a labor leader. Interestingly, at the end of the letter, Kemp explained that he was writing a book entitled *Can A Republican Find Happiness in the Labor Union Movement.* “So far the answer is definitely not,” Kemp quipped.¹

That Kemp had doubts about his role in the labor union movement illuminates the tensions in football unionism during the late 1960s. The collective action of workers vs. management (i.e., players vs. coaches) appears in contrast with the sport’s culture where coaches act as dictators and players as foot soldiers. As discussed in chapter three,

conformity and “falling in line” was the conventional way of thinking. This authoritarian worldview also manifested through the players’ meager attempts to unionize in the late 1960s. Whereas football’s authoritarian culture came under fire from those associated with the white New Left and counterculture, players who worked toward unionizing in the late 1960s also contested management authority in the sport.

Through the late 1960s, union involvement in professional football remained on the fringes; little advancement had been made since the original NFL Players Association (NFLPA) appeared in 1956. Although several players tried to invigorate the union movement in the 1960s, by the end of the decade their efforts had reached a standstill. The NFL and the AFL merged in 1966; the agreement did not become official until following the 1970 season. Thus, the two labor associations—the NFLPA and the AFLPA—worked independently during the four-year interim. Each organization professed a different vision for the future, thereby creating tensions that influenced the union-league relationship.

Drawing on the Jack Kemp Papers at the Library of Congress, along with NFLPA vice-president Bernie Parrish’s 1971 autobiography They Call It a Game, this chapter analyzes these tensions. Each union fought for an expansion of worker/player freedom, but they did so in very different fashions. Led by Kemp, the AFLPA attempted to remain a loose coalition of united workers who believed that, in general, the league’s powerbrokers (that is the owners and league managers) were out for the best interests of the players. The NFLPA, on the other hand, influenced by vice-president Bernie Parrish, advocated for a union movement influenced by the Old Left Marxist tradition. Yet, by the end of the decade, even the NFLPA (in working with the NFL owners) shed its
radicalism. These differing styles of union activity stemmed from the various players’
political affiliations and ambitions. Their divergent worldviews clashed in the late 1960s,
affecting the course of the union movement when the leagues finally merged following
the 1970 season.

**Union Politics**

In the United States, laborers have always tried to work as collectives. Trade
unions as far back as the late eighteenth century provided workers with ways to try to
protect workers’ safety and achieve better salaries and health benefits. Labor groups
appeared during the colonial era, such as Boston shoemakers. In the first century of
nationhood, unions also appeared. In 1845, for example, a group of women at the Lowell
Mill, in Lowell, Massachusetts, formed a union that was able to reduce the working hours
at the mill from twelve or thirteen hours to just ten.²

Most historians point to the late nineteenth century as the beginning of the union
movement.³ During the second industrial revolution that spanned roughly from 1870-
1914, many U.S. factory workers joined national labor organizations. These included
groups such as the Knights of Labor (founded in 1869) and the American Federation of

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Labor (1886). By the beginning of the twentieth century, labor unions gained strength and legitimate influence.\(^4\)

Unions experienced ups and downs throughout the twentieth century. The “labor question,” as President Woodrow Wilson referred to it in 1919, became a harbinger of the 1920s and 1930s when industrial unions and the new welfare state ushered in by the New Deal offered hope to the labor movement. Nearly five million Americans held union cards in the 1920s and the passage of the 1935 Wagner Act forced businesses to act in good faith with the labor organizations. The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) emerged as a powerful force in 1935, and new strike tactics appeared on shop floors across the country. By refusing to go to work (or simply threatening to not go), laborers were able make headway in improving working conditions. By 1939, union membership grew to nine million workers across the country.\(^5\)

The partisan leanings of labor also shifted during this time period. At the turn-of-the nineteenth century, some labor activists had held nonpartisan positions. With the Depression and the emergence of the New Deal welfare state, though, union activists began to align with the Democrats in larger numbers throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Although unionism grew again during World War II, the movement experienced setbacks following 1945. Postwar mandates, such as the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act, sought to de-radicalize labor by defining various unfair labor practices; for example, the act outlawed unions from pressuring other industries from doing business with their employer during a strike. Twelve years later, Congress passed the Landrum-Griffin Act, which allowed

\(^4\) *Major Problems in the History of American Workers.*

more government intervention in unions. Together, these acts marginalized the broader movement.\(^6\)

Furthermore, in the 1950s, Cold War anxieties sparked the Second Red Scare and McCarthyism spread across the country, which saw the federal government trying to stop the spread of communism by arresting anyone considered a threat to the American way of life—free market consumer capitalism. Consequently, many saw unions as contributing to the spread of communism.\(^7\) This was because, in the early twentieth century, particularly during the 1930s, some associated the unions with the communist party. Because they did not want to get caught up in the Second Red Scare, union leaders tried to dissociate from labor radicals. According to historian Kevin Boyle, because labor silenced its radical voices, the ability of the movement to deal with class inequalities diminished, while other social issues, such as race and gender, overtook other political issues on a national scale. Civil rights movements against racism, sexism, and homophobia became more central to politically-minded activists in the 1960s than the plight of industrial workers.\(^8\)

By the 1960s, unions lost the power they gained during the New Deal. Corporations resisted unions as more companies had the opportunity to outsource to other nations. For those involved in the New Left (see chapter three), the so-called Old Left—

\(^6\) *Major Problems in the History of American Workers.*


that is, those more associated with the industrial labor unions—appeared out of touch with the realities of 1960s cultural politics. New Left groups, such as SDS, originally aligned with leading union groups, such as the United Auto Workers (UAW), but they eventually stopped focusing on the predicament of the American worker and instead focused on antiwar and civil rights initiatives. To them, unions became known “as a prop for the status quo,” as Boyle contends.9 Additionally, in what historian Nelson Lichtenstein calls the “erosion of the union idea,” people, including “intellectuals, jurists, journalists, academics, and politicians came to see the unions as little more than a self-aggrandizing interest group, no longer a lever for progressive change.”10 In sum, labor “stood on the wrong side of American political culture.”11

**Unions in Professional Football**

Unions in sport, and particularly professional football, took a similar path. Players in professional sport had organized since the last quarter of the 1800s with the rise of “modern sport.”12 For the next century, unions remained weak as club owners and league presidents largely controlled player-management relationships. According to historian Warren Goldstein, after the formation of baseball’s National League in 1876, baseball became “work performed by employees under contract to boards of directors, directed

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10 Lichtenstein, *State of the Union*, 141.

11 Ibid., 178.

and disciplined by ‘management.’”\(^{13}\) Yet, compared to other working-class men, baseball players earned high salaries. Therefore, in 1879, National League owners instituted a reserve clause, all but stopping the ability of players to jump from one team to another and temporarily ending the days of skyrocketing salaries. This relationship in professional sport—in one way or another—lasted for the next one hundred years. Professional football, too, adopted a reserve clause.\(^{14}\)

Whereas a weakened form of union activity existed in baseball, it was even rarer in professional football. When the sport spread throughout the United States in the middle of the twentieth century, it was, according to historian Richard Crepeau, “the most difficult [sport] in which to organize a union.” In the early years, teams and leagues were so unstable that the unification of players remained nearly impossible. At midcentury, as the game began to make serious money, owners rarely listened to player demands. Crepeau postulates that during this time, the new owners succeeded in non-sporting businesses “in a union-free environment, and came into the league hostile to unions.”

Some brought with them “union-busting experience” from their days in industry. “The authoritarian world of football,” Crepeau continues, “where coaches demand total submission of the individual to authority and to the team, within an atmosphere of paternalism at times bordering on abuse, was a world in which unions seemingly made no


\(^{14}\) For analysis of baseball’s union during the same time period as this chapter focuses on, see Charles P. Korr, *The End of Baseball As We Knew It: The Players Union, 1960-81* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002). For professional football’s reserve system, see Michael E. Lomax, “The Quest for Freedom: The NFLPA’s Attempt to Abolish the NFL’s Reserve System,” *Football Studies* 7 (2004): 70-107.
sense.” In short, football’s contemporary mantra was “[c]oach knows best, coach hates unions, therefore unions must be bad.”

Nevertheless, in the early 1960s, a new competing league, the AFL, challenged the sport’s anti-union culture. Looking to enter the business of professional football and after being denied the right to purchase NFL franchises, entrepreneurs Lamar Hunt and Bud Adams (both wealthy Texas oil tycoons) organized the new league. They managed to find enough wealthy owners to launch an inaugural season in 1960 that fielded eight teams. In its first two years, the AFL struggled, losing out in attendance numbers and television ratings to the NFL. Although the AFL received star college player Billy Cannon through a draft-day loophole, Canadian Football League players and small-time college athletes filled the AFL rosters in these early years.

By 1961, AFL Commissioner Joe Foss attempted to organize a championship game between the two major leagues, but NFL administrators refused to negotiate with its fledgling competitor. At first, AFL owners refrained from raiding NFL rosters. Owners were reluctant to jeopardize any chance of future negotiations. Soon, the two leagues battled fiercely over players and market rights, opening the door for union growth.

The AFL continued to grow and, according to historian Craig R. Coenen, in 1964, when it signed a lucrative television deal with the National Broadcasting Company, an

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17 Ibid. The AFL lost $3 million in 1960 and over $2 million in 1961.
“all-out war for markets and players soon began.” Both leagues scrambled to win and profit in new markets, organizing teams in cities such as Miami and Atlanta. This new money from television helped the AFL’s New York Jets sign star Alabama quarterback Joe Namath to a $427,000 contract (including a $200,000 signing bonus), making him, at the time, the highest paid football player in the game’s history. In response, other notable players demanded higher salaries, such as star Cleveland Browns’ quarterback Frank Ryan, who reportedly declared he was worth $1 million.

Average salaries doubled in the following years. By 1966, with some teams reporting near break-even profits because of rising player wages, preliminary discussions about a merger between the NFL and the AFL began. On June 8, 1966, the new Commissioner of the NFL, Pete Rozelle, announced that the “war” was over and the two leagues had agreed to merge. Although it would not become official until following the 1970 season (because of existing television deals), the two leagues would collide in a championship game following the 1966 season in what became the first Super Bowl.

Although, they would not gain much until the 1960s and 1970s, players had lobbied for greater earnings for years, which indirectly led to league officials recognizing a players union—albeit a weak one—for the first time. In 1949, Detroit Lions lineman Bill Radovich filed an antitrust lawsuit against the NFL after the Pacific Coast League (a minor-league affiliate of the NFL) barred him from playing in their league because he had played with the Los Angeles Dons of the All-America Football Conference (AAFC).

18 Ibid., 221.

19 Jack Olsen, “Dr. Ryan Of The Browns: How Smart Is Too Smart?” Sports Illustrated, September 27, 1965, 64-76. Ryan explained in a Sports Illustrated article that he had been misquoted. Specifically see page 70.

20 Coenen, From Sandlots to the Super Bowl, 219-226.
This case led to the U.S. Supreme Court ruling that the NFL was subject to antitrust law.  

When NFL officials appeared before the Judiciary Committee for congressional hearings on antitrust and sport in 1957, NFL Commissioner Bert Bell agreed to begin negotiating with the young NFLPA. After not getting enough votes, though, league owners did not officially recognize the NFLPA. Still, Bell agreed to some of the demands from the players, including a $5,000 minimum salary and marginal benefit and pension plans. Even with this minimal growth of the union, the NFL owners and management still remained, by and large, in total control.

For players, owners, and league management, the 1960s became a contentious decade. The AFL emerged, Rozelle became NFL commissioner, and the NFLPA, according to Crepeau, neither had a true leader nor trusted the new NFL czar. Similar to other sports—most notably Major League Baseball—labor organizers from outside sport eventually joined the players’ cause against the owners. Wisconsin lawyer Ed Garvey, for instance, became the executive director of the NFLPA in 1971. But in the 1960s, player representatives still controlled the course of labor relations in the two football leagues. These players brought in various political ideals to the union movement in the late 1960s, which shaped the course of the labor movement in the sport.

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22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
Competing Visions for Union Politics

When the NFLPA first organized, one player told vice-president Bernie Parrish, “I certainly don’t expect anything radical.”25 This attitude seemed to characterize most people involved in the unions in professional football in the postwar era. By the 1960s, when the AFLPA and NFLPA made headway in union organization, this mode of thought remained. Most players continued to believe in the culture of conformity. They only wanted minor fixes to the worker-management relationship. However, Parrish (along with a few others) brought in tenets of the union movement that aligned with the Marxist traditions of the Old Left. These ideals clashed with others in the NFLPA and, in particular, the union advocacy of Jack Kemp of the AFLPA, who believed in maintaining a cordial and submissive relationship with the league bureaucrats and owners. Kemp, specifically, leaned on his moderate-conservative political consciousness. These competing political worldviews clashed in the late 1960s, and NFL officials responded by recognizing a distinctly un-radical form of union activity.

Bernie Parrish

Parrish appeared in professional football in 1958 when the Cleveland Browns selected him in the ninth round of the NFL Draft. He played seven seasons as one of the team’s starting cornerbacks, and helped lead the Browns to the 1964 NFL championship game, playing alongside running back Jim Brown. After his release from the team in

25 Parrish, They Call It A Game, 238.
1966, Parrish played one season with the AFL’s Houston Oilers before retiring and devoting his energy to the labor movement and specifically the NFLPA.²⁶

Parrish became involved in the NFLPA early in his career. The Browns elected him to be their player representative in 1962, and the other player reps quickly elected him vice-president of the association that same year. While a member of the NFLPA, he became more radical than other players when he began to think of football as work rather than simply a game. He differed from other athletes, many of who did not fully believe in bringing union ideology to professional football.

Parrish, as he wrote in his autobiography, believed that players did not recognize “the true nature of the labor-management situation.” This was because most players, he believed, were college graduates and often hoped “for some sort of professional career after [their] playing days [were] over.” The conventional player “considers unionization something for manual workers, not for an aspiring young executive.” Furthermore, these players had “become conditioned to accepting the dictates of higher authority” because of their long career in sports.²⁷ Therefore, when Parrish began to trumpet connections to the broader union movement, he was radical within the culture of professional football.

Jack Kemp

Like Parrish, Kemp also joined the professional football ranks in the late 1950s and developed into a leader on and off the field. Kemp’s career with the NFL came to a quick end after he played one game in the Canadian Football League while serving in the

²⁶ For biographical information on Bernie Parrish, see his They Call It A Game.

²⁷ Parrish, They Call It A Game, 147.
U.S. Army Reserves. When NFL owners blacklisted him for his Canadian transgression, he joined the AFL’s San Diego Chargers, beginning his ten-year AFL career. He earned a spot on the all-AFL team after his first season. In 1962, Kemp, a quarterback, injured his passing hand and the Chargers put him on waivers; the Buffalo Bills, also of the AFL, claimed him for $100. It was the Chargers’ loss. By the time of his retirement from football following the 1969 season, the league had named him an all-star seven times, and he ranked first in career passing yards. After leaving the Bills and professional football, Kemp began a long political career in the Republican Party.\(^ {28} \)

Kemp became involved in the AFLPA during his playing career; but this was not Kemp’s first foray into politics. He often read the work of intellectuals writing on national issues, such as William F. Buckley’s *National Review*, the well-known conservative publication. As a college student, he worked for President Dwight D. Eisenhower and campaigned for New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller. He canvassed during Richard Nixon’s governor run in 1962. Two years later, Kemp gave several speeches on behalf of presidential candidate Barry Goldwater. He served as a special assistant to California Governor Ronald Reagan during the 1967 offseason.\(^ {29} \)

Kemp clearly aligned with conservative ideologies and agendas. Indeed, in 1968, he joined a group called “Athletes for Nixon,” endorsing the G.O.P. presidential

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candidate. He then served under President Nixon as an “ambassador to the academic community.” “I’ve always believed in the Republican philosophy,” he told a reporter in 1968. “I come from a Republican family. I also think pro football has strongly reinforced my views.” Conservative ideals and professional football both stressed individual accountability (rather than communalism) and deference to authority (rather than the questioning of authority). Kemp therefore associated professional football with his views of the Republican Party.

Just as Parrish used his political ideals to shape his leadership in the NFLPA, Kemp drew on his Republican consciousness during his time as AFLPA president. Both men espoused opposing views on the culture of management-worker relationships in professional football and in the workplace in general. During their time as leaders in the AFLPA and NFLPA, they expressed their thoughts on what they believed the course of union activity in professional football should entail.

Kemp’s Labor Ideals

Kemp’s viewpoint on unions and labor relations included foremost a profitable employer in the equation. This is “not a Marxist class struggle,” he once told a local


During discussions of the AFL-NFL merger in 1966, Kemp and AFLPA leaders expressed that the joining of the two football leagues improved player relations. “[T]he merger was no attempt on the part of management to infringe on the players rights to play out their options,” Kemp stated during the 1967 AFLPA meetings.\(^3^4\) Players in both leagues had worried that unification would “destroy their bargaining power and harm them economically.” Yet, Kemp felt that when the league profited, the players benefited too. “[W]ith greater profits,” he explained, “more money would be available for salary increases and greater fringe benefits.”\(^3^5\)

Led by Kemp, the AFLPA attempted to remain a coalition of workers similar to labor associations in professional sports for the preceding century. The so-called “union” Kemp envisioned was similar to certain industrial unions of the postwar era which, according to sociologist Stanley Aronowitz, attempted to maintain “unilateral control” through “military discipline.” That is, the owners, coaches, and administrators had the right to make the demands of the players; in return, the players would abide by management rule.\(^3^6\) Kemp broadly accepted this position.

A *New York Post* article on May 26, 1967, revealed Kemp’s vision. “We do have a union,” Kemp hedged, “in a way.” During negotiations with professional football owners for an all-star game between the AFL and NFL, Kemp publicized that the AFLPA

\(^{3^3}\) “Kemp Aims at High Goals as Union’s Signal Caller,” *Buffalo Courier Express*, November 17, 1968.


was “very interested in the clubs making money,” attempting to distance the association from players who thought the owners were being exploitative. He also noted that there were owners who thought that “the players are avaricious and not concerned about the future of the game.” He outlined the distinctiveness of labor in sports nearly a year later when he explained that the “unique nature of the pro football business” was predicated “on the individual and team competition.” He argued that sport unionism “precludes the type of traditional union organization which doesn’t recognize all aspects of this business.” Management had “inherent rights,” for example, to negotiate for players’ individual salaries. Kemp’s expectation for a professional football players’ union was basically not to have one.

Parrish’s Union Ideals

Parrish, in contrast, saw the owners and managers of the NFL as “con men.” Unlike Kemp, Parrish had little respect for the owners. He had a tenuous relationship with Browns owner Art Modell, whom Parrish believed represented the pitfalls of business people in football. As he explained:

Owners may pay us, they may trade us and fire us and blackball us and subjugate us and try to break our spirits for the sake of their power complexes and a few

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39 Parrish, *They Call It A Game*, xii.
dollars, but they can never be one of us, and without us they would be anonymous.\(^{40}\)

Furthermore, Parrish believed that the NFL owners were hypocritical in their treatment of the players. “Owners demand that on the field you must be tough, cunning, intelligent, skilled, and aggressive,” he wrote, “but off the field when playing their game of negotiations you must be gullible, stupid, gutless, and docile, or they don’t want you around.”\(^{41}\) Parrish ultimately believed that the drive for money led owners to mistreat and take advantage of players.

While this vision competed with Kemp’s and the AFLPA, it also clashed with some in the NFLPA. Parrish made his most influential mark when he tried to create his own union in 1967. In doing so, Parrish often disagreed with NFLPA president Creighton Miller. Miller, who had been involved in NFLPA activities since the late 1950s, did not agree with Parrish’s radical attempts at unionization, and Parrish thought that Miller did too little to improve the working conditions for the players. When Parrish first became involved in the NFLPA, he remembers that he “fell right into the chorus line, stepping high to Creighton Miller’s tune.” Yet, by the mid-1960s, he routinely told the president “we [players] ought to affiliate with a union” rather than negotiating with the owners individually. Throughout his tenure as vice-president of the NFLPA, Parrish “began to push the Association toward a more aggressive line of action despite Creighton Miller’s warnings to go slow.”\(^{42}\)

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 26.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 145.

\(^{42}\) Ibid., 247-248, 250.
In this sense, Parrish believed that they should be more in touch with labor unions across the country. He thought they should try to become certified with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), an action that would have constituted a push toward more mainstream union engagement. In a 1964 meeting, the player-reps agreed to allow Parrish to invite a representative from the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists “so that we could question him on the strategy and procedures of that union.” This was to try to keep pressure on NFL owners, and particularly commissioner Rozelle, who had come under heat from Parrish and other player-reps for commercial and merchandise deals. In fact, in early 1965, Parrish made an unsuccessful push for the NFL owners to fire Rozelle who, he argued, “was such a sore spot with the players” that he “felt sure they would have to declare themselves and support my move.”

Ultimately, Parrish believed that the league needed a true union, not just a players’ association. He desired to bring in “professional help from the people who specialize in the problems of the employees,” a stark difference from Miller in the NFLPA and Kemp in the AFLPA who both wanted to simply rely on player representatives to negotiate with the NFL owners and league managers. According to Parrish, “[a] majority of the other representatives agreed [with his view].” However:

[T]hey were afraid of what the public would think, afraid of the owners’ reaction to such an affiliation, and afraid of being “exploited by outsiders who don’t

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43 Ibid., 259.
44 Ibid., 259.
understand pro football.” With that reasoning we continued to let the owners, who do understand the business of professional football, exploit us instead.\footnote{Ibid., 249.}

Over the next few years, as the NFLPA and AFLPA neared closer to their merger, Parrish grew more committed to changing the course of worker-management relationships in the sport.

Clash of Union Ideals

As he wrote in his autobiography, by 1965, Parrish firmly believed players should: “[g]et rid of Miller and form a union that would utilize all the economic pressure tools of labor, including NLRB recognition and the strike, if necessary.”\footnote{Ibid., 265.} Parrish even envisioned a union amongst all of the players in the “big four” sports in the United States—the NFL/AFL, Major League Baseball, the National Hockey League, and the National Basketball Association.\footnote{Ibid.}

During a meeting in 1967, members from each of these leagues met to discuss the future of unionization. There, tensions emerged about how players should interact with management in professional sport. Along with Parrish and Kemp, present at the meeting were: Marvin Miller and Richard Moss from the MLBPA (along with Bob Rodgers, legal counsel to baseball’s California Angels); Alan Eagleson and Bobby Orr of the NHLPA; Larry Fleischer and Oscar Robertson representing the NBAPA; and Creighton Miller and Don Augustine, of the NFLPA and AFLPA, respectively.
According to Parrish’s account, Kemp, Creighton Miller, Augustine, and Pyle attacked him for trying to “split the Association.” This accusation stemmed from a *New York Post* article that appeared in the weeks prior that stated that Parrish had tried to radicalize black players, along with Jim Brown (who had retired but kept up a working relationship with Parrish), in order to create his new union.\(^{48}\) Furthermore, although no minutes of the meeting are known to exist, according to Parrish, “Jack Kemp made a particularly bad impression [on him] with a long antiunion dissertation on how the unions had nearly destroyed the newspaper business and would do the same to football if players were ever unionized.”\(^{49}\) In all, the meeting suggests that most athletes of the 1960s were still uncomfortable associating with “radical” unions.

Parrish was distraught by the meeting and intensified his efforts to bring in outside union advisers. He finally found help in the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. The “Teamsters” became known as one of the more “traditional” unions, often associated with crime, in the United States throughout the early and mid-twentieth century.\(^{50}\) Representatives did not often associate with workers who came from college backgrounds, as NFL players of the 1960s did. Still, Parrish believed that this group was the best opportunity to improve working conditions for the players.\(^{51}\)

Although the Teamsters had a negative public image, “they were the only union enthusiastically interested in helping the players.” As Parrish explained:

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\(^{48}\) Ibid., 269.

\(^{49}\) Ibid., 270.

\(^{50}\) David Witwer, *Corruption and Reform in the Teamsters Union* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

\(^{51}\) Parrish, *They Call It A Game*, 271-272.
I looked at their organizing record and found they were also the only union that had displayed any aggressiveness in organizing, and the only union that had grown substantially in membership the last ten years. If I was going to fight a group of rich, powerful, ruthless men, I wanted the strongest, richest, most powerful allies I could find. In weighing the job I was undertaking, and looking realistically at the tools and weapons available to me, they were my one logical choice.\textsuperscript{52}

Parrish went into the 1968 season with the belief that with the Teamsters’ aid and enough support from players, the tide would begin to turn for the athletes in their fight against owners and management.

The discord in the NFLPA continued into 1968. At the annual NFLPA meeting in Miami (in January), Parrish again pushed to affiliate with a union, now with the support of the Teamsters. At that point he had successfully persuaded a number of players on teams to sign union-pledge cards, one of the first steps at becoming a bona fide union. He had a separate meeting with the Rams that went well and convinced their player representatives that unionization was a good idea. Before Parrish could meet with the rest of the NFLPA, he received a call from Dan Shulman, the new legal counsel of the association. Shulman canceled a scheduled meeting with Parrish (and Jim Brown, who had traveled to Miami from Los Angeles to support Parrish). The NFLPA then quickly organized as an official union and elected a new president, John Gordy. According to Parrish, this was all done behind his back because the league feared his radical stance, especially since it now looked as if he was able to gain player support for his new

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
Teamster-affiliated union. The new leadership was a pawn of the owners, entrenched in the NFL’s conventional politics, Parrish believed. The league responded to potential radical activity by recognizing a lesser-radical form of labor, something that would allow them to basically continue the relationship between players and management that existed for decades.53

Approaches to the Collective Bargaining Agreement

The NFLPA moved away from the “radicalism” of Bernie Parrish. Still, residuals of his attempts to bring outsiders into the players’ association remained as the group attempted to sign a collective bargaining agreement (CBA) with owners. At the same time, the AFLPA also sought a similar agreement. The varying approaches leading to each association signing their CBAs in the summer of 1968 sheds light on the broader culture of unions in professional football.

In the AFLPA, labor relations in 1967 were stable and the association continued to have a cordial relationship with the owners. Kemp lauded the AFLPA for continuing to be a “voluntary” association, rather than an “orthodox” or “militant” union, in his words, that charged mandatory dues. In clear rebuke of Parrish, Kemp noted that he did not want to associate with groups “such as the Teamsters.”54 Furthermore, by “unionizing,” Kemp believed that the public image of the “professional athlete” would deteriorate.55 Considerable progress had been substantiated “within the framework of

53 Ibid.
honest and fair negotiations,” he wrote to the players in 1967. More success between the AFL and AFLPA, he maintained, would soon “follow under the same philosophy.”

Still, Kemp understood that the players in the AFL needed to be galvanized. At the annual meetings in 1967, he finally began to negotiate with the AFL owners and league executives. Kemp reported that after discussions with Bills’ owner Ralph Wilson Jr., he believed that the Retirement Plan would be “amended and upgraded in its entirety.” Kemp and other labor leaders in professional football made retirement and pension plans their priority. Parrish critiqued this line of thinking, writing that he believed more needed to be done for current players. Nevertheless, other teams agreed with Kemp’s assessment.

While the pension plans continued to be the most important aspect of the AFLPA, Kemp began to slowly change tactics. During a summer 1967 meeting, a representative from the Pension Planners of Baltimore spoke to the AFLPA. Although the reports from the meeting do not offer specific information, for the first time, the AFLPA brought


58 “Jack Kemp to Joe Foss,” February 15, 1966, Jack Kemp Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. In fact, in the annual meeting the previous year, Kemp stated that there was “complete unanimity among our League players that this is the single most important objective of our Players Associations this year, even suggesting that All Star Game bonuses not be raised in order to improve the retirement plan.”

outsiders—albeit in a minimal fashion—to meet with the association, while maintaining cordiality with the AFL owners.\textsuperscript{60}

Although Kemp still had no desire to “affiliate with an international type” of union, as he wrote in early 1968, he felt he was forced to begin negotiations with the NLRB.\textsuperscript{61} Kemp believed that although the organization wished to remain strictly about honest representation for the players, the “continuing intervention of outside labor organizations” required the AFLPA to seek protection.\textsuperscript{62} He still refrained from supporting the “traditional” image of a labor union and insisted that NLRB certification was aimed at rapacious outside unions and not a strategy to become militant. Indeed, Kemp continued to be reluctant about aligning the AFLPA with the broader labor movement. “It is not fair to say that we are ‘unionizing,’” he wrote in a letter.\textsuperscript{63} He believed that some players hoped to create a movement that was “out of touch with economic reality.”\textsuperscript{64}

Kemp’s desire for a “soft” labor environment came to fruition. On March 29, 1968, in a letter to all AFLPA members, Kemp wrote that because the owners had “shown a complete willingness to be reasonable in all matters,” the AFLPA would drop

\textsuperscript{60} “AFL Meeting Minutes,” July 8-9, 1967, Atlanta, Ga., Jack Kemp Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.


\textsuperscript{63} “Letter from Jack Kemp to Unknown,” February 9, 1968.

its NLRB application.\(^{65}\) In what Kemp described as “critical times” for labor relations in professional football, he stressed that negotiations needed to remain private, not become hostile, and avoid the “so-called ‘militant bargaining.’”\(^{66}\)

The negotiations that occurred between the AFLPA and the AFL aligned with Kemp’s “non-militant” style. He ultimately wanted to keep negotiations behind-the-scenes. On July 10, 1968, Kemp and the AFL owners announced a two-year collective-bargaining agreement.\(^{67}\) Kemp stated that he was content with the discussions, that they were “productive and peaceful,” and that they had tried to keep the negotiations “out of the public eye,” because he did not want to bargain “in a fishbowl.”\(^{68}\)

Meanwhile, the difference between the AFLPA and the NFLPA continued and perhaps sheds light on why Kemp had become increasingly disturbed by the prospects of a “militant union.” Now led by Detroit Lions offensive lineman John Gordy, the NFLPA had more trouble with NFL owners than the AFLPA had with AFL owners. After Parrish stopped leading the radical charge, others took over. But the groundwork that Parrish laid in the mid-1960s remained, making the NFLPA’s approach to collective bargaining different than that of the AFLPA. When the NFL owners did not oblige to the NFLPA’s

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\(^{65}\) Jack Kemp to All Members of the AFLPA,” March 29, 1968, Jack Kemp Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

\(^{66}\) “Jack Kemp to All Players,” April 30, 1968, Jack Kemp Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.


demands, the NFLPA voted to strike; before they could, the NFL owners locked the players out. The lockout lasted less than two weeks, but “striking” suggested that the NFLPA had a less harmonious relationship with the owners than the agreeable rapport that supposedly existed between the AFLPA and its owners. On July 14, the owners and the NFLPA resolved their differences and signed the collective bargaining agreement.

According to Oriard, these provisions were reached “largely on the owners’ terms.” When Parrish left and others took over, the NFLPA ultimately still lacked solidarity, leading to few concessions to the players from the NFL. Indeed, according to Parrish, the NFLPA of 1968 and beyond had structural issues.

Geographically, the players are spread out thinly all over the country. Their Association lives are as short as their careers. Communications are poor because player representatives are active players working part-time without pay, without proper education or training, and without prior labor-oriented experience. It is impossible for a player to divide his concentration and dedication between his team, the championship race, and the problems of the Players Association. So, once the season begins, the Association duties of the officers and player

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70 The agreement raised the minimum salaries to $9,000 for rookies and $10,000 for others, it paid $50 for preseason games, and moved the retirement age to 65. The NFL also agreed to pay $3 million to the pension plan over two years, a raise from the previous $1.4 million a year but less than the $5 million that the players demanded.

71 Oriard, Brand NFL, 58-59.

representatives are all but forgotten. There is no continuity in the Association’s leadership. Players are not elected team representatives until they are three-or four-year veterans; which means, on the average, they can expect to remain in the league another year or two, then new representatives must take their place and start again from scratch.\footnote{Parrish, They Call It A Game, 248.}

Because the players did not entirely buy into the union and the leadership had differing views on how to approach labor relations between workers and management, the NFLPA had trouble deciding on what kind of union they wanted to be. Yet, compared to the AFLPA, its negotiation tactics still moved toward a more “militant” style of bargaining by threatening a strike.

Kemp and the AFLPA, meanwhile, refrained from adopting “orthodox” unionism and attempted to distance themselves from the NFLPA, illuminating the schism that still existed between the two labor organizations. Kemp stated days before the NFLPA-NFL CBA that he “deplored such action,” referring to the players strike.\footnote{“A.F.L Won’t Go on Strike, Kemp Insists,” Chicago Tribune, July 10, 1968, p. C1. The article explained that the “American Football League players will not support any strike which might result from the current owner-player deadlock in the National Football League.” The article explained that Kemp “said that a different economic situation is the primary reason.”} With ongoing discussions of strikes and lockouts in the NFL camp, Kemp explained that “[t]alk of [a] strike in [the] AFL is neither called for nor helpful to our talks.” Kemp admitted that there had “been some suggestion that our approach to these talks has not been militant enough.” Yet, as he explained, if that meant they did not want to strike “then it is correct, but if it means that we are any less interested or devoted to representing the best interest
of the players then it is false.” Kemp showed restraint toward “radical” unionism. “Anyone can call a strike,” he cajoled. He believed that because professional football “is a unique business” that it required a “unique approach to representing the players’ collective concerns.” Kemp thought that if players and owners wanted to continue to profit from sport, they needed to be aware of any situation “that would erode its competitiveness.” This included “militant” and “radical” strikes. Kemp’s beliefs about sports and unionism illuminate the differences between the AFLPA and the NFLPA which held the two associations from merging along with the leagues in 1966.

Kemp and AFLPA leaders considered the CBA a victory for the players. When he opened the annual meeting of the AFLPA just days after signing an agreement with the AFL owners, Kemp congratulated the association on signing the league’s first CBA. He stressed that there were still substantial differences between the NFLPA and AFLPA contributing to their lack of solidarity in labor negotiations with the two football leagues. The AFLPA, Kemp believed, had helped to enhance the longevity of professional football by not reducing itself to bellicose strategies.


76 “Kemp Aims at High Goals As Union’s Signal Caller,” Courier Express, November 17, 1968.

77 “AFL Meeting Minutes,” July 12-13, 1968, San Diego, Ca., Jack Kemp Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Kemp’s declaration about signing the league’s first CBA brings into question the traditional historical marker of the NFLPA signing professional sports’ first CBA. The agreement between the AFLPA and the AFL occurred days before the NFLPA and the NFL came into agreement.
The NFL and Unions

Kemp, Parrish, and the other NFLPA leaders brought divergent union principles into professional football in the late 1960s. The competing visions for how a union should look were based on their political ideals. Although Parrish’s radicalism of the mid to late 1960s did not fundamentally alter the management-worker relationship, it did lead to more of a response from the league on the topic of unions than had been received in the past. NFL officials reacted to the ongoing union movement in professional sports by allowing space for union activity, but they fought against too much player freedoms. One way this appeared was through the press.

Importantly, the popular press sided with the owners and lauded Kemp’s dismissal of “radical” unionism. As Oriard explains, by the 1970s, the media lived “in the owners’ pockets,” or as Parrish put it, “[p]ro football’s sportswriters are equally biased by their emotional and economic involvements with the team they follow.”78 An amicable relationship flourished between the media and professional football executives in the late 1960s. In response to the labor disputes of the two leagues and the two unions, a New York Times reporter cheered that the negotiations between the AFLPA and AFL were done in “silence” and carried out with “dignity and responsibility.” The players in the NFL, the author compared, were still “bogged down” in arguments about excessive owner profitability and their fair share of the earnings.79

The union movement in the 1970s also sheds light on the league officials’ response to the union idea of the late 1960s. The NFL and the AFL officially merged in

78 Oriard, Brand NFL, 76-83; Parrish, They Call It A Game, xiii.

1970, and, correspondingly, so did the two players unions. Upon electing a new president for the unified NFLPA, some players lauded Kemp and hoped he would become the new labor leader for the players. Yet, the NFL teams held a majority and most (if not all) did not accept Kemp as their leader. Instead, the players chose John Mackey. From the beginning of the NFLPA under Mackey, according to Crepeau, “the owners refused to treat the players with any sense of equity.” As such, Mackey quickly went to outside labor negotiators. Soon, Ed Garvey, the Minneapolis-based labor lawyer, became the NFLPA’s legal mind. And, for the first time, the NLRB gained control over the labor movement in football (and professional sports in general).  

Garvey and Mackey attempted to change the fundamental nature of the relationship between players and owners; NFL management correspondingly despised the two. According to Rozelle, Garvey was “a prototypical early sixties radical, a militant ideologue who is unable to see any good, any justice, in any action of management.”  

Mackey became well known as the NFLPA used his name in the lawsuit against the NFL which attempted to tear down the Rozelle Rule in 1972. The NFL commissioner implemented the Rozelle Rule in 1963, which gave the commissioner the power to provide compensation to any team that lost a free agent (the compensation would come from the team that signed the player). The rule persuaded teams not to sign free agents, effectively limiting the freedom of the players. In fact, from 1966-1972, only nineteen players switched teams. In 1972, Mackey and seven others players filed Mackey v. NFL, challenging that the league violated the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. Between Garvey

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80 Crepeau, NFL Football, 139.
81 Ibid., 140.
82 Ibid.
and Mackey, the tide seemed to have shifted in favor of a more “radical” union movement.

Players and labor leaders continued to fight for more freedoms for the NFL’s players association. The CBAs signed in 1968 and again in 1970 had run their course, and now, under the leadership of Garvey, the NFLPA made “freedom” its central concern, a stark comparison to the amicable negotiations that took place during the 1960s in professional football when Kemp helped push through the first CBA in professional sports. On July 1, 1974, the NFLPA called a strike, hoping that all players would refrain from reporting to training camp. Those “radical” actions of unions (the people Kemp abhorred) were now central to the NFL owners’ union strategy.83

Although the union movement became a more central focus of the NFL’s politics in the 1970s, the owners still had much power. While some players did protest and march outside of the practice fields, wearing shirts that said “No Freedom, No Football,” eventually others, in fears of not making the team, reported to camp. Star player, and former Navy veteran Roger Staubach, for instance, crossed the picket lines on August 1, 1974, delivering a blow to hopeful strikers. In fact, teams cut or traded many of the player reps across the league. While the strike ended with little progress in player-owner relations (the league did lose $1.8 million on the first week of exhibition games), the month-long labor disagreement foreshadowed the winds of change that had come into the NFL and the breakdown of the social contract between players and management that Kemp had fought for during his time as AFLPA president.84

83 Ibid., 141-144.
84 Ibid., 141-144.
Over the next decade, players, management, and owners went head to head in a fight for freedom and power. Mackey v. NFL became central news. In 1975, a district court ruled that the Rozelle Rule was indeed in violation of U.S. antitrust legislation.

Under Garvey a new modified Rozelle Rule was implemented. Through the new 1977 CBA, Garvey and the NFLPA agreed to a deal that kept a rule intact that hurt the star players, but favored the “rank-and-file.”85 Five years later, during negotiations for another collective bargaining agreement, the NFLPA organized a strike, this time costing professional football eight regular season games, and giving the players, according to Crepeau, “almost nothing.”86

The NFL owners’ response to the attempt at radicalization from people such as Parrish in the 1960s was to acknowledge labor, but only in a relegated fashion. The league instead tried to uphold the culture that Kemp had created in the AFLPA in the same era. Instead of allowing those co-called “radical” unionists that wanted to disrupt the fundamental relationship between the players and management, league administrators responded to the union movement by allowing space for more union activity, but in a way that they always had a watchful eye over such action. The labor question again came to head in the 1980s when a new group of players held strikes and became more “radical.”

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85 Ibid., 145-146.
86 Ibid., 149.
CHAPTER 5. REVOLUTION ON THE AMERICAN GRIDIRON: THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT AND PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL, 1971-1979

If NFL officials resisted the Civil Rights Movement, leftist critiques, and unionism, they sidestepped the women’s movement altogether. Instead, the league sought to curry favor with female fans by offering them ancillary space within the professional football establishment. Indeed, during the late 1960s and through the 1970s, team marketers began to cater to women, but not in terms of their athletic participation. They accommodated women as fans, but presented their fandom as different from—and lesser than—male fandom. Club administrators began to offer opportunities to women by providing them educational programs so that women could “understand” professional football. A few women had opportunities to work in the league, such as in broadcasts of the games. At the same time, NFL officials also sought to cater to male fans through the sensational, often sexual, addition of sideline cheerleaders and dance squads.\(^1\) While women across the United States started a women’s movement that sought to improve their living and working conditions, league representatives instead reaffirmed the sport as a domain of male control.

What the league missed, perhaps ignored, was that there were scores of American women who longed to test their mettle on the gridiron. Specifically, approximately thirteen teams, including hundreds of women, joined the fledgling National Women’s

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Football League (NWFL) during the 1970s with the intent to play professional football. In the process, they joined with a virtual "revolution" in women’s sports that took place during the 1970s. Still, NFL marketers showed little interest in women as athletes and instead promoted their roles in the bleachers and on the sidelines—roles that added value to the commercial product of professional football but did nothing to advance women’s struggle for equality. Indeed, by providing only peripheral positions in the greater culture of the sport often subjected to sexual objectification, league marketers reaffirmed women’s marginalization within American culture.

In this chapter, I analyze the women’s movement within the broader culture of professional football. I first examine the history of the women’s movement and provide a brief analysis of women in sport. I then show how NFL officials tried to get women into the game, but instead of promoting participation, they reasserted male hegemony by only offering women limited roles, such as spectators and cheerleaders. I then provide a brief history of the women who brought the women’s movement to the institution of professional football by attempting to create and sustain their own league, the NWFL.²

² This section draws on interviews with thirteen women on three different football teams: the Columbus Pacesetters, the Oklahoma City Dolls, and the Toledo Troopers. The players interviewed were Mitchi Collette, Pamela Schwartz, Carla Miller, Olivia Flores, Jacqueline Elaine-Allen Jackson, Gloria Jimenez, Joellyn (Joey) Opfer, Pam Hardy, Laurel Wolf, Julie Sherwood, Kim Waggoner, Nancy Erickson, and Jan Hines. Some of the players played just a few games, others played for nearly a decade. One player (Julie Sherwood) decided to become the team trainer after one practice with the Pacesetters, but was with the team for three years. Three interviews (Collette, Schwartz, and Wolf) were done in-person and recorded by the author. Five players (Miller, Flores, Jimenez, Opfer, and Hardy) were interviewed together as a group and recorded by the author. The other four players (Sherwood, Waggoner, Erickson, Hines, and Allen-Jackson) were interviewed via telephone and the discussions were recorded by the author. This chapter builds off of my work “Revolution on the American Gridiron: Gender, Contested Space, and Women’s Football in the 1970s,” International Journal of the History of Sport 32, no. 18 (December 2015): 2171-2189. Oral histories are important because, as historian Joan Sangster states, “traditional sources have often neglected the lives of women.” Therefore, interviews offer “a means of integrating women into historical scholarship, even contesting the reigning definitions of social, economic and political importance that obscured women’s lives.” Furthermore, historian Susan K. Cahn believes that interviews are useful in order to study “traditionally disempowered groups, whose voices and perspectives show up least in written records.” Finally, sport historian Carly Adams argues that oral histories are imperative for the study of sport because “[e]ach woman’s perception of her experience [in athletics] . . . has implications for how we
Moreover, the media—which saw the NFL as the standard bearer of the sport—did not cover women’s football in earnest; instead, they derided the sport and the athletes as a sideshow.

Overall, I argue that, because of the cultural climate of the era and because they saw female consumers as a means to financial gain, league and team marketing specialists did open space for women, but instead of encouraging participation in the sport, they catered to women fans and offered secondary space for women across the country. In doing so, they confirmed that professional football remained a source of hegemonic masculinity.

The Women’s Movement in Culture and Sport

Women have fought for equitable treatment in American culture since the nation’s inception. For example, women were involved in the American Revolution. As historian Linda K. Kerber argues, the Continental Army relied on women “for nursing, cooking, and cleaning.” Further, most men could only join the war effort because of women who “bravely stayed on alone, keeping family farms and mills in operation, fending off squatters, and protect[ed] family property by their heavy labor.” Unfortunately, although women had important roles in the formation of the United States, and developed a political consciousness while on the home front, “the newly created

republic made little room for them as political beings.”³ Women have always had an important role in the domestic and private spheres, but by the middle of the nineteenth century, some women began to organize more for equal rights.

The “first wave” of feminist activism began roughly in the middle of the nineteenth century when women in the young United States began to fight for an expansion of rights, focusing primarily on suffrage.⁴ In 1848, women met to hold the Seneca Falls Conference, at the Wesleyan Chapel in Seneca Falls, New York. After this historic meeting, thousands of suffragettes fought for the right to vote. Physical activity (prior to the emergence of “modern sport”) actually became a part of this movement in the early twentieth century. As one example, hundreds of women used their bodies as a site of what Jaime Schultz refers to as “physical activism” when they marched hundreds of miles on the east coast as part of the battle for suffrage.⁵ The movement eventually prevailed in 1920 when Congress ratified the nineteenth amendment, giving women the right to vote in the United States for the first time.

As this first wave of feminism slowed, women continued to participate in the nation and fight for more equitable treatment. During the war years of the early twentieth century, women entered traditionally male-dominated spheres, particularly as men went off to war and women worked industrial jobs. At the end of World War II, women returned to the domestic sphere, as the appropriate structural and cultural change had not


taken place in order to ensure larger roles in the economy and polity for American women.\textsuperscript{6} To that end, the so-called “second wave” of feminist activism began throughout the next few decades.

The “women’s movement,” what some might call feminism’s “second wave,” became, according to historian Stephanie Gilmore, “the largest and farthest-reaching social movement of the era.”\textsuperscript{7} Indeed, in the 1960s and into the 1970s, women began to fight for institutional and cultural shifts in the relationships between the sexes. Much of this came through legislative mandate. The 1964 Civil Rights Act, for instance, ostensibly made sexual discrimination illegal, however, the Equal Economic Opportunity Organization (EEOC) failed to enforce Title VII of the 1964 act, which all but ended a legal hope at stopping sexual discrimination in the workplace. Enraged, some women, led by Betty Friedan—writer of the 1963 \textit{The Feminine Mystique}—organized the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966.\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{6} Maureen Honey, \textit{Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda During World War II} (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), 3.


\textsuperscript{8} Evans, \textit{Tidal Wave}, 137-138.
NOW helped push the fight for rights to the courts and, at the end of the 1960s, it became a leading force in the push for a national Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). But the movement also found political resources from outside organized campaigns and feminist organizations. As numerous historians have pointed out, by the 1970s, most women participated in the feminist movement more through “private battles of the sexes than with the political struggles of women as a whole.”  

Many women of the 1970s came to embody the cultural climate created by those involved in the broader second-wave feminist movement and began to demand greater freedoms within their individual lives.

Feminism thus carried multiple meanings for American women. For some, the women’s movement included women who became involved in the postwar shift to the left by the American liberal movement. Some women, both informed by and disillusioned with the New Left, offered a so-called radical approach to women’s rights. Others adopted more “liberal” tactics, seeking space within the existing legal, educational, political, and workplace structures. Still others simply made politics personal by fighting for more rights in their own domestic spheres. These “personal politics,” as historian Sara Evans articulates, became a central part of the movement.  

The movement or, more accurately, the movements, were neither homogenous nor harmonious. Not all women necessarily joined groups such as NOW and marched for the fight for the ERA. Many women, as historian Finn Enke maintains, simply searched for “opportunities and

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contingencies of daily life” where they could improve their positions in the social world.11

One area they did this in was sport. Although the mainstream feminist movement paid little attention to the topic of women’s sport, women athletes fought for the same freedoms as those women who explicitly took part in in the women’s movement. As historian Susan K. Cahn argues, “[w]omen’s efforts to attain the right to fully participate” in sport “were consistent with a broad range of feminist activities designed to win for women the right to control their own bodies.”12 Athletes exercised important grassroots campaigns that contributed to the era’s wide-sweeping push for equality.13

Although American women have always played sport, the postwar era represents a boom in female participation in all areas of physical activity. Perhaps nothing better illustrates the connections between American sport and American feminisms than Title IX of the Education Amendment Act of 1972. The law did not initially mention sport, but it fundamentally shifted the landscape of physical culture in the United States. Title IX states that institutions must not discriminate on the basis of sex in any educational program that receives federal funding. Since its passage, millions of girls and women

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13 In her 2011 historical biography of Billie Jean King, historian Susan Ware stated: “Too often, the histories of sports and feminism have operated on separate, not always parallel tracks, to the detriment of both.” While much has been written in women’s history and sport history, the two areas have not adopted ideas and themes from one another. In general, the histories of women’s sport have generally been written in comparisons to men’s sport, or what cultural historian Jaime Schultz refers to as “masculinist approaches to the chronological segmentation that revolve around Western politio-economic events.” See Susan Ware, *Game, Set, Match: Billie Jean King and the Revolution in Women's Sports* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 10; Jaime Schultz, *Qualifying Times: Points of Change in U.S. Women’s Sport* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 8.
have taken to the field, court, ice, or pitch. Indeed, in 1971-1972, 294,015 girls participated in high school athletics and 29,977 women participated in intercollegiate athletics. In 2005-2006, those numbers reached 2,953,355 and 166,728 respectively.  

Unsurprisingly, those who found new opportunities in scholastic and intercollegiate sport began to clamor for professional outlets for their newly developed talents. 

While the women’s movement and Title IX increased opportunities for women in high schools and colleges, it had very little influence on American football. Women had little involvement in the sport when it developed at East Coast universities in the late nineteenth century.  

As football scholar Michael Oriard contends, “[e]xcept as the

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unnamed other, women had no role in football-as-athletic contest.”¹⁶ When women did become involved in professional football in the 1960s and 1970s, it was mainly on the sidelines, sometimes literally. During this era, people in the league did nothing to promote women’s equality. Instead, they reasserted professional football as a male domain.

**Women Get In the Game (Kind Of)**

NFL officials saw women as a viable option for expanding their sport’s commercial reach. For much of its early history, NFL marketers assumed that women made up a small percentage of fans. However, by the 1960s and 1970s, team marketers began to realize the potential of women as consumers and waged a series of “women’s initiatives.” Moreover, they also saw women as a way to expand the entertainment value of their sport spectacle. Indeed, it was the 1970s when the famous Dallas cheerleaders—with all of their glitz and heteronormative sexuality on display—first performed on the sidelines of Cowboys games. As I have argued elsewhere, “it seems that women might be *in* a national pastime but not necessarily *of* it.”¹⁷ In other words, NFL officials responded to the broader revolution in women’s social rank by reasserting men over women in the culture of their sport.

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¹⁶ Oriard, *Reading Football*, 248.

¹⁷ Schultz and Linden, “From Ladies’ Days to Women’s Initiatives,” 157.
Women as Consumers

As it grew in popularity in the second half of the twentieth century, both AFL and NFL bureaucrats sought to expand their audience. One way to do this was to begin catering to potential female fans who might enjoy professional football in the company of their male partners. Newspapers published stories on how women could just not deal with NFL football each Sunday—they could find pleasure in it. In a 1969 issue of the *Chicago Tribune*, for example, Elaine Tarkenton (then wife of NFL quarterback Fran Tarkenton) and Michael Rich argued that “[p]rofessional football has become THE game for American men.” For these authors, “Sunday afternoon means hours of pro-football widowhood—a slam-the-door retreat to kitchen or bedroom in an often unsuccessful attempt to get beyond range of a sportscaster whose excitement is reflected in a rising crescendo of incomprehensibility.” Because of this apparently “common” unhappy scenario, the authors hoped that women would be able to learn to enjoy the sport as much as the male partners.18

Additional pleas made by social commentators, urging women to follow the NFL, remained “[c]ouched in patriarchal, heteronormative discourse.” NFL officials often “placed their emphasis on how women might use sporting affairs to demonstrate their “feminine’ proficiencies.”19 As the magazine *Changing Times* alluded in a 1969 issue,


19 Schultz and Linden, "From Ladies Days to Women's Initiatives,” 166.
women did not necessarily want to actually watch NFL football; they just wanted to appease their boyfriends and husbands.\(^{20}\)

Whether to get along better with male counterparts or to actually enjoy the game, the education of female fans became part of the culture of professional football in the 1970s and beyond. While newspapers continued to supply women with advice on how to be better fans for their male partners, various individual teams throughout the NFL specifically offered women classes on how to become more informed football followers. The New York Jets, the Pittsburgh Steelers, and the Chicago Bears all put together clinics in the late 1960s and early 1970s that helped “members of the fair sex learn the game and understand the play strategy.” League officials created these classes, such as the Steelers’ “Female Football Clinic,” in order to increase revenue streams in terms of fan engagement with the game. The Steelers and other teams hoped that an increased interest from women, who themselves, it was assumed, wanted to spend time with men. For the Steelers, the end result was greater revenue in their coffers.\(^{21}\)

Instead of connecting with women who might desire to storm the gridiron themselves, and take advantage of all of the positive aspects that team sport can offer, the NFL’s marketers reacted to the cultural milieu of the 1970s by trying to take advantage of women’s autonomy as decision-makers in the market place. People in the league did not provide an equal playing field or opportunities of empowerment for women; instead NFL team officials merely sold football to women for their own benefit.


\(^{21}\) Schultz and Linden, "From Ladies Days to Women's Initiatives,” 166.
While the league marketers sold football to women consumers in hopes of expanding its coffers, they also provided marginal space for women in other parts of the sport. During the post-World War II era, some professional sports leagues and television networks began offering women opportunities. Former tennis player Sarah Palfrey Cooke hosted a Sportswoman of the Week program for NBC in 1948 while Donna de Varona appeared on ABC’s Wide World of Sports in 1965. As communications scholar Pamela Creedon explains, there were very few opportunities until the 1970s. Still, a few women found opportunities to cover NFL games. Some major newspapers offered spots for women. The Boston Globe hired Lesly Visser as a beat reporter for local Patriots games and CBS hired Carole Howley in 1970 for its NFL Today program. By having women take part in broadcasts, proprietors in the NFL were trying, again, to attract more women consumers.

The two most notable women who tried to break through the male dominated broadcasts were Jane Chastain and Phyllis George. In the early 1960s, Chastain broke into the sports broadcasting scene when she worked for local stations in Atlanta, Georgia, and Raleigh, North Carolina. But it was when Miami’s WJTV station hired her to cover games that Broadcasting magazine dubbed her a veritable “pioneer.” During her seven years in Miami, she covered sports, including professional and college football. “She's our Jackie Robinson,” said CBS Sports reporter Lesley Visser during an interview in


23 Schultz and Linden, “From Ladies Days to Women's Initiatives,” 166

24 “Programing: Pioneering is Hard for Woman in Booth on CBS-NFL Football,” Broadcasting, October 28, 1974, p. 34.
2001. Like Robinson, to make strides toward social progress, Chastain dealt with prejudice and discrimination. According to Roy Firestone, an intern at WTVJ during Chastain’s tenure, Chastain “took a lot of abuse, a lot of behind-her-back stuff.” As he recalled, “players literally check[ed] out her skirt when she sat down.”

Sexual harassment became a common workplace hazard for women reporters covering professional football.

In 1974, CBS hired Chastain to be a color commentator along with other male reporters. Viewers were correspondingly displeased with her creeping into the male terrain. In late October, Chastain called a game between the Washington Redskins and the New York Giants with male commentators Pat Summerall and Brent Musburger. According to Broadcasting magazine, during the broadcast, the New York CBS affiliate took over 600 phone calls from angry viewers “complaining about Ms. Chastain’s incursion into a hitherto all-male preserve.” Washington’s CBS affiliate took 270 similar calls. When Chastain’s contract was up in 1975—after covering that year’s Super Bowl for CBS—the network did not renew her contract.

Rather than sticking up for their qualified employee, CBS appeased their consumers. The presence of a woman in a position of authority within the all-male preserve had indeed elicited a harsh backlash from male fans. Said Chastain in 2001, “I had 15 great years [in sports media], and one miserable one—the one at CBS.”

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26 “Programing: Pioneering is Hard for Woman in Booth on CBS-NFL Football,” Broadcasting, October 28, 1974, p. 34.

While Chastain’s NFL career met a disappointing end, another woman found opportunity in the league. In 1975, Phyllis George joined CBS’s early Sunday morning show, *The NFL Today*. George, the former Miss America contest winner of 1971, became part of a group that included male commentators Irv Cross and Jimmy “The Greek” Snyder, the famous sports bookkeeper and broadcaster. Nevertheless, Creedon refers to George’s role with CBS as a “hostess” rather than a bona fide sports broadcaster. When George did present her own stories, they were often special interest pieces on players and their families. Rather than report on actual football, she covered players within the feminine domain of the home. After two years, CBS replaced George (who moved to cover other sports and events for CBS) with a former *Playboy* magazine model, Jayne Kennedy, who became the first black woman network sports broadcaster; CBS fired Kennedy in 1980. Just as league managers did not help progress the women’s movement when selling the game to distaff consumers, they also did not offer much support to women’s sport journalists.

**Women as Sex Objects**

Another way that the associates in the NFL provided women a secondary role in the culture of the sport was through the popularization of cheer squads on NFL teams. Although cheer teams had existed for some time, in 1972, the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders burst onto the scene. Prior to that year, the Cowboys brought in high school cheerleaders to lead their crowds in cheers during games. The team’s head of public relations, Curt Moser, thinking that new uniforms would help expand audiences,

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28 Creedon, “From Whalebone to Spandex,” 140.
suggested that they change the wardrobe of the cheerleaders “to more up-beat uniforms.” Simultaneously, Moser and the Cowboys thought they “better get some high school graduates [rather than current students] to fill them.”

According to Chicago Tribune journalist Bob Greene, the cheerleaders were “scantily clad young women who bounce[d] around on the sidelines (and in front of those CBS cameras) showing lots of cleavage and legs.” They certainly were seen as sex objects, rather than a part of football as a sport.

“They exuded a wholesome sexuality,” notes Schultz, “as they danced (not cheered) their way through their inaugural 1972-1973 season in hot shorts, knee-high boots, and tight-fitting, midriff-exposing, cleavage-revealing, star-spangled tops.”

With overt sexuality, the Dallas cheerleaders became “America’s sweethearts.” The squad became so popular that a photographer for Playboy magazine imitated the cheerleaders in a topless photo spread to be printed on posters in the late 1970s (NFL lawyers sued for copyright and the posters were never sold). The Cowboys obviously did not see women as contributing to football as a sport, but part of the spectacle.

The popularity of the Cowboys cheerleaders inspired other teams across the country to open their sidelines to women. The Chicago Bears had their “Honey Bears”; the San Diego Chargers employed the “Chargerettes”; New Orleans had the “Angels”; Washington its “Redskinettes” and Denver its “Pony Express.”

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29 “Cowboy’s Cheerleader Squad NFL’s Toughest Team To Make?” Atlantic Daily World, May 23, 1978, 2.

30 Schultz, Qualifying Times, 175.


the Cowboys, saw women as something that could contribute to the commercial success of professional football.

Those in more support of the broader women’s movement saw cheerleaders as a harbinger of continuing male hegemony. “The surge in status for cheerleaders,” wrote New York Times columnist Neil Admur, “has come at a time when women’s liberation groups have denounced them as sexist tools.” Again, instead of promoting women as serious contributors to the sport as athletes and participants, they only ascribed value to women for being part of the NFL’s commercial enterprise.

NFL officials ultimately reacted to the social era—one that saw women making strides in different realms—by continuing to promote the sport as a male domain, where male athletes participated and (heteronormative) male viewers gained satisfaction. NFL marketers acted as though they helped the causes of women who wanted to get in on the game, but they only allowed women into sideshow aspects of the sport. They were only thought of as consumers or objects to be gazed upon.

What league officials missed, or more likely outright ignored, was the women who tried to play the sport in earnest during the same era when the NFL’s “women’s initiatives” took flight. Just as the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders strutted onto the sidelines to be ogled at by fans in the stadium and at home alike, hundreds of women took to the gridiron in the National Women’s Football League, trying to get into the sport for real.

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Women Get in the Game (For Real)

In the 1970s, with no assistance or even acknowledgement from people in the NFL, women suited up on football teams. In fact, women had done so for almost a hundred years. A brief mention of women playing “a football game” appeared in the press as early as 1893 and New York’s *The Sun* printed a story about a women’s “football contest” played near Sulzer’s Harlem River Park in late 1896. In the 1920s, women played at the halftime of an NFL game. From the 1930s through the 1950s, semiprofessional and amateur teams emerged, though they “barely registered on the public consciousness,” according to Oriard. In the 1960s, Midwest promoter and entrepreneur Sid Friedman organized the Women’s Professional Football League (WPFL). Providing “circus-type entertainment,” the WPFL was short lived.

It was not until 1974, though, when women’s football advocates from across the country founded the NWFL, that the sport gained serious traction. The league found players primarily through newspaper advertisements and word of mouth. Teams included the Los Angeles Dandelions, the California Mustangs, the Columbus Pacesetters, the Dallas Bluebonnets, the Fort Worth Shamrocks, the Toledo Troopers, and the Detroit Demons. By the end of the 1970s, the league had expanded to three divisions, adding teams such as the Oklahoma City Dolls, the Philadelphia Queen Bees, the Houston

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Herricanes, the Pasadena Roses, the Phoenix Cowgirls, and the Tucson Wild Kittens. The NWFL became the first women’s league to play regular season games, instead of simply holding exhibition contests and barnstorming trips. \(^{38}\)

The NWFL developed into the most successful organization for women’s football in the postwar era. Franchises, such as the Troopers, amassed local and national attention when star running back Linda Jefferson was named “Athlete of the Year” in 1975 by womenSports magazine. \(^{39}\) The Oklahoma City Dolls—led by star fullback Frankie Neal—also resonated with American audiences. In fact, the American Broadcasting Company aired a made-for-television movie about the team. \(^{40}\) Despite the relative popularity of teams like the Troopers and the Dolls, financial troubles plagued the NWFL. Team organizers had trouble attracting fans to their games. Media coverage was spotty. And teams had issues with insurance contracts for their players. \(^{41}\) The players, similar to those in the men’s professional leagues of the 1960s, lacked the power and/or organization to unionize in a league that seemed barely to keep its head above water.

By the early 1980s, the NWFL fragmented and teams disbanded. Hoping to keep the sport alive, proponents attempted to form new leagues on the West coast while those

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\(^{39}\) See womenSports, cover, June 1975.


\(^{41}\) Author’s interview with Mitchi Collette (Toledo Troopers), December 27 2013, Toledo, Ohio, notes and recording in possession of author.
in the east tried valiantly to continue to schedule games.\textsuperscript{42} Out of desperation, other teams tried transitioning to flag football, as opposed to the tackle variety, reasoning that it would resonate more with women and the public who did not approve of women playing tackle football.\textsuperscript{43} There were also a few women who played on major men’s teams, rather than play in the women’s leagues.\textsuperscript{44} It was all in vain; women’s football did not make another attempt at nationwide league play for another twenty years.\textsuperscript{45}


\textsuperscript{43} Some women’s teams (including NWFL clubs) gravitated toward “flag football”—a similar style of the sport played that includes “tackling” the opponent by pulling a flag located around their waste—to attract more athletes to the sport. See ‘The History of Women’s Football.’ Throughout the end of the century and into the beginning of the twenty-first century, some U.S. states, such as Florida, began flag-football programs at high schools. By 2002-2003, seventy-five high schools in Florida had flag football teams for girls and women. See Katie Thomas, “No Tackling, But a Girls’ Sport Takes Some Hits,” \textit{New York Times}, May 15, 2010, accessed January 27, 2015, \url{http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/16/sports/16flag.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0}.

\textsuperscript{44} Patricia Palinkas played for the Orlando Panthers of the Continental Football League on August 15, 1970. See Gary McKechnie and Nancy Howell, “Pat Parlinkas, The Only Woman To Play Professional Football,” \textit{Orlando Sentinel}, April 5, 1999, accessed January 27, 2015, \url{http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/1992-04-05/news/9204031063_1_palinkas-pat-fans}. Kate Hnida played for the University of Colorado and the University of New Mexico from 1999-2004. Hnida became the first woman to play in a FBS (NCAA Football Bowl Subdivision) game. After her playing career had ended, she described in an interview that she had been a victim of sexual abuse while at the University of Colorado. She admitted that she had been raped by other members of the football team. See Katie Hnida, \textit{Still Kicking: My Journey As the First Woman to Play Division I College Football} (New York, Scribner Publishing, 2006). Most recently, Jen Welter became the first woman athlete to play at a non-kicking position when she suited up at running back (she ran the ball three times) for the Texas Revolution of the Indoor Football League. See Nick Mandell, “Jen Welter Becomes First Woman To Play In Men’s Pro Football League In Contact Position,” \textit{USA Today}, November 16, 2014, accessed January 27, 2015, \url{http://ftw.usatoday.com/2014/02/jen-welter-becomes-first-woman-to-play-in-mens-pro-football-league-at-non-kicking-position}.

\textsuperscript{45} In 1999, entrepreneurs Terry Sullivan and Carter Turner launched the second WPFL and organized the “No Limits Tour,” consisting of two teams (Minnesota Vixen and the Michigan Minx) in a six-game barnstorming tour. The story of the tour is preserved in a PBS documentary. See \textit{True-Hearted Vixens}, VHS, produced by Mylène Moreno (Berkeley Media LLC, 2001). In the 2000s, various leagues emerged.
The Women’s Movement and the NWFL

Thus, while league and team officials continued to dismiss the women’s movement, there was a group of women on the gridiron contributing to the revolution in women’s social rank. In doing so, women footballers of the 1970s connected with the thousands of women across the United States who fought for space in American culture. Women in the NWFL articulated connections with some of feminism’s larger tenets in three important ways: they gained new experiences connected to physical culture, they forged alternative communities, and they found safe spaces to express differences in sexuality. Meanwhile these positive experiences remained absent from NFL fields and clubhouses.

With the growth of women’s sport in the 1970s, more women began to enjoy the benefits of physical culture that had been denied to them for generations. But, as the former NWFL players discussed, women’s football players still had to overcome cultural norms, stereotypes, and discrimination to be able to play football. “Back then girls were discouraged from playing sport,” explains Toledo Trooper Laurel Wolf. Growing up in Huron, Ohio, a small city in between Toledo and Cleveland, Wolf always played backyard sports with neighborhood kids. She specifically remembers games that consisted of “full-out football.” When she turned twelve, Wolf’s parents banned her from

playing football with the boys.\footnote{Author’s interview with Laurel Wolf (Toledo Troopers), December 29, 2013, Toledo, Ohio, notes and recording in possession of author.} Upon growing up, women were pushed to leave childish activities behind and develop as “proper” women.

For women who continued to engage in “unwomanly” sport, playing football offered empowering experiences in an otherwise oppressive culture. Born to a working-class family in Columbus, Ohio, Julie Sherwood always enjoyed neighborhood football with her brothers and later played intramural volleyball, basketball, and softball in high school. When her friends introduced her to the women’s football team in Columbus, she jumped at the opportunity. One reason for her enthusiasm about the team, Sherwood recalls, was that she found in the sport a space where non-normative body types were not only accepted, but valued. It was a liberating space: “It was the first place that I ever was where your weight wasn’t something to be ashamed of.” In the 1970s, she explains, “if you were heavy set, if you were fat, or even if you had muscle. . . [it] wasn’t a good thing. . . . If you weighed 175 pounds and you were applying for a job as a secretary, you could pretty much kiss that job good bye.” Yet, on the football field, “if you weighed 175 pounds people took you seriously.” She recalls renewing her driver’s license and thinking: “I didn’t feel like I had to lie about my weight.”\footnote{Author’s interview with Julie Sherwood (Columbus Pacesetters) December 30, 2013, phone interview, notes and recording in possession of author.} Sherwood found a new and liberating way to live her life as a woman in the 1970s. She did not have to abide by culture’s repressive social stigmas and she attributes this to her football career.

Women on the three football teams also created “alternative communities,” which, as historian Finn Enke points out, is one way that “ordinary women and men . . .
became involved in diverse activities that constituted the [women’s] movement.\textsuperscript{48}

Women believed that the football teams provided a “sisterhood” not available in other private or public spheres. Born into a military family, Mitchi Collette was not able to play sports because her family moved many times throughout her childhood. “I’ve never felt as much of a family, than with the Troopers,” she remarks. After the 1970s, Collette found in football her life’s calling. She worked with women’s football players and teams in Toledo for the next four decades. The alternative community that she found helped create her identity.\textsuperscript{49}

Other players also suggested how these new and unique attitudes and experiences helped shape their lives. Sherwood explained that football contributed to her career path. Her parents told her that she could only have certain occupations in her life when she was young, such as a nurse or secretary, or other “gender appropriate” careers. She had different thoughts.

Football attributed to just being able to see myself doing something different, just being able to do that, learning that it was OK, meeting other people who were OK with it, just learning to be something besides . . . [a] quiet well-behaved woman, it really helped me live the life I’ve lived.\textsuperscript{50}

Leaving the football field and later becoming a teacher of applied technology and automotive diagnosis and repair for over twenty-three years, Sherwood lived an

\textsuperscript{48} Enke, \textit{Find the Movement}, 2.

\textsuperscript{49} Author’s interview with Mitchi Collette (Toledo Troopers), December 27 2013, Toledo, Ohio, notes and recording in possession of author. She played her last game in 2003 (at age 53) and is currently (as of 2014) the owner and head coach of the contemporary Toledo Reign of the Women’s Football Alliance.

\textsuperscript{50} Author’s interview with Julie Sherwood (Columbus Pacesetters) December 30 2013, phone interview, notes and recording in possession of author.
exceptional life for a woman born in the 1950s. Football, she argues, “certainly contributed to it.” Through football, she and the other women created spaces where they could broaden their horizons, where they could achieve goals that may have seemed previously far too distant for consideration, and they shaped their identities around their time on the gridiron.

Women also found in football unique environments that accepted various sexualities. As Cahn argues, the American culture of sexualities in the United States in the postwar era allowed for some lesbians to express their identities through women’s sport in an otherwise suppressive culture. Sherwood remembers that there were a large number of lesbians on the Columbus Pacesetters. Not out as a lesbian to her parents at the time, she explains that it was not easy “trying to keep that [a] secret.” The football team

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51 Ibid.

became an accommodating community, something that she did not find in other areas of her life.\textsuperscript{53}

Inclusion and acceptance in both public and private spaces for lesbian women is important because, as Waggoner describes, some people in places, such as Oklahoma, had trouble accepting lesbian women; various women on the team had been fired from their jobs when their employers found out that they were gay.\textsuperscript{54} But, for women in the NWFL, the football communities became accepting environments. In relation to the Oklahoma team, Waggoner explains: “Nobody ever had any problem with it. I saw more problems in the huddle because you [weren’t] doing your job than I ever saw with [anybody not] accepting [anyone].”\textsuperscript{55} While other spaces in 1970s America were unfriendly to lesbians, the football team became a place where gay women could create and sustain a sense of community.

Heterosexual women also realized the benefits of the diverse and tolerant milieu of women’s football in the 1970s. Quarterback of the Oklahoma squad, Jan Hines—who says she grew up in a conservative Christian community—remembers that the first time she personally knew an openly gay woman was during her time with the Dolls. This experience allowed her to see past differences that she had not been able to in other realms of society. She explains:

I have to admit, it was the first time that I—[who] was raised in church and straight myself and . . . had no knowledge of this stuff—found out that a friend of

\textsuperscript{53} Author’s interview with Julie Sherwood (Columbus Pacesetters) December 30 2013, phone interview, notes and recording in possession of author.

\textsuperscript{54} Author’s interview with Kim Waggoner (Oklahoma City Dolls), December 31, 2013, phone interview, notes and recording in possession of author.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
mine was gay, [and] it was like “wow.” It took me a few days to work through it mentally. And I’m thinking to myself, “I’ve known this person for [a] number of years, and never had an issue. Why should things change that I now have knowledge of something that I didn’t before. Why should that change my relationship?”56

She maintains that once she “worked through that” she was able to see past of the teachings of the culture that she had grown up in.57 The football community became an alternative environment for Hines.

The women in the NWFL remember the highlights of playing a sport previously closed to them. They recall the new spaces that became available and how much these communities meant to their personal identities. They remember the importance of the football teams for being spaces that did not discriminate against lesbian women. But, while the women of the NWFL offered sporting opportunities for hundreds of women, they were never accepted into the mainstream culture, and the controllers of the league never endorsed or even recognized the women’s game. Instead, they continued their promotion of women as auxiliary objects within men’s professional football.

Women’s Football in the Media

The media responses to women’s football in the 1970s reflect the mainstream opinion toward the sport. In general, the media did not see the NWFL, or women playing

56 Author’s interview with Jan Hines (Oklahoma City Dolls) January 11, 2014, phone interview, notes and recording in possession of author.

57 Allen-Jackson reports a similar experience. See Author’s interview with Jacqueline Elaine Allen-Jackson (Toledo Troopers) October 25, 2014, phone interview, notes and recording in possession of author.
football in general, as a serious sporting venture. Instead, they reaffirmed football as a male space, epitomized by the NFL. Specifically, the popular press “framed” women’s football as a novelty and abnormal and made few attempts to seriously cover the sport.  

Even though women’s football organizers attempted to give players serious and legitimate sporting opportunities, the media did not earnestly cover the sport. Writing for the Wall Street Journal in 1971, journalist Roy J. Harris described a game between the Pittsburgh Powederkegs and the Detroit Fillies in which a Pittsburgh player sped “across the backfield . . . and dart[ed] in for the score.” After the game, the victorious player told the reporter that nothing was “more fun than a one-on-one tackling situation, when it’s you or her.” The author then quipped: “That’s right. Her.” In other words, he did not take seriously the game as a sport.

Sports columnist Jack Murphy furthered this line of thinking: “Even in this enlightened age,” he wrote, “the idea of women’s football boggles the mind.” It seemed as though journalists had a difficult time fathoming the concept of women on the gridiron. After watching the team from San Diego, one writer for the San Diego Magazine felt as though his “head was screwed on sideways.” Even those who attempted to take the distaff game seriously expressed their doubts. For instance, the


Columbus Dispatch described the Pacesetters as a “professional football team with a winning instinct and competitive spirit as sharp as any club in the National Football League.” Yet, the author continued: “There’s just one twist—these players are women. Yes, women.” More often than not, media coverage tended to lampoon the league and its players, rather than covering the sport as a serious sporting venture.

The press also devoted significant ink to emphasizing the players’ “femininity,” a common (and unfortunate) trope in covering women athletes and their sports. One approach was to accentuate the players’ (hetero)sexual attractiveness. The New York Times’ Judy Klemesrud, for instance, wrote that the New York Fillies “seemed to have stock replies to the question that almost everybody has been asking them: Can a woman

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play football and still be feminine?“ Toledo’s The Blade described star running back Linda Jefferson as “at home in a dress with neatly coiffured hair as she is in shoulder pads behind a facemask.” Ebony magazine referred to the Troopers’ Jackie Allen as “an attractive five-foot-four, 135-pound star defensive guard.” And as columnist Betty Liddick declared about the football team in Los Angeles, the players were “small, curvy and long-haired. . . . Not one needed a chromosome check.” These examples show how commentators endorsed a popular line of thinking that held conventional feminine qualities more important than athleticism.

Elsewhere, the media published stories about the footballers’ male partners and the degree to which the couples perpetuated a traditional, even conservative gender order. A San Diego Tribune writer quoted a player stating: “My husband is overseas so he doesn’t know I signed up yet. . . . When he finds out he’s going to kill me.” The Troopers’ Brigette Hartz reportedly told the West Toledo Herald, “As long as my


husband puts up with me going out to play football, I guess I’ll do it.”

A player identified as Mrs. Kovarocic supposedly told sportswriter Jack Murphy that her husband supported her, “but he’s not so sure if he likes the idea of having a football player for a wife.” The alignment of football with traditional gender norms attempted to dispel any radicalism on the part of the players. Even if sarcastically, these players acknowledged that they needed their husbands’ permission to play football.

The press and, consequently, the mainstream culture of professional football did not believe that women’s football was as serious as the male version. The players weren’t really playing football. The teams weren’t really football teams. The NWFL wasn’t really a professional league. This illustrates just how rigid the boundaries of gender were in American football. Women’s football was something that women did not and could not do. As the press framed it, even when women did dabble with the game, it was always secondary to other aspects of the players’ lives.

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70 “German Import Studies Grid Rules,” West Toledo Herald, 10 October 1979. For another example, see Ron Rapoport, “Wham, Bam, Thank You, Ma’am,” womenSports (November 1974): 38-43, 52, 67-69. Rapoport reported that a player for the Los Angeles Dandelions told womenSports that: “I don’t think my boyfriend wants me to play. I just don’t think he thinks it’s very feminine.”


72 For historical scholarship on the relationship between masculinity and American football, see Oriard, Reading Football; Oriard, King Football; Michael Oriard, Brand NFL: Making and Selling America’s Favorite Sport (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). Sociologists have further suggested that football remains the most exalted form of masculinity and the sport’s relationship with manhood manifests into mainstream culture through television, among other mediums. See Donald F. Sabo and Joe Panepinto, “Football Ritual and the Social Reproduction of Masculinity,” in Michael A. Messner and Donald F. Sabo, eds, Sport, Men, and the Gender Order: Critical Feminist Perspectives (Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics, 1990), 115-126; Nick Trujillo, ‘Machines, Missiles, and Men: Images of the Male Body on ABC’s Monday Night Football,” Sociology of Sport Journal 12, no. 4 (December 1995): 403-423. The ways in which the mainstream media represented these teams demonstrates the marginalization of the sport and reflects on how women’s involvement in football transgressed normative social relations of the era. See Nancy Theberge and Alan Cronk, “Work Routines in Newspaper Sports Departments and the Coverage of Women’s Sports,” Sociology of Sport Journal 3, no. 3 (September 1986): 195-203. Theberge and Cronk explain that “[b]ecause the media forms a powerful institution that does not simply reflect but indeed shapes perceptions and behaviors, their treatment of women is important to the larger struggle for women’s advancements.” Quotation on 196.
Nevertheless, the women’s movement ultimately crept into the realm of professional football. As I argued above, NFL officials did see opportunity in women, but they only regarded them as beneficial to their coffers. They were avid consumers, produced special interest pieces on NFL media, and were sexual objects on the sidelines of the men’s games. In these ways, the media and NFL marketers did their best to profit from women as consumers while keeping the sport a male preserve.

Indeed, football was a man’s domain—played and controlled by men, a place where the women’s movement seemed to have little effect. As Oriard contends, “As a sport, football meant heroic males, their masculinity exaggerated by padded uniforms, engaged in struggles of almost primitive physical combat but governed by the most modern forms of discipline and strategy.”

Instead of encouraging participation in the sport or aiming to inspire women to be involved in management of teams, NFL administrators opened space for women in its league, but in a marginalized fashion, offering women space only in the ancillaries of the sport.

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CONCLUSION: THE IMPORTANCE OF POLITICAL FOOTBALL

Players brought politics and political movements into professional football from the beginning. Class, gender, and racialized issues were part of the sport’s inception. Yet, because the NFL was not popular across the country, these instances had little effect on the broader culture. In the second half of the century, though, the sport emerged as America’s pastime. Politics not only continued to influence the sport, but because of the game’s now prominent place in American society, activist athletes became an important part of culture. Challenges over how the sport should function, regarding labor and capital, between men and women, between races and ethnicities, and from leftist groups critiquing the social order, appeared in the sport and in the coverage of the game. In essence, professional football became one place where nationwide discussions of politics took place.

In this dissertation, I analyze various moments when the NFL became a location for such political discourse. Professional football emerged as a cultural spectacle at a time when Americans struggled over many social issues. Meanwhile, football, for a variety of reasons, continued to gain strength and valuable space within both the marketplace and American hearts. The sport offered people a way to focus on what they believed to be important in society. Most of the players studied in this dissertation, for instance, brought liberal or progressive perspectives to the gridiron; they saw these views as important enough to make them central to their football identities. For the most part, though, the mainstream media, NFL coaches, owners, and other league officials tried to disassociate the league from the larger social movements. Certainly, in the era of commissioner Pete Rozelle, who “saw himself as the defender of the ‘American One Way,’” league representatives did not want any of the so-called radicals (whether they were from the
civil rights or women’s movement, part of the New Left or counterculture, or part of the Marxist Old Left) to make a negative mark on the Americanism that the game promulgated.¹

With all of this in mind, I’d like to raise two closing points about the importance of political football. The first is about the significance of athletic activism. Throughout this dissertation, I consider athletes who brought politics to the gridiron. In doing so, they arguably helped spread political ideals more effectively than other activists could have during the same time period. Football became a political vehicle that elite players could use to advance their own political prerogatives.

This was not something new. Throughout history, thousands of people have derived political meaning from sport. Historian Elliott J. Gorn’s insight into nineteenth-century working-class consciousness helps illustrate this phenomenon. Although many working-class people had a sense of alienation during that era, the majority, Gorn argues, “did not spend their free time reading the Rights of Man, toasting Tom Paine, and struggling to resist oppression.” Put another way, they did not directly participate in the late-nineteenth century social movement regarding class structure. Instead, they found their “deepest sense of meaning and wholeness,” particularly on how they engaged class dynamics and the struggle for workers’ freedom, through their leisure activities. “Probably more hours were consumed at cockfights than at union meetings,” Gorn suggests.² These recreational activities helped shape the political identities of thousands


of Americans. They were able to connect in a tacit fashion to other like-minded people through watching or participating in sport.

Sport continued to matter for the American public in the twentieth century, and some athletes played prominent roles in the dissemination of political thought. Viewers of Jesse Owens at the 1936 Olympics shaped their thoughts on race relations as he won four gold medals, just as others would eleven years later when they watched Jackie Robinson steal home nineteen times while becoming the first black man in white baseball in the twentieth century.¹ From the late 1950s through the 1970s, when professional football became the new national pastime, and arguably a greater cultural spectacle (in the United States) than any other sport, football players brought in different and contemporary forms of politics.

These political athletes impacted the American public. As journalist Dave Zirin articulates, they matter because “[i]t’s not the power of their words as much as the power of their reach.”² Indeed, between 1950 and 1980, millions of viewers consumed professional football through various media and they were forced, whether they liked it or not, to consider emergent social movements and political issues. For example, when they read journalists criticize the radical Dave Meggyesy and Chip Oliver, they were, at the very least, made aware of Leftist critiques of sport and postwar American culture. Just like working-class Americans, who probably spent more time watching cockfights in the late nineteenth century than participating in social movements, contemporary Americans


were more likely to pay attention to athletes than the writings of Leftish intellectuals of the time period.

While the individual players had an influence on the public, what we often forget is how much power the leagues had in maintaining a dominant social order. This brings me to my second point. As I have suggested, professional football was the most popular team sport in the United States. This continues today. Millions of viewers tune in every Sunday and Monday (and even Thursdays and Saturdays) to watch NFL games. They watch the NFL Network in large numbers. The NFL Draft has become a cultural event. Overall, the league continues to thrive. Therefore, from a political standpoint, the way the NFL interacts with American culture matters significantly, even when the league is merely parroting dominant norms and expectations. The league is an independent business not (directly) associated with the government, and it has free reign to endorse certain political issues over others (although the public money that goes to build billion dollar stadiums certainly questions this logic). However, it is undeniable that the NFL’s political ideals have important ramifications on American society.

Significantly, this political context materialized during the late 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Indeed, at the same time the NFL became one of the most popular “brands” in American culture, the four social movements I looked at intersected most prominently with the sport. The NFL’s brand was one that sold traditional views in an era of upheaval. The league did not approve of un-American, Leftish “radicals,” remained hostile toward ardent supporters of “radical” union ideology, and did little to help the cause of the ongoing women’s movement. Although professional football is a site where

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people from all across the political spectrum have found meaning and political power, through studying how people in the league responded to postwar social movements, it becomes clear that league representatives endorsed some political motives while it actively silenced others.

Therefore, the culture of professional football (and the NFL in particular) represents what scholar Thomas P. Oates and Zach Furness refer to as a “central site for the assertion of hegemonic ideals and the maintenance of dominant social norms.” That is, the NFL became a site of conventional modes of thinking and conservative politics. Anyone contesting these narratives from within the sport faced reproach when trying to articulate oppositional views. While NFL officials have routinely refrained from making outright political statements, studying their connections to social movements illuminates their ideologies. As such, my main aim in this dissertation is not just to outline the various individuals who took part in politics through professional football in the postwar era, but to analyze the broader political ideology of the sport in relation to the cultural milieu—thereby revealing the conservative ethos emanating from America’s most consumed professional team sport.

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