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HOW POSTMODERNISM EXPLAINS FOOTBALL AND FOOTBALL EXPLAINS POSTMODERNISM

The Billy Clyde Conundrum

Robert L. Kerr

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Also by Robert L. Kerr

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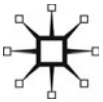

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Contents

1	Introduction—Why This Game, Why This Story	1
2	America Meets Football, and Football Meets Frank Merriwell	7
3	Time Runs Out on the Wholesome Warrior	22
4	Center Stage for Billy Clyde	36
5	Scenes from the Conundrum in Motion	52
6	A Postmodernist Theory of Football	67
7	Life in the Hyper-Mediated Marketplace of Football Narratives	80
8	A Merriwellean Billy Clyde from a Postmodern Beer a Minute	99
9	Two-Tiered Gender System Encounters Emotion Work	112
10	Conclusion—Football, Postmodernism, and Us	125
References		127
Index		140

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1

Introduction—Why This Game, Why This Story

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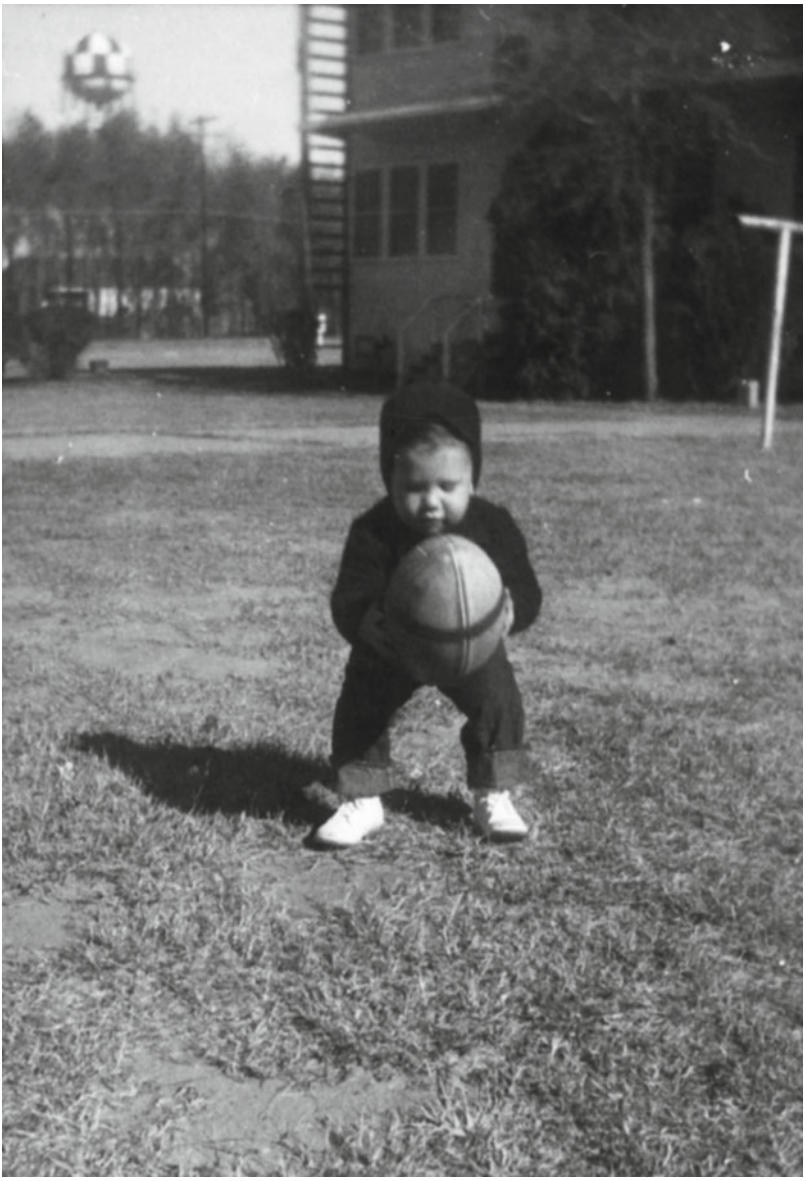

FIGURE 1.1 *Norman, Oklahoma, 1953*

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On a cool, bright fall afternoon on America's southern plains, a boy plays in his yard with a football that is not much smaller than he is. It is a time, about halfway through the twentieth century, when just blocks away the game of college football is being played by some measures with more success than ever before or since.

The boy does not know that. Yet over the years he comes to believe that moment of childhood pre-consciousness somehow stayed with him. As a college professor much later he will have his students reflect upon Carl Becker's once well-known essay on how memory's "engaging blend of fact and fancy" works to "imaginatively recreate" for us "a mythical adaptation of that which actually happened." He will ask them to seek and write about unrealized times that may have shaped their own beliefs more than expected, the times when, as Robert Penn Warren put it, "the meaning of moments passes like the breeze that scarcely ruffles the leaf of the willow."

In another of the boy's own earliest memories, all the grownups at a family gathering are particularly animated by what is happening on the little, black-and-white television. He watches only in fleeting moments between other amusements. But by the end of the day, he has come to grasp that a team from the University of Oklahoma has been playing football on TV. The way it commanded the attention of the adults stays with him.

As the years go by, he learns from family stories that his father was an all-state halfback who joined the Navy instead of playing for Oklahoma, despite an invitation from its most legendary coach. But earlier, in a high school, playoff game one cold November night in Altus, the father outplayed another team's star who would soon make it big for the Sooners. The boy's uncle will still be telling the story decades later.

The father teaches his son to pass and punt, and the boy spends countless afternoons and evenings playing football in the yard with his friends. At some point, it occurs to him to start scrawling out accounts of what happened in those games. His grandmother tells him he has "a way with words." Again he does not know it, but the conceptual relationship of game and mediated game—actual football recreated via a medium of communication—has begun to faintly flicker within him.

The boy grows up in small towns where his take on social priorities leads him to assume the high school football team must be the reason the town has a school. When he is old enough to join the team himself, he rarely gets off the bench.

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But then one day, on television, a small man from another country is kicking field goals in a professional football game in New York—by swinging his leg around sideways, instead of straight ahead in the style of everyone else the boy has ever seen. He takes his football outside and after a few days, to his great surprise, he is kicking the ball enough like the little man on television to suddenly be made his team's starting kicker.

Television has changed his life. But then, on the very first extra point he attempts in a game, someone fails to block a tall, fast defensive end. The boy turned soccer-style place kicker is flattened before ever swinging his leg. Now he does know it—and *feels* it: the game is very different from the mediated game.

As time goes by, the boy learns he doesn't seem to have many marketable job skills. Then he discovers newspapers are willing to pay people who can write complete sentences and semi-coherent paragraphs, almost a living wage. He goes to work reporting on sports—now mediating them for a living—and eventually a great many other things. It is what keeps a roof over his head.

But the years go by and suddenly one day the newspaper industry is largely replaced by Facebook and Twitter. Fortunately, by the time that happens he has discovered how graduate school also rewards complete sentences and paragraphs. Eventually it turns him into a professor employed to teach media law and history, as it turns out, by the University of Oklahoma.

And there, his office window looks out upon the very stadium where college football was being played so successfully when he was just a little boy across the way. It is being played extremely well still. But the professor spends his time writing endlessly about First Amendment law and grading exams, not going to football games.

The stadium is absolutely packed for every game anyway, and most of the rest of the state watches on television. The professor hears the roar of the crowds outside his window and finds his mind pondering what it means, in sociological terms, that so many Americans are so captivated by the game of football.

Much of his pondering has long been drawn to such questions of culture as an "ensemble of meaning-making practices," especially when they concern the way we "dwell in symbolic worlds mediated by mass communication." As John Pauly laid it out in one of the most important articles ever written on media research, scholars may never contribute more than when they help us all "simply to know our cultural habitat."

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So what about that remarkable habitat constructed by the culture of American football? Sociologists have been for some time saying things like, "Mediated sport has been firmly established as a significant institution in American culture," and "Sport is a microcosm of the larger society—a social phenomenon that provides important clues about the nature of society."

Thinking it through, he arrives at the conclusion that what the world needs is a scholarly book that will apply postmodernist theory to explain American football—and vice versa. And then, lo and behold, a publisher one day says it agrees.

As he begins, he has in mind Mary Winsor's *Every Person Her Own Historian*, reminding twenty-first century academics of the enduring wisdom from Becker's *Everyman His Own Historian,* that scholarship "will be of little import except in so far as it is transmuted into common knowledge." They were both speaking in particular to the point "that writing history that no one will read is a vain and pointless business"—but the rest of the scholarly community should be listening as well.

And the prof decides that this time around, he will. He knows the days of thousands reading his newspaper articles are long gone. But he wouldn't mind if a few more than the usual handful of ivory-tower eggheads like himself read the book.

Doubtless, you have concluded by now that the little boy with the football, who became the prof in quest of a scholarly tome on the meaning of the game, is the author of this book. You are correct.

I have written a few other books and learned that people seem to ask authors more about why they wrote books than what they wrote about in them. So I tell you the story above to go ahead and explain why I wrote this one. And how it came to be something of a hybrid of scholarship told as a story for more than just scholars. Everything on the pages that follow aims for that anyway.

Yet it is *still* a hybrid, so there are tradeoffs. It is scholarly in its essential conceptual grounding, and thus some of the story must be told in those terms.

So for my fellow eggheads just briefly: Methodologically this study relies on framing as an interpretive guide, in the sense of Gamson's conceptualization of the media frame as "a central organizing idea used for making sense of relevant events" that helps explain how audiences may "understand and remember a problem." Specifically helpful in that guidance was Altheide's "document analysis" process for connecting

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media representations to broader ideas in discourse and ideology. I have detailed that process in a number of journal articles, including some in this book's reference list.

And for everyone, unfortunately *metanarrative*, *narrative*, and related terminology likely will seem overused in many passages ahead. But they are too essential to the basics of postmodernist theory to misrepresent it by underusing them.

So that's the introduction. From here, we will start in the next chapter working our way through the full story.

It is a story of how, among other things, a sport both appealing and horrifying, the power of media, the far-reaching metaphors of Frank Merriwell and Billy Clyde Puckett, and a remarkable show about football and drinking and women and men all help us understand the way a game played by boys in the yard has become the American national pastime, a multi-billion-dollar industry, a clinical obsession.

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2

America Meets Football, and Football Meets Frank Merriwell

Kerr, Robert L. *How Postmodernism Explains Football and Football Explains Postmodernism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. DOI: 10.1057/9781137534071.0003.

For us today, trying to think of American football's beginnings in anything close to their actual historical context is a challenge bordering on the impossible. The game is too much with us. We cannot escape it, especially in its mediated form.

For most people, the first time they encountered a football game was when one form of media or another presented it to them. Early on, that would have been print media creating representations of the game, soon to be joined by radio, then television. Today, all are engaged in more of that than ever before—far more. And still that represents only a fraction of the mediated connections that now flourish between the game and audiences. As with so many other aspects of human activity today, for football those connections beyond any number and variety once imaginable now proliferate in virtually all places and all times via an ever more digitally cyber-networked world.

So football for Americans today exists as a fully formed social institution. It is omnipresent as an obsession for far too many, as just entertainment for others, as nuisance or even scourge for many others. Yet we all believe we know what "football" is. We know it the way we know what Coca-Cola is. It is quite simply a fixture for us today, socially, materially, culturally, economically.

That is what makes trying to picture the game's actual beginnings so challenging. Trying to imagine what "football" would mean to us if we encountered it unawares as it existed earlier in American history, takes effort. Considering its earliest form as "more or less a series of controlled riots," as writer Steve Almond has accurately called it, helps us start to readjust our senses from the relentlessly choreographed and monetized media spectacle that saturates them today. But even that still could be a catchphrase from, say, an ESPN documentary, so often casually and routinely employed today to hype a game in which violence plays as intrinsic a role as the ball. So let's attempt the flashback another way.

"What I seen was this whole raft of people a-sittin' on these two banks and a-lookin' at one another across this pretty little green cow pasture," begins this recounting of an unworldly young man accidentally stumbling into a stadium in which a football game is about to take place. Andy Griffith's "What it Was, Was Football" comedy routine came forth after the game had been played in the United States for several decades. But it invaluably—and hilariously—captures a historical snapshot of how someone who had never encountered the game before might well have attempted to give meaning to the inexplicable phenomenon before him.

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"About the time I got set down good, I looked down there and I seen 30 or 40 men come a-runnin' out," it continues. "And everybody where I was a-settin' got up and hollered! And about that time, 30 or 40 come runnin' out of the other end . . . and the other bank-full, they got up and hollered." The narrator turns to the man next to him and asks, "Friend, what is it that they're a-hollerin' for?"

That could be the plainest way to articulate the question at the heart of this book, and a question that helps us today try to imagine what "football" might mean to us if media didn't so ceaselessly do that job for us. Just what was it about football that so combustively set so many "a-hollerin' " *from the very beginning*, and what is it that has kept ever greater numbers engaged so intensely ever since?

Griffith recorded "What it Was, Was Football" in 1953 when he was a young, unknown comedian from North Carolina, and it became a hit that launched his long career on stage and screen. Attempting to answer his question in the monologue, the narrator recalls that possession of the football "made the other bunch just as mad as they could be," with the struggle over it causing "the awfulest fight. . . . They would . . . kick one another and throw one another down and stomp on one another and . . . I don't know what-all and just as fast as one of 'em would get hurt, they'd tote him off and run another one on!"

It helps to start our story by focusing on the notion of a bunch of young men doing all that kicking and shoving one another about a "cow pasture" as the fodder for launching an enduring commercial enterprise with apparently still boundless market potential to this day. Because even in the game's earliest years we can see the fundamental elements that seeded both its popular success and its inherent scandal and controversy. Both its astounding appeal and its violent, corrupting propensities were all there, all along. And so were fiercely competing narratives, seeking from the start to prevail in the making of the game's meaning.

The beginnings

American football was created on college campuses in the Northeast in the nineteenth century, most prominently in what is popularly referred to as the Ivy League. Those colleges quickly discovered the remarkable reality that fielding teams in their names attracted many thousands of spectators who had no direct connection to the schools involved. It was

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a "commercial enterprise from the start," one indeed "both commercialized and professionalized" at venerable temples of learning like Harvard and Yale, Ronald Smith wrote in his definitive history of that period in American sports. Quite simply, students preferred playing and watching and celebrating football over studying, and football fascinated alumni and other fans as well—far more than anything transpiring in the classrooms and libraries. Football would become "the emotionally integrating force of the American college," a Lafayette College president wrote. "It is the symbol about which are gathered the loyalties of students, faculty, alumni and friends of the college."

So it was in the American East that virtually everything associated with college football to this day originated—all the pageantry and spectacle, as well as the Faustian pact that brings to campus bountiful revenue streams and enthusiastic support from alumni and the broader public, along with also endless scandals over violence in the game, illegal payoffs to players, and salaries for coaches that dwarf those of university faculty. The success of football there quickly led colleges and then high schools across the country to begin developing teams—by the 1930s, even high schools that had too few students for regulation eleven-man teams were playing a version of the game with six-man teams. Between the two world wars, football's popularity grew to rival that of baseball as the American pastime. The era after World War II saw professional football for the first time attract popular interest.

Almost from the beginning, the game's development was characterized by raging controversy at the same time its popularity and media interest were soaring. Its rapid growth was accompanied by intense criticism and pressure to abolish it from schools. Analysis such as that of influential sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen declared adult interest in football and other sports to be a sign of "arrested spiritual development." He observed in his 1899 classic *The Theory of the Leisure Class* that "chicane, falsehood, browbeating, hold a well-secured place" in the game. So did savagery, mangled bodies, blood, and gore. At least eighteen deaths and hundreds of serious injuries were reported during the 1905 season alone. Earliest films of games show the players mostly massed together and slamming into each other over and over. Headlines such as "Killed in A Football Game," "Mortally Hurt at Practice," "Boy Tackled Hard in Football Game; Dies Soon After," "Will Lose an Eye," "Football Captain Killed," and "Rib Driven Into Heart" were common. In cartoons of the period, a skeleton holding a football stands in a field

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littered with dead bodies; the Grim Reaper looks down from the goalposts as players maim each other; Father Time points to a list of landmark events from 1905 with references to such dark episodes as "The Russian Revolt," "The Battle of Mukden," and "The Revolt Against Brutal Football." Historian H.W. Brand has observed, "There was this idea that football, at least in the minds of some of the progressive reformers, was this barbarous relic from an earlier day."

But any number of other accounts from the early years of the game offered more glowing idealizations. When Amos Alonzo Stagg took the job in 1891 at the University of Chicago (where Veblen would soon teach), he said he had done so "because he believed that he 'could influence others to Christian ideals more effectively on the field than in the pulpit,'" football historian Michael Oriard recounted. Such rhetoric would help establish a long tradition in which football's spokespersons sought to imbue football with qualities more socially palatable (and marketable) than the essentially brutal struggle at its core. Walter Camp, a nineteenth-century Yale star who introduced coaching to the game and was its most successful early promoter, published twenty books and countless newspaper and magazine articles, with emphasis on the "purity" of the college football star who "plays as a gentleman.... Whatever bruises he may have in the flesh, his heart is right." A Harvard coach declared that football "embodies so many factors that are typically American.... Virile, intensive, aggressive energy that makes for progress is the root which upholds and feeds American supremacy and American football."

All that reflects elements of the way that college football soon developed a well-established, public-relations function, so much so that it has been described by historian Warren Goldstein as "the main instrument of public relations for institutions of higher education," beginning as early as the 1890s. It would become by some measures, he said, "the principal means by which alumni, public relations professionals, and fund-raisers gained control of American college life" and in Oriard's assessment, "a grotesquely important agent of public relations for many universities" to this day. And quite early in the history of that process, the PR function got a face, one that was handsome and young, heroic and selfless—everything that Americans wanted to be and that commercial football wanted to be understood as representing.

Beginning just before the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the face of college football promoted most vigorously would

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be that of Frank Merriwell. Sprung to life from the pages of magazine installments and novels that eventually numbered in the hundreds, the fictional Yale football star would become one of the most famous heroic figures in all American fiction through "athletic triumph after athletic triumph—all in an atmosphere of joviality, boyish enthusiasm, and sterling virtue." For decades, mentioning Merriwell's name to almost any American would immediately bring to mind "the picture of an honest, healthy straight-shooter, always on the side of truth and honor," wrote the editor of the posthumous autobiography of Gilbert Patten, who penned the stories under the name Burt L. Standish. But as a popularized archetype of football, his presence in the game would snowball into something even more pervasive via countless other invocations in media and elsewhere, so much so that Oriard dubbed it the "Frank Merriwell model of gee-whiz modesty."

The role of the Merriwell model and its many layers in understanding football's social meaning is one of the central themes of this book. It has been—and continues to be—utilized so extensively and integrally in the game's broader PR function that it can indeed also be considered as the Merriwell *strategy*. For as we will see, presenting its figurative face in Merriwellean terms can be vital to marketing stories of a game inescapably and perpetually characterized by much darker and more dangerous forces. But such efforts are regularly undermined by the enduring dynamics of what this study calls the game's "Billy Clyde Puckett" side. That side—the darker, violent, antisocial elements that are structurally integral to both its appeal and to its ongoing controversies and concerns—will be elaborated upon in following chapters.

Irresistible narrative possibilities

Reflecting unsentimentally on football's past recently drew Steve Almond's attention in his book, *Against Football*. A lifelong, hardcore fan of the game, Almond had examined rock 'n' roll, chocolate, and various other pop-culture staples of the American scene in fiction and nonfiction. Then he sought to understand how "in the space of a century football grew from an obscure collegiate hazing ritual into the nation's most popular professional sport." In significant part, he concluded, it happened because so many of the game's early participants and observers realized just what a compelling narrative the "series of controlled riots"

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offered for those ready to tap into it. Camp liked to speak of football as "purposeful work," and Almond noted that he must be given much credit for helping create "beauty and meaning from controlled violence" through his own writing and his role as a leading coach, rulemaker, and spokesperson for the game. As the "anarchy of a folk game" became more "coherent and complex," it was "the excess savagery of football's origins" that would become "the engine of its transformation."

Almond found much of the rhetoric spouted to promote the game as grounded in a "uniquely American quality" to be "hokum" and "overheated historiography." But he acknowledged the way its roots took hold in reaction to urbanization and industrialization pulling the American male farther from the demands of frontier life at the same time that football began to flourish. Oriard concurred: "Thrust into a new world where traditional masculine traits were no longer meaningful, he found vigorous outdoor sports such as football a compensating validation of his manhood." The association between football and nationalistic machismo was cultivated from early on in the game's growth. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when the United States faced no major military engagements, football was seen as "an alternative training ground for restoring masculinity and aggressiveness," sports historian Gerald Gems concluded. Football thus contributed to a century-long, post Civil War process merging "Victorian values of discipline, order, control, and self-reliance with modern American society."

In his insightful *Reading Football*, Oriard made the argument that football's narrative structure proved to be so rich it made it easy for even run-of-the-mill sportswriters to give readers of newspapers and magazines a sense of thrills, suspense, and athletic prowess. The audience responded enthusiastically, finding in football "an irresistible duality" that was "at once mythic and visceral, liberating and lethal . . . rolled into one compact drama," as Almond put it. And once all that became evident to individuals and groups alert to social trends that presented opportunity for commercial exploitation, the boom was really on. "Football succeeded as a spectacle because the games' own structure made narrative drama possible," Oriard pointed out, "but also because these narrative possibilities were exploited by football's promoters." By the 1960s, those possibilities would enable football to surpass baseball as the nation's leading spectator sport. The NFL was then being run by Pete Rozelle, who instinctively understood its narrative possibilities and found more ways to monetize them through media than anyone before

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him. "Rozelle was essentially a PR man," Almond wrote, "and he understood the American lust for the mythic, the manner in which his fellow citizens yearned to feel part of some heroic past."

What really matters about the Heisman

One of the most tangible and enduring talismans commercial football draws upon to bond with a heroic past is the Heisman Trophy. It is awarded near the end of each college-football season to the player deemed most outstanding by a vote of selected members of sports media and past winners of the award. Like most everything else about the game today, the annual presentation has become a media spectacle, telecast live in prime-time, commentators teeming all about with microphones and cameras. Top candidates for the award are arranged on camera as the vote is announced, so that their reactions to winning or losing are instantly beamed out nationwide. It might seem that nothing about it could be missed, and yet really, the main point of how a Heisman Trophy came to be and what the name has to do with football rarely comes up. It's all about who won and who didn't. But in the story of John Heisman, for whom the trophy is named, we find all the fiercely competing narratives that shaped the early history of the game, and that continue to both power and bedevil it.

He was born two weeks before the first American college game in 1869. He earned an Ivy League law degree but chose instead to make his living at something potentially more lucrative—coaching football. After playing in high school and college, he coached for thirty-six years at a string of colleges, winning a national championship at Georgia Tech. But his enduring influence on the game would come from the way he worked to alter its fundamental structure and allow fans to better follow the action, and even more crucially, to save the game from the violent excesses that almost got it banned. Heisman is credited with, among other innovations, introducing scoreboards at games, having the center snap the ball to start each play instead of rolling it on the ground, having a vocal "hike" signal initiate each snap, and dividing the game into four quarters with regular breaks from play between each.

And beyond all that, he helped change the game most of all by working to have the forward pass legalized. Over the course of football's early years, every play was either a run or a punt. Passing was not legal in rugby, from which many of American football's rules were developed, so it was

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zealously kept illegal by early stewards of the game, like Camp. But after Heisman witnessed a successful pass heaved illegally in desperation in 1895, he recognized in it something that "would scatter the mob" and cut down on the shocking numbers of deaths and devastating injuries produced by the violent scrums then dominating play. As head of the national rules committee, Camp resisted, but Heisman's prominence helped him rally other coaches and newspaper reporters to keep pressure on for change.

After he retired in New York City, where he was part owner of a sporting-goods company and later became athletic director of the Downtown Athletic Club, he declined its proposal to name a new award honoring the best college football player after him, considering it "absurd" in "strictly a team game" to pretend it possible that "one player be singled out as better than his peers," according to his biographer. After the old coach died, they named the award after him anyway. And although Heisman the man is barely known any longer, even by the players who win the trophy named for him, occasionally a sports writer like Bill Pennington of *The New York Times* will dig up the story and recognize that "Without John Heisman, there might not be a forward pass in football, and without a forward pass, the game would probably have died from disinterest or been abolished because of its fatal brutality."

Sinful waste—or muscular Christianity?

But as we consider football in a historical context that precedes our media-driven understanding of the game today, it is worthwhile to look back at just how serious the movement was in late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America against it. The deep moral concerns many considered at stake were articulated with particular intensity at Baker University, the oldest college in Kansas, whose early Eighteen Nineties team had been so dominant it was referred to by the press as the "Champion football team of the great West." But even though Baker had "met and conquered the best football talent west of the Mississippi," football at the school was abolished after the 1893 season, according to a detailed account by historian Hal Sears. That occurred after the Kansas Methodist Conference, the governing body that had established the college, declared it was "more fully convinced than ever that intercollegiate games are dangerous physically, useless intellectually, and detrimental morally and spiritually."

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For many spiritual leaders of frontier religions like the Methodists and Baptists, football was "inextricably linked to alcohol, sabbath-breaking, gambling, de-civilizing public violence, and the sinful waste of youthful blood and time," Sears found. Yet another theological strain saw in football the potential for a "muscular Christianity," one which could cultivate "a Christ-like strenuousity and manliness . . . to reinvigorate and redeem . . . a too-decorous American Protestantism with its stress on the 'effeminate' qualities of softness and submission." As it happened, Baker had a youthful president who belonged to the latter camp. In 1890, Greek scholar William Alfred Quayle had become the youngest college president in the nation when he was appointed at the age of thirty. He would later write that he would have "every candidate for the ministry play football," for it would teach them to "heed not the opposing line, . . . but break it." His tenure at Baker was marked by both remarkable success on the football field and rising condemnation from the majority of church leaders associated with the school.

Seeking how to best handle the controversy, he wrote in the spring of 1893 to presidents at other Methodist colleges to ask them "the view you entertain concerning inter-collegiate games and the practice in your University." He got a wide range of responses, with most seeming to seek a way to balance between the excesses and benefits such games brought to their schools. "There should be no more of them than is necessary to keep up a reasonable interest in athletics," replied Northwestern's president. The president of Allegheny College said he found all sports morally problematic, "a kind of necessary evil with possible good which I am not clear about." The president of Cornell College in Iowa reported he had to "say that we are embarrassed . . . in respect to intercollegiate games; but are compelled to yield somewhat to public sentiment." He said the "hot competition in these games stimulates certain unfortunate practices," including "the admission of professionals into college as nominal students at the expense of the team, tendencies to betting, the limitation of the benefits of the game to a very few persons, and with these the interest is too intense to be compatible with educational advantages."

The views of most of Baker's church leaders were consistent with that of the *New York Christian Advocate,* considered the leading Methodist journal of the time, which found college students were as consumed with football as had been pagan crowds of the Middle Ages in the tournaments, or those of Rome in the gladiatorial shows." Sears characterized the *Advocate*'s editorializing as aimed at what it saw to be "a society, out of control, in

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the grasp of sport." It called forcefully for banning football. In 1894, Baker did stop playing the game, against Quayle's wishes but in line with what Methodist conferences around the country were recommending.

A president steps in, on the brink of abolition

Such efforts were far more than just regional concerns. As scholarship by historians such as Ronald Smith has documented definitively, "numerous colleges considered abolishing the game both for its commercialization and professionalism as well as its brutality and questionable ethics. Columbia and another score of colleges even banished the game." Harvard, one of the most dominant football powers of the day, "came to the brink of banning it. Furthermore, the first intercollegiate meeting of college authorities to consider abolition came within two votes" of a broader collegiate ban. It's hard to imagine a movement to ban football today seriously gaining traction. But at that time, just a few years into the twentieth century, the game was still relatively small enough a presence in American society that it might well have been possible. A group of influential college presidents clearly *believed* it was possible—and advisable. And in those early debates over whether the game should be ended, we see the deep conflict between its commercial appeal and its inherently antisocial qualities.

At Columbia, the administration began to realize by the 1890s that it had serious problems with its football team even beyond the brutality of the game, in Smith's account. Investigations found that boosters were paying players for their services and covering it up by falsifying financial records and lying to the faculty committee that oversaw athletics. One member of the school's board of trustees declared it was "the most disgraceful scandal ever known in college athletics." Stricter rules were put in place in an effort to better control the football program, which was run largely by students. But a few years later the situation had so worsened that the law-school dean who chaired the faculty athletic committee informed Columbia's president he believed the "evils" of the school's program to be "incurable." He urged that all schools playing football reach common agreement on stronger rules and stricter enforcement, even though many such efforts had already failed.

Things grew worse as the 1905 season unfolded. In a game against Wesleyan College, a Columbia player was severely injured in such blatantly deliberate fashion that players, coaches, and fans poured onto

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the field, sparking a melee that required police to restore order. The latest chair of the university's athletic committee, a devoted sportsman, began warning players and coaches that games would be stopped if fighting was not curbed. But by the end of the season, he concluded the rules of football then in effect encouraged "vicious antagonisms" and could only be changed if the "pig-headed . . . obstinate" rules committee of Camp's were replaced. Columbia's president asked Harvard president and outspoken football critic Charles Eliot to help lead such an effort, but he declined on the reasoning that "Mr. Camp has the matter completely in his hands" and "seems to be as powerful today as he ever was." Eliot declared Camp "directly responsible for the degradation and ruin of the game" and "deficient in moral sensibility—a trouble not likely to be cured at his age," Smith chronicled.

Still, in December, thirteen colleges met in New York City and fell two votes short of resolving "that the game of football, as played under existing rules shall be abolished." A majority did commit to work toward reform and invited all the nation's colleges to meet at another conference later that month. It began a series of annual meetings that eventually would produce the formation of the National Collegiate Athletic Association. Thus, the NCAA's very existence is testament to the enduring conflict between football's popularity and the desire of many sponsors to civilize the beast. That effort was joined by President Theodore Roosevelt, who as Oriard put it, "before, during, and after his presidency, . . . preached the virtues of all sports, but particularly football." He called Ivy League presidents to the White House and urged rule changes to calm calls for abolition of the game.

Despite the "moral suasion of the President," Smith wrote, "the nature of the football rules was such that questionable practices and serious injuries would continue in the American game in which the desired result of the contest, victory, dominated the concern for playing the game." So deeply engrained were "foul play and brutality" that even at Harvard, athletes reported they had long been taught the "tricks of the trade" for deceiving officials. After the 1905 season, Columbia decided to shut down its football program, and Harvard came close to following suit. But in 1906, pressure by Roosevelt and shrewd leadership particularly by Harvard coach Bill Reid overcame Camp's opposition and put the beginnings of rules changes in place that would save the game from the "brink of disaster," Smith concluded. If circumstances had not been such that a popular American president weighed into the fray, it could

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have well "left football to an uncertain future," declared journalist John J. Miller in his assessment of the crisis.

Even so, neither uncertainty nor football fatalities ended with the 1905 reforms, historian John Watterson has documented. In 1909, Army cancelled the rest of its games after one of its players died from injuries suffered in a game against Harvard. Two other players from smaller schools in Pennsylvania and Oklahoma died after being injured in games the same day. The same season, Navy's quarterback was paralyzed from the neck down by a fierce tackle. Then a halfback for Virginia died of head injuries from a game against Georgetown, and both schools cancelled the remainder of their seasons. The public school systems in Washington, D.C., and New York City decided to ban football. Stagg wrote Camp that something must be done because "the season has been a mighty bad one." Once again, college presidents weighed in. David Starr Jordan of Stanford declared the problems created by football "the heaviest burden yet borne by higher education in America." Chancellor James Day of Syracuse said colleges could not "afford to have their men killed and maimed in a game that serves only an exceedingly small proportion of college men."

But the truth was, despite all the brutality and scandals, many of the presidents "welcomed the growth of football as a healthy substitute for the mayhem practiced by earlier generations of undergraduates," as Watterson observed. Students loved football and their teams, and the game heightened devotion from alumni who assisted the schools in important ways. Yale, which would run up a record of 345 victories and only twenty-one losses over the course of thirty seasons, had an extremely profitable football program run by Camp. He had served on the search committee that chose the university's president, Arthur Hadley, who said in 1909, colleges should avoid "indiscriminate condemnation" of the game, lest they "forego the good derived from football." Woodrow Wilson, the Princeton president, future U.S. President, and onetime football cheerleader and assistant coach, declared: "Football is too fine a game to abolish offhand."

Gorillas and tradeoffs

Once again, reforms were pushed through by 1910, this time liberalizing ways in which the forward pass could be employed and eliminating some

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of the more brutal techniques used by linemen. Further changes would be instituted in 1912, producing a game much more like what is played today and one "palpably more wholesome and acceptable to the public," in Watterson's assessment.

William Alfred Quayle left Baker College the same year it stopped playing football to pastor a church in Kansas City and later became a Methodist Episcopal bishop. When he returned to Baker in 1909, it was in part to commend the school's decision to reinstate football after a fifteen-year hiatus. With time, Sears found, the president who succeeded Quayle had persuaded the trustees, telling them the abolition of football had "killed all college spirit and only the most heroic effort kept our enrollment up," promising that bringing back football would both improve student morale and boost enrollment." Today, 157-year-old Baker has a student body of more than four thousand and thirteen conference football championships since 1979.

Time and again, colleges and universities have ultimately embraced the compromise that football represented between their traditional missions and values and the many undermining forces the game brought to campus. Clearly those forces—including the violence and other antisocial behaviors, the mockery of academic standards, the corruption of money, etc.—have been there from the start. But so has the game's irresistible appeal to audiences that enables colleges to attract students, alumni support, political influence, financial support, etc. The history of higher education is replete with examples of university leaders tapping into the force field of football in order to build their institutions.

At Michigan State University, for example, beginning in the 1940s, President John Hannah put into place a plan specifically utilizing the development of football and other intercollegiate sports to overhaul the onetime Michigan Agricultural College's longtime reputation as a "cow college," historical research by Beth Shapiro has detailed. To that end, Hannah reputedly vowed, "If it meant the betterment of Michigan State, our football team would play any eleven gorillas from Barnum and Bailey any Saturday." He told one of his coaches that all they needed was two victories over the more established University of Michigan, and State would "become a great educational institution." Hannah's strategy brought politicians and corporate chairmen to games where he established relationships that led to record fundraising, and it also opened doors for him to speak to enthusiastic crowds across Michigan, dramatically raising the university's national media profile. It was not

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without tradeoffs, including sanctions for football recruiting scandals, leading football coach Duffy Daugherty to observe that the priority must be filling the stadium by winning—without getting caught cheating.

As we will see in more detail, the Merriwell strategy has been a useful one as commercial football strives to manage the tradeoffs that are as much a part of football as the ball itself. In the next chapter, we will move on to another Midwestern state university that utilized the same model as Hannah with even more football success. We will see how a young coach deeply immersed in the Merriwell model rolled out one of the most phenomenally triumphal string of seasons in the game's history. Hardened by a Depression-era childhood and World War II combat, but polished by training in music and literature, Bud Wilkinson and the idealistic narrative he constructed on the Oklahoma plains drew upon media and winning football and all the Merriwellean promise imaginable. And then, as America changed and Coach Wilkinson didn't, the story led him to a dramatic encounter with the dark side of the game.

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Time Runs Out on the Wholesome Warrior

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"Bud moralized a lot," one of his close aides recalled. That reflection on Charles Burnham "Bud" Wilkinson gets at what makes him a central character for this study. Midway through the twentieth century, Wilkinson emerged on the windy plains of Oklahoma as one of the most prominent figures of the college-football landscape. Tall, educated, and well spoken, his players would come to refer to him as "the Great White Father," partly for the wavy blond hair that turned white relatively early in his life, but more for the patriarchal shadow he cast over so much of the world as they knew it.

And Bud also *mediated* a lot. For well beyond his team's games, influential narratives produced and shaped by Wilkinson reached larger audiences with the potential to create "systems of meaning and standards of reality shared by writer and audience," as media historian James Carey has characterized such message making. Wilkinson contributed narratively to his times in ways both tangible and intangible. One of the former that stands as a formal effort to utilize mass media is his *Football Letter*. Wilkinson's renown came as one the game's winningest coaches ever—his teams from the Fifties still hold the record for most consecutive victories by a major college football team—but his institutional newsletter offers narrative-making insights beyond football.

"If you read through the [news]letters, there is always in the background, between the lines, sometimes right out front, where he would preach one of the beliefs he had," said Mike Treps, a former sports information director at the University of Oklahoma who worked with Wilkinson. "He would sermonize a lot. Maybe just a line or two, but there was always something that could be used as a 'sermon' topic, if indeed you wanted to call it that."

Over the seventeen years Wilkinson was head coach at Oklahoma, his newsletters consistently articulated an idealistic vision of college football as a metaphorical realm where wholesome warriors strive for collective progress. Especially in his early years that emphasis on self-sacrifice in the name of team progress dovetailed with the formative wartime experience of both Wilkinson and his newsletter audience, most of whom had just returned from World War II service at the time Wilkinson began his coaching career at Oklahoma. And his early athletes at Oklahoma, most of them World War II veterans, validated his metaphorical vision. However, in the second half of Wilkinson's career, that vision began to be challenged by a younger generation of athletes raised on affluence, television, and individualism instead of wartime sacrifice and collective effort.

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Football versus *The Grapes of Wrath*

Wilkinson grew up in an upper middle-class family in Minneapolis, where he was born in 1916. His mother died when he was seven, from injuries suffered in a train accident, and his father sent his son to military school at the age of 13. The young man grew tall and athletic, starring on three national-championship football teams at the University of Minnesota before serving in the Navy in World War II and then working as an assistant coach at Syracuse University, where he completed a master's degree in English. Wilkinson's father planned on him returning to Minneapolis to join the family mortgage business, but instead he agreed in 1946 to work temporarily for Jim Tatum, who had just been hired as head coach at Oklahoma.

Tatum's hiring was central to a strategy developed by the University's board of regents that year in response to their blaming of novelist John Steinbeck for lack of progress in the state. In the 1940s, "Oklahomans had a mass inferiority complex and pictured themselves as creatures out of *The Grapes of Wrath*," wrote George Lynn Cross, University of Oklahoma president from 1943 to 1968. Considerable commentary in the state during that period and since has characterized Steinbeck's Pulitzer Prize winning 1939 novel as ridiculing Oklahomans as failures and sending the populace into a chronic condition of low self-esteem. Lyle Boren, then representing the state in Congress, condemned the book on the House floor as "a damnable lie, a black, infernal creation."

Other analysis of the novel generally considered it not to have ridiculed its Oklahoma characters but rather to have portrayed them as courageous and even heroic figures displaced by dehumanizing market forces of the Great Depression. Nevertheless, the "inferiority complex" it engendered among Oklahomans long has been established as an article of faith in regional mythology. Countless media accounts and pronouncements by prominent figures in business and politics also have publicly framed the assertion as an established matter of fact. As recently as 2008, the Oklahoma Heritage Association published a volume titled *John Steinbeck Was Wrong About Oklahoma!*

Thus, when invoked at a university board of regents meeting in 1945 in the name of better football, the anti-*Grapes* narrative instantly resonated with the other board members. "One regent suggested that many Oklahomans seemed to feel apologetic about the state, an attitude perhaps engendered by the continuing impact of John Steinbeck's *The*

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Grapes of Wrath," Cross wrote. That led to an endorsement of oilman and influential regent Lloyd Noble's proposal for a concerted effort to acquire World War II veterans with college football talent and eligibility "to produce some outstanding football teams in which the citizens of the state could take pride."

That meant hiring a coach with established connections for recruiting such individuals, and Tatum came to the regents' attention for his coaching work with U.S. Navy teams during the war. When Oklahoma called, the rough-hewn Tatum persuaded a younger, better-spoken Navy friend to accompany him to the job interview. Bud Wilkinson proved to be so impressive that the regents made Tatum's hiring as head coach conditional on him hiring Wilkinson as an assistant. Tatum had not actually planned on doing that and in fact tried to refuse, but was informed he had no choice. And Cross and the regents were actually pleased when just a year later Tatum took another job at the University of Maryland, making it possible for them to elevate Wilkinson to head coach.

Amending what the newspapers missed

As the Wilkinson era unfolded over the following two decades, a powerful narrative was advanced by his image as the face of Sooner football and the hero who saved the state from Steinbeck. "Wilkinson did more for Oklahoma by way of favorable publicity than any other individual other than Will Rogers," Cross said. It was an era in which the Oklahoma football program achieved what by some measures can be considered "the most successful stretch of seasons college football has yet seen," one in which the sport "was overtly converted from one of many campus activities…to the state institution," wrote Berry Tramel, now the dean of state sportswriters. Over the one-hundred-game span that marked Wilkinson's best years, between 1948 and 1957, Oklahoma won all but six of those games, producing three national championships.

Early in 1950, Cross delivered a thirty-minute presentation to joint appropriation committees of the state legislature detailing the university's request for a budget increase. After he concluded, a senator raised his hand and said, "I'd like to ask the good doctor why he thinks he needs so much money to run the University of Oklahoma." Exasperated at having his detailed presentation dismissed, Cross retorted "I would like to build a university of which the football team could be proud."

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It amused the legislators and some even applauded—but they still did not increase the funding. The quote, however, lived on, most often out of context, reported more widely in newspapers, magazines and other media than anything else Cross ever said in twenty-four years as the longest serving president in the university's history. The next year, his place in Oklahomans' esteem relative to the football program was made clear at a booster-club meeting in Muskogee, where Wilkinson was given the keys to a new Cadillac sedan. Then the boosters gave Cross a cigarette lighter, he later wrote, as testimonial to how "higher education was appreciated in Muskogee."

As public attention on his football program escalated, Wilkinson proved adept at media relations. Darrell Royal, an Oklahoma player from 1946 through 1949 who would later have coaching success at the University of Texas that rivaled Wilkinson's, and cited Wilkinson's media methods as the model for his own. His coach was not only remarkably skilled at winning football games, Royal said, he was also "someone who was good with the press. I read every word that he said to the press, and I listened to the radio interviews, and I traveled with him to some banquets. I had an excellent teacher."

On the sidelines, Wilkinson typically wore a gray suit, red tie, and fedora, in an era when for most, "the better part of a coach's wardrobe was a gray sweatshirt and white socks," as one sports writer put it. Reporters were fascinated with the way Wilkinson's demeanor contradicted traditional coaching imagery: "The Oklahoma Sooners . . . are the only team in football with a head coach who looks more like a poet than a punter," *Los Angeles Times* sports columnist Jim Murray wrote. "Bud Wilkinson looks like he got lost on the way to a Browning lecture." Wilkinson not only actually did write poetry for his wife, he read Shakespeare "just for the fun of it," and played the organ to relax. He also won loyalty from reporters by helping them give their audiences the impression they understood the game better than they actually did. Volney Meece, a sportswriter for *The Oklahoman*, learned to get to the coach's home immediately "after the games, before all the boosters would get there," when Wilkinson would be "in the kitchen mixing drinks and telling us what really happened in the game, so we could write a story and look like the experts we weren't."

Despite that sort of influence on media accounts, Wilkinson still was not willing to leave representations of his football program entirely to the press. In 1947, he became the first coach at Oklahoma to publish a weekly newsletter of his own, introducing it with a promise "to describe

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each game Oklahoma plays fully and frankly, trying to give you an insight the newspapers may have missed." He was apparently highly sensitive about what the newspapers missed. Meece recalled publishing one story in which he quoted Wilkinson as using the phrase "gonna" instead of "going to" and being told shortly thereafter by an assistant that "Bud would appreciate it if I didn't quote him as using such contractions because it was bad for his image."

Cold fury and level-headed sportsmanship

From 1947 through 1964, Wilkinson published an issue of the *Football Letter* the week after almost every game, often producing the first draft himself, but always at least dictating an outline for it and then participating in the editing, Treps said. The *Football Letter* was mailed to members of the university's alumni association and various other parties each week during the football season. "There was no television show when he started, no radio network as we know it now," Treps said. "So the newsletter was one of the few ways he had to reach anybody and everybody connected with OU football around the country."

In the *Football Letter*, Wilkinson regularly made use of the language and imagery of combat to characterize the kind of effort he prized from his players. He would describe a key moment in a game as "the battle's turning point," and express his pride in "the cold, determined fury with which our team kept attacking" and "our blockers doing their duty savagely . . . in a fighting mood." A few decades before, college football had almost been banned for its brutality and other abuses. However, Wilkinson cast his warriors as wholesome emissaries. "It has been a pleasure to coach such a clean, level-headed group of boys. . . . I have never seen a team that played the game with so much furious enjoyment," he said after the 1949 season. A few years later, he observed: "If the fans would pattern their sportsmanship after that of the players themselves, the game would come much nearer to fulfilling the purpose for which it was created, a clean robust autumnal sport for college men." Wilkinson applauded both friend and foe who contributed to "the sportsmanship under which college football should and usually is played." And when his own supporters failed to hold true to that standard, he reprimanded them, noting, "The purpose of every competition is to test yourself, not embarrass your opponent."

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In the *Football Letter*, both fighting spirit and sportsmanship were essential components of a greater whole. Wilkinson constructed representations of a collective ideal in which everyone involved contributed significantly toward the common goal of "a triumph for our whole squad, every man of which unstintingly poured out every pound of his strength and courage to achieve it." His collective vision extended to his opponents. The more lopsided his team's victories, the greater lengths to which he went to praise the opponent's effort. After one 58–0 victory, he wrote: "Coach Ralph Graham's Wildcats . . . pluckily carried it to us." After a 65–0 victory: "I don't believe we are as good as the score indicates nor that Kansas is that poor a team." After a 40–0 victory: "The Cyclones had so much continuity of attack that they originated three more scrimmage plays than we did, 73 to 70." An opponent might lose 30–7, but Wilkinson would commend the way its groundskeepers "had skillfully protected the turf with their field cover."

Beyond the *Football Letter's* narrative

Beyond the consistent narrative that Wilkinson maintained through his *Football Letter*, there were of course many subjects that always remained outside that frame. Among what can be seen as competing narratives to all that were events involving the University of Oklahoma twice being placed on probation by the NCAA during his time as coach. In 1955, a two-year probation was imposed for athletes receiving excessive financial assistance, and in 1960, an indefinite probation that ultimately lasted one year was imposed regarding questions about a fund used to recruit athletes. Wilkinson was not implicated personally in the violations, at the time or since. If he was involved in any illegal activity, it has not been documented. The violations largely derived from alumni boosterism and university confrontations with the NCAA on rule interpretations.

Onetime newspaper sports writer Jim Dent has in recent years authored a number of well received books on football history, including Wilkinson contemporaries "Bear" Bryant and Ara Parseghian. In Dent's 2001 account of the Wilkinson era, he portrays the football program being elevated to new levels when Tatum arrived and oilmen and other wealthy Oklahomans keeping him supplied with all the cash needed to attract the best football players coming from military teams after the war—many more than would ever make the team in an effort to draw

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as many as possible away from other college football programs. Dent reported having interviewed a great many players from the period to produce his book.

Dent portrayed Wilkinson privately as a hard drinker in a state that did not repeal Prohibition until 1959, meaning even respectable social drinkers in Oklahoma had to do business with bootleggers, including Wilkinson, Cross, and "practically every upstanding doctor and lawyer in Oklahoma City and Norman with a taste for drink." Major boosters hosted parties off-campus that would have been frowned upon at the university president's mansion. Dent said wealthy supporters of the team coordinating fundraising for it and kept university administrators in the dark—and that what he described happening at Oklahoma was common at universities with top football programs in the era.

A tidal wave of change

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, more college football teams reached parity with Oklahoma, particularly within its conference—Wilkinson's teams did not lose a single conference game during his first twelve seasons, but then lost nine in the next three. Cross attributed that partly to pressure from the NCAA on Oklahoma during the two probations making recruitment of top athletes more difficult. But in the memory of one of the best linemen from that period, it also represented the beginnings of another trend, perhaps more portentous for Wilkinson. "We had a simple existence. . . . If Bud said something, we believed him; we did it. We didn't question him," Byron Searcy told Gary King for a 1988 account of the era. "I saw in '57 an entirely different bunch of guys and it began a whole different era for Bud in dealing with the boys. There were guys on that team who questioned; they didn't see the importance of discipline." Searcy characterized it as a watershed of the Wilkinson era, with the earlier teams rooted in very different times: "I just can't imagine there being a situation like that again because kids today are too independent. They're going to do their own thing."

Before serving as an officer on the aircraft carrier *USS Enterprise* and participating in a series of grueling Pacific island battles in World War II, including Iwo Jima and Okinawa, Wilkinson was assigned to the U.S. Navy's V-5 Preflight Program. There the Navy developed a training model that featured a strong athletics component designed to prepare

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young pilot trainees for the intense physical demands of flying military aircraft. Research by academic and onetime coach Donald Rominger has documented how military leaders worked with coaches and athletic administrators to structure the V-5 program. "In short, men were to be trained for war through sport," he wrote, with "football a fundamental ingredient in the V-5 syllabus." That syllabus included the fielding of military football teams to play against college teams. Rominger characterized the Preflight Program as utilizing sport's "mystique of controlled conflict," as well as Wilkinson later employing "paramilitary style V-5 tactics" to train his Oklahoma teams. While assigned there, Wilkinson worked with several coaches who would be highly successful in college football after the war, including Tatum and Bryant.

Most of Wilkinson's early players were fellow WWII veterans. "We'd all been to war, and we knew we had to obey the man at the top," said guard Stan West. One of Wilkinson's first star athletes was lineman Dee Andros, who had landed in the second wave of Marines at Iwo Jima and had won a Bronze Star for helping attack Japanese gun emplacements there. In Wilkinson's first season as head coach, his roster featured at least twenty-eight veterans of the war and three Purple Heart recipients. In addition to Wilkinson, his four full-time assistant coaches and two part-time assistant coaches were all WWII veterans. Six of that first group of players with wartime service would make All-American at Oklahoma.

In stark contrast, one of Wilkinson's last All-Americans was Joe Don Looney, an unruly hedonist who spent his days on the Oklahoma team capriciously defying the head coach. When Looney was dismissed from the team in 1963, the *Oklahoman* made it the lead story on its front page. Though Looney played only a little more than one season at Oklahoma, and only sporadically in professional football later, his anti-hero antics contributed to a popular following that continued even after his death in 1988 in a motorcycle accident. Late in his own life, Wilkinson expressed frustration over the attention paid Looney: "After my years at Oklahoma, people would always ask me about Looney," he told writer J. Brent Clark. "People like Billy Vessels and Eddie Crowder [players of the early 1950s who both achieved more athletically and behaved better than Looney] would be ignored completely. I just don't want to talk about Looney."

Looney's arrival on the scene foreshadowed what Oriard called "the abandonment of the Frank Merriwell model of gee-whiz modesty for the pervasive finger-pointing, fist-pumping, elaborately choreographed antics" that soon would come to dominate the game, transforming

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"football for an age obsessed with self-presentation and self-fulfillment." In Clark's assessment, "Joe Don heralded a coming tidal wave of irreverent, outspoken athlete-individuals." And Wilkinson's disapproval of Looney's behavior cannot be overstated. For Wilkinson, Treps said, "Joe Don was the antichrist."

In an earlier time, Merriwell was the "dominant image of the college football hero," as Oriard wrote, and "one of the most widely known heroes in all American fiction." The anti-hero era of Joe Don Looney at Oklahoma began in the summer of 1962 when the enormity of his talent persuaded Wilkinson to accept a junior-college transfer for the first time. The young running back already had a troubled reputation, Oklahoma being his fourth college in three years. He was an obsessive streetfighter who kept an elaborate gun collection in his dorm room at OU, a self-absorbed individualist who would become an All-American on the field but whose off-the-field violence bordered on the sociopathic. Among other incidents, Looney once broke into the apartment of a young couple and beat them up because they voted for Lyndon Johnson for president instead of Barry Goldwater, earning him a year's probation for assault.

But at a time when the rise of anti-establishment figures such as Elvis Presley and Marlon Brando increasingly was reflected in the popular culture of television, music and film, Looney provided a prototype for behavior soon to become more common in sport as well. Amid Cold War tensions, Americans in the 1950s had experienced unprecedented affluence, in marked contrast to the consumer deprivations of the Great Depression in the 1930s and the war years of the first half of the 1940s when Wilkinson and many of his early players were coming of age. For David Halberstam in his history of the Fifties, the period "represented a prosperity beyond [Americans'] wildest dreams." That prosperity allowed Americans to purchase an "endless bounty of goods…with an apparently limitless supply of consumer credit." Americans bought record numbers of homes, automobiles, and televisions—especially televisions. There were only 7,000 television sets in use in the U.S. in 1946, but more than 50 million by 1960. Movies reflected increasingly popular themes of individualistic antiheroism: Brando as leader of a rampaging motorcycle gang in 1954's *The Wild One*; James Dean as a troubled, middle-class teenager in 1955's *Rebel Without a Cause*; and juvenile delinquency and rock-and-roll coalescing in *Blackboard Jungle* the same year.

"Looney was just a complete rebel. He had so much talent, and yet if you told him to do something, he would do it and then not understand

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why he had to do it again. Part of Bud's philosophy was to do something over and over until you no longer had to think about it," Treps said. Looney's early 1960s' popularity hinted at the coming cultural and commercial appeal of the anti-establishment athlete. Since at least early in the twentieth century, athletes had been marketed through consumer media as celebrities and their popularity utilized to promote products. Such images long reflected the Merriwell model, but as societal interests shifted and the youth culture rose in influence, imagery associating celebrity athletes with rebellion would become more marketable. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, this trend would reach critical mass, as we will see in the next chapter.

One full season together

Wilkinson and Looney survived one full season together. The coach recorded his best record in four years, and the phenomenally talented halfback made national headlines in his first game. Several accounts have reported that with Oklahoma trailing Syracuse 3–0 and less than three minutes to play in the game, Looney suddenly approached Wilkinson and promised to win the game if the coach sent him in to play. Looney did enter the game at that point and delivered a sixty-yard, game-winning touchdown run. In the subsequent issue of the *Football Letter*, Looney's run was described with arguably the single most effusive account of an individual performance that Wilkinson ever published. He spoke of Looney being "apparently stopped" but then "fired by that most priceless of all football qualities—determination. He somehow fought out of their clutches,... refusing to go down.... Racing down our east sideline he turned on all his speed.... It was as fine an exhibition of power ball-carrying as I have seen in many years."

But that glowing passage would the last one of its kind in the *Football Letter*. References to Looney in subsequent issues of returned to an emphasis on the team context over individual achievement. In a typical example, Wilkinson characterized Looney as just one of many cogs in a collective effort, devoting as many words to each fake and block as to Looney's long runs. Such characterization was more consistent with Wilkinson's long-held philosophy. "Individual achievements are not a tribute to any one player—but rather the result of fine team play. The man who makes the yards or scores the points doesn't really do any more—and

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sometimes does less than the 10 men who clear the way," he had written a decade earlier. And during the 1962 season, he reaffirmed the value he still placed on collective effort: "Dedicated men working together for a common objective is the key to success in football as in everything else."

Despite devoting extensive coverage to Looney's football heroics, in an era when sportswriters rarely reported on athletes' off-the-field activities, Oklahoma newspapers offered scarcely a glimpse of the unconventional aspects of Looney's personality and behavior during his time at Oklahoma. Those details did not begin to emerge until after his dismissal, during his itinerant professional career, and even later, as sportswriters actively began to explore athletes' personal lives. The definitive reporting on Looney appeared in the 1993 J. Brent Clark biography. However, by the end of the 1962 season, Wilkinson already was considering dismissing Looney. In the second game of the 1963 season, Looney had his last moment in the spotlight as a member of the Oklahoma team. The *Oklahoman* reported, "Jolting Joe Looney frequently ran wild" and devoted an eight-photo spread to a long touchdown run of his as Oklahoma upset the defending national champion University of Southern California team on national television.

Oklahoma was voted the nation's No. 1 team in the Associated Press poll for the following week, but then traveled to Dallas and lost by twenty-one points to Texas, its biggest rival and an underdog that day. The *Oklahoman*'s coverage described Wilkinson "in a state bordering on shock." And two days later, the lead story on its front page reported that Looney had been "dropped from the Sooner squad Monday by coach Bud Wilkinson for 'disciplinary reasons.'" Although Wilkinson refused to elaborate, the newspaper said a source told it, "Looney was a persistent source of dissension on the Sooner team because of continued 'dogging' in practice and a 'haughty' attitude."

In another front-page story the following day Looney defended himself: "I think I got a bad deal.... I admit I loaf some of the time, but not always.... Maybe I didn't break my neck on the practice field, but I wasn't alone." Wilkinson declared, "Team morale had just ceased to exist.... We protected this guy for more than a year and we can't continue to protect one boy at the expense of 55 others.... We had been living with this problem for more than a year and finally could take it no more." Wilkinson made no mention of the dismissal in the *Football Letter.*

Oklahoma lost only one more game that season and finished the season ranked in the top ten teams nationally in wire-service polls. Throughout

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what would be his final year of producing the *Football Letter*, Wilkinson remained true to the major themes that had always characterized it. He never mentioned what must have been prominent in his thoughts, and what was certainly a frequent subject of media speculation that year—his interest in running for political office. In early 1964, Wilkinson resigned from Oklahoma and announced a bid for the U.S. Senate. Running as a Republican in a then heavily Democratic state, Wilkinson lost narrowly to State Senator Fred Harris. Only forty-seven at that time and the most successful college coach in the game, Wilkinson did not coach again until 1978, when he recorded a losing record in two years as coach of the professional St. Louis Cardinals. In the time between leaving Oklahoma and his death in 1994, Wilkinson also worked as a prominent television announcer on national college football broadcasts for ABC and other networks, and in other business and appointed governmental positions.

The price of idealism

Throughout the Wilkinson era at Oklahoma, his *Football Letter* maintained its unwavering emphasis on the same basic set of ideals: collective effort, "fighting spirit," and sportsmanship. This suggests it can be read as a defense of those ideals, and perhaps even as an effort at cultural reconstruction in the face of changing times. In postmodernist terms, what happened to Wilkinson can be characterized as the failure of his idealistic, Merriwellian metanarrative. Wilkinson could dismiss Joe Don Looney from the team, but he could not dismiss the future. It seems unlikely that Wilkinson would have failed to sense on some level the approaching "abandonment of the Frank Merriwell model." And as we will see particularly in Chapter 6, the fallibility of modernist metanarratives is at the heart of the slippery theoretical assertions of postmodernism.

As the author of the *Football Letter,* Wilkinson either believed devoutly in the ideals of collective effort, "fighting spirit," and sportsmanship that he publicly maintained as sacred, or at the least believed it was important to emphasize them in his representations of the game that made him an icon of the early postwar era. As that era gave way to a very different one, Wilkinson sought unsuccessfully to capitalize upon his ideology politically and never again approached the football success he had at Oklahoma.

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Despite his early-season dismissal from the Oklahoma football team, Looney was named an All American for 1963 and was selected in the first round of the NFL draft by the New York Giants. The *Oklahoman* published an Associated Press article on the selection: "Asked if the Giants had considered Looney's attitude, the fact that he had attended four colleges [and] been dismissed from the Oklahoma team," a team executive responded, "We have considered those shoulders, those legs and those 224 pounds. Otherwise we have to take people as we find them."

And how those words have echoed down through the decades since then. More and more, the football world at large has chosen also, in effect, to take talented football players as it finds them and excuse anti-social behavior. Indeed, as we will see in the next chapter, that represents the societal dynamic at the heart of the cultural evolution that soon after the Looney years at Oklahoma would enable the Billy Clyde Puckett model to flourish in the spotlights of football's center stage.

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4
Center Stage for Billy Clyde

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Almost exactly a decade after Joe Don Looney arrived on campus at Oklahoma to trash Bud Wilkinson's revered metanarrative of wholesome warriors striving for collective progressive, another running back even more rudely repudiated Frank Merriwell's literary archetype of football chivalry. With his first words of introduction, he made clear the model he represented would consider any idealistic Wilkinsonian selflessness or Merriwellian modesty completely alien.

"I guess by now there can't be too many people anywhere who haven't heard about Billy Clyde Puckett, the humminest sumbitch that ever carried a football," he said in the very first sentence of Dan Jenkins' 1972 novel *Semi-Tough*. "Maybe you could find some Communist chinks someplace who don't know about me, but surely everybody in America does if they happen to keep up with pro football, which is what I think everybody in America does."

Billy Clyde proceeds from there to introduce some of his teammates. Shake Tiller—"Pimp. Sex maniac. Dope fiend." Also star receiver, pop sage, and Billy Clyde's best friend. Hose Manning—popular with truck-stop waitresses and by Billy Clyde's measure the best quarterback in pro football. Puddin Patterson—so ruthless an offensive lineman that if asked by a teammate to kill somebody, would say only, "Where you want this cat's body shipped?" Nobakov Korelovich—an All-Pro at center "if he hadn't beaten up a sportswriter from Chicago." T.J. Lambert—unstoppable defensive end, known to feed live cats to a mad dog kept chained in his room, defecate in the closet for convenience, and break wind so often and creatively that the graphic details of his emissions fill significant portions of the novel.

Joe Don Looney may have been kicked off the team by the Great White Father, but he would have been welcomed by Billy Clyde and his teammates. The behavior Wilkinson rejected was normalized in their world, with any deviancy condoned, if not sanctified, as long as the perpetrator could do his job on the field. Jenkins, one of the best writers in sportswriting history, with newspapers in Texas and then *Sports Illustrated* magazine, said he wrote *Semi-Tough* simply by following the age-old advice to write what one knows. "I had never been to war, had never been to sea, all that business. But I had been in a lot of locker rooms and a lot of press boxes and a lot of barrooms. So I just sat down and started doing it," he told radio personality Don Imus recently. "And I got a lot of help from a lot of the football players and coaches I had known and hung around with."

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The players in his novel have no interest in Merriwellian standards as they party their way to the Super Bowl championship with a week of routine debauchery detailed in the first person by Billy Clyde. *Semi-Tough* became a publishing sensation, and more than four decades later, interviewers like Imus tell Jenkins they remember where they were when they read the first words from it. During that interview, Imus also noted how longtime New York television sports reporter Warner Wolf said the book showed the world more from behind the scenes of professional football than ever before revealed.

In that same early-Seventies era, writer Roy Blount spent six months with professional football players for a nonfiction book and found a world not significantly dissimilar to that of Billy Clyde's. Blount found pro players to be "adults who fly through the air in plastic hats and smash each other for a living." He ended up titling his book *Three Bricks Shy of a Load*, inspired by a conversation in which a defensive lineman told him, "You picked the right team. Oh, a great bunch of guys! And a bunch of crazy fuckers! I'm crazy too! We're all about three bricks shy of a load!" Blount concluded that last sentence "summed up my six months with the Pittsburgh National Football League team better than anything else." Those "crazy" Steelers went on to win three Super Bowls that decade.

Football historian and former NFL player Michael Oriard declared *Semi-Tough* transformational in that it contributed to changes in the way people think about the game and its participants. "Football was not always the most sexually charged of American sports; this part of its myth is a recent trend since the rise of professional football to prominence in the late fifties," he has written. For most of football's history before *Semi-Tough*, he said, the dominant image of a football player was Frank Merriwell, who wooed his long-time sweetheart with "two kisses over a period of several years" before finally marrying her and starting a family. Most influential in refocusing popular imagery of football players on "the sexual 'stud,'" in Oriard's assessment, have been media representations that highlight "the excessively sexed male such as Billy Clyde Puckett of Dan Jenkin's *Semi-Tough*." He called it "the most complete portrait of the stud football player in American fiction. . . . In fact, sex is the foundation of Billy Clyde's ideal world—everyone enjoys it and nobody is hurt." In the pages of the novel, "Billy Clyde's world is a juvenile never-never land, peopled only by perfect individuals" where "Billy Clyde and his teammates live out the male fantasy of abundant and perfect sex."

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In *Semi-Tough,* Billy Clyde and Shake routinely ranked the parade of women who pass through their lives—"Anything below ten was a Running Sore. . . . An Eight was a Young Dose of the Clap, but . . . not bad for an hour. . . . A Five was a Dirty Leg. . . . A Three was a Semi. . . . A Two was a Her. . . . And there just never had been a One. Ever." And they also had the lifelong devotion of the "semi-perfect" Barbara Jane Bookman, Shake's girlfriend when the book began and Billy Clyde's when it ended. Throughout the book, Billy Clyde, Shake, and Barbara Jane, all best friends since high school, endlessly smoke cigarettes and guzzle Scotch, but still always know exactly what to do and say in every situation. Billy Clyde frames anything he and his teammates do as not only acceptable but indeed truly enlightened. He uses the word "nigger" ten times on the first page of the novel alone—and that and various other racial epithets all the way through—explaining that it didn't make him "some kind of racist" because he was using it all for shock value, not because he had derogatory thoughts toward other races "in my heart." And in *Semi-Tough*, none of his many black teammates are offended. As with all behaviors anyone might find offensive, in Billy Clyde's world all such judgments come down strictly to intent—if one's motive in using racial slurs, for example, is not racist, then using them isn't racist. Indeed, no one who *hears* such slurs will be offended—if their hearts are similarly pure, according to Billy Clyde.

That in essence stands as the rather remarkable grand narrative that holds all of *Semi-Tough* together. The bestselling novel found a huge audience for its fictional world in which every sort of vice, indulgence, depravity, and mayhem played out with a cartoonish harmlessness, because somehow it all contributed toward successful football. However audacious an assertion it may have been, as we shall see, it has been rather widely embraced ever since.

Violent, cruel, insane . . . and loved

The period's other most prominent rejection of the Merriwell model cast the game in an even less benign narrative. In the novel *North Dallas Forty*, published the year after *Semi-Tough*, pro football players use massive quantities of alcohol and recreational drugs to deal with the constant pain from injuries and the fear of losing their jobs. Coaches are just part of corporate management, which views players purely in business terms

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as interchangeable parts to be kept around for the best price possible and only as long as their value to the enterprise exceeds their cost. Narrator Phil Elliott, a flanker for a fictional Dallas professional football team, and his teammates lead anxious lives in which the violence they are paid to engage in on the field doesn't end after the game but manifests itself in all sorts of other ways off it. It makes a convincing case that something more like the Billy Clyde model than the Merriwell model is the only rational choice for players, given the brutality of the game they play and the way it inverts so many social values—in the name of the game.

"We're not the team, man, they are.... All those front office cocksuckers, they're the team," as Elliott puts it. "We're just the fucking equipment to be listed along with the shoulder pads and headgear and jockstraps. This is first and foremost a business." Written by Peter Gent, a former professional player, *North Dallas Forty* portrayed postgame parties and family life with a jaggedly sharper edge than had *Semi-Tough*: "Players bottle up a lot of fear and frustration trying to maintain a tone during a week's practice and a Sunday afternoon. It all comes spilling out after the game. Compound that with amphetamines taken to maintain a pitch before and during the game.... Mix liquor and adrenaline with the aforementioned ingredients."

After games, Elliott and other players gather at team parties in that altered state of mind, where assaults on each other, unsuspecting women, and forgiving team hangers-on are routinely part of amusements. It represented only one of many sources of domestic conflict for the players. "There were more punches thrown between player and wife than there ever were between player and player," Elliott says. "The amount of bodily harm these marriage partners inflicted on each other was amazing. Physical violence was a daily component of their marital give-and-take."

The players make their livings and win fame by inflicting violence on others and being regularly battered themselves. They never stop paying the price, in Elliot's account. "The first hours of the morning were always the most miserable," he says. "Getting arthritic joints, torn muscles, and traumatized ligaments warm took at least an hour. In addition, large quantities of blood and mucus had to be emptied from my head." Ultimately, Elliott loses even more after the team decides to release him. His demise plays out in a climactic scene at team headquarters near the end of the book, which can be read as a clash between him and his coach over the Merriwell and Billy Clyde models and the price of adhering to the myth of the former while living the reality of the latter.

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"Football is other things besides ability," the coach tells Elliott. "It's dedication and it's discipline. You must give something back to the sport, you can't always be taking."

"I can barely stand up, can't breathe through my nose, haven't slept more than three hours at a stretch in over two years, all from leaving pieces of me scattered on playing fields from here to Cleveland. Isn't that giving something back?" Elliott counters.

"You must live by the rules that have been built up over the years by people who love the game and sacrificed for it. You just can't come in here and disregard those traditions and change what you want."

Elliott finds that laughable. "You people change everything, a game becomes a corporate enterprise for one thing—money. Look at you all,' I pointed around the room, 'pinstripe suits, hundred-dollar shoes, and razor cuts. And now you tell me I've got to be Bronko Nagurski."

It infuriates the coach. "You think there is something wrong with winning and I won't tolerate that.... Winning is *the* most important thing. The sacrifice and responsibility that must be shouldered in order to win are what make men. It's what makes this country the greatest in the world."

Author Gent's own injuries from the game included having three ribs detached at the spine and "permanent damage to several vertebrae... and lingering paralysis on the left side of my body," he said. When he died in 2011, his *New York Times* obituary called the book one of the first "providing unsettling views of pro athletics that went beyond the game details on the sports pages." Near the end of his life, Gent said that despite the physical toll, football held the same power over him that it does millions of other Americans: "It was violent, it was cruel. There was a part of the game that was literally insane. And I loved it."

The nonfiction Billy Clyde

In the era in which those fictional accounts were set, more and more athletes began living out a nonfiction Billy Clyde model more and more publicly, probably none more so than quarterback Joe Willie Namath. He wasn't the first real-life Billy Clyde by any means, but certainly the first to make it so big in commercial football and beyond. Namath did so more openly and unapologetically concerning his off-field life than any player had ever done before. He played high school football in the

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steel country of Pennsylvania, starred at quarterback for "Bear" Bryant at Alabama, then signed a $427,000 contract with the New York Jets that was then the largest ever for a pro football player and soon became known as "Broadway Joe" for his swinging lifestyle. "At the height of his fame, he made—or had made for him—a cult of his bachelorhood," wrote biographer Mark Kriegel. "Broadway Joe was a high priest of lush life, his affections sought by a sugar-frosted society of starlets and stews, all of whom sought to worship at an altar adorned with llama-skin rugs." An apartment carpeted in furry llama was only part of why Namath was considered by so many "the coolest kid in America, an object of affection for girls and gangsters.... He walked off with Jagger's girls. He spilled drinks on Sinatra. He grinned his way through it all."

Part of Namath's fame was constructed through the efforts of Jets owner Sonny Werblin, who had made his fortune packaging hugely popular television shows like *Bonanza* and managing stars like Frank Sinatra and Elizabeth Taylor. Werblin saw in television's growing fascination with football the potential for starmaking with charismatic individuals like Namath. But what made the quarterback's celebrity lasting was that he came through on the field, regardless what he had been doing the night before or how rough things got. "The Raiders broke his face, and he caught a flight to Vegas, came back the next week, and set a single-season passing record," Kriegel wrote. "Namath had a concussion when he hit [receiver Don] Maynard in the AFL championship game. He was still drunk the day he threw three touchdowns against the Patriots in '66." And then in what remains one of the most famous and most important games in football history, he predicted the Jets would defeat the heavily favored Baltimore Colts in the third Super Bowl and then led his team as it did just that. At the time, the Jets played in a professional league not part of the NFL and not considered by the more established league as its equal. The Jets' victory shattered that pretension, and the two leagues soon merged.

While Namath's greatest fame derived from his celebrated indulgence in the party-life side of the Billy Clyde model, others grew famous from their boundless appetite for violence far removed from the wholesome sportsmanship of the Merriwell model. Excessive violence almost got football abolished in the early twentieth century. But in the Sixties and Seventies, Dick Butkus became possibly the most famous linebacker in NFL history and is still celebrated decades later for the savagery with which he played for the Chicago Bears. A recent NFL Films feature on Butkus includes clip after clip of him throwing and slamming other

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players to the ground, as commentators like sportswriter Rick Telander observe, "He wanted to twist them as if he could snap that person in half and take it over to the sidelines and drop in a garbage can." Recalls former teammate Ed O'Bradovich, "I've never seen a person that intense, that vicious every damn play that he was in there." In one recollection after another, the exceptional violence is what comes to mind with his contemporaries. "When he tackled people, he didn't want them to get up. That's how hard he wanted to hit," remembers former teammate Doug Buffone in awe. "He just kept banging them and banging them. I said, 'Jeez!' "

The Great White Father's errant heir

At the University of Oklahoma in the *Semi-Tough* era, a young coach took charge and won games at a rate that would top even the Wilkinson years, in part by enthusiastically demonstrating how comfortable he was with the Billy Clyde model. Bud Wilkinson might have discreetly relied on bootleggers in the days before Oklahoma finally repealed Prohibition, but Barry Switzer grew up the son of a bootlegger. When he was named head coach at Oklahoma in 1973, his fun-loving, freewheeling style helped him relate to the era's players and recruits as his teams matched Wilkinson's with three national championships and recorded twelve more wins in one less season.

In his autobiography *Bootlegger's Boy*, Switzer reported that a university president told him in the mid Eighties, after a season in which he lost four games, that he needed to go to church more often and marry the woman he was dating. "However, if you go ten-two next season and beat Texas and Nebraska, you don't have to attend church or get married and we won't fire you," Switzer says he was told. "But, Barry, if you win the national championship, the regents won't fire you even if we catch you smoking dope." According to that account, the school's athletic director was also present for that conversation and said afterward it "just emphasized what we've known all along, Barry. They expect us to pay lip service to all the high-sounding goals, but what it really all comes down to is money and winning, and those two things really control everything." Switzer referred to the expectations created by Wilkinson's success as "the Oklahoma Football Monster", and said it "is real, it is huge and hungry, and it was my job to feed it."

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Switzer's most famous Billy Clyde played for him in the mid Eighties and loved that his coach "let his players be who they were." Still known to the football world as "The Boz," Brian Bosworth became a media sensation like football had never seen, playing linebacker so well he became the only player to twice win the Butkus award as the game's best linebacker, giving reporters one outrageous quote after another, and sprouting a spikey, blonde, sometimes multicolored mullet. Late in his college career he was banned by the NCAA for steroid use, but as the most famous player in the game at the time by far, signed a rich NFL contract and multiple endorsement deals. He also published his story in an as-told-to autobiography in which the business-school graduate detailed constructing a media persona as a "quotable, occasionally obnoxious, never-give-a-damn side of me…who's not afraid to be an individual." He wrote of Switzer's coaching style that "if you were a great player who helped him look good,…you could do anything." Former Oklahoma quarterback Dean Blevins considered the linebacker so much an extension of the coach as to be "Barry Switzer in uniform."

Switzer responded in his own book that Brian Bosworth was indeed "one of the greatest players ever to play for the University of Oklahoma," and there had been "very few linebackers in the history of the game who could play" in his class. But on the other hand, he considered the Boz "an asshole who strutted around Norman like he owned the place, both stiffing and intimidating people." More recently, the two have made peace and toned down those earlier comments, including tearful apologies from Bosworth in ESPN's *Brian and the Boz* and Gabriel Sports Reunion's *Oklahoma Football Legends Reunion*. Since coaching the Dallas Cowboys to a Super Bowl victory in 1996, Switzer has settled into life back in Norman as a grandfather and the genial grand elder of Sooner football.

But before that he lived through a backlash to the relatively relaxed way he ran the program that ended his college coaching career. Switzer called the last six months of that career "a *Twilight Zone* nightmare" in which "we had a rape and a shooting in Bud Wilkinson House, our football dorm. My quarterback, Charles Thompson, had been arrested for selling cocaine to an undercover cop. The NCAA had charged our football program with sixteen rules violations and had put us on three years probation." He argued the headlines generated by all that—particularly a *Sports Illustrated* cover story featuring Thompson in handcuffs and orange prison coveralls above the caption, "How Barry Switzer's Sooners Terrorized Their Campus"—did not reflect the broader perspective that

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"it was four players who were accused and charged with the raping, shooting, and doping." From his perspective, distorted media narratives were to blame for making "it seem as if our entire squad of about a hundred was running around like a blood-crazed horde plundering the countryside, and as if I had no rules of conduct for the team." But from the perspective of postmodernist theory, as we shall see in Chapter 6, it would represent another example of a failed metanarrative—in broad terms, for Wilkinson the Merriwell model did not hold up; for Switzer, it was the Billy Clyde model that did him in.

Keeping Merriwell alive

Even in the age of the explosive emergence of the Billy Clyde model there were still players who kept the Merriwell model alive. Indeed, as captured in an NFL Films feature, no one has come closer to a Merriwellean life in football and beyond than Roger Staubach, the quarterback who served out his military obligation with a Vietnam tour after winning the Heisman Trophy at the U.S. Naval Academy in 1963 and then played his entire professional career for the Dallas Cowboys. After winning the Super Bowl, when reporters wanted to know how he would celebrate, he said he was going to spend the time with his family—and did. In 1975 he was interviewed about his too-perfect-to-be-true image by the former Miss America Phyllis George, one of the first women to have a prominent role in television sports on CBS's *The NFL Today*. "Everyone in the world compares me to Joe Namath, as far as him being single and a swinging bachelor and I'm married and a family man and he's having all the fun," Staubach told her with a big grin. "You know, I enjoy sex as much as Joe Namath, only I do it with one girl. I mean, it's still fun."

Former teammates and others recount one example after another of the generosity and charitable acts of the quarterback who came to be known popularly as Captain America, with retired Cowboys safety Charlie Waters flatly declaring: "No one is going to find anything wrong with him—because he does everything right." For Hall of Famer Mike Ditka, who also played and coached for Dallas, "If you were to pick the prototype great American citizen, I would say that is Roger Staubach." And Troy Aikman, who also starred at quarterback for Dallas, flatly declares: "He is everything that people think he is."

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As it happened, Staubach played his entire professional career for the head coach of that era whose public image was most closely aligned with the Merriwell model. Tom Landry, also the subject of an NFL Films bio, was Dallas's head coach twenty-nine years and so well known as a football icon who walked the straight and narrow that he was often referred to as "God's Coach." Sportswriter Skip Bayless, who authored a book with that title about Landry, said it was a common saying that Texas Stadium was left only partially domed rather than fully closed-in so that "God could look down on his coach. I think a lot of people in the Bible Belt went to church on Sunday morning and then felt they went to a second service presided over by Coach Landry [at Cowboys games]." Indeed, Landry quite frequently did speak at church services, including fifty-four appearances with the Billy Graham Crusades.

The mesmerizing influence of the dark side

But in the Billy Clyde era, figures like Staubach and Landry tended to stand out more as exceptions, with so many others publicly rejecting the Merriwell model in their quest to reach the top of the game. Coach Jimmy Johnson was so hated for encouraging his teams at the University of Miami to gloat as they ran up the score on their opponents and not worry much about social niceties that opposing fans at one Miami game wore t-shirts bearing Johnson's photo and the caption "Pork Faced Satan." In Johnson's NFL Films story, *Miami Herald* reporter Dan Le Batard recalled it as "an excellent description," even though " 'Satan' seems sufficient," but noted that the now retired Johnson "hates the person that he had to be and that he was back then."

Another of the most successful owners of the same era relied upon the essence of the Billy Clyde model so aggressively that an NFL Films documentary today talks of how Al Davis marketed his image as the league "villain" and how his Oakland Raiders were "built and branded in his image." Former players confirm how flatly Davis rejected Merriwellean sportsmanship. "Raider Rule Number One: Cheating is encouraged," unapologetically admits Matt Millen, who played linebacker on two Super Bowl winning teams for Davis in the Eighties. "Raider Rule Number Two: See Rule Number One." Ken Stabler, who played quarterback for Davis in the Seventies recalls an opposing coach characterizing Raider defensive players as "the criminal element of the NFL—but that

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was the way those guys played." Following that, narrator Josh Charles intones: "They played that way because Al Davis wanted it that way."

But life for flesh-and-blood Billy Clydes would not always work out so happily as it could in the pages of a novel. Lyle Alzado, who won a Super Bowl ring as a defensive end for Davis's Raiders, not only rejected Merriwellean ideals but indeed raged against them. "I play a violent game. And anybody who tells me that they go out there to have fun playing football, they are a liar," he seethed in NFL Films footage. "This game isn't fun. This game is a war." Former teammate Howie Long said Alzado was "all about the rage." He was responsible for the NFL instituting a rule against players using helmets as weapons, after he savagely did just that in a 1982 game. Then a few years after retiring, a gaunt Alzado appeared on a *Sports Illustrated* cover above the caption, "I Lied," publicly admitting that his career was built on massive use of illegal anabolic steroids. Alzado called it a "deal with the devil" that unnaturally made him big and strong enough to play pro football but often unleashed uncontrollable violence in him on and off the field and that he blamed for the brain tumor that soon killed him at the age of forty-three.

Mark Bowden's account of superstar lineman Jerome Brown tragically captured another example of the way the seemingly infinite rewards for aggressive, antisocial behavior on the field represent a powerfully mesmerizing influence on players' behavior beyond the field, too often blurring if not erasing the lines between the two. From high school to the NFL, Brown was a dominating player who could change the flow of a game almost by himself, and he reveled in the way that talent enabled him to cruise through a life of "breaking the rules, staying out late, skipping class, juggling girlfriends, drinking too much, driving too fast," as Bowden depicted it, "blasting his music through the center of town,… vanishing off into the thick Florida veld to loose up his collection of high-powered automatic weapons, and partying, partying, partying, rolling in snatch." Brown lived that all to the hilt till the summer day when he crashed one of his six sports cars into a Florida palm tree and died at the age of twenty-seven.

He and countless other professional players "are all just young men getting paid extraordinarily well to play a boy's game. In their twenties, they have, with their heroic size and talent, taken life by storm," Bowden vividly articulated the surreal world that is everyday life for football's stars. "They have performed a kind of end run around (or bull rush through) all the truisms of America's creaking, dusty Protestant ethic,"

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demonstrating that just by playing that game well, one can "succeed in life, brilliantly, without ever doing homework!"

Right and wrong, blurred by life in the bubble

In the stories of those young men so richly rewarded and exalted by football society we see the seductive way that the more successful one is at the game, the more challenging it can be to remain conscious of the line between what is socially acceptable and what is not—or to even believe that there is such a line for them. It is a powerful dynamic of commercial football, the way that the violence and excess and general antisocial behavior that the game so incalculably rewards on the field inevitably cannot but help be a material factor in identity formation for the game's participants, especially the best ones. An almost ceaseless chorus of coaches, players, fans, and video-highlights exhorts football players to tune out instincts that might inhibit committing violence and antisocial acts on the field. In countless ways, the message flashed, shouted, pounded home says to shut off those signals, to give oneself over to the reckless abandon that can endanger the bodies and minds of others and even one's own—and vast renown, riches, and recreations of the flesh will be yours without end. How can we even imagine such conditioning will influence the way one plays football but *only* that? How can we imagine that in the complex, tangled process through which an individual's sense of social reality is constructed that being immersed in the otherworldly reality of talented young football players cannot help but play *some* role of consequence?

Certainly, not all who play the sport of football will come out of it with a diminished sense of social accountability. It has of course over time produced real-life Merriwells and continues to do so. But it was one of the most preposterous notions imaginable to have ever even pretended that that would be the *only* sort of personality turned out by regularly engaging in an endeavor fundamentally structured to advantage players and teams that most effectively inflict sanctioned acts of violence against their opponents. The Merriwell model could be just as well referenced as the Merriwell fantasy, which of course is exactly how the concept began life before being appropriated as a highly effective public-relations tool. A more accurate representation of football's effects on its participants would be candidly encouraging acceptance for the game

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as a tradeoff—one that would never stop stirring antisocial, Billy Clyde behaviors but would flourish commercially and sometimes produce at least a few Frank Merriwells or Roger Staubachs.

We can find many examples of the way the game shaped its participants in one direction or the other, often among those who played right next to each other. Tackle Merlin Olson and end Deacon Jones were such dominant players for the Los Angeles Rams that both made the NFL's Hall of Fame. They played side by side, with Olson always able to isolate his aggressive impulses to the momentary requirements of the game, while Jones maintained long after his playing days that he was driven by hatred of his opponents on the field and that the hatred never left him. Roger Brown, a former teammate, recalled, "Deacon would say, 'Get out of my way, I'm going to kill you.' Merlin, after he knocked you down, he'd help you get up." Jones himself concurred, fiercely so, even many years after retirement: "I ain't helping you up off the ground. I'm going to step on your hand." In an interview with Phyllis George, Olson elaborated: "I think it's possible to separate the game on the field from the person off the field. I'm not a violent person by nature. I detest violence in many ways. But my job requires me to do certain things." In a relatively recent interview for an NFL Films documentary, Jones is sitting with Rosey Grier, another former teammate, talking about quarterbacks he hated, when Grier commented with a smile, "He doesn't really mean that." But Jones growled back, "Yes, I do."

So again, the effects of football on its participants cannot be considered to be monolithic, by any means, and the process of any individual's identity formation is a highly complex matter. But at either the academic or the everyday level of discussion, it is difficult to rule out the likelihood that one's activities on football fields can play some significant factor in one's behavior off the field—even if precise predictions about how the two will be linked in any given individual are not possible. Also contributing to the picture, beyond the culture of richly rewarding on-field violence and antisocial behaviors, and often excusing them off the field, is the process by which team membership can cocoon its participants into a separate reality, a bubble in which the narrow preoccupations of the team can become truly a world unto themselves.

H.G. "Buzz" Bissinger, who has written a number of books looking inside sports, has spoken of how the locker-room vacuum of "insularity and extreme pampering" cannot but help influence the thinking of those who spend so much time there. "On the playing field, every single

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mistake a player makes is pointed out and criticized until corrected. By design, on the field of real life, the athlete rarely faces similar accountability," he wrote in *The New York Times*. In the locker-room bubble, especially in professional sports, televisions are never tuned to anything but sporting events, newspapers are presorted to remove all but sports pages, and only magazines that focus on "hunting, guns, cars and breasts" ever appear. He contended that the bubble works to diminish athletes' moral sensibilities. "To win, you should learn only what coaches want you to learn, and the prevailing attitude is that the less you know about the outside, the more successful you will be on the playing field," he wrote. "Sadly, and too often with tragic repercussions, athletes don't distinguish right from wrong.... Rules don't apply. Acceptable standards of behavior don't apply.... If someone gets into trouble, the first move is for an authority figure, usually in the form of a coach, to get them out of it." Bissinger argued that athletes must be held accountable but even so little will change if society does not recognize that "we are just as culpable, allowing them to exist in a realm all their own and not caring a bit about what we have turned them into—as long as they bring us victory."

Among examples of recent football scandals in which he contended that culture must be considered were the shocking revelations at Sayreville, New Jersey, War Memorial High School, in which seven football players were charged with criminal sexual contact and the remainder of the season cancelled as a result of aggressive gang-hazing of freshmen players in what was apparently an established locker-room ritual. The charges made the front page of the *Times* and shocked the town of 43,000 where the team had won three of the past four state championships and boasted the motto "Commitment and Character." Still, at a school-board meeting, one parent insisted, "No one was hurt, no one died. I don't understand why they're being punished." And among the student body, the priority was on finding the freshman "snitches—the kids who killed football in Sayreville," as the *Times* characterized it. A sixteen-year-old female student tweeted after the cancellation of the season was announced that if freshmen "thought we hated them before we sure as hell hate them now." The media attention also revealed glimpses of just how the small-town football program may not have been untouched by other excesses of the sport's culture either—it turned out that the team's defensive coordinator had just been arrested with a cache of steroids and hypodermic needles in his pickup truck.

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Lowering the bar

Clearly, in the broadest understanding of the multiple layers that Billy Clyde culture signifies, it has evolved into one in which efforts to maintain anything even resembling the classic Merriwell model have grown challenging, to put it mildly. Consider one coach's recent efforts to establish a code of "core values" that his players would be required to live by henceforth. In perspective to the ideals maintained by an earlier generation of coaches like Wilkinson, it would seem a stunning lowering of the bar. But Charlie Strong of the University of Texas received considerable media attention and a formal endorsement from the school's board of regents when he announced these as his team's five core values:

- Honesty.
- Treat women with respect.
- No guns.
- No drugs.
- No stealing.

The Great White Father might have found it disconcerting that *any* of those would need to be specifically instituted in policy—rather than simply understood as givens anywhere in a civilized society. But any such understanding is now a very long time ago in the history of commercial football and its bid to maintain Frank Merriwell as the face of the game. Thus we come to what this study asserts as the "Billy Clyde Conundrum."

The intense tension between those two metanarratives is vigorously in play in any number of current scenarios we will consider in the next chapter.

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Scenes from the Conundrum in Motion

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Quite clearly, the spirit of Billy Clyde Puckett lives on and on, far beyond the pages of the novel that gave a name to the darker forces coursing through the game since its earliest days. Spokespersons influential and numerous have long essayed vigorously to exorcise it from the soul of commercial football. They would cast it out and give the ethos of Frank Merriwell full reign over the game if they could.

But they can't.

Reviewing the history of the metanarratives advanced via the Billy Clyde and Merriwell models makes that clear. Commercial football faces what must be seen as a structural conundrum. It would very much like to market Frank Merriwell as the face of its product. But fundamental to the very nature of the game is the violence, the ribaldry, the disregard for the standards of civilized society that beats eternally in the heart of Billy Clyde Puckett.

So we can call this the Billy Clyde Conundrum. Commercial football cannot live without that which has from its beginnings created so much outrage, scandal, and societal reproach for the game—because it is also central to its primal appeal. Thus it grapples on in quest of ways to live with him, to at least smooth his roughest edges—and of course also to keep the Merriwell model as viable as possible and center stage any time the opportunity presents.

Clearly, none of that is going to be easy. As we look over the landscape of the game's most recent developments, we see concern of such intensity it may rival the societal backlash that in its early days came close to abolishing football. The commercial game is now too deeply established economically, with a visceral magnetism far too mighty and marketable, for its actual existence to be brought to an end. But the problems football faces do approach the existential, at least in the sense that they threaten to change the game dramatically. And by some measures, it may already have begun to mutate.

The commercial viability of beating brains in

Before considering those propositions, let's be even clearer on the basics of the Billy Clyde Conundrum. First, despite all the efforts to cloak it in more noble raiments, as a society we have one of the most deeply entrenched and highly profitable of all social institutions constructed upon marketing what in almost any other context would be unacceptably

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antisocial acts. As University of Clemson Defensive Coordinator Brent Venables said recently, with possibly a bit more candor than he intended, "The whole goal is to, you know, beat somebody's brains in."

That the very basis for the game is so absolutely and fundamentally grounded in antisocial, violent acts would be stunning if it were not so well established and packaged into the everyday pageantry of a ubiquitous commercial enterprise. Players *block* others—throw their body into the body of another with enough force to knock it somewhere beyond where it intended to be. Players *tackle*—utilize the impact of powering their body into the body of another to force it into a prone position on the ground. Players *drive* their helmeted skulls, their plastic-shelled shoulders, and other parts of their armored bodies into the bodies of others with the intent of physically hammering them into a designed compliance that is always contrary to the will of those bodies.

And those sorts of things all happen *on every play*. Even though quite frequently shocking and repurposed into video clips for sportscasters to replay endlessly, they are still quite routine. Usually with no more than several seconds pause between, the players will line up and get set to do it all again and again, through the entire course of every game. Such actions in other contexts could produce criminal charges of assault, battery, etc. But the most antisocial acts are not just allowed on a football field but enthusiastically encouraged, roundly applauded, outrageously rewarded. And that remarkable dynamic is at the heart of the commercial enterprise that almost every day of the week, from at least late August through late January, lucratively monetizes the unwavering devotion of millions upon millions of fans. Because whatever any of us may feel personally about the game of football, it remains an undeniable reality that today it is so astoundingly, addictively appealing that it would seem inconceivable to seriously question its ongoing commercial viability.

And yet…

There are *so very many* storms of such portentous scale churning about in various corners of the vast landscape of commercial football today. Even knowing all that we know about the game's viability, we must wonder if some of the challenges will continue to metastasize into a critical mass that could change the game as radically as reform movements managed to achieve more than a century ago. This analysis, grounded as it is in postmodernist sensibilities and the fallibility of metanarratives that promise predictive certainty, will not pretend we can *know* which of the fronts rolling in on the game today *will* be the ones that wreak that

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sort of change. Better at this stage to consider in bulleted summations the current forces brewing. Because depending on where one looks, the game can appear invincibly popular and profitable, or alarmingly vulnerable. Thus we find in this survey a spectrum of narratives that may contribute to grander metanarratives concerning the nature of commercial football's conundrum in the years ahead.

- **The bliss of being Billy Clyde:** For anyone who doubts how deeply Billy Clydeanism beats in the heart of football's soul, and will continue to do so, consider only the ongoing Jameis Winston saga. At the moment, he stands as prototype for the early twenty-first-century version of the model—his transgressions off the field are many, but he almost invariably prevails on it. Widely considered the most talented college quarterback of recent years, he won the 2013 Heisman as a freshman and finished runnerup for another as a sophomore, plus a national championship for his Florida State University team, before heading for the NFL. But he has made even more headlines for the transgressions, some confirmed, some alleged, but all quite un-Merriwellean. Through it all, he quite often seemed blissfully oblivious to the implications. While still under suspicion in a rape accusation that was ultimately not prosecuted after Tallahassee police put little effort into investigating it, Winston stood on a table in the student union and according to many witnesses, yelled a vulgarity that was then a popular Internet catchphrase, or meme. After being suspended for a game by his university for that incident—and ESPN and countless other media outlets reporting it endlessly to the world for some twenty-four hours before the Saturday night game—Winston jogged out onto the field in uniform and started nonchalantly warming up until his exasperated coach ordered him back to the locker room. For this Billy Clyde, it seems, no other reality intrudes.
- **He ain't heavy, he's our quarterback:** In the months between Winston's last college football game and the draft in which NFL teams choose the group of players they most want to put under contract, commentators engaged in endless discussion of how his repeated transgressions while at Florida State University would downgrade his value in the eyes of those prospective future employers. Oregon State quarterback Marcus Mariotta "will probably be the first quarterback picked and only because of the baggage the other guy is carrying around," said sportswriter

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Bob Ryan on ESPN. "It is going to be interesting to see how far Jameis Winston falls." College football writer George Schroeder also expected Mariotta to be selected ahead of Winston: "Unlike some of the more recent Heisman winners, he does everything off the field that you would like to have. He is the kind of Heisman winner you can take home to mom. I gotta tell you, he is of sterling quality." Despite the popularity of that metanarrative, it ultimately failed rather spectacularly when Winston was selected as the first player drafted by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. No expense is spared when a quarterback can really play. Months before Winston was drafted, the Tampa Bay front office had meetings with the city's Sexual Violence Task Force to reassure its members. Further, *The New York Times* reported that "predicting how Winston will behave off the field" had become "the consuming focus of as many as 20 N.F.L. teams," financing "exhaustive examinations" involving the use of scouts, psychologists, orthopedists, security agents, cognitive test specialists, and personality assessment clinicians—even professional detectives.

- **No legend is sacred:** Before it all came to light recently, it would have been unimaginable that the coach with a football program at the center of a brutal child-abuse scandal could be Joe Paterno. For generations of fans far beyond Penn State, if there was ever a coach who seemed to keep football in reasonable perspective to more important things in life, it was Paterno. He was head coach longer than any other at the same major college—forty-six seasons—and won more games—409. "The most important thing that happens in a college player's career is not receiving a fifty-yard pass, but a diploma," he said in his 1989 autobiography. "We know there's something that counts more than winning." Over the years he and his wife gave millions of dollars to university colleges and departments, working so actively to raise funds for a new school library that it was named after them. And then near the end of the 2011 season, news began to break that Paterno's former longtime defensive coordinator Jerry Sandusky was under investigation for sexual abuse of young boys, in some cases in university athletic facilities. As more details came out, Paterno offered to retire, but the school's board of trustees decided to fire him even before the season ended. An investigation by former FBI Director Louis Freeh concluded that Paterno and other top Penn State officials were

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involved in concealing Sandusky's conduct, leading the NCAA to vacate Paterno's 111 wins from the period of the allegations and impose other stiff sanctions on the school. Sandusky was later convicted of sexually abusing ten boys over fifteen years and sent to state prison. Paterno had not been charged when he died of lung cancer two months after his firing. The university's president and athletic director were hit with criminal charges in connection with Mr. Sandusky's crimes, but had not been brought to trial as of mid 2015. Penn State took down the bronze statue of Paterno that had stood outside the football stadium since 2001.

- **Well, maybe some legends *are* sacred:** With ferocity and considerable success, efforts have already countered punitive actions by the university and NCAA taken in response to the Penn State child-abuse scandal. The Paterno family hired Dick Thornburgh, a former United States attorney general and Pennsylvania governor, to review Freeh's report, resulting in Thornburgh challenging the findings and Freeh standing by them. The family has also brought legal action against the NCAA and the university, alleging breach of contract and commercial disparagement, but as of mid 2015 had received no judgments from the lawsuit. Funds were raised by fans to erect a new statue of Paterno in Philadelphia, to depict him sitting on a park bench and reading a copy of Virgil's *Aenid*. Most notably, less than three years after the penalties were imposed, under pressure the NCAA agreed to restore all the victories that were vacated from the Paterno's record, leading hundreds of students to rally on campus in celebration. One student told the *Times* it was good to see the NCAA "coming back and giving back what they shouldn't have taken back in the first place." Others, such as an alumnus and longtime donor, said nothing could restore Paterno's image: "He had 10 years to do the right thing, and he didn't do it. All the things he talked about—courage, morality and ethical behavior—go out the window." Syndicated columnist Dan Thomasson said Paterno would always have "indelibly etched on his reputation" him and university officials turning "a blind eye to the criminally perverted activities" of Sandusky: "And no matter how hard they scrub, fans won't be able to erase that. They did so for one reason—to preserve the money and prestige their robust football program brings annually to the institution." In his *The Framing of Joe Paterno*

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documentary, radio talk show host John Ziegler's documentary contends that "an incompetent, ratings-driven media, along with some self-serving politicians, all acted in their own perceived self interest to tell this story in a way not consistent with the facts," bringing injustice upon Paterno and Sandusky. In his *Happy Valley* documentary, Director Amir Bar-Lev concluded that "it becomes, to my mind, not a story about Joe Paterno or Penn State or even football, but America today."

- **A toast to "power conferences":** One of the most vivid demonstrations of the singular appeal and power of football came in the first College Football Playoff championship game in January of 2015. The National Collegiate Athletic Association does not permit sales or even advertising of alcohol at the eighty-nine college sports championships it administers—but big-time football now plays by its own rules. Its championship is actually governed by the NCAA-sanctioned Football Bowl Subdivision, which gave a thumbs-up to letting the booze flow at its playoff events. Run by the largest, richest football "power conferences," the FBS operates free of many of the restrictions the NCAA places on lesser sports and schools. "Partly because of its relative independence and partly because of its popularity, football can be more brashly commercialized," Mike Tranghese, a former Big East conference commissioner, told the *Times*. "Football is such a phenomenon, and it has such economic power, that those five conferences can do what they want."
- **The norms of the marketplace:** With the top football programs at public universities, it has become common for the school's football coach to be the state's highest paid employee and one of its most powerful. The insatiable hunger for success in college football now means that top coaches not only make far more than faculty members but five to fifteen times more than college presidents—dozens now rake in more than a million dollars a year, plus other perks like cars, country-club memberships, subsidized mortgages, and an array of performance bonuses. "Never mind that [that]... sends a strange message to the student body about the institution's priorities," wrote economist Andrew Zimbalist in the *Times*. "Never mind that Article I of the N.C.A.A. Constitution affirms that academics have primacy over athletics." Nor that fewer than ten of the more than one thousand college athletic

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departments run a surplus, by his accounting. "If universities want to get the best coaches, they have to pay the going rate. . . . The market demands it." Professors like Zimbalist can insist—with much justification that "college athletics are not supposed to be run according to the rules of the marketplace. They are supposed to be run according to the norms of the university." But the reality remains that in far too many ways, they are run according to the norms of football.

- **What really matters:** College football has come to generate such staggering revenues—ESPN is paying $7.3 billion just to televise seven games annually, featuring the largest schools' playoff games and top bowl games, for twelve years—that some commentators argue the enterprise resembles professional football more than higher education, according to the *Times*. "When you hear presidents and athletic directors talk about character and academics and integrity, none of that really matters," said Mack Brown, who coached and won big at the University of Texas, until he no longer won big, and then became a television sports commentator. "The truth is, nobody has ever been fired for those things. They get fired for losing." Football has been calculated to produce at least sixty-five percent of total revenue for major college athletic programs. "In the old days, there was a much more even distribution of revenue between football and basketball," said Lou Anna K. Simon, president of Michigan State University. "That has become skewed because of the value the public has placed on football." Due primarily to soaring football revenue, almost all the largest college athletic programs, those in the five "power conferences," make at least fifty million dollars a year now, some two or three times that. "Fans pretty much have an insatiable appetite for college football," Ilan Ben-Hanan, ESPN's vice president for college football programming, told the *Times*.
- **The games go on, practically everywhere:** The fact that the appetite for football has not diminished practically anywhere in the face of many scandals making headlines may be the most important dynamic in understanding the place of football in society today. Even in discussions from highbrow venues like the *PBS Newshour*, the problem is evident. "We have had any number of violations looked into this year. We can go all the way back to the 1980s. And even—even before that, it's part and parcel of collegiate

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athletics, but it's probably getting worse," longtime sportswriter turned University of Maryland academic Kevin Blackistone told the *Newshour*'s Jeffrey Brown. "The root of the problem is money. And money has corrupted college sports," Blackistone said. "It is a very—to me, a very unholy alliance that we have right now between what is a revenue-generating operation in college athletics placed under the umbrella of a nonprofit institution of higher education." But the final exchange before the end of the segment served to highlight, even on PBS, just how unshakable is football's appeal. "And, in the meantime, as we said, the games go on, right?" Brown observed. "Absolutely. And I will be watching them this weekend," Blackistone replied, laughing.

- **Billy Clyde—benefactor of higher ed?** In one of the most exhaustive recent analyses of the place and price of football in American society today, Gregg Easterbrook wound up producing a 2013 narrative that was much longer than that PBS discussion but on balance similarly resigned to the same tradeoff. In *The King of Sports: Football's Impact on America*, his parade of horribles runs on for page after page. Young men spend years in college generating revenue but receiving no education. Injured players are usually on their own after college. Painkillers and other drugs are widely abused. Studies show universities in major conferences spend some twelve times more on sports per athlete than on academics per student. At many universities, the millions of dollars that athletic departments do contribute to the school represent only a tiny part of their overall revenue, meaning that essentially, "they are leasing the schools tax-exempt status, land and brands for a fraction of their value and expecting praise for giving back anything at all." And yet, he makes quite a case for why universities do, and perhaps even should, be so deeply involved in football. "At any university, what happens in the English or engineering or biology department is more important than what happens on the sports field," he writes. "But the academic departments do not generate public enthusiasm and media attention: football reliably produces both." More specifically, "Sports events induce state legislatures to fund colleges, put donors in the mood to give to schools, make alumni want to stay in touch with their old colleges, place the names of colleges in newspapers daily." He cites research that concludes football confers "status markers" on schools and increases the public's willingness

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to support spending for higher education. He asserts that in an earlier book of his that ranked eighty-nine U.S. universities as among the one hundred best in the world, most of the eighty-nine field football teams "because they believe it makes them better *as schools*." All of that might be another way of arguing that society may have a hard time living with Billy Clyde, but might be worse off without him.

- **Put Billy Clyde on the college payroll?** From within the game itself, growing numbers of college players have begun to question how so many other parties can make fortunes off what they do on the fields of play, but not the players themselves. Coaches make millions. Conferences make hundreds of millions. Television networks make billions. Players who may put in sixty hours a week of football work can be compensated with no more than a scholarship. "Honestly, every guy in every college locker room in the nation talks about this," said quarterback Kain Colter, one of the organizers of a players' union movement at Northwestern, in the *Times*. Organizations like the National College Players Association aren't calling for big-bucks salaries but arrangements more along the lines of a fraction of the massive earnings college football generates being diverted to a fund that would help players who need it later in life. It's a serious enough movement that in Michigan the legislature pushed through a bill forbidding college athletes to form unions—around the same time that new University of Michigan coach Jim Harbaugh was handed a five-million-dollar-a-year contract. "It's athletes who are the labor force, whose blood and sweat is the backbone of the billion-dollar industry, the multibillion-dollar industry that is collegiate athletics," said sportswriter turned professor Blackistone, on the *Newshour*. Pulitzer Prize winning historian Taylor Branch has recently been focused on college football. He told the *Newshour*, "I discovered . . . that they invented the term 'student athlete' to help colleges and the NCAA defend against workers compensation suits from athletes." Beyond that, he argues, "It prevents us from having an honest conversation about whether professionalized sports and quality education are compatible. We're the only country in the world that houses big-money sports in institutions of higher learning." Branch won't be surprised to see big changes. "The Olympics were amateur for a century, and people thought, even

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more than college sports, that it would ruin them if they went professional. They went professional, and no one even noticed," he said. Lawsuits also are making their way through the courts arguing players should get a share of the money the NCAA and others make off video games that feature the players' likenesses and that schools often commit academic fraud by failing to educate athletes. Congress has been looking into related questions. Conference commissioners and other college-football leaders have formed the "Coalition to Save Sports" to fight compensation for players, *Times* columnist Joe Nocera reported, on the grounds that they don't need it because "student-athletes gain an education, learn skills, and have opportunities in life."

- **Finally facing up to off-field violence:** More than ever before in 2014, football was forced to face the reality of how often players fail to restrict their acts of violence to the field of play. Especially after video surfaced early in the season showing NFL running back Ray Rice punching his wife (not long before they married) so hard in a casino elevator that he had to drag her unconscious across the floor, the controversy lit up both mainstream and social media on an unprecedented scale. It was hardly the first incident of players being involved in domestic violence, but the video was so stunning and was seen by so many it focused more coverage than ever before on other incidents. Then Adrian Peterson, generally considered the best running back in the league, was charged with abuse of his four-year-old son, for spanking him so hard with a tree switch that it left cuts and bruises on his legs. *USA Today* reported that law-enforcement authorities had pursued fifty domestic-violence cases against NFL players since 2006, finding that most had charges dropped, were acquitted or, most often, had charges resolved through diversion programs in which charges or prosecutions were dropped for completing a rehab program or probation. The *Times* published a series on how NFL teams often had close relationships with local law enforcement, which frequently worked to favor the player and isolate victims in domestic-violence cases, tendencies further exacerbated by team cultures that encouraged women not to press such matters.
- **Will anything change?** Despite the domestic-violence furor that dominated almost the entire 2014 NFL season, considerable analysis asserted that professional football, in the words of sports

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economist Andrew Zimbalist on the *Newshour*, "always bounces back." With the NFL's value having grown by almost eleven billion dollars since Roger Goodell became commissioner in 2006 and the league paying him forty-four million dollars in salary, "Owners shrug off moral turpitude because when they pay a lot of money for a player, they don't want him sitting out games," columnist Maureen Dowd wrote. "They think they can get away with anything now, even with women being almost 50 percent of their fan base. And maybe they can." She noted that twenty million people tuned in to watch Rice's team, the Ravens, play that week, and that many women at the game proudly wore his No. 27 jersey. Still later in the season, Christine Brennan, sports columnist for *USA Today*, said that as she worked in Phoenix reporting during the 2015 Super Bowl Week, "It struck me that, in this year of Ray Rice, the video that changed everything, our perceptions of the country about domestic violence, our culture, as well as the NFL's feelings about it and having to deal with all these issues," signs of fan concern about the subject were "almost nonexistent." She concluded that in the end, "Fans come, and this is America, and this is our football. And they want it. And, yes, talk about domestic violence, they're kind of saying, at least you figure they're saying, but don't bother me with it on Sunday, every Sunday." A few months later, it did seem to be business as usual when criminal charges were dropped against Rice in return for participating in a pretrial-intervention program, a move other prosecutors called extremely unusual when aggravated-assault charges are involved. On the other hand, as Brennan then noted, the NFL also had made more policy changes concerning domestic violence "than anyone in sports," including a mandatory six-month suspension on first offenses and potential lifetime ban on the second.

- **Reckoning with the wreckage:** For all the violence perpetrated by football players off the field, and all the heightened attention it has gotten of late, it may ultimately be the violence *on* the field that holds the greatest potential for catalyzing change in the years ahead. As we have seen, that violence is at the core of the game. Early rule changes managed to channel it into somewhat less fatal forms. But to this day, the game remains collisions, hits, blocks, tackles, blows, sacks, smacks, cracks, hacks, thrashings, crushings, poundings, pummelings, whippings, hammerings, bludgeonings—all the

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vivid verbs and imagery long employed by the scribes of the sport, but which semantically festoon an often grim reality. Testing in recent years has begun to reveal the condition of chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a degenerative brain disease referenced as CTE, in shocking numbers of players. It is caused not only by the major hits that get replayed endlessly on television-sports highlights but also very much the "little hits that happen on every play," the "constant thwack-thwack-thwack of a player's head against his helmet," as *New York Times* columnist Frank Bruni put it. "This is the reliable, unremarkable percussion of the sport." Even most players afflicted by CTE still say they would do it all over again. And like them, he wrote, all we fans of the game "have entered into a compact, a conspiracy. For the pleasure the sport gives us, we'll tuck away our reservations about its culture of violence. We'll turn a blind eye to the wreckage." After decades of denying and stonewalling evidence, the NFL recently admitted in federal court that actuarial estimates indicate twenty-eight percent of its retired players will suffer from early-onset dementia, Alzheimer's or other debilitating neurological disorders. The impact of that now being documented so definitively in medical research has led to such announcements as one of the top rookie linebackers in professional football deciding at the age of twenty-four to walk away from a half-million-dollar salary. "I don't think it's worth the risk," Chris Borland said, noting he had already suffered multiple concussions. At least some indications suggest it may signal a trend, the *Times* reported.

- **Damage that begins in the young:** In fact, by the time players get to the NFL, it may already be too late. A Boston University School of Medicine study of retired NFL players that was released in 2015 found that those who started playing before the age of twelve had a significantly higher risk of developing cognitive issues. An Institute of Medicine study found high-school football players are nearly twice as likely to experience concussions as college football players and high-school athletes in other sports. Thus with more than a million youth playing high-school football, compared to forty thousand at the college level, dramatically more are at risk in high school. A Virginia Tech study found that football players as young as seven years of age sustain hits to the head comparable in magnitude to those absorbed by high-school and adult players, and most of the hits are sustained in practices. Three times as many

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youth between the ages of six and thirteen play tackle football as older youth play high-school football. Given all that, parents may be growing less willing to let their children play football—from 2007 to 2013, participation in tackle-football fell 26.5 percent among youth ages six to twelve, according to the Sports & Fitness Industry Association—the sharpest decline of any major team sport during that time.

- **What if football *can't* be made safe?** Both the NFL and college football have recently settled major, multimillion-dollar, class-action lawsuits, and both have established concussion-management protocols. The NFL has also created USA Football to conduct hundreds of nationwide clinics to reassure mothers that the game can be safe and to share safe practices with coaches and trainers. "You've got to look that parent in the eye and demonstrate through actions, not words, that you are doing things to create a better, safer environment for their child," said Scott Hallenbeck, the executive director of USA Football in the *Times*. "Otherwise, guys, we're in trouble." Indeed. "The N.F.L.'s marketing department continues to devise new ways to deflect attention from its past misdeeds and continues to devise schemes in an attempt to convince their national audience and parents that football can be made safe," said a lawyer, who represents brain trauma victims in reference to USA Football. "Simply put, it cannot be made safe. Football is a concussion delivery system." And that seems to be a message that has begun to gain traction, even in places like Marshall, Texas, the *Times* reported, where the school board recently shut down tackle football for seventh graders to little objection. Said one father whose oldest son played youth football but whose two younger ones won't be, "Once a society gets to know something is unsafe, we forget there was a time that we didn't." A retired Marshall doctor has led the campaign after years of reading the medical studies. "It's fixing to be a big deal," he said. "This is the tip of the iceberg."

Trying to reach a deeper understanding of the game

Recent book titles indicate how much more actively so many of the issues highlighted above are being engaged today. In a "personal attempt . . . to honor the ethical complexities *and* the allure of the game" and try "to see

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football for what it truly is," author and lifelong fan Almond wrote 2014's *Against Football: One Fan's Reluctant Manifesto.* "What does it mean that our society has transmuted the intuitive physical joys of childhood—run, leap, throw, tackle—into a corporatized form of simulated combat?" The same year, Mark Edmundsun, a successful college professor with deep memories of his own high-school football experience, brought forth *Why Football Matters: My Education in the Game.* "We need a deeper understanding of the game than the one the coaches, boosters, and broadcasters offer," he wrote. "We need to recognize how much football can give, yes: the game can be a superb school for body, heart, and mind. But we also need to see how much harm football can do, and not just to the body."

So finally we come to the point of more fully proposing just how postmodernism explains football. In one sense, as we will see in the next chapter, postmodernist theory suggests we always need to be questing for deeper understanding—because it holds that our assumptions about what we *think* we know too often are grounded in unreliable stories. But it also doesn't promise to provide us with answers so much as it encourages us to seek more stories, to rely more on a multiplicity of narratives than on grand explanations that offer more than they can ever deliver.

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6
A Postmodernist Theory of Football

Kerr, Robert L. *How Postmodernism Explains Football and Football Explains Postmodernism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. DOI: 10.1057/9781137534071.0007.

If theorists of postmodernism worked in research-and-development laboratories in a quest to create, let's say, a textbook microcosm of human social activity that would demonstrate their essential ideas at work—it very well could come out looking something like the mediated game of commercial football.

This chapter will elaborate upon that assertion and attempt to demonstrate its defensibility. It will propose that thinking about football and thinking about postmodernism in the manner put forth here can suggest useful understandings of complex phenomena and offer practical sociological insights into the human condition.

Certainly, some scholars of postmodernism will take issue with that proposition—or any proposition put forth in so tangible and linear of terms. It reeks too strongly of the narrative of such grand design—or metanarrative—that it presumes to offer explanatory power that postmodernist thought insists can never be presumed. But it nevertheless remains the intention of this study to draw upon primal elements of postmodernist thought in fashioning an approximate template of analysis for arriving at more essential meanings of commercial football.

The term *approximate template*, unwieldy as it may be, cannot be avoided because even suggesting that any formal method of analysis could legitimately be derived from postmodernist premises would be a bridge too far, truly a narrative too grand. That is because we are grounding this endeavor in a school of thought that rejects any such systematic mode of interpretation. Writing objective history or raising a teenager may be like trying to nail Jell-O to a wall, as those and other challenging tasks have been popularly analogized. But even that would be easier than trying to nail postmodernist specifics. For that is more like trying to nail Jell-O to Jell-O—with a Jell-O nail and a Jell-O hammer.

The best articulations of postmodernist theory show us that so much of what we pretend is consistently and clearly explainable actually is not. The worst suggests that *nothing* is explainable. A benign interpretation of that might be something like Robin Williams's declaration that anyone who claims to remember the Sixties wasn't really there. And what might be characterized as a fundamentalist school of postmodernist thought can seem to suggest that anyone claiming to reliably explain postmodernism hasn't really been there either. It might well be true that under some orthodox understanding of postmodernism, any attempt to explain it must indeed fail—if the fallibility of metanarratives is considered an

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absolute, then any explanation of something as complex and nuanced as postmodernism must indeed fail.

But then, holding an absolutist line on the fallibility of metanarratives would also mean that such a line *itself* represents a metanarrative that must also fail. And certainly not all scholars of postmodernism hold that any attempt to write accessibly about postmodernism must on its face be rejected as another failed metanarrative. This study concurs and considers postmodernist thought too valuable to only be discussed either incomprehensibly or not at all—and further, too valuable to split hairs over narrow, technical definitions of key terms like *metanarrative* and *narrative*. The latter can be thought of here for everyday working purposes simply as stories told to explain or give meaning, and the former as a greater story told to explain many others. And then it follows that we may also consider relatively lesser stories in terms of *mini-narratives*, *micro-narratives*, etc.

Postmodernist thought represents a source of wisdom that knows our modernist impulses always crave simple, sure answers. But it keeps finding ways to tell us, sometimes gently, sometimes annoyingly, sometimes rather arrogantly that no matter how much we do *want* such answers—or reliable metanarratives, etc—we can't have them, because they so often don't exist. Having that, a postmodernist understanding advises us, just is not the nature of reality. So if you wanted to make a music video of postmodernist theory, it could look something like the "The Making of *Frozen*."

If you have never checked out the "making of" feature that is included among the extras on many DVDs, they typically are documentaries that present viewers with footage from its shooting and comments from the filmmakers on their making of the film. But here is what you will see if you watch that special feature on the DVD of Disney's extremely popular *Frozen*: Actors Josh Gad and Jonathan Groff, who do voices of major characters in the animated film, appear on a studio lot in khakis, sweater vests, and bow ties. They begin singing, "This is the making of *Frozen*. People want to know what filmmakers do. People want to go behind scenes of the movie." They continue to sing as they begin dancing about the lot, hallways, offices, sets, a writers' room. "How did we make, how did we make, how did we make *Frozen*?" goes the chorus.

Partway through they are joined by actress Kristen Bell, another of the film's voices: "This is the making of *Frozen*. It's time to take you on the path that we took. People want to know, people want to know,

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people want to know about *Frozen*." The energetic dancing and lively lyrics continue—"La-la, la-la, yeah-yeah, yeah-yeah, scoobedy-boobedy, doodle-oodle-oodle-oodle-ooh! Ooh-ooh! Ooh-ooh!"—as they are joined by a growing throng of extras in the procession. After about two and a half minutes of that, they all wind up in a screening room and settle into the seats as if about to watch a film, raising their arms skyward in unison as they ascend into a final rousing chorus of, "How did we make, how did we make, how did we make *Frozen*? People want to know, people want to know, people want to know."

Then abruptly, all drop their arms to their sides and blurt together: "We don't know!" They all fall back into their seats in silent resignation for a moment, then Bell and the extras start filing off screen. Groff gazes into space. Gad begins to check his phone. And that is where it ends.

Indeed, people do *want* to know so many things. And postmodernist theory maintains that we accept all sorts of explanations—sometimes really grand ones referred to as metanarratives—that ultimately can't tell us what we want to know. It is in that spirit that this chapter elaborates on the useful insights and understandings that commercial football and postmodernism offer for thinking about each other, useful in reaching practical insights into the slippery mysteries of the human condition. Ultimately, this chapter and the next most fully lay out the case for asserting that what football most vitally of all provides us as individuals and as a society is a remarkably compelling source for expressing and consuming endless, ever-competing narratives in our primal quest to engage in the making of meaning.

There is *something* there

Any attempt to summarize the essential meanings of postmodernist theory—at least any attempt to do so in a manner that may resonate with a general audience—must begin with the acknowledgment that "finding . . . a simple, uncontroversial meaning for the term 'postmodern' is all but impossible," said literary scholar Simon Malpas. In attempting to define the subject in "reasonably straightforward terms," scholars find that "it is hard to identify the essence of something that denies the reality of essences," wrote sociologist Frank Webster. Rather than providing any sort of "scientific reason or philosophical logic," or even "common sense and accessibility," Malpas observed, postmodernist theory as more often

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articulated "seeks to grasp what escapes these processes of definition and celebrates what resists or disrupts them."

Although the subject has generated a vast body of literature, "there are few sources which provide clear and readable accounts of postmodern theory," declared Dominic Strinati, also a sociologist. The postmodernist intelligentsia is like a "loosely constituted and quarrelsome political party," observed Christopher Butler, a scholar of English literature, "not particularly unified in doctrine" but "certain of its uncertainty," having "seen through the sustaining illusions of others, and . . . grasped the 'real' nature of the cultural and political institutions which surround us."

Discourse on postmodernism is "often associated with philosophical writings and social and political theories that are complex, dense, esoterically sophisticated and all too often replete with jargon and incomprehensible prose, which intimidate even the most sophisticated readers," said Michael Drolet, who writes on the history of political thought. Indeed, it is often characterized by the use of language that is "too vague, abstract and difficult to understand," Strinati added, and "a bewildering array of meanings which vary frequently from discipline to discipline," noted Drolet. That actually is intentional, Malpas said, at least to the extent that a "clear and concise process of identification and definition is one of the key elements of rationality that the postmodern sets out to challenge." Ultimately, we must accept that any discussion of the subject of postmodernism should include something of a disclaimer: "And it is more . . . or perhaps less, [ellipse included]" media-management and journalism scholar Peter Gade wrote.

All that said, this study proceeds on the assumption that within the concept of postmodernism, there is *something* there—something more than "academic irresponsibility and ivory-tower indifference" that rejects "all wisdom of the past" by "playfully appeal[ing] to our subjectivities" but making "no genuine judgment of what is better or worse," as philosopher Harvey Cormier put it. It is utilized here as an arguably worthwhile element for employing in the quest to assert proposed understandings of complex phenomena—in this case, commercial football. And to help understand football as a phenomenon that we societally constructed, even though it has grown so ubiquitous that it may feel as if it just *is*, something that has been with us always, perhaps almost naturally. Linda Hutcheon, a literary theorist who has written extensively on postmodernism, characterized its "initial concern" as an effort "to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that

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those entities that we unthinkingly experience as 'natural' . . . are in fact 'cultural'; made by us, not given to us."

Also critical to understanding postmodernist thought is its skepticism of the explanatory power of metanarratives, what Webster characterized as an "opposition to what we may call the Enlightenment's tradition of thought which searches to identify the *rationalities* . . . which govern change and behavior." Postmodernist theory argues that such efforts to articulate linear, explanatory narratives are "disintegrating, losing their validity and legitimacy and increasingly prone to criticism," and that it is becoming ever more "difficult for people to organize and interpret their lives in light of meta-narratives of whatever kind," Strinati said.

Demonstrating fractures and silences

Expression of such penumbral ideas began as early as 1928 in the work of Catholic theologian Bernard Iddings Bell on a more "intelligent alternative to the two rival ideologies" of liberalism and totalitarianism then dominating modern Western societies, in Drolet's assessment. By the 1950s, artists and poets were using the term to reject the way, in their judgment, that modernism had become "entrenched and conventional." In the 1970s, the highly influential work of philosophers such as Michel Foucault and Luce Irigaray, sociologist Jean Baudrillard, and political philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard more fully articulated intellectual repudiations of central tenets of the Western philosophical tradition in terms of postmodern theory. Today, shelves and shelves of work on the subject can be found in academic libraries.

Many who write on the subjects of modernism and postmodernism, however, "either do not bother to state precisely what they mean by these words or concentrate only upon certain features of what they take them to be," Webster pointed out. In some cases, writing on the subjects seems to employ such vague, dense prose in "a fashionable but muddled recourse to the use of these terms to describe just about any phenomenon which is odd and new," Drolet declared. But within the social sciences, modernism "is generally understood to identify a cluster of changes—in science, industry and ways of thought" commonly referred to as the Enlightenment that "brought about the end of feudal and agricultural societies in Europe and which has made its influence felt pretty well

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everywhere in the world"—while postmodernism "announces a fracture with this," Webster said.

Most centrally, the school of postmodernism does that by challenging what are variously referred to as metanarratives, grand narratives, rationalities, or totalities, striving "to demonstrate the fractures and silences that have always been a part of the grand narratives," in Malpas's summary. It represents a perspective "axiomatic to postmodern thought" that "all the accounts of the making of the modern world, whether Marxist or Whig, radical or conservative, that claim to perceive the mainsprings of development . . . are to be resisted" because they "have been discredited by the course of history."

Lyotard described that process of resisting as the "antimythologizing manner in which we must 'work through' the loss of the modern." Baudrillard characterized postmodernism as "the immense process of the destruction of meaning" and declared that "he who strikes with meaning is killed by meaning." In rejecting the "the claim of any theory to absolute knowledge," postmodernism suggests instead "more contingent and probabilistic claims to the truth" that express it in terms of a more "diverse, iconoclastic, referential and collage-like character." Thus, literary critic Fredric Jameson proposed in his influential *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,* that one way to think of postmodernism quite arguably could be as "the narrative of the end of narratives."

When postmodernist theorists speak of the way modernist grand narratives of earlier times have been shown to be flawed, they are referring—not exclusively but most frequently—to ideas such as Fascism, communism, capitalism, Christianity, Marxism, and others that represent major, social-organizing philosophies. All still have varying numbers of adherents, but all have been shown to be objectively less reliable than once held to be as absolute guides to truth. And more broadly, the same line of reasoning is applied to all sorts of theories, explanations, assertions, etc., that are shown to be similarly unreliable—with postmodernist theory contending that much or even all modernist/Enlightenment rationalities ultimately suffer such a fate.

So for our purposes, we can think not only of metanarratives in this context but also of less expansive assertions that we might call mini-narratives or just simply narratives. That is, whenever any attempt to neatly explain the meaning of events, developments, or other subjects of societal interest proves fallible, it could in these terms be considered

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to further confirm postmodernist theorems. As Webster summarized it, "Postmodern thought is characteristically suspicious of claims from whatever quarter, to be able to identify 'truth.' "

Another way to think of this subject is in the way media scholar Frank Durham highlighted journalists' repeated failure in 1996 to produce a valid explanation concerning the cause of the crash of TWA Flight 800, "given the lack of actual empirical data defining the cause of the crash." He argued their fallibility was grounded in an assumption that "the cause of the crash should have been knowable" and thus excluded the dominance of "postmodern chaos." He proposed that it would be more interesting and ultimately tell readers more if "multiple explanations would replace the streamlined empiricism of modern journalism."

A profusely mediated narrative marketplace

So that brings us to the direct connections between postmodernism and commercial football that are the concern of this study. In the next chapter, we will see in detail how a coach actively pushes back against all sorts of narratives and metanarratives that are proposed by members of the media and football fans. And on an even broader scale, a veritable multitude of narrative advancement and rejection can be seen so commonly today in the way that the reality of media as we know it has been multiplied exponentially—far beyond the traditional press and broadcast networks with endless talk radio, social media, blogging, and tweeting, just to summarize it briefly.

It allows virtually every individual on the planet who wishes—and mind-boggling numbers seemingly do wish so—to actively, aggressively participate in the mediated narrative marketplace. Mediated representations are so much more profuse than ever before or even ever before imaginable. And it is a highly contentious marketplace of narratives, one in which it often seems that almost every posting is "characteristically suspicious" of the claims of almost all others and is fiercely determined to advance its own version of truth.

And at the same time, most of them must also be considered as failed narratives. For most participants in that narrative marketplace, quite simply, are wrong most of the time—because actual developments in the sports world are so completely random as to defy anyone's ability to know most of the time what will happen next, or even why past events

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really happened. For example, given that only one team can win the championship in any particular league, virtually each and every narrative concerning each and every team, except one, in any given season that advances assertions of success for any but *that* team is a narrative that failed. So too is any narrative about the one team that did win the championship that advanced assertions predicting anything *except* the championship. And even among that small selection of narratives, one must consider that the narrators almost always advanced *other* assertions contradictory in various ways of the certainty of championship for the team in question—thereby in most cases undermining to one degree or another the reliability of those few narratives that theoretically could be argued as successful.

And yet the narrative blitz goes on and on, because it almost never matters how incorrect any particular narrative is. The mediated narrative marketplace never closes, so participants freely move on to propagate and interrogate further strings of narratives that quickly leave all the ones that failed somewhere far back in a mediated past, which recedes ever more rapidly all the time.

Literary critic Brian McHale has written of how postmodernism is less concerned with asserting how the world can be changed than in raising a creative range of questions about the nature of reality in any given world. This study pursues questions about the mediated "world" of commercial football and considers how postmodernism's assertions regarding the unreliability of metanarratives contribute to deeper societal insights into the meaning of football. It proposes postmodernism's critique of linear explanatory narratives as a means of questioning whether difficulties in commercial football's efforts to maintain the Merriwell model more consistently may reflect the futility of anticipating significant success for such a grand narrative.

Pastiche and our need for narratives

In support of such proposed understandings of football's meaning in American culture, let us consider key relevant characteristics that are argued as critical for understanding postmodernism. First, postmodernism "describes the emergence of a society in which the mass media and popular culture are the most important and powerful institutions, and control and shape all other types of social relationships," as Strinati

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has articulated the argument. "Popular cultural signs and media images increasingly dominate our sense of reality, and the way we define ourselves and the world around us." That then suggests mediated commercial football, one of the most prominent institutions of popular culture today, has a significant role in shaping Americans' sense of reality and the world around us. The almost fantastical state of the interrelationship between football and media today will be elaborated upon in the next chapter.

Second, as social theorist Geneviève Rail focused upon in *Sport and Postmodern Times*, a collection of essays she edited on the subject, crucial to postmodernist thought is "the idea that the world is fragmented into many isolated worlds; it is a collage, a pastiche of elements randomly grouped in a plurality of local, autonomous discourses that cannot be unified by any grand theory," along with a preoccupation with "the problem of meaning…as fundamentally slippery and elusive." Consistent with that line of reasoning, this study proposes that the riotous collage or pastiche represented by football's mediated narrative marketplace today offers a more useful template for getting at the societal meaning of the game today than will grander narratives. That too will be focused upon more deeply in the next chapter.

Finally, the argument that football exists more than anything else as a powerful source of narratives draws upon society's great need for narratives—in all sorts of matters, not just football by any means. And even beyond that, the reality that narratives do not exist only as stories, amusements, or diversions. Indeed, they move mountains. They make things happen—because human beings much more often than they realize *act* upon narratives that explain what they *believe* to be transpiring—rather than only on empirical knowledge of what may actually *be* happening.

Peter Kramer, a professor of clinical psychiatry and author of several books, has written for example of the role that narratives play in the practice of medicine. He speaks of areas of treatment in which none of multiple therapies have yet been shown to be consistently more effective, so a physician's ability to relate to individual patient narratives can help identify which therapy offers the strongest potential upside. "It has been my hope that, while we wait for conclusive science, stories will preserve diversity in our theories of mind," Kramer said.

Further, he contends, the stories that consciously or unconsciously shape decisions on selection of data in meta-analyses of multiple clinical trials can ultimately color findings to such a degree that "the design of a

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meta-analysis stacks the deck for or against a treatment," and "effectively, the numbers *are* narrative." Therefore, ideally, doctors will "consider data, accompanying narrative, plausibility and, yes, clinical anecdote in their decision making," Kramer concludes. "We need storytelling, to set us in the clinical moment, remind us of the variety of human experience and enrich our judgment."

So too do we need to understand the role of narratives in shaping turns of direction in financial markets. Robert Shiller, the Nobel Prize winning economist, has written of how narratives can move markets more dramatically than actual economic developments. In one example he details, an idea of one sort or another may gain impetus for any number of random reasons, then begin to proliferate in media and develop into what he calls a "thought virus" with the potential to mutate "into a more psychologically powerful version, one with enough narrative force to create a major bear market."

Shiller states flatly: "Fundamentally, stock markets are driven by popular narratives, which don't need basis in solid fact." Such influential stories, "true or not," are what he means by thought viruses, and "when they are pernicious, they are analogous to the Ebola virus: They spread by contagion." When that happens, "first, they cause investors to take action that propels prices even further in the same direction," Shiller said. "These narratives can affect people's spending behavior, too, in turn affecting corporate profit margins, and so on. Sometimes such feedback loops continue for years."

Not what we want—but maybe what we need

The suggestion that the game of football may represent for us, more than anything else, a compelling source of narratives no doubt can seem a wacky egghead notion to legions of rabid fans. But those very legions indeed make the point. For truly one can consider any game of football, from kickoff to final play, and extending even before and after those moments, to be *nothing* without the narratives that sponsors, participants, media, fans, and others impose upon it.

For example, the fans must embrace the notion that there is great significance for them in deeply bonding with one group of individual players wearing a particular uniform (rather than those wearing another), when in fact any player in theory could potentially be wearing

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one uniform or another. How, for example, would fans respond if the two teams in any given game decided at halftime to swap uniforms? Would fans still maintain the same bond with different players wearing "their" team's uniforms? Or would the supposedly deep union between the fans and "their" players wearing one uniform endure when the players switched to the other team's uniforms?

In essence, what actually happens in all games of football at even the highest levels of play is no more than what happens when a bunch of kids take a football out in the yard, choose up sides, and see which can do the things that will count as scores more often than the other team can. To that end, the participants will shove and chase each other about for some period of time. And beyond that, all meaning imposed upon those activities is narrative—an effort to develop stories with explanatory power. It offers textbook examples of processes that sociological scholars and others would call meaning-making, the social construction of reality, or narrative creation.

What happens at the most advanced, most commercialized levels of the game is different only in degree, not really in essence, from what happens with children in the yard on their own. Yes, at those highest levels, teams select the largest, fastest players to practice and prepare with successful coaches in advance of games against other teams who have selected the largest, fastest players to practice and prepare with other successful coaches. Then those teams meet on the same field and try to execute what they have practiced and prepared to achieve. Certainly on some occasions, they do achieve those things—but just as often, indeed far more often, the results are more random. The things that happen are not what was planned.

Regardless, the mediated narratives—and as noted, the possibilities that term encompasses cast an unimaginably diverse swath today—never cease. Before, during and after the games, such narratives seek to impose meaning upon what will happen, what is happening, what has happened. The appetite for such narratives among audiences seems to have no limit. And only football truly feeds the hunger. As journalist Warren St. Moon has written, "without football to generate controversies and scandals" once the season ends, even the most successful sports talk-show hosts like Paul Finebaum in Alabama have to "improvise—sometimes desperately—to keep listeners tuning in for four hours a day."

And yet, as different and unprecedented as the circus of mediated commercial football can seem today, it really is what has been going on all

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along, in terms of competing narratives. As Oriard has noted, "it is most important to recognize that no single interpretation of football's place in American life has ever achieved consensus. The value of the games was debated from the outset and never resolved." Recalling the clash of two dominant figures at the University of Chicago around the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, "In what [Coach Amos Alonzo] Stagg called sportsmanship, [Thorstein] Veblen found exploitation and the desire to inflict damage on others," Oriard mused, "Who spoke for America, Stagg or Veblen? Both did from different vantage points."

So postmodernist theory tells us, perhaps, what we should have recognized all along—that football is not likely ever to give us definitive answers, but always it will give us the endless narratives that we may need even more. And just maybe, that is why the game exists and endures and flourishes and means so much to so many Americans anyway.

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7

Life in the Hyper-Mediated Marketplace of Football Narratives

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Probably no one has published more pages of scholarly ruminations upon just what might be the meaning of football than Michael Oriard—certainly no one who also captained the football team at Notre Dame and played in forty-two games in the National Football League before transitioning into the life of an academic. In his sixth book, after so many years of playing and writing about the game, he spoke of having "learned a great deal about Americans' fascination with football since the 1880s" and how it had made him "wonder if football's hold over us has changed, or how it has changed, as money washed over it."

It has indeed been a dizzyingly rapid evolutionary progression for commercial football from its late-nineteenth-century beginnings in America's oldest college towns. Gregg Easterbrook, another prolific essayist on implications of the game—more than two million words on that in his long-running column "Tuesday Morning Quarterback" alone—calls football today "the king of sports—the biggest game in the strongest and richest of nations." More than any other single factor in that transformation was television recognizing the salability of football. Once that happened, it jacked up the game's commercial physique with a steroidal degree of magnitude.

"To say that TV has been good for football would be like saying that roads have been good for cars," said Steve Almond, who has also recently essayed at length about the state of the game. "Most Americans had never seen a football game until television showed them one." Once they did, football's place in American life would soon morph steadily toward that of "a product in the entertainment business, competing against not just baseball and basketball but also MTV, blockbuster movies, video games, and everything else vying for Americans' leisure time and loose dollars" in Oriard's analysis.

In providing what has become essentially a central showcase for commercial football that never ends, television has "dramatically multiplied the number of people who care about it, significantly enlarged the role it plays in their lives, and harnessed the result of all that collective passion for the benefit of the networks and colleges," wrote Keith Dunnavant, another prolific analyst of the game, with a string of books, magazines, and films devoted to the subject. Television and football are all that, concerning each other, beyond question. But it could not be so, not on such a grand scale, if not for the way that football connects so elementally with so many corners of society. Television extends football's reach, but the reach would not, could not endure and keep expanding if

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that connection did not exist. Television may not bring out the best in us as a society, but it does bring us out, for better or worse.

So as we consider the complex interlacing of football, television, and so many of our society's primal, communal impulses, let us turn to one of today's most prominent products of that synergistic web. In ESPN's *College GameDay*, we have quite arguably our era's single most prominent mediated showcase of the game of football. And it seems to find more ways every season to further multiply the means through which it plugs itself into the surging confluence where the boundless appeal of the game ignites its publics.

The age of GameDay

In 1987, ESPN launched a new show devoting an hour on Saturday mornings to previewing college football games around the country. Soon it left the studio for a live format with the panelists each week set up outside a different stadium for one of the day's prominent games. Today it has mushroomed into a three-hour spectacle whose official name is "College GameDay built by The Home Depot," in deference to its major sponsor. The on-site format has developed into something of a cult celebration of the game and its fans, who gather boisterously around the set, to be a part of the live audience. The most popular regular feature comes near the end of each show when the panelists and a "guest picker" make predictions about the day's games. And most popular during that segment since 1996 is always panelist Lee Corso's final pick for that day's on-site game, in which he teases the crowd with various gimmicks and routines before finally pulling out and donning a large costume headpiece or other raiment associated with the team he predicts will win that day. Corso, a former coach known for his eccentricities and humor long before getting into television work, has been a part of the show since it started.

The show very much taps into the utopian youth-culture fantasy of freedom and fun without responsibility that the American college scene serves up to the world—droves of carefree young people partying in hedonistic abandon on picturesque campuses. Elaborately choreographing an aura of total communal spontaneity creates a dynamic showcase for what almost certainly is the single most prominent generator of narratives on the game of college football today. *GameDay* has created

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a compelling venue that connects it not only with television audiences but ardent crowds and an array of football players, coaches, other sports and entertainment personalities, and lucrative commercial sponsors like Coca-Cola, AT&T, and GM. Analyzing the show's 2014 season demonstrates just what a vivid narrative parade and cultural tapestry *GameDay* represents in the early twenty-first-century, mediated-football pastiche.

Flim flam, bim bam

Each show opens with a few minutes of scene setting by Chris Fowler, who completed his fourteenth year as host in 2014, followed by a music video of the band Big & Rich performing the *GameDay* theme song, "Comin' to Your City." It was originally a 2005 hit for the band but the lyrics are revised for the show—"You love football, you know what's next…It's time to kick off *College GameDay*"—to promote top teams and complement shots of dancing cheerleaders, big plays, fans and other related imagery. All through the show, a number of cameras zoom through and pan over the raucous crowd. At various times throughout the show, there are discussions among the on-set panelists about a number of games, often with live reports from reporters in the cities where games will take place. Interviews with coaches on the set and by the network's reporters on remotes are also regular features, along with features on players and teams, interviews with various sports reporters who cover college football, and all sorts of highlights providing local color on the host site.

In an early October telecast, for example, the show opened with the camera cruising in from above the University of Mississippi campus and Fowler setting the scene: "Welcome to the Grove, ten sacred acres of the collegiate landscape, oak trees a century old above a sea of red and blue," the colors favored by throngs of the school's faithful, gathered once again for the football and the society. It featured "high fashion, fine food, flowing drinks. A celebration across generations, today bigger than ever before," Fowler continued. "What a milestone, magnificent, momentous, Magnolia State showdown. *College GameDay* finally gets its Grove on." The Grove references were to the wooded area in the middle of the Oxford campus where such gatherings have been centered for decades but *GameDay* had never before visited. Fowler closed his opening with an enthusiastic reworking of a chant revelers there have been shouting

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for almost a century: "Hoddy Toddy, gosh almighty, where the hell are we? Flim flam, bim, bam. Ole Miss, by damn." Video featured crowds staking out spots in the Grove the second they were allowed in, where they would later set up tents and tailgate parties with chandeliers, doilies, fine china, champagne fountains, and crowds that have been estimated at twenty-five thousand. *GameDay* regular Samantha Ponder called it "a combination of a prom, an outdoor wedding and a NASCAR event."

Over the course of the 2014 season, there were no Billy Clyde narratives more recurring than those springing from Jameis Winston developments. During the mid September show, after the quarterback had been suspended for yelling an obscene phrase in the student union, more minutes were devoted to his behavior than to any other single subject. Fowler framed it in terms of Winston's "history of at the very least lapses in judgment and tone deafness in behavior" particularly at a time "when the climate is such that the degradation of women and violence against women in sports involving football is a front-page topic." Panelist Kirk Herbstreit, once a star quarterback in college himself, wondered if Florida State had told Winston clearly that the suspension was a consequence of his actions or had blamed it on public pressure: "If somebody passed the buck, it's just same-old, same-old—a player who since middle school has never necessarily had to live by the rules." Winston was featured in a clip from an earlier press conference, saying, "I have to tone it down." Former Texas coach turned commentator Mack Brown called Winston "the face of the Florida State program, and to many,... the face of college football." Panelist Desmond Howard observed—correctly, as anyone knows who has spent any time recently around college students when adults they need to impress aren't present—"Kids use these words and worse around each other on college campuses today. But he [Winston] can't do it." Winston's off-field behavior as well as his on-field play would be topics of every *GameDay* all season, as he led his team to an undefeated record until the first college loss of his career in a January playoff game.

Another of the most recurring set of narratives over the course of that season centered on efforts by the panelists and others to analyze and predict the outcome of deliberations by the committee created, before that season, to select four teams to participate in the first playoffs in major college football history. For many years, fans and sports media had clamored for a playoff system to determine the national champion, but the new system simply generated many more debates over which

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teams should be selected and how the committee should go about doing that. Week after week, the matter was argued ad nauseum by the *GameDay* panelists, an array of players, coaches and various other guests on the show, along with what seemed to be every football commentator in the country. Toward the end of the season, after still another lengthy discussion among the other panelists, however, Corso hit upon what actually was a perfect postmodernist assessment of it all: "Let me say something. I think they love it. Chaos is what they want, us talking about them week after week. The more chaos, the more people watch television." That is, the point was never to establish the objective truth of a champion determined through playoffs but rather to establish a new focal point for endlessly competing narratives. And within minutes of Corso's comments, an ESPN commercial promoted its upcoming two-hour *Playoff Selection Show*.

Merriwellian representations were abundant over the course of the 2014 *GameDay* season, with feature segments on stories that included a coach who was able to help treat his daughter's cancer by donating his bone marrow, a quarterback who was inspired by his mother's battle with cancer, and a running back who "leads his team in rushing and heartaches" after dedicating his football playing to the memory of a sister who died of an accidental drug overdose. Another feature on the Saturday before Veteran's Day told the story of an Iraq and Afghanistan veteran who had vowed if he got out of those conflicts alive he would one day play major college football—and was doing just that in 2014 for Clemson. Another told of how a running back at Mississippi State overcame virtual homelessness to become a star player. Still another running back, this one a Heisman candidate for Nebraska, said that even after his playing ended, he planned to use his renown "as a platform to inspire the youth. As long as I do that, the game of football will continue to live on through me."

GameDay also regularly advanced narratives that invoked the game in terms of its connection to a heroic past. One video essay by ESPN sportswriter Wright Thompson focused on the season-ticket seats in Mississippi's stadium that his father had carefully selected before he died and that the family continued to use. "The ghosts come alive in Section O. There is not a single time I sit in those seats that I don't remember my father," Thompson said. "People often ask about game day in Oxford and the Grove. And I try to explain it is much more to Mississippians than a party. It's the way we talk to the dead." Later in the season, ESPN

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reporter Tom Rinaldi essayed at length about the contest between Harvard and Yale, which would be played later that day and has been long been popularly referred to as "The Game." As clips featured games in the rivalry over the years and shots of the schools' stadiums and campuses, he narrated, "The name is perfect, but incomplete. Because it's more. It's legacy and history. And always, it's rivalry." He spoke of how in 1875, the schools first played in what was the second game in American college football history. "But most here will tell you, it's the first one that mattered," he declared, before highlighting several of the greatest games from years past in the rivalry. "This will be the twenty-seventh time they meet with at least a share of the Ivy League title at stake. But really, there's more. Oppression versus freedom. Justice versus tyranny. Darkness versus light. Good versus evil."

The sea of homemade signs brandished by many in the crowds that gather each week for *GameDay* advanced their own narratives via one of the simplest forms of media possible. A common theme always was disparagement of opponents, such as "I hate Auburn," "Fail State," and "Kiss my butt." Humor was often the objective: "This sign is funny because no one from Mississippi can read. Roll Tide!" "Sarah McLachlan can't save these Dawgs," read a sign waved by a fan opposing the Mississippi State bulldogs and referencing the singer's frequent commercials seeking support of animal-cruelty-prevention efforts. Always, many signs featured Winston, such as: "I took the SAT for Jameis," "Jameis Winston's lawyer for Heisman," and "Jameis stole my sign." The humor seemed to elevate a bit in the Ivy League crowd at Cambridge: "Even Jameis got into Yale," "My first sign was too erudite for you uncouth ruffians," and "Yale cites Wikipedia."

Game picks—a narrative circus

The crowds always stick around for all three hours of the telecast until the final segment. That is the time when the show's panelists engage in a sort of round-robin announcement of which teams they are predicting will win the dozen or so top games of the week. Corso's "headgear pick," as *GameDay* actively promotes it, in the final minute of each telecast has long generated the crowd's greatest anticipation and strongest reactions. But rivaling him for attention in at least some cases are the "guest pickers" who join in with the show's regulars on the predictions. It

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offers a rich example of just how wide open the mediated marketplace of commercial-football narratives has come to be.

For the guest pickers often come from walks of life far removed from any established expertise in determining the relative strengths of football teams—and yet it can seem that the crowds at *GameDay* most loudly and enthusiastically validate the predictions of those least formally qualified. Among the 2014 guest pickers: Gabrielle Reece, college and professional volleyball star turned model and actress; Ken Griffey, Jr., the retired professional baseball star; country singer Brad Paisley; Alice Cooper, widely called the "Godfather of Shock Rock;" actor and retired professional wrestler "Stone Cold" Steve Austin; baseball All-Star Jonathon Papelbon; Jase and Willie Robertson, brothers and *Duck Dynasty* reality-TV stars; and Marcus Luttrell, retired Navy SEAL, Purple Heart recipient and bestselling author;

GameDay did include some former pro-football players in Roger Staubach, Brock Jensen, Matt Birk, Mike Singletary, and Joe Namath. But all of them missed on as many or more of their predictions as did the guest picker who indisputably turned in the smash-hit performance of 2014. In fact, with seven of nine predictions correct, pop singer Katy Perry guest-picked just as successfully as any other in that role the entire season except Jase Robertson, who got all nine of his selections right.

When Perry walked onto the *GameDay* set that morning in Oxford, she had never attended a college football game. She had the Mississippi home crowd roaring the moment she took a seat in a furry pink football jersey, clapping her hands down on the set's desk and yelling, "Gosh almighty!" She pulled out props, like a plate of corn dogs (in reference to an odd but popular saying among opponents of Louisiana State University that its fans smell like the batter-fried hot dogs) and a heart-shaped cardboard fan featuring a photo of Oklahoma quarterback Trevor Knight. Brandishing the latter, she gazed into the main camera and cooed, "Trevor Knight, you hear me? Call me!" She correctly forecast that Mississippi would win its game that day over Alabama, unlike Corso who donned the elephant head worn by the Alabama mascot, only to have Perry throw corn dogs at him and then wrestle the elephant head off of him.

Later, Lee Fitting, *GameDay*'s senior coordinating producer, told the *New York Times* there was "no question" that Perry was the best guest picker in the show's history. Perry, who did not attend college, ran out on the field with the Mississippi fans after their big upset victory, and

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later celebrated with them at a local bar. "I think she realized, 'This is my college experience, packed into one day, and I'm going to make the most of it,'" said her manager, Bradford Cobb. Perry later told *ESPN the Magazine*, "Journey was playing 'Don't Stop Believing,' and I just thought, 'Why not be the quintessential college girl and jump off the bar?'" That leap, along with virtually everything else about her one day of college, was captured for a music video, further generating over the course of that single day still more dimensions for one of the most unlikely but engaging mediated football narratives ever.

A hyper-mediated marketplace that never ends

The dazzling, high-energy, profusely teeming-with-narratives pastiche that *GameDay* represents would all by itself be unimaginable to football figures from not that long ago, like Bud Wilkinson, or even Joe Don Looney and the first television generation. But today, all of the above comprises only a fraction of the hyper-mediated marketplace of commercial-football narratives. Today's fans, conditioned to multiple college and pro games telecast almost every day of a season that runs from August into January or February might go into the shock of withdrawal if they were suddenly time-traveled back to the Wilkinson-Looney era, when no more than one or two college games a week was the norm. But the vast selection of football televised now *too* exists as only a fraction of the picture in today's media cornucopia.

Sports-talk radio alone has become an endless blitz of narratives spewed forth one after another just by the hosts of the shows alone—never mind all the calls from listeners who light up the studio phones and ignite the air waves. That is, for those who are actually listening via the air waves, when so many more are doing so via Internet connections. And even at this point, we still have touched on only a fraction of the full hypermediated picture because, yes, now try—just *try*—to consider the mass of narrative generation and consumption made possible by a digitally networked world. Almond has written of how hard it is to imagine today that "there was a time when interest in football was restricted to weekend afternoons in the autumn," especially now that even beyond the games fans spend exponentially more time "consuming what might be called the ancillary products: highlights, previews, updates on injuries, trades, arrests, contract negotiations, firings, and so on." And in today's

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blogosphere culture, scholars such as Jacob Dittmer have documented "a surge of new forms of fandom" have been made possible through a variety of media products that enable football fans to "engage in their own games of control and ownership over the sport by participating in online communities."

"Americans now give football more attention than any other cultural endeavor. It isn't even close," Almond declares. "An errant comment on Twitter begets a national story and weeks of agitated kibitzing, and a player accused of something more serious—dogfighting, or murder—commands the grave regard once reserved for a presidential scandal." Indeed, there is no football offseason any more, given that "the moment the Super Bowl ends, draft speculation begins. The draft itself wasn't even televised until a few years ago. More than 25 million people watched the first round last year."

Wilkinson's newsletter for a new media age

In this raging maelstrom of exponentially ever more mediated football narratives spun out by infinitely more people than ever before, how could the current heir to the Great White Father at the University of Oklahoma even *begin* to hold forth? Bud Wilkinson's *Football Letter* from more than half a century ago would seem today an irrelevant relic. But the fact is, Bob Stoops, the coach in Wilkinson's old job and one with almost as remarkable a winning percentage, manages to pull off something that resonates surprisingly of Wilkinson's efforts to get his own narratives out.

Of course Stoops has an in-house multimedia operation that dwarfs anything from the Wilkinson era, advancing an array of Oklahoma football narratives for a hungry market. Analytic analysis of data on Facebook by the *Times* ranked the state as second only to Alabama in the highest concentration of college-football fans. And like almost anyone in the commercial-football business today, the university regularly finds itself responding to counter-narratives from the dark side of the game. In 2014–2015 alone, the program had one of the most highly recruited freshman running backs in the country put on probation in a plea deal after being accused of knocking a woman unconscious and breaking several bones in her face; a starting linebacker suspended for a year by the school after an internal investigation into sexual-assault charges not

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prosecuted by the district attorney; and a receiver who had been a blue-chip recruit when he arrived on campus hit with eight years probation on accusations of exposing himself to women in public.

So it remains vital public relations to push the Merriwell model as vigorously as ever, to continue pushing back against the Billy Clyde tide. The current-day Oklahoma efforts to do that can be seen in many of its media activities, but one of the best examples is the way it has begun utilizing the telecast of its spring "game"—in actuality a scrimmage between groups of players to entertain fans mid-offseason. Earlier, Stoops had resisted televising the spring game because of what it might reveal to opposing coaches. But beginning especially in 2014, the telecast—an athletic-department production rather than that of the cable sports network on which it is shown—has been packaged elaborately as a message-packed promotional enterprise.

Commentators employed by the athletic department tell the audience about activity on the field, cutting in frequently with supplementary highlights such as a "Big Game Bob" graphic summarizing Stoops's national championship, four appearances in national-championship games, nine Bowl Championship Series appearances, eight Big 12 championships, two Heisman Trophy winners, thirteen first-round draft picks, and more. Sideline interviews are conducted with players. Highlights are shown from the team's upset win over Alabama in the Sugar Bowl. Commercials solicit contributions to the President's Associates fund of the university. A recorded feature has Knight greet the camera in front of the opulent new athletic dormitory "right across from the stadium, a quick walk from campus. It's the best place to live not only in the Big 12 but I think in the nation."

The camera follows the quarterback on a dorm tour, then an athletic-department announcer notes it has contributed forty-six million dollars to academic programs over the past thirteen years. In a feature on an offensive lineman majoring in petroleum engineering, the announcer declares, "The Sooner Athletic Department strives for their student athletes to achieve great things, but not just on their field of play." When the game action resumes, additional features provide tours by other players of the indoor football-practice facility, the expansive weight room, the luxurious locker room, the auditorium-style meeting room, and Stoops's office, with its array of game balls from big wins, family photos, and a showcase full of his many championship rings. Before the game ends, additional segments include Stoops talking about how players

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regularly read to students at area schools and visit Haiti each summer on a mission trip, and announcers talking about the success and vision of Athletic Director Joe Castiglione.

None of it represents anything particularly remarkable in terms of organizational public relations. But the packaging and coordination of all of it—within a telecast of what is billed as a football game—does highlight just how much the program's marketing effort has evolved in recent years. And Stoops plays his designated role in all that.

But it is during each football season that he can best be seen directly advancing his own narratives. In a news conference at the beginning of each week preceding a game, the coach fields on live television any question asked him by local and regional sports media gathered there. And in the process of doing that, he winds up producing what can be understood as his version of the *Football Letter*—utilizing different media and different media skills, but effectively pulling off the same feat as Wilkinson. And everything about Stoops's demeanor during the sessions suggests that, like Wilkinson, he considers it important for him to give audiences "insight the newspapers [and any other media] may have missed." Stoops quite simply is in the narrative game as much as he is in the game of football.

What Bud Wilkinson did in a weekly newsletter drafted, crafted, and polished before being sent out via the U.S. mail, Bob Stoops does facing microphones, cameras, a regional television audience, and a roomful of sports reporters with their own agendas. He takes their questions, but then regularly reframes them on his own terms, advancing his own narratives and rejecting theirs—again, all in real-time and without PR assistance at the podium. It's actually a rather impressive feat that he pulls off as a routine part of his weekly schedule, a demonstration of intellectual depth and quickness that likely would surprise many who assume they know how coaches always think and talk.

Coach as postmodernist sage

The basic format for the hour-long show has commentators employed by the athletic department making various introductory observations for a few minutes, then the shot shifts from their studio to Stoops when he arrives at the press-conference podium. After a few opening comments of his own, the questions begin, with the camera mostly staying on the

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coach but sometimes momentarily panning to the audience to show a questioner. The following analysis focuses on the body of exchanges between Stoops and media over the course of the 2014 season.

The most consistent theme that emerges in the exchanges is the way that the coach comes across most often as if he were something of a postmodernist sage, demonstrating—often less than patiently—the fallibility of one narrative after another that individuals among the sports media attempt to propose. Quite often he flatly rejects the proposed narratives and articulates why. Sometimes he dismisses them with just a few words as if that is clearly all that is needed to demonstrate their flaws. Occasionally he concedes at least part of an assertion to be valid but rejects the rest of it. Stoops generally maintains a reserved demeanor throughout the conferences, but at times his tone and facial cues suggest various levels of annoyance and at times stronger aggravation, often seemingly at having to explain the obvious. But through it all, in articulating his response, he most often seems to quickly cut through each question to the premise upon which he sees it as based—and then frequently to address the premise.

Early in the 2014 season, when asked whether upcoming opponent Tennessee being a twenty-one-point underdog gives him reason for concern in motivating his team, he responds, "No, because again, we have great respect for the program there," and then insists that the quality of the opponent is an irrelevant matter anyway. "Our focus is not on the other team. It is on how are we going to be our best." At one point he does concede that his team has been making relatively fewer mistakes as the season proceeds. But when asked about popular beliefs that the Southeast Conference generally has players "a cut above" other conferences, he replies, "Well, I don't know. That hasn't been the case in our experience." Even on a question about when his team will wear the special uniforms announced earlier for some games that year, he chuckles but dismisses the notion that he would have considered the matter: "I haven't thought about that. I think about the football game, not about the uniforms." Later in the season, after the team wins in the special uniforms, having lost twice in previous years when wearing such gear, he is asked if he requested that the latest uniforms not "be cursed" like the earlier ones. "Oh. I'm not much on that. The uniform didn't win or lose anything. How we play wins and loses."

In another exchange, Stoops is asked about whether the criticism the NFL was receiving that fall for its handling of the Ray Rice

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fiancée-punching incident—the video having just gone public—made him pleased that perhaps public perception was better concerning the university's handling of its one-year suspension of the Oklahoma player who had punched a woman after she shoved and slapped him in a restaurant that summer. "I don't know what that is. I'm just in my office working on football, so I can't say that I hear and read everything that everyone else does," he begins, but adds that certainty about such decisions is often not available. "There is nothing right about it, I guess, but we did what we felt was the right punishment. It is what it is. We felt it was strong enough, and regardless of the circumstances those decisions are always difficult." A little later in the same conference, a question is asked whether a recent incident—in which Southern California's athletic director joined its coach on the field during a game to complain to officials about a call—gives Stoops concern about that same athletic director being on the committee that will choose the teams for the postseason playoffs. "No, I don't see where that pertains to the fact that he is on the selection committee. I mean, there won't be any referees in there. He's got all the integrity in the world. I don't know why that would be an issue," Stoops responds.

That pattern continues as the 2014 season proceeds. This analysis does not assert that Stoops *never* agrees with the questions that are put to him. That does happen, but notably less frequently than him challenging or revising the premise of the questions. His determination to maintain only narratives consistent with his perspective is evident. When asked before an upcoming game with West Virginia if changes to his staff made following the 2012 season were related to the same team gaining so many offensive yards against his team that season, he replies, "No. It had nothing to do with those people in particular. What it had to do with was we realized scheme-wise some of the things we were doing weren't going to hold up against the run." When the same questioner argues that West Virginia moving a wide receiver to running back before that game seemed to be something Oklahoma could not handle, Stoops says, "I think they wish they had done that earlier in the season too probably. We had the bad misfortune of having it happen that day." The questioner attempts to press the point, but never gets his narrative accepted. "Yeah, I've been over all this. Some of the schemes we were in were stronger in pass coverage than against the run but fortunately we were still one point better that day," Stoops concludes, noting that Oklahoma actually did win the game in question.

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When asked later about his role in a former Oklahoma star linebacker appearing at a previous game and "getting you guys fired up," the coach rejects the proposition that he ever has any role in such matters: "I'm not part of the game-day festivities. I'm part of the play on the field. Other than that I'm out." To a question about whether he and his coaches "get more juiced up for games" against teams like West Virginia that are known for their high-scoring offenses, he responds: "No, I don't look at anything that way. It's all about the team aspect of competing. We get fired up every week, whoever we are going up against." Later he is asked if it is "impossible to stay at peak intensity getting up for big games so often." "I don't know why that would be," he counters. "You know, it's funny, you hear that every week. To me, we are never way up here; we are never down here. I don't care who we are playing.... You don't count on some level of excitement to carry you through the game."

While Stoops generally responds with rather few words, on occasion some subjects lead him to take time to more elaborately advance narratives that seem particularly important to him. When reporters at the conference ask him to comment on a recent ESPN poll among major-college coaches that ranked him first, by a solid margin, as the coach they would most like to have their sons play for, he first seeks to deflect the attention to his "respect for the coaches in the coaching fraternity" and how there are "more than fifty I would like my sons to play for that I know personally by their character." When asked again about the poll, he takes that Merriwellian characterization further, explaining that he and his coaches' priority is "to build those relationships" with players, to "be demanding and... put the right things in front of them daily, to help them grow as young men. It has to gel, but I believe when you do that really well you end up with a really good team." And when asked if achieving that is difficult today, he rather passionately advances the Merriwell model still further. "I don't think it is that difficult. These guys that we work with, if they know we really do care about them, they will work for you," he insists. "I enjoy these guys, and you only hear about the problem one percent, two percent. I'm not talking about just at Oklahoma but all around the country. The kids we work with are incredible."

Over the course of the season, opportunities to invoke Merriwellean narratives seem to instinctively animate Stoops. For example, when discussion focuses on the emerging success of running back Samaje Perrine, who set a national record for most yards rushing in a single game, Stoops characterizes the freshman as "a great character guy," a hard

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worker who is "about as low-key, humble, down-to-earth kind of guy as you are going to find." When a reporter follows up on that by asking if it is "refreshing…in this day and age of social media, cell phones, selfies, to have a guy like that," he says, "I think it's great, but we have a lot of those guys. And so does everyone else," insisting that "locker rooms around the country are loaded with these kinds of guys."

But just as quickly as Stoops grows so relatively effusive on such occasions, he pulls back immediately when the reporters seek to nudge him beyond the boundaries of his own narrative. After the earlier discussion of coaching styles produces questions about Stoops's own coaches, he momentarily seems to warm to the subject, talking first in a relatively relaxed manner about the influence of his coaches in college, and then about his father, a longtime high-school coach in Ohio. But when he is asked how his father disciplined him and his three brothers, he immediately draws the line. "Oh, you know, we're not going to go into our family matters," he says, then closes the subject with a bit of humor: "Strongly, let me just put it that way. With four of us in one room, it was a circus every night." The reporters laugh and Stoops smiles. But he says nothing more on the subject.

After the team's first loss of the 2014 season, to Texas Christian University, the coach seemed to grow particularly resistant to reporters' efforts to advance explanatory narratives. Asked if he would have liked more running plays, in light of several passing plays that did not succeed, he replies, "Oh, in hindsight? Yeah, that would have been a lot better. But that's not how it went." What about the defensive backs who had good games earlier but struggled in the loss? "They didn't have a very good game is the best way to say it." Why did that happen? "It doesn't matter why. There isn't a reason why they didn't have a very good day." What about his offensive coordinator calling a quarterback draw that was stopped near the end of the game instead of a play with more potential to produce a longer gain? "I thought it was a great call. Every other time we ran it, what did we get—fifteen, twenty yards and a first down? We needed a first down—you are forgetting that part." Did Oklahoma throw too many passes when TCU had more players defending for the pass instead of "in the box" to defend against running plays? "Yeah, and they've got two other guys hanging there, ready to come back to the box," Stoops counters. "And when you saw five in the box, it's probably third and ten, and if we ran the draw, you would have had a problem with that, if it didn't get fifteen yards like it did every other time." Was

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it shocking to him that his team did not have the readiness that it had displayed earlier in the season? "I didn't say readiness was lacking. You said that. He said that. I didn't. I said we didn't play very smart. Now you guys are saying why—not me."

When discussion turns to the upcoming game with Texas, by far Oklahoma's primary traditional rival, Stoops is asked if it helps to have that opponent next, "as opposed to an opponent that doesn't maybe get your attention as much." The coach responds: "Well, yeah, anybody ought to have your attention after a loss, right?... It doesn't matter. Whoever you play after a loss has your attention, I don't care who it is." He was asked if it would be "strange" that for the first time since Stoops had been at Oklahoma that Texas would have a new coach. "No, I don't see that different at all because, well, it would be different if he and I were out there playing, but that isn't happening. And I have never looked at it as an individual issue. It's not for me."

After his team defeats Texas, but not as convincingly as fans and media expected, Stoops is asked what he would like the "identity" of the Oklahoma offense to be. "I don't know what you want. I don't have a word for identity. I like to see one that scores a lot and is efficient and one that is well balanced, you know, run and pass." So, on plays when the quarterback has an option-read to hand the ball off or keep it himself, is one option there more often than the other? "It's different every play." Well, it looked like Texas had the defensive ends selling out to take away the run and the possibility of something being open outside. "You think?" Stoops says nothing further, possibly considering the reporter's question too speculative. When asked if he has anything more, Stoops simply replies, "No, no reaction to that." Well, then, do you wish your quarterback had kept the ball himself more often? "Heck, I wish he had kept it every time and gone a hundred yards every time. That would be real simple." His demeanor suggests he may find that line of questioning reflects an assumption that he could know the unknowable. But whatever the case, reporters do not obtain the elaboration they seek.

Later in the same session, Stoops is asked if he feels his team improved from the game before to the Texas game. "Well, it's a heck of a lot better, winning over losing. That should be pretty obvious to everyone." So, was the team's style of play better overall? "Yeah, because you won. Is it the end-all for us? No, now we are six games into it, so any time you come away from the Cotton Bowl [where the Oklahoma-Texas game is played] in a rivalry game like that with a win, it's pretty darn good." Is it

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frustrating that even though Oklahoma won, you still get so many questions about what is wrong? "No, that's the nature of everybody. That's the nature of what you guys do. It's the nature of what fans do," Stoops says. "But that's ok. I'm not a bit complaining about it. We get to put the trophies in the case, you know, and guys get to see them here for this year, and that's a real positive." Three trophies go to the winning team of that rivalry every year, and Stoops in effect pointed to them as representing more valid narratives than those represented by concerns over why the margin of victory was not greater.

The price of narrative dissonance

In so frequently resisting and challenging the premise of questions put to him in the conferences, Stoops could be seen in the terms of this analysis to have developed a postmodernist-grounded model for coaches in the hyper-mediated age—however he may have arrived at it. That is not to suggest that Stoops has consciously utilized postmodernist theory in fashioning his style of interacting with media representatives. There is absolutely zero evidence for such an assertion. But in an age of cybergalactic narrative profusion, it can hardly be surprising that a football coach would find it in his and his program's interest to staunchly advance narratives that *he* finds more valid interpretations of relevant football realities. Clearly the evidence does suggest Stoops is quite skilled at rejecting and countering narratives that fail to meet that standard.

Certainly coaches at high-profile programs like Oklahoma's are always at risk of having competing narratives undermine their success. As discussed earlier, human behavior can be shaped as much or more by the power of narratives as by more objective realities. As also discussed, the careers of Oklahoma's previous dynastic coaches, Wilkinson and Switzer, can be argued to have suffered from forms of narrative dissonance in their later years. And such could potentially be the fate of Stoops as well. For after his 2014 team wound up with four losses in the regular season and also a bowl-game loss, the narrative pattern that began to coalesce among Oklahoma media represented Stoops in some of the harshest terms of his fifteen-year career there.

"Among OU teams with championship hype, this four-loss season will rank with the four-loss 2005 season as the most disappointing in recent school history," said Dean Blevins, who played at Oklahoma in the 1970s

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and is now an Oklahoma City sportscaster. Standing in front of a graphic featuring a photo of Stoops and the caption "Unable to finish," he declared: "Losing at home as a 21-point favorite, losing a two-touchdown lead in the final five minutes before losing in overtime is unacceptable—and that is probably a pretty good description for the 2014 debacle." Jim Traber, who co-hosts the most popular sports talk-radio show in the Oklahoma City market, said, "This was the most embarrassing season in Bob Stoops's career, since he's been here." He insisted that the team was on a steady decline. "When the national polls come out next year, they're not going to be ranked as high," said Myron Patton, an Oklahoma City sports anchor—and indeed the *Sporting News* six months later would rank the team twentieth, down from first a year before. Earlier the *Oklahoman* had pointed out that after losing only four games by twenty or more points his first ten years at Oklahoma, it took Stoops just five more seasons to lose another four by that margin.

Such comments are characteristic of the way sports media seem to insist that the players and coaches upon whom media have imposed narratives of superiority are to blame when the narratives prove unreliable. That is, virtually every sports-media figure in the area who criticized Oklahoma for the 2014 games it lost had predicted the team would win most or all of those games. Nevertheless, when participants in the game do prove not to be eternally superior—as all inevitably must, eventually—sports media virtually always represent it as a failure on the part of the participants, rather than a failure of media to construct more reliable narratives. But that is simply one fact of life in the hyper-mediated marketplace of narratives in which Bob Stoops and other big-time coaches in the commercial-football industry operate today. They must attempt not only to win as many games as possible but also advance the narratives they see as most valid. Sports media by contrast have a relatively easier job of only advancing narratives.

In the next chapter we will consider what mediated football looks like today when Hollywood is doing the narrative creation. In the game as rendered by television's *Friday Night Lights*, we will find a pastiche of remixed representations that further help us work out the relationship between commercial football and postmodernist theory.

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8

A Merriwellean Billy Clyde from a Postmodern Beer a Minute

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Moving on through the landscape of hyper-mediated narratives that is commercial football today, we arrive at arguably commercial art's best effort at telling the story. Further, *Friday Night Lights* presents us with rich opportunities for postmodernist understandings of the game, what we do with it today, and quite possibly what we *should* do with it.

Whereas those whose interests have been served down through the decades by advancing the Merriwell or Billy Clyde models most often have tended to promote one or the other, *FNL* rejects any such consistency. It freely, creatively, sometimes playfully reworks such media representations historically associated with football, remixing the heroic and antiheroic, crosswiring the positive and negative, alloying the constructive and destructive. Its football-centric narratives loosely associate themselves with an array of outcomes, spinning through an interplay of the familiar and unfamiliar that may or may not mesh neatly for primetime-television typologies.

FNL provides a body of texts rich in their remarkable evolution in the cultural positioning and understanding of meaning derived from the game of football. The television series, which began a five-season run in 2006, was developed from the 1990 *New York Times* bestselling nonfiction book *Friday Night Lights: A Town, A Team, A Dream* by H.G. Bissinger, also the basis for a major Hollywood movie. The book, which recounted one football season in a Texas town where life revolved around the Odessa Permian High School team that had won six state championships and two national championships over a two-decade period, believing a mystical force called "Mojo" powered the dominance.

The book received much critical acclaim and still sells well a quarter-century after its publication, ranking second in mid 2015 on Amazon's list of bestsellers on American football and fifteenth among books on sports history. The television series found unconventional ways to take on the difficulty of transforming a story with an established and finite timeline into weekly primetime entertainment, using its established characters and setting to venture freely beyond confines of the original. The show somehow always managed to feel like it was about playing and coaching football in a small Texas town and at the same time about so much else. The *New York Times* characterized it as "a melodrama in the most redemptive sense of the term, elevating our understanding of the form the way . . . Balzac and James did."

In and of themselves, the raw components of *FNL* are relatively common in popular television drama—a small town's desires and excesses,

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teenagers' steamy couplings and uncouplings, their elders' pursuit of temporal gain—and could have been purposed more unambiguously for primetime entertainment. That might have proven more commercially beneficial, given that the show faced the threat of cancellation due to low ratings throughout its five-year run. But Executive Producer Peter Berg told *Broadcasting & Cable* magazine early on, "Obviously, football's a big component of the show, but we're gonna try and branch out very quickly." Thus he was committed to "explore not only high school culture and sports culture but American culture in general." And thus we consider here the degree to which that aspiration was fulfilled and find considerably richer insights into socially constructed meaning than might be expected.

In this chapter and the next, we will consider the ways *FNL* reworks the two most central staples of the established Billy Clyde narrative: alcohol and women. We will see how the show employs the sort of contingent pastiche of representations that, in the precepts of postmodernist theory, get closer to reliable truths than do more encompassing metanarratives.

A book, a film, a television series

Friday Night Lights might not have ever become all that it is known for now if not for a bit of journalistic sleight of hand. Many years after Bissinger's book had been published, he confessed in *Sports Illustrated* that he gained such remarkable access to the team in the first place by misleading Odessa Permian coach Gary Gaines about his intentions. Bissinger persuaded the coach that his objective was a story on the lines of *Hoosiers*, the heart-stirring film about a small Indiana school that defied all odds to win a state basketball championship in the Fifties. Bissinger maintains he actually did plan on writing something like that, and even that his book did invoke the spirit of the movie in "moments of sustained inspiration."

But as he spent time in Odessa, as he "heard the word 'nigger' used all too often" and learned the school spent more money on football game films than on English books, he said, his journalistic instincts nagged him about glossing over so much to forge an inspirational fable. Then when the team's superstar running back Boobie Clark, who up until then had been recruited by virtually every major college in the country, was injured and had all his dreams ended, Bissinger knew "this would be a

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book with more than a passing share of darkness." Coach Gaines did not speak to the author for many years and told *USA Today* if he had it to do over, he never "would have allowed Bissinger the access to write the book," because of his view that it "painted Odessa unfairly as a city of rednecks and racists, where winning mattered more than learning."

Many local residents were even angrier, so much so that a promotional appearance by Bissinger in Odessa the year of the book's publication had to be canceled because of threats made against him. He said in *SI* that for years he could only visit by creeping in "like a church mouse for a day or two" and then creeping back out again. But some of the important figures in the book like Brian Chavez, the team's tight end from Bissinger's year in Odessa, called it "dead-on accurate, painfully so," telling *USA Today* that "a lot of the people who say the book got it wrong didn't read it." Those who did read it made it a critically acclaimed bestseller with staying power. In a 2002 list of the one hundred greatest sports books—based on a standard of "sportswriting [that] transcends bats and balls to display all the traits of great literature: incision, wit, force and vision, suffused with style and substance"—*Sports Illustrated* ranked it at Number Four. The movie also succeeded commercially and critically, with Billy Bob Thornton playing the role of a coach in the impossible position of fulfilling demands for him and a bunch of teenage boys to deliver an entire town the benediction of ceaseless victories and state championships.

Powerful as the story was, it seemed questionable whether it would be possible to translate it into a weekly drama that could stay compelling over the course of an entire television season. Critically however, Berg pulled it off from the start, with *The New York Times* calling it "the most visually sensual series perhaps ever seen on television," and *Broadcasting & Cable* magazine critics ranking it the second-best show on television in the mid 2000s, after *The Sopranos*. But weak ratings led NBC to consider cancelling it after the first season and even more seriously after the second. The network said in *Sports Illustrated* that it was difficult to sell bigger audiences on "the show's challenging mix of genres—sports, soap opera and social commentary."

Berg said part of the problem was NBC moving the show around to different time slots, including for a while opposite ratings juggernaut *American Idol*. But *FNL*'s relatively small viewer base proved vigorous in its lobbying of NBC, including efforts that resulted in fans mailing the network thousand of footballs and light bulbs as a show of support

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for the program's renewal. Ultimately, NBC kept the show going after the second season through a creative deal with DirecTV in which new episodes were first telecast on the satellite network before being aired on NBC.

Those five seasons contributed eloquently to the place the story has come to hold in American pop folklore. *Times* television critic Ginia Bellafante said during its run that there were "no cameras in Hollywood at this particular cultural moment more efficiently deployed" than those on *FNL*. She stressed that to hold the show to "a measure of realism would be to miss what are its essentially Expressionistic pleasures." Such pleasures were indeed critical to what gave the series its literary dynamism and an enduring place in popular imagination.

Nearly five years after the television show ended and a quarter-century after the book was published, ESPN writer Wright Thompson chronicled a 540-mile odyssey across Texas in quest of "the state of football in all its joy, regret and insanity," with his ultimate destination: Odessa. There, even though Permian had fallen on hard times some time before, with no state championship since the year after the book, the "myth of the Mojo dynasty outlived the dynasty itself."

Meaning-making and *FNL's* hardest drinking player

As in the book and in the Billy Clyde side of the game generally, alcohol use by football players and other characters is common in the television series. Indeed, drinking is one of the most frequently utilized story elements. But rather than a consistent modernist metanarrative, the representations of alcohol use over the course of time can be read more as a postmodernist pastiche in which drinking is associated with multiple potential outcomes or mini-narratives. From that perspective, *FNL* proposes relationships between masculinity and alcohol that can be contextualized as constructive, destructive, or neutral and which can advance an antiheroic or heroic model of embedded meaning in representations of football players.

Most essential to the broader thesis of this study, we will see *FNL*'s multiplicity of football-centric drinking outcomes rework the way media representations have most traditionally defined Merriwell/heroic and Billy Clyde/antiheroic models as part of the narrative process of meaning-making in relation to the game. The discussion will be centered

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on the most prominent player over the time that he was most integrally part of the game of football on *FNL*.

In terms of the players on the field in its fictional story, the show debuted with its focus on a classic Merriwell-model figure in the fictional Texas town of Dillon. Jason Street, considered to be the best high school quarterback in the state, is clean-cut, modest, and devoted to family, church, and community. But after an injury in the first episode renders him a paraplegic, his playing days end and the story line for him shifts to his long struggle to build a new life off the field.

So it is Street's best friend, fullback Tim Riggins, who goes on to star most consistently on the field in the fictional football games of *FNL* over the course of the first three seasons, before he finishes high school and his story line also shifts more to off-field developments. Riggins also does far more onscreen drinking than any other player portrayed. He begins the series squarely on point with the Billy Clyde Puckett model, living a self-centered life of almost constant womanizing and hard partying. His football talent in a football-obsessed town gives him a free ride at school and with one girl after another, while the fact that his father and mother are both out of the picture and he lives with an older brother gives him total freedom from parental restraints. And most of his time on screen involves drinking, often heavily.

Over the course of the fifty episodes of *FNL*'s first three seasons, Tim is shown drinking in thirty-six. Although there are some occasions when his drink of choice varies, that choice is most often beer. During that time, the number of beers that Tim is either shown drinking on screen or suggested to have drunk off screen—based on indications such as the number of empty beer bottles around him during drinking scenes and the quantity of beer that he acquires before drinking scenes—was estimated in this study to be a minimum of eighty and quite possibly more than two-hundred twenty. The minimum represents the number of beers that Tim is shown drinking on screen, while the larger figure includes that number plus the total number he is suggested to have drunk off screen—based on the indications noted above.

So if we calculate his per-episode beer drinking based on that estimate for the entire fifty episodes, that would place the figure at between 1.6 and 4.4 beers per episode. If that calculation is based on the thirty-six episodes in which he drinks, it would place his per-episode beer consumption at between 2.22 and 6.16. Thus, given that the character Tim Riggins typically has around three minutes of time on screen per

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forty-five-minute episode, his overall beer consumption can conservatively be estimated to fall somewhere between one-half and two beers for every minute of screen time—or quite plausibly characterized as a beer a minute.

In tracking the social meanings embedded within all that drinking, this analysis found a range of themes advanced that focused on a nuanced relationship between masculinity and alcohol that could be constructive, destructive, or neutral, and which could advance an heroic or antiheroic model of behavior. The latter two themes were developed relatively more strongly, but the presence of others must also be considered in terms of *FNL's* postmodernist pastiche of multiple outcomes. We will see that through the Billy Clyde Puckett model, Tim interacts with alcohol as a force that can be constructive, destructive, or neutral—but through which the character can also be pulled from the Billy Clyde/antiheroic model toward the Merriwell/heroic model.

Drinking and constructive outcomes

Often the theme of drinking as part of constructive outcomes is advanced through story developments involving the Dillon High School football coach, Eric Taylor. He often resolves various domestic issues with his wife—such as working out issues involved in having a second child unexpectedly—over a glass of wine, as well as working through problems involving other characters while sharing a drink. Coach Taylor, for example, shares a drink with an older assistant coach while working out problems the latter has with a star black player.

But narratives in which Tim Riggins is part of developments involving constructive outcomes are also frequently advanced. He is drinking beer, for example, when he persuades a group of former players to take on the purchase of a house to renovate and sell. Indeed, in every scene in which Tim and the others are working on the remodeling or even discussing it, they are drinking beer. Yet despite all the drinking, the young men complete the rather extensive renovations ahead of schedule. They celebrate and plan the use of their profits with still more drinking.

Another example can be seen in the way Tim and other players are often portrayed as gathering on the school football field on various nights, when it is closed, to drink and bond in various ways. (On *FNL*, the players always seem to have access not only to the game field at any hour of the

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day or night, but to the lighting and public-address systems as well.) For example, a group of current and former players gather on one such night with multiple six-packs of beer to celebrate having helped one of the former players rehabilitate an injured knee and win a college football scholarship.

Drinking and destructive outcomes

Just as regularly, *FNL* represents alcohol use by Tim and other characters in the context of drinking as part of destructive outcomes. This further contributes to the broader framing of a nuanced relationship between masculinity and alcohol. In an interview before football practice, a television reporter smells alcohol on Tim's breath and asks if he has been drinking. Tim denies it but his intoxication becomes obvious through his repeated mistakes once practice begins.

At the drive-in that is the main hangout for high school students, a drunken Tim gets into an argument and near fight with another player, who tells Tim to "go home and sleep it off." In another episode, as Tim drinks his way through a six-pack and largely ignores her, a girlfriend breaks up with him, telling him he is "just another mediocre football player who is going to grow up to drink himself to death."

Other characters also are regularly depicted in the context of drinking as part of destructive outcomes. A player who generally does not drink is talked into going with other players and drinking heavily in a hot tub with several of the team's cheerleaders, and later photos of the party posted online cost him the girlfriend he really cares about. A leading team booster's drinking contributes to his wife leaving him and to humiliating behavior by him in front of many townspeople at a postgame party. Even Coach Eric Taylor uncharacteristically drinks to excess in a moment of rivalry with an ex-boyfriend of his wife. The two eventually wind up in a drunken wrestling match among the white-linened tables at an upscale restaurant.

Drinking as part of neutral outcomes

FNL also contributes to the multiplicity of a nuanced relationship between masculinity and alcohol by working in some representations of alcohol use in the context of drinking as part of neutral outcomes. In this

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theme, the drinking cannot be said to provide any substantial embedding of social meanings other than the presence of drinking as a minor story-line fixture that contributes to neither constructive nor destructive outcomes in those instances. In examples of such representations, drinking takes place on screen but has no material influence on any particular outcome. In some instances, Tim's beer drinking is seen only in passing, or in other typical cases, various characters are shown briefly drinking at parties, or in restaurants or bars.

Drinking as part of the Billy Clyde/antiheroic model

The *Friday Night Lights* themes that most strongly contribute meaning in the context of drinking are those that can be expressed in terms of either advancing representations of Tim Riggins through the Billy Clyde/antiheroic model or through the Merriwell/heroic model. Most significantly, the discourse consistently works over time to place Tim in a struggle between the two, with on balance the latter dominant in the social meanings embedded in his story.

In the beginning of the series, and to some extent throughout, Tim is represented strongly and vividly in terms of the Billy Clyde/antiheroic model. Early on, his ethos is summarized by a cheerleader who tells him: "Tim, I know you don't ever do anything you don't want to do, and I guess that's fine." In the series-opening episode, he is first seen passed out on the living-room sofa in the home where he and his older brother live, a half-dozen empty beer bottles on the coffee table next to him. As his brother tries to rouse him for football practice, Tim is joined by a young woman wearing apparently nothing more than an unbuttoned dress shirt of Tim's. His frustrated brother walks off muttering, "This is life, not *Maxim* magazine."

In Season Two, Tim, carrying a case of beer to his truck, runs into a churchgoing young woman who counsels him not to "go around bragging that you spent your entire summer in a drunken stupor." He grins and tells her he spent much of it "in a three-way with the Stratton sisters." In Season Three, as a sports talk-show host speaking in voiceover tells his radio audience that Tim Riggins must be in top condition to carry more of the team offense in the upcoming season, a series of shots shows him lolling in a swimming pool with girls, drinking a series of beers and then finally throwing up.

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The theme is further advanced by having other players on the team discuss Tim's legendary exploits, such as the time he "was so drunk he fell asleep on the kickoff." When the coach asks Tim to help a younger player whose family has recently moved to town feel more a part of the team, Tim first shows him where underage athletes can buy alcohol. "If you ever need to get away from anything, anyone, you will go in there. You hear me? Smitty's—best bar on the planet," Tim advises. When the younger athlete says he doesn't drink, Tim replies, uncomprehending, "What do you mean, you don't drink?"

It is in the representations of Tim drinking with his best friend, Jason Street, in the opening season of *FNL* that the meaning-making sets up the subsequent representations that will place Tim in a long running struggle between the Billy Clyde/antiheroic model and the Merriwell/heroic model. The night before the first game of the series' first season, Tim sits by a campfire with Jason and other players, drinking one beer after another from an ice chest. He tells Jason—who at that point is still a superstar quarterback on the rise—that once the latter starts making big money in professional football, Tim will always look out for the ranch Jason will buy back home.

"Here's to God and football and good friends living large together. Texas forever," Tim proclaims, raising a beer. Later, after an injury in that first game leaves Jason a paraplegic, Tim at first can't bring himself to visit his disabled friend for weeks, then utilizes alcohol to work through the situation. He spirits Jason out of a rehabilitation center and stocks up on beer; then they ride in his truck to a lake with Jason's girlfriend. Tim promises, "The three of us, we'll rise up, get through anything."

Drinking as part of the Merriwell/heroic model

Finally, the theme that *FNL* can be said to most significantly utilize to embed social meanings in its broader representations of drinking is that in which the Tim Riggins character is pulled from the Billy Clyde/antiheroic model toward the Merriwell/heroic model. As the preceding discussions demonstrate, *FNL* does not utilize words, images, and thematic emphasis that represent alcohol use by Tim Riggins and other characters in a simplistic or monolithic manner, but rather a nuanced one in the context of multiple outcomes. Yet among those outcomes, arguably the most creatively substantial theme effects something of a

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reversal of the historical progression through which mediated representations of football players shifted from the Merriwell/heroic model to the Billy Clyde/antiheroic model—pulling Tim increasingly into modes more akin to the former.

That process is set in motion through representations in which Tim must face consequences of his "Billy Clyde" lifestyle, beginning with his betrayal of his best friend Jason by sleeping with his girlfriend Lyla. Jason does not find out for a time, but Lyla's guilt eventually leads her to end the affair, telling Tim, "God, it's not even 7 o'clock and you can barely stand," she says, gesturing at the drink in his hand. "If you think getting drunk is going to make this any easier, you're wrong. It's not cool or charming. It's just pathetic and gross and I feel sorry for you. I really do."

Wrestling through increasing confrontations with the ways that his hard drinking contradicts his belief in it as a successful focal point for life, midway through the first *FNL* season Tim announces he is going to quit drinking. Friends are derisive and skeptical, but he actually does abstain for a time, during which he has his best football game to date. But his fledgling efforts in the direction of the Merriwell model collapse when Jason realizes Tim has betrayed him and ends their friendship. Tim begins drinking again.

But from then on, the struggle over which model—Billy Clyde/antiheroic or Merriwell/heroic—Tim will embrace continues. In story-line development, it plays out first as he wrestles with a growing realization that his absent father—a portrait of a Billy Clyde Puckett aging badly—is not the larger-than-life figure he had long idealized but a petty thief who is dishonest even with his adoring son. A series of discoveries leads Tim to seek a form of redemption for helping his father hustle an unsuspecting victim in barroom pool, returning later to allow the sucker to gain vengeance by beating up Tim. Later, Tim manages to win Jason's forgiveness through an effort that involves finding a way to make the wheelchair-bound Jason a part of the football team again, as well as several cases of beer consumed with other players in the course of hanging out overnight on the high school field.

The framing effort continues to pull Tim back from antiheroic to heroic through drinking endeavors in which he has similarly higher purposes. Tim accompanies Jason on a trip to Mexico for risky surgery that is illegal in the United States but which Jason is convinced will enable him to walk again. By drinking heavily with Jason for weeks,

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persuading Lyla to join them, and ultimately arranging an intervention on a "booze cruise," Tim ultimately convinces Jason not to undergo the surgery and to return to Texas. Later, Tim goes to similarly heroic lengths to help Jason launch a career at a sports agency in New York City, after which they part company with a fist bump and a final vow of "Texas forever." Thus, it is the thematic effort to pull Tim toward the Merriwell model that ultimately imbues that "Texas forever" promise with meaning far more authentic than when Tim uttered the same words while still squarely within the Billy Clyde model.

Tim goes on to push himself to additional heroic efforts that lead to better lives for various characters, including his brother and Lyla, as well as lesser efforts for the sake of other characters. He must earn his way back onto the football team after missing practices and games while on a drunken road trip, as well as to free himself from a harrowing entanglement with a temporary roommate who turns out to be a violent methamphetamine dealer. He is forced to endure extended and undeserved punishment from his coach who mistakenly jumps to the conclusion—based on Tim's Billy Clyde reputation—that the player had tried to use alcohol to take advantage of his daughter. As the characters near the end of high school, Tim works determinedly to persuade Lyla, who has begun drinking heavily and skipping school after her father blew her college fund on a foolish investment, to find a way to follow through on her plans to attend college. Thus, over the course of time, in a number of ways, the Tim Riggins character is successfully pulled from the Billy Clyde/antiheroic model toward the Merriwell/heroic model.

Although certainly some of the *Friday Night Light* themes discussed here could be assessed separately as modernist narratives, considering thematic meaning in terms of multiple outcomes suggests a fuller mediated understanding of a football-centric story arguably more consistent with a postmodernist pastiche. It may also suggest more practical considerations of the Billy Clyde Conundrum than others that seek hegemony for either the Merriwell or Billy Clyde model in understanding football's place in American culture.

Practical, that is, in the sense that accepting a multiplicity of outcomes to be the shape of things to come will likely prove more predictively reliable than investing in the hope of any particular outcome—given what our broader considerations tell us about commercial football's history

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and fundamental dynamics. And that may be the case as well when it comes to turning a postmodernist lens on *FNL*'s representations of the other element of the established Billy Clyde metanarrative that has been as essential definitionally to it as heavy drinking in relation to football: Women.

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9

Two-Tiered Gender System Encounters Emotion Work

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Truth be told, neither Billy Clyde nor Merriwell for that matter would really be all that comfortable with the way *Friday Night Lights* employed a football-centric narrative to have female characters participate in a dismantling and reconstructing of those archetypal models that is often jarring. It was a process that changed life on the show for the men accustomed to those roles as well as for the women in their lives who once dutifully conformed to corollary supporting roles. Thus, the show's commitment to "explore not only high school culture and sports culture but American culture in general" included a determined but fluid exploration of a multiplicity of gender narratives.

As in our consideration of the show's alcohol-related representations, we find *FNL* a text that can be read as more of a postmodernist pastiche or collage-like panorama of assertions than a linearly consistent modernist metanarrative. As noted earlier, individual narratives from *FNL* considered as such must be conceded as arguably modernist and subject to the failures and fractures inherent in that. Through a multiplicity of representations, what Mariah Burton Nelson called football's long-entrenched "two-tiered gender system with men on top" is regularly deconstructed and synthesized with other systems of meaning. That system is manifest on *FNL* in many contexts in which women are represented decoratively as cheerleaders and other peripheral roles, as well as the victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and other violent, antisocial behaviors. But women on *FNL* also participate in forcefully rejecting such roles, and in incorporating that rejection into reworkings of the traditional Merriwell and Billy Clyde models.

On *FNL*, the more contextually contingent the better. Its reworkings of the Merriwell and Billy Clyde models are sometimes gentle, sometimes confrontational, sometimes whimsical. In regard to the particular concerns of this chapter, we will see the representations are advanced toward what have been described by sociologists as "companionate" forms of male-female relationships with "higher levels of positive emotion work" by both partners. In virtually every episode, *FNL* seems to be working through situations "in which the manly sports culture is so pervasive we may fail to recognize the symbolic messages we all receive about men, women, love, sex, and power," as Nelson, who has written extensively about women and sport expressed that dynamic.

That analysis is consistent with a shift in the marketing of the show early in its development. Rather than sticking strictly to the football-as-Texas-town-religion theme that was inherited from the book and movie

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(detailed in Chapter 8) and aimed at the broader youth market, *FNL*'s producers and NBC decided to alter that in response to ratings data that indicated thirty-five to forty-nine-year-old women "were a far more reliable audience and right in the show's sweet spot." It didn't require a truly radical shift though, since female characters were given significant roles in the drama from the beginning. In Season One, for example, the show's fictional Coach Taylor talked over so many matters with his wife that one actual Texas high school football coach told *Sports Illustrated*, "Most coaches realize what they need to do before their wives tell them." That assertion would be challenged week in and week out for the next four years of *FNL*, as Coach Taylor's wife—and many other women on the show—regularly convinced men they often actually did not realize what they really needed to be doing.

Stronger women, persistent tiers

As discussed earlier, sociologist Gerhard Falk characterized football as a business that "depends on the support of a large number of American fans whose values are such that they coincide with the forms and conditions of football." That identification of shared values within the game has been asserted to have contributed to some bridging of racial, religious, class, and ethnic divisions. "Immigrant offspring learned to transfer communal, family, clan, and ethnic loyalties to the larger community of football with patriotic fervor," sport historian Gerald Gems found, a process that "eventually produced a national football culture more inclusive and democratic." After World War II, the integration of professional baseball, and the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling banning segregation in public schools, ever greater numbers of universities and high schools slowly began to open up to African American players—particularly as segregated teams realized they faced an increasing competitive disadvantage against integrated teams.

Historically, the game has proven less inclusionary toward women, on many levels. Even as women pressed for a more equal role in American society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, football provided a key enabling mechanism for "men to define a limited role for women, as it defined the characteristics of true manhood," Gems wrote. Traditionally, football in particular has been a sport that "segregates boys from girls, men from women," in Falk's assessment. "Sexism is virulent

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in the sports world and most extensive among those who play football." For Nelson, "Sport is a women's issue because on playing fields, male athletes learn to talk about and think about women and women's bodies with contempt." Over generations, such male socialization patterns have contributed to "beliefs and behaviors that reinforced patriarchy and dominance rationalized as mental, physical, and moral development," Gems asserted.

In many ways, the nature of the two-tiered paradigm has evolved, particularly since the late twentieth century when Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972 banned sex discrimination in the allocation of funds for government-sponsored sports programs. It significantly helped increase female inclusion in many high school and college sports, which has expanded the audience of female sports fans. Certainly efforts to market football and other sports to women also have grown in recent years. In professional football, for example, that effort has gone so far as to feature players wearing pink shoes and other pink articles of attire during games to help raise awareness of efforts to prevent breast cancer. Although relatively more women participate in sports today, in football the majority tend to be relegated to the sidelines, as cheerleaders and feature commentators for broadcasts, but only rarely doing the play-by-play reporting.

A two-tiered gender system certainly seemed to be at work when a Florida State University freshman reported in December 2012 that she had been raped. It turned out the accused was Jameis Winston, the school's star quarterback, but reporting by *The New York Times* found there was virtually no investigation by police or the university. Late the next year, after it became public that the victim had identified Winston as her assailant, the local prosecutor concluded he lacked evidence to file charges, saying, police "just missed all the basic fundamental stuff that you are supposed to do." Winston was allowed to keep playing through the 2013 season, when the controversy became public, winning the Heisman Trophy and leading his team to an undefeated national championship. Further investigation led the *Times* to conclude that in "a community whose self-image and economic well-being are so tightly bound to the fortunes of the nation's top-ranked college football team, law enforcement officers are finely attuned to a suspect's football connections."

Some wives of NFL players have talked recently about how their husbands' teams practiced a subtle but effective form of two-tiering by

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encouraging them not to report domestic abuse to the police but to work the team to resolve such problems rather than spark media attention, according to other *Times* reporting. They spoke of how the team's "close-knit culture" as well as other players' wives created an environment that encouraged them to believe it was better to "keep quiet even if the hostility in their marriages seemed unbearable than to cause a ruckus that could upend the success and harmony of the team" and possibly imperil them through loss of their husbands' income. NFL cheerleaders, including some who have initiated litigation over their complaints, have also reported not being paid for their duties, which they say have included being required to work games for no pay, as well as perform at social functions such as golf tournaments largely to entertain the predominantly male guests.

"The stronger women get, the more enthusiastically male fans, players, coaches, and owners seem to be embracing a particular form of masculinity: toughness, aggression, denial of emotion, and a persistent denigration of all that's considered female," Nelson wrote. "By pointing to men's greater size and strength and by imbuing those qualities with meaning (dominance, conquest), many men justify to themselves a two-tiered gender system with men on top." From that perspective, the representations advanced over the course of the *FNL* series stand in even sharper contrast as a vision of what a gender system with no tiers might look like.

Merriwell and Billy Clyde—with women and reconstructed

In *Friday Night Lights*, as central as football is to the show, participants actually spend less time playing the game than they do interacting with women. And as with its representations of alcohol use, *FNL* can be read as a postmodernist pastiche in which gender relations are associated with multiple potential outcomes or narratives, rather than advancing a consistent modernist metanarrative. From that perspective, *FNL* proposes relationships between women and men that can be contextualized as reconstructed representations of the traditional Merriwell and Billy Clyde models, or of women in relation to those models. Also proposed are representations of the centrality of the football-coach figure in terms of "companionate" understanding and of male football

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figures advancing interests in terms of "emotion work." And perhaps contributing most to the broader thesis of this study is the way in which this multiplicity of football-centric narratives proposes representations of historically male-centered ideals instead in terms of intractable situations negotiated via shared efforts with women—advancing a model of cooperation between men and women toward idealistic progress, rather than a two-tiered gender system. This discussion focuses particularly on developments over the course of the first three seasons when the primary original characters were all still integral to the main story line.

The classic Merriwell character upon whom *FNL* first focused most centrally goes on to figure prominently in the various themes. Jason Street first appears in the series as not only one of the most recruited high-school quarterbacks around, but also tall, handsome, and a model youth. But his world is quickly turned upside-down in ways far beyond anything Frank Merriwell ever had to face. An injury in the first episode renders him a quadriplegic; his long-time girlfriend sleeps with his best friend; his staggering medical bills force him and his parents to sue the school and his football coach; and many in the town that once idolized him begin to turn a cold shoulder. It all sets in motion a struggle over the course of the first three seasons of *FNL* in which Jason Street must draw upon not only the core values of his deepest inner Merriwellean heroism but a much more diverse set of resources.

His journey of transformation contributes significantly to the thematic multiplicity. Over time, his reclamation process requires him to coalesce his understanding of the meaning of football with a much fuller sense of life as a truly cooperative venture, successfully negotiated only when the contributing influences of interconnected men *and* women are truly embraced. The story line will not allow him redemption without reconciling and reformulating virtually every relationship he has known. The women and men in his life in turn must similarly evolve far beyond the narrower roles they once unquestioningly believed were predetermined in terms securely centered within the meaning of football.

It is Street's best friend, fullback Tim Riggins, who begins the series fully immersed in the Billy Clyde Puckett model. But he too is forced into a long evolution toward a future he would never have expected or sought in the world as he knew it in the opening episode. His football talent in a football-obsessed town gives him a free ride at school as well as with girls and women. But in *FNL*'s telling of the stories of Street/Merriwell and Riggins/Puckett, neither ultimately can regain a

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meaningful place in life—once events have dismantled their previously comfortable existence—apart from the influence and parallel evolution of Street's childhood sweetheart, town "good girl" Lyla Garrity. In the series' beginning, she can hardly have a more perfect life, in the context of a small, football-centric town in Texas. She is wealthy and sweet, a cheerleader and a top student, prettier than almost any girl around, devoted to her star-quarterback boyfriend. Her father, Buddy Garrity, whose auto dealership makes him one of the town's richest men, focuses his considerable financial and political influence on the Dillon Panthers football team.

By early in the first season of *FNL*, however, the Merriwell and Puckett models are brought into total conflict. Lyla too finds her previous familiar life ripped further from her, as she and Jason break off their engagement, and her father's philandering ends her parents' marriage. She pushes back against her "good girl" constraints, smashing her car into several new vehicles on her father's lot during the father-daughter dance at school. She demands angrily but effectively that Jason take responsibility for overcoming the challenges forced upon him. She tosses her cheerleader outfit in a stadium trash can. By the end of the first *FNL* season, Jason and Lyla are no longer together, but their interaction in response to all that his injury brought into their lives has pointed them both toward new horizons.

Before much longer, Jason gets rid of his football trophies, discovers his persuasive-communication skills as a car salesman, and develops a relationship with a woman that—against medical odds and her own immediate wishes—results in a pregnancy. Lyla at first grows deeply involved with her church and a new boyfriend she meets there. Tim Riggins continues to pursue her, while going through a series of experiences that amount to his own odyssey. It is largely traversed about hometown streets no longer so familiar to him but also one in which his interactions with key figures, both male and female, time and again help guide him back on track. Tim is first forced to face the fact that his absent father is not the larger-than-life figure he had long idealized and to repair relations with the older brother who has done his best to replace their father. He also must earn his way back onto the football team after missing practices and games while on a drunken road trip, then free himself from a harrowing entanglement with a temporary roommate who turns out to be a violent methamphetamine dealer, and endure undeserved punishment from his coach.

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Through its representations of those developments, *FNL* works to deconstruct the secure understandings that Jason, Tim, and Lyla originally held, all linked to the place in life that they believed football had provided for them. The process forces them into unwelcome experiences and relationships, as well as the beginnings of difficult reconstructions of virtually all their previous relationships. It leads Jason to believe the unexpected opportunity to become a father represents the driving purpose he has been searching for since losing his ability to play football. His efforts to hold on to his relationship with the new baby and its mother, Erin, come to shape every action Jason takes. Meanwhile, Lyla and Tim eventually do wind up together, but at odds over where they are headed. When he tells her the problem is that she doesn't view him seriously enough, she replies that it is his complacency in "the pinnacle of the dumbest part" of the football scene that scares her: "You show up drunk to school. . . . You have the Rally Girls do your homework. . . . Your relationships last about twenty minutes. How am I supposed to take you seriously, if *you* don't?" In time, their cooperative interaction with each other and with Jason helps provide something approximating resolution.

Jason is desperate to improve his income because Erin has concluded she cannot make it financially with him in Texas and must take the baby to her parents' home in Connecticut. He first pulls together a small nest egg by improbably renovating and successfully selling a house—an effort that requires him to overcome the resistance of the original homeowner, the impetuosity of his partners in the venture (a friend he met in rehab and the Riggins brothers), and ultimately his own self-doubt. Jason also produces an impressive promotional video on Tim, after his brother pleads for help with impressing college recruiters, which ultimately does help generate a scholarship offer. Both processes develop his skills in persuasion and management, preparing him to envision a longer-term career plan after a chance meeting with a New York sports agent. With Lyla's encouragement and Tim's assistance, he journeys to New York, gets an entry-level job at the agency and then heads to Erin's house to try and convince her he can make a life for them. Watching from the car, Tim realizes that his boyhood friend has finally found what he lost when he went down on that football field back in Dillon in Episode One. And in the construction of this line of thematic emphasis, *FNL* has channeled the Merriwell and Puckett models into a cooperative effort that represents women not as a separate tier from their world but intrinsically vital to it.

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Lyla gets accepted at Vanderbilt, but after learning her father has lost her college money in a risky investment, she moves in with Tim and makes plans to attend the small state university that has offered him a football scholarship. For a time she begins drinking heavily and skipping school, until Tim finds it in himself to make a determined effort at getting her back on track. "I'm not here to solve all your problems, Garrity. I'm here to support you, whatever choice you make," he tells her. "But this self-pity that I've been seeing,… you're better than that." Eventually he persuades her to follow through on her Vanderbilt plan. As the trajectory of their seminal story lines nears the end of its arc, through their ongoing, cooperative interactions with each other and with other characters over time, *FNL*'s Merriwell and Puckett figures, and the woman with whom both have been romantically involved, are all moving beyond the limitations that once stood between them and more meaningful destinies.

The transformative power of 'emotion work'

Ultimately it is within an even more central set of relationships that *Friday Night Lights*' develops its pastiche of mini-narratives most fully. For that, the series consistently focuses on Dillon's head football coach Eric Taylor and his interaction with his wife Tami, characters whose presence serves as an idealistic force in conflict with the town's relentless, even self-destructive obsession with winning football games. More broadly the conflict is utilized to advance an overarching narrative on the consequences of misplaced societal priorities that over-emphasize short-term, material gain over deeper, more enduring values. In *FNL*'s telling of their story, the coach and his wife push back against forces of much greater power through cooperative interactions with each other and with other individuals in ways that only sometimes allow higher ideals to prevail. In two early episodes, for example, that tension is underscored with the camera cutting from one shot to another of townspeople immersed in various game-related rituals, as the song *Devil Town* by the indie rock/folk band Bright Eyes plays: "I was living in a devil town / I didn't know it was a devil town / Oh Lord, it really brings me down about the devil town."

Coach Taylor—and more broadly the character development of Street and Riggins—provide resonance of the "emotion work" of men in their

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relationships with women that sociologists Bradford Wilcox and Steven Nock have articulated. Their work suggests the most crucial determinant of a woman's marital satisfaction to be the level of her husband's commitment to "higher levels of positive emotion work"—affection, empathy, and quality time devoted to intimacy. In their summary of what they call the *companionate* theory of marriage, they assert that such a relationship "stands in clear contrast to an older model of marriage where women specialized in expressive, private functions and men specialized in instrumental, public functions." Additionally, the theory sees "the elimination of patriarchal authority and power . . . as a key mechanism for promoting marital intimacy" and predicts "that marriages characterized by an ethic of equal regard, as well as equal access to the labor force, will have higher levels of male emotion work and interpersonal honesty." Finally, it holds that "egalitarian-minded men are supposed to be more open to a 'counter-stereotypical' masculinity conducive to marital emotion work." Other research on the subject supports similar assertions.

Tami and Eric Taylor's relationship throughout the series reflects such a companionate approach to marriage and the centrality of "emotion work." One story line, for example, has them in conflict over whether to buy an expensive house that she has found. After scenes in which she resists his initial tendency toward patriarchal authority in the decision-making until he agrees to visit the house again, he speaks there plainly from the heart of both his own desires for the house and his deep fears of the financial strain it would create on them. The scene and story line ultimately are resolved with Tami telling him: "I don't need this house, I don't. But I appreciate your coming and looking and being honest with me. That was all I cared about—just whatever we do, we are doing it together."

The coach's regular demonstrations of empathetic regard for his wife's views are not presented as something he instinctively does on his own, but often result from Tami's assertion of resistance to the sort of patriarchal authority that he is never completely past imposing. Early in the series, when she mentions a job opening for a guidance counselor at the high school where he coaches, he tells Tami he is not ready for her to do that, but she replies that she has taken the job already. In another episode when he tries to use the stress of his job as an excuse for failing to let her know about a team party at their house, she presses him until he recognizes the stressfulness of her own job and other responsibilities. When the coach tells Tami that he is uncomfortable with her decision

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to get involved with the mayor's reelection campaign, she pleasantly but firmly explains, "Well, you know what, you are just going to have to be uncomfortable with it then."

When Coach Taylor is pressured by team boosters to illegally recruit a talented but self-centered quarterback willing to transfer for a price—rather than to go with another player on the team who is less talented but truly committed, he tells his wife, "I think sometimes that for anyone to do what I do, it is damn near impossible to not sell your soul just a little bit down the river." One of the fullest representations of the coach attempting to push back is dramatized in an episode in which he grows disgusted at the way town merchants take over the stadium shortly before the Panthers are to play in a state playoff game there. When a chemical spill renders the stadium unsafe, the coach uses his authority over the game site to make a metaphorical statement of his own values. He takes Tami to a cow pasture near Dillon and tells her about his idea to play the game there. "Where would people park? And how would you put lights in here?" she asks. "Where will people pee?" He says he doesn't know yet but he is sick of the way the town has grown so "money hungry." Finally he tells her to close her eyes: "Pretend you are ten years old again, just playing. You're just *playing*. You want to *play football*." Once she buys into his vision, they enlist the team and other students to prepare a football field that meets regulations. As the crowd gathers in the pasture, alternative rock band The Killers' *Read My Mind* plays, underscoring his idealistic stand: "The good old days, the honest man / The restless heart, the Promised Land."

Futile idealism, heroic cooperation

Quite often though, the principled efforts of Coach Taylor and his wife fail in the face of the disproportionate power of the forces opposing them. Midway through the series, the story line engages that dynamic so fully it costs the coach his job. Earlier, Tami has been promoted to principal of Dillon High School. Just as she begins to grapple with the way tightening budgets have cost the school teaching positions and numerous other vital resources, Buddy Garrity arrives at her office with photographs of the giant new Jumbotron video scoreboard for which the boosters have just successfully concluded fundraising. As he hands her a multimillion-dollar check for it, she asks him if the school really needs a

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Jumbotron in light of all the budget cutbacks. "Well, no, Tami, we don't need one." he replies. "But we *want* one. And we're going to have one." They make it clear that not even Coach Taylor's wishes on the matter will change their mind. Nevertheless, Tami later decides the school needs teachers and chalk and textbooks more than the Jumbotron, and she moves to reallocate the scoreboard funds for academics. But the boosters persuade the superintendent, a Garrity customer and golf buddy, to buy the Jumbotron instead.

Tami continues to wrestle with funding issues, which contribute to even greater setbacks for her husband in his own conflicts with the Dillon football establishment. When it becomes apparent that in return for increased funding the state is going to require Dillon to reopen a second high school on the east side of town, closed some years before because the boosters wanted all the town's best athletes on one team, the boosters begin secretly maneuvering to keep the best players at Dillon High in the planned redistricting. When the coach tells Garrity that he doesn't approve of such tactics, he is rebuked. "That's not something you need to worry about," Garrity growls coldly. "If you don't want to know, don't ask." The situation worsens when the Coach tries to resist pressure from boosters to start a flashy sophomore quarterback, J.D. McCoy. Despite the conflicts, the team makes it to the state finals. But on the eve of the championship game, the coach tells his wife, "I have no idea what's going to happen tomorrow." She replies, "Well, you're going to win." Then after a pause, she continues, "Or you're going to lose." And a moment later: "Either way the sun is going to come up the next morning."

After Coach Taylor benches J.D. for poor play in the game, and his backup leads a comeback that falls just short, J.D.'s wealthy father persuades the boosters to replace the coach. But Eric is offered the same job at the planned East Dillon High when it is reopened. He and Tami drive out to the long abandoned school, where the football facilities and the players' talent will be meager compared to Dillon High. Their plan for the future is not fully articulated as the sun sets on them in the final scene of that season. But it is clear they see the coach can make an ultimate statement on his values by idealistically taking on the quixotic challenge.

His coaching efforts at the new school prove disastrous for some time, though eventually he teaches his undermanned team lessons about winning and life. And when the series ends, he has taken a coaching job in Philadelphia, so Tami can accept a university position there. At

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least within the mediated pastiche represented by *Friday Night Lights*, thematic multiplicity can make it possible for football to move beyond the two-tiered gender system. Such possibilities may be the case in the game beyond *FNL*'s fictional confines, at least in some instances. Indeed, as discussed in Chapter 6, recent developments have already initiated degrees of change in that regard. But perhaps only a deeply modernist idealism could imagine two-tiered gender relations ending anytime soon in the world of commercial football.

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10

Conclusion—Football, Postmodernism, and Us

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Has this attempt to tell the story of football in postmodernist terms succeeded? Hmm. A hardcore postmodernist would probably have no choice but to insist such a thing is not possible—because telling such a grand story successfully would mean accepting a reliable metanarrative of football. And all metanarratives must fail.

But a more, let's say, *hopeful* postmodernist—as the author feels this study has made of him—would say postmodernist theory has lessons to teach us that are too important to presume that successful stories about important social phenomena are not even possible.

So in terms of commercial football and the society in which it flourishes, your hopeful author proposes that we can at least mini-narratively consider a few lessons from this study.

In the nineteenth century, American college students began playing a brutal game that contributed some element of meaning to their lives that their classes didn't. Its popularity spread rapidly, so fascinating to audiences that one mediated representation after another extended its reach still further. Over time, football's essential structure proved fundamentally ideal for both narrative drama and commercial exploitation.

The appeal of the game enabled it to survive early challenges that strove sincerely to banish it from civilized society. Reformers saw in the game a serious undermining of Americans' physical, intellectual, and moral well being. But rule changes and its phenomenal popularity and commercial viability allowed it to flourish.

Frank Merriwell and the model of football player as honorable hero that he inspired also helped. But eventually, the darker side of the game gave rise to another model that championed the player as hedonist. In fiction and in fact, Billy Clyde Puckett would prove so primally connected to football's soul it became evident that it could not live without him.

Yet resonating in the ongoing demonstration of the game's age-old inability to resolve that conundrum, we can find the central assertion of postmodernist theory—that we are better off seeking a multiplicity of narratives than pretending grand resolutions are possible in the first place.

So maybe that is the ultimate lesson here. We may want grand answers. But we probably won't get them, particularly when it comes to our most prominent cultural institutions—like commercial football.

But what football will do—indeed already *is* doing—is spawn the endless narratives that we may need even more. And quite possibly, *that* is why the game exists and endures and means so much to so many Americans anyway.

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Index

Against Football, 12, 66
Aikman, Troy, 45
Allegheny College, 16
Almond, Mark, 88
Almond, Steve, 8, 12, 13, 66, 81
Altheide, David L., 5
Alzado, Lyle, 47
Andros, Dee, 30

Baker University, 15, 20
Baptists, 16
Bar-Lev, Amir, 58
Baudrillard, Jean, 72, 73
Bayless, Skip, 46
Becker, Carl, 3, 5
Bell, Bernard Iddings, 72
Bellafante, Ginia, 103
Ben-Hanan, Ilan, 59
Berg, Peter, 101
Billy Clyde Conundrum, 51, 53
Bissinger, H.G. "Buzz", 49, 100, 101, 102
Blackistone, Kevin, 60, 61
Blevins, Dean, 97
Blount, Roy, 38
Boren, Lyle, 24
Borland, Chris, 64
Bosworth, Brian, 44
Bowden, Mark, 47
Branch, Taylor, 61
Brand, H.W., 11
Brando, Marlon, 31
Brennan, Christine, 63
Brown, Jeffrey, 60
Brown, Jerome, 47
Brown, Mack, 59, 84
Brown, Roger, 49
Bruni Frank, 64
Bud Wilkinson, 27, 32
Bud Wilkinson's Football Letter, 23, 26, 27, 28, 32, 33, 34
Buffone, Doug, 43
Butkus, Dick, 42
Butler, Christopher, 71

Camp, Walter, 11, 13, 18
Carey, James, 23
Chavez, Brian, 102
chronic traumatic encephalopathy, 64
Clark, Boobie, 101
Clark, J. Brent, 30, 33
College GameDay, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87
Colter, Kain, 61
Columbia University, 17, 18
Cormier, Harvey, 71
Cornell College, 16
Corso, Lee, 82, 85, 87
Cross, George Lynn, 24, 25, 29
Crowder, Eddie, 30

Daugherty, Duffy, 21
Davis, Al, 46
Day, James, 19
Dean, James, 31
Dent, Jim, 28
Dick Thornburgh, 57
Ditka, Mike, 45
Dittmer, Jacob, 89

DOI: 10.1057/9781137534071.0013

Dowd, Maureen, 63
Downtown Athletic Club, 15
Drolet, Michael, 71, 72
Dunnavant, Keith, 81
Durham, Frank, 74

Easterbrook, Gregg, 60, 81
Edmundsun, Mark, 66
Eliot, Charles, 18
"emotion work", 120
ESPN, 59
Every Person Her Own Historian, 5
Everyman His Own Historian, 5

Falk, Gerhard, 114
Finebaum, Paul, 78
Florida State University, 55
forward pass, legalization of, 14
Foucault, Michel, 72
Fowler, Chris, 83
framing, 5
Freeh, Louis, 56, 57
Friday Night Lights, 98, 100, 101, 103, 104, 106, 107, 108, 110, 113, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 124
Frozen, 69, 70

Gade, Peter, 71
Gaines, Gary, 101
Gamson, William A., 5
Garrity, Lyla, 118, 119, 120
Gems, Gerald, 13, 114
Gent, Peter, 40, 41
George, Phyllis, 45, 49
Georgia Tech, 14
Goldstein, Warren, 11
Goodell, Roger, 63
Grier, Rosey, 49
Griffith, Andy, 8

Hadley, Arthur, 19
Halberstam, David, 31
Hallenbeck, Scott, 65
Hannah, John, 20
Harvard University, 10, 17, 18
Heisman, John, 14
Heisman Trophy, 14
Herbstreit, Kirk, 84
Howard, Desmond, 84
Hutcheon, Linda, 71

Irigaray, Luce, 72
Ivy League, 9, 18

Jameson, Fredric, 73
Jenkins, Dan, 37
Johnson, Jimmy, 46
Jones, Deacon, 49
Jordan, David Starr, 19

Kansas Methodist Conference, 15
King, Gary, 29
Knight, Trevor, 87, 90
Kramer, Peter, 76
Kriegel, Mark, 42

Landry, Tom, 46
Le Batard, Dan, 46
Long, Howie, 47
Looney, Joe Don, 30, 31, 32, 33, 35, 37
Lyotard, Jean-Francois, 72, 73

Malpas, Simon, 70, 73
Mariotta, Marcus, 55
McHale, Brian, 75
mediated football, 3
mediated narrative marketplace, 74
mediated sport, 5
Meece, Volney, 26
Merriwell, Frank, 6, 12, 30, 32, 34, 37, 38, 40, 42, 45, 48, 51, 53, 85, 90, 100, 103, 107, 117, 126
metanarrative, 6, 45, 68, 69, 70, 72, 73, 74
Methodists, 16
Michigan State University, 20, 59
Millen, Matt, 46
Miller, John J., 19
Murray, Jim, 26

Namath, Joe, 41, 42, 45
narrative, 6, 69, 70, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78

DOI: 10.1057/9781137534071.0013

narrative structure of football, 13
NCAA, 18, 28, 44, 57, 61
Nelson, Mariah Burton, 113, 116
New York Christian Advocate, 16
NFL, 13, 62, 63, 64, 65
Nocera, Joe, 62
Nock, Steven, 121
North Dallas Forty, 39, 40
Northwestern University, 16

O'Bradovich, Ed, 43
Odessa Permian High School, 100
Olson, Merlin, 49
Oriard, Michael, 11, 13, 18, 31, 38, 79, 81

Paterno, Joe, 56, 57
Patton, Myron, 98
Pauly, John, 4
PBS Newshour, 59, 63
Penn State University, 56, 57
Pennington, Bill, 15
Perrine, Samaje, 94
Perry, Katy, 87
Peterson, Adrian, 62
Pittsburgh Steelers, 38
Ponder, Samantha, 84
postmodernist theory, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 75, 76, 79
Presley, Elvis, 31
Princeton University, 19
Puckett, Billy Clyde, 6, 12, 35, 37, 38, 39, 40, 43, 45, 47, 49, 51, 53, 55, 61, 90, 100, 101, 103, 107, 126

Quayle, William Alfred, 16, 20

Rail, Geneviève, 76
Reid, Bill, 18
Rice, Ray, 62, 63
Riggins, Tim, 104, 105, 106, 107, 108, 109, 110, 117, 118, 119
Rinaldi, Tom, 86
Rogers, Will, 25
Rominger, Donald, 30
Roosevelt, Theodore, 18
Royal, Darrell, 26
Rozelle, Pete, 13
Ryan, Bob, 56

Sandusky, Jerry, 56
Schroeder, George, 56
Searcy, Byron, 29
Sears, Hal, 15, 20
Semi-Tough, 37, 38, 39
Shiller, Robert, 77
Simon, Lou Anna K., 59
Smith, Ronald, 10, 17, 18
St. Moon, Warren, 78
Stabler, Ken, 46
Stagg, Amos Alonzo, 11, 19, 79
Stanford, 19
Staubach, Roger, 45
Steinbeck, John, 24
Stoops, Bob, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 98
Street, Jason, 104, 108, 109, 117, 118, 119
Strinati, Dominic, 71, 72, 75
Strong, Charlie, 51
Switzer, Barry, 43, 44, 45, 97
Syracuse University, 19

Tatum, Jim, 24
Taylor, Coach Eric, 105, 106, 114, 120, 121, 122, 123
Taylor, Tami, 120, 121, 122, 123
Telander, Rick, 43
The Grapes of Wrath, 24, 25
The King of Sports, 60
The Theory of the Leisure Class, 10
Thomasson, Dan, 57
Thompson, Charles, 44
Thompson, Wright, 85, 103
Thornton, Billy Bob, 102
Three Bricks Shy of a Load, 38
Traber, Jim, 98
Tramel, Berry, 25
Tranghese, Mike, 58
Treps, Mike, 23, 27, 31, 32

U.S. Navy V-5 Preflight Program, 29
University of Chicago, 11

DOI: 10.1057/9781137534071.0013

University of Mississippi, 83
University of Oklahoma, 3, 4, 24, 25, 28, 43
University of Texas, 26, 51

Veblen, Thorstein, 10, 11, 79
Venables, Brent, 54
Vessels, Billy, 30

Warren, Robert Penn, 3
Waters, Charlie, 45
Watterson, John, 19, 20
Webster, Frank, 70, 72
Werblin, Sonny, 42
"What it Was, Was Football", 8
Why Football Matters, 66
Wilcox, Bradford, 121
Wilkinson, Bud, 21, 23, 25, 26, 28, 29, 33, 34, 37, 43, 97
Williams, Robin, 68
Wilson, Woodrow, 19
Winsor, Mary, 5
Winston, Jameis, 55, 84, 86, 115

Yale University, 10, 19

Ziegler, John, 58
Zimbalist, Andrew, 58, 63

DOI: 10.1057/9781137534071.0013