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Creating Cowboys and “Playing Indian”: Football and White Supremacy from 1890-1980

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Honors Thesis
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Abstract: This honors thesis argues that football is a location of leisure which reinforces and (re)creates a comforting white male supremacist American empire through its use of imaginary frontiers, distortion of Native imagery and culture, and its development of mythic cowboy-heroes— which serve as escapes from ubiquitous national anxieties. I use textual and visual analysis of primary sources from the 1890s, 1920s, and 1970s to describe how football developed as a comforting space of leisure for white people in the face of national crises of masculinity, rights movements, and disillusionment with America’s empire.
For my Baba. May your memory be a blessing.
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Introduction

“Hail to the R*dskins,
Hail victory!
Braves on the warpath,
Fight for old D.C.!

Scalp ’um, swamp ’um
we will
Take ’um big score
Read ’um, Weep ’um,
touchdown
We want heap more.”

- Original R*dskins fight song ¹

Corinne Griffith composed the original fight song for the National Football League’s (NFL) Washington R*dskins while she was married to the team’s founder George Preston Marshall. Marshall, a storied segregationist, was also an early proponent of football as entertainment, rather than simple sport. Griffith, a former silent film actor deemed the “orchid of the screen,” was the perfect white woman to accompany him in the early years of the team (Figure 1).² Her fight song, as seen in the epigraph, plays upon

one of the most common leisure themes of the twentieth century— stereotypes of Native people.

During Griffith’s involvement with the R*dskins she also helped design the uniforms for the storied marching band (blue and gold uniforms with Native-style headdresses). The band and the song quickly became the most visible and famed part of the franchise. By the 1950s, when Griffith and Marshall divorced, she had left an indelible mark on the team— their name and imagery. Her influence in this respect,

unquestionably racist depictions of Native people, would follow the team into the twenty-first century.

Though a white, beautiful, wealthy actress may seem out of place in this story of discrimination, Griffith’s deep involvement and affinity for the R*dkins organization is anything but. White women have historically aided football and the broader American empire in its maintenance and development of white supremacy. White women’s involvement in football, particularly as entertainment aides, adds to this historical trend. Corinne Griffith, like “New Woman” advocates in the 1890s; women’s suffragists in the 1910s; and some women in the feminist movement in the 1970s, spoke about the rights of women to control their own finances and buck patriarchal control. Yet she also helped Marshall create an entertainment empire centered on racist stereotyping of Native people. Griffith, and several other historical figures in this thesis, used football to reinforce the white, male supremacist culture of the United States.

I grew up in one of the whitest states in the U.S., and my high school’s biggest social events centered around football on fall Friday nights. One memorable evening, the New Hampshire National Guard came to a home football game a shook hands with our players as they ran out to play. Before I came to college, I thought these military spectacles were the norm in the U.S., but other Macalester students did not share in these memories. Many of them came from upper- and upper-middle class urban areas; those areas are not as heavily recruited for the military. Many of my friends from high school are members of the military now—several of them were athletes in high school. An even higher percentage of them were football players.
This might seem like a tiny, anecdotal study of one small school, but I wanted to understand why some of my smartest friends ended up in the U.S. Army, Air Force, Navy, and even Coast Guard. The intense overlap, in my experience, between former football players and current military members led me down an academic path focusing on football and the military. For my thesis I decided to broaden my focus to football and white supremacy because the connections between the military and football are ultimately rooted in America’s deep history of white masculinity, white supremacy, and patriarchy. I wanted to know why football, a violent and dangerous sport, is seen as the pinnacle of science in sport. How has football regenerated and reimposed white supremacist power structures over time and how do they continue to be rebuilt today? What sets football apart from other sports as quintessentially American today and how is that informed by its past? During these times of fear and anxiety why do white Americans turn to football for their leisure activity—whether as spectators or players?

The entire history of American football spans the past 150 years, thousands of teams, and millions of players. Football’s rise, though, lines up with eras of masculine crisis in the U.S. I decided to focus on three eras—the 1890s, 1920s, and 1970s. Each decade was a period of change an anxiety for men. In the 1890s, this was most visible in the concern about the close of the American western frontier. Without the frontier as a place of violent conquest, white men felt they needed a new location to prove their superiority; they found one on the football field. The 1890s is also when American football coalesced into its modern form and began to spread beyond the Ivy League universities on the East Coast. Similarly in the 1920s, the 1918 influenza pandemic, World War I casualties, and women’s rights movements created another era of crisis for
white men. Like in the 1890s, without a place to prove their heroism or patriotism, white men turned to football. The 1920s was also a turning point in football. It featured the first professional football teams and the founding of the NFL in addition to exponential increases in press coverage both in print and on the radio. Finally, in the 1970s, the Vietnam War, second-wave feminism, Native activism, and international nuclear grappling defined another era of anxiety—and football. I focus, in this era, on the Dallas Cowboys, whose white-hat imagery provided a reassuring location of leisure focused on God, family, and football. The sport, in the 1970s, also surpassed baseball as the most viewed sport in the U.S., and it completed its transition to live television as opposed to radio.

The connections between militant white supremacy and football are illustrated by the frontier metaphors present in football, something I examine in each chapter of this thesis. Several scholars have written about the imaginary frontier in the U.S. and the popular culture surrounding the ubiquitous “cowboys versus Indians” stereotypes. Patricia Nelson Limerick, Richard Slotkin, and Gail Bederman all discuss the deep connections between the imagined American West, American masculinity, and Native stereotypes in their work, and I draw heavily on each of these scholars. Limerick’s work, which refutes Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis, adds new avenues of analysis to the history of the American West.4 Through her I explore the metaphorical frontiers of the football field through lenses of gender and race. Slotkin’s theses on the regeneration of American masculinity through violence is a large influence in my descriptions of

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violent masculinity in football, particularly in the absence of war.\(^5\) Finally, Bederman connects violent masculinity and American empire in her work.\(^6\) I draw heavily on her chapters about Theodore Roosevelt in Chapter 1, explaining the importance of virile, active masculinity to elite men in the 1890s.

Shari Huhndorf, Philip Deloria, and C. Richard King describe the American obsession with “playing Indian”—coined by Deloria—and its connections to the abundant racist mascotry, appropriation and distortions of Native imagery, and assertions of “Indianness” in football. Huhndorf and Deloria explore the adoption of “Indian personas” by white people to create a unified national identity. Deloria begins his analysis back with the Boston Tea Party when colonists dressed as Native Americans.\(^7\) Huhndorf describes how white people “going Native” distorts Native cultures to create a white supremacist narrative in many cultural phenomena.\(^8\) Football is no exception to Deloria’s and Huhndorf’s explanations. The sport both used Native stereotypes to create a nationalized identity, and it completely distorted those Native images in pursuit of a white supremacist frontier narrative. C. Richard King’s work ties in with Richard Slotkin’s to explain how Native mascots and aesthetics became a space for the regeneration of white masculinity during eras of crisis.

In my discussions of white women and football empires I work with Amy Kaplan, Linda Gordon, and Molly Engelhardt who explore, in different eras, the intertwinement

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of white womanhood, white supremacy, and women’s rights movements. Before the
1890s until 1973, American history was one big struggle for women—both white women
and women of color. Yet white women were seen as appendages to their husbands and
sons at football games, simply attending to support their families. Though many of these
women spectators’ political and social beliefs are unknown, their presence at football
games was used to reinforce racial and class divisions. Kaplan explores how fictional
romances justify American empire in her work, and I draw heavily on her in the first and
second chapters as I discuss white women spectators. I also use her concept of “manifest
domesticity” coined in relation to white women writers’ work in the 1800s explains how
domesticity refers both to the private sphere and as a term in opposition to foreignness.9

Linda Gordon’s work on the Women of the Ku Klux Klan (WKKK) describes how
women’s suffrage intersected with KKK goals of “purifying the country,” and informs
my analysis of women’s support of football as a leisure activity for their husbands,
brothers, and sons. Finally, Molly Engelhardt explores the connections between second-
wave feminism and cheerleading; cheerleading rose to NFL prominence in the 1970s
with the Dallas Cowboys. Engelhardt argues that the devaluing of cheerleading is
connected to the backlash against second-wave feminism and constructed a dichotomy
which allowed popular media to vilify both feminists and cheerleaders.10

All these scholars explore themes of gender and race in relation to American
identities and sports as an important, culture-defining form of leisure. Despite these in-

10 Molly Engelhardt, “‘Airheads, Amazons, and Bitches’: Cheerleaders and Second-Wave Feminists in the
Popular Press,” in Disco Divas: Women and Popular Culture in the 1970s, ed. Sherrie A. Inness,
depth examinations— and many football histories— no one had looked at the interdependence between football and white male supremacy in the U.S. Football histories tend to focus on the minute political moves of the league, popular player or team histories, and biographies. Though some scholars like Michael Oriard and John Sayle Watterson have done wonderful, in-depth work on the press and football and collegiate football, respectively, there have been no overarching histories of football’s appropriation of the frontier aesthetic, Native aesthetics, and cowboy imagery to forward a national identity centered on whiteness, Americanization, and masculinity.

I will argue that football is a location of leisure which reinforces and (re)creates a comforting white male supremacist American empire through its use of imaginary frontiers, distortion of Native imagery and culture, and its development of mythic cowboy-heroes—all of which serve as escapes from ubiquitous national anxieties. In the 1890s, 1920s, and 1970s heterosexual white women played a complicated role in football—they both tacitly supported the imaginary conquests through their presence, challenged the patriarchy, and were continually reduced to appendages of their husbands and sons. Each chapter will focus on one decade and describe how the development of football connects with and enhanced the maintenance and growth of white supremacy during that era.

In Chapter 1 I discuss how, during the 1890s, the close of the frontier, increasing immigration, and changing roles for women created a crisis of white masculinity, particularly for wealthy men on the East Coast. Using case studies from Yale University, Princeton University, and Theodore Roosevelt’s writing I explore how football players, coaches, and fans created a new “frontier” on the field. This all-white frontier featured
female spectators who were seen as appendages of their husbands and sons. For them football became a domestic war—in the domestic sphere—where men could demonstrate their violent prowess and reassert their supremacy.

I then move into Chapter 2 which focuses on the football world 40 years later during the 1920s. This chapter engages the development of the National Football League (NFL) and continued spread of collegiate football to argue football in the 1920s was a space of white Americanization, a location to build white supremacy and white American empire, and an opportunity for white men to “play savage/Indian.” In the aftermath of World War I, the 1918 influenza pandemic and the first Red Scare, white men were searching for a new location to be or see heroes. I use examples of players in professional football who were second-generation immigrants and gained respect as “Americans” through their football playing. I also discuss examples of prominent football coaches and administrators who touted the whiteness of their programs, football, and its history. This chapter explores how football teams created Native mascots which appropriated Indigenous histories and cultures and allowed white teams to “play Indian” to create a nationalized identity. In the last section of the chapter, I discuss the resurgent KKK and its female chapter—or appendage—the WKKK which advocated for sports as a method of maintaining moral purity, protecting the family, and upholding a separation from foreign influence.

Chapter 3 takes a case study of the 1970s Dallas Cowboys football team to explore the trends of white supremacy, masculinity, and football during the end of the Vietnam War and Civil Rights eras. I argue that football was a location that reinforced and demonstrated the proper gender and racial divisions of the white supremacist
American society using the Cowboys’ differing treatments of their white and non-white players and their creation and development of a cheerleading squad. I add too that their naming and branding— as a white-hat team committed to God and family— is reminiscent of iconic mythical cowboys like Roy Rogers and the Lone Ranger. I use specific examples of their coach Tom Landry and quarterback Roger Staubach to illustrate this argument.

Football today continues to use these cultural touchstones like frontier metaphors and myths to reinforce white supremacy on the field and in U.S. culture. Several school teams still use Native mascots and the overwhelmingly white ownership and coaching staff of the NFL maintain a culture of white supremacy on and off the field. Football cannot escape its history of racism by continuing to employ the same people— like Corinne Griffith— and methods of the past. As I show in the following chapters, those people and methods have created, recreated, and reinforced a white supremacist culture. Football must be radically reimagined by people who understand its historical significance to the racist and sexist culture of America.
Chapter 1

“Really Superior Qualities”: Violent masculinity on the football frontier

He was a football star, class president, and a “good fellow.” John Prentiss Poe Jr., often known as Johnny or Johnnie, spent three years at Princeton University where his academics often faltered, but his football skills were so impressive it did not matter. His brother Edgar Allan (named after the famed poet, a second cousin) had graduated just before John started in 1891. Both were members of the Poe family of Maryland, whose six sons went to Princeton and played football. The children of Maryland Attorney General John Prentiss Poe Sr., these two men seemed to be both swashbuckling fighters and intellectual gentlemen as they weaved through football stardom and post-college careers. Yet John’s connections to the American West and Spanish-American War bring him closer in line with an idealized vision of masculinity during the 1890s. After he flunked out of Princeton a second time, John had to find another method to prove his manliness. He joined the Army when the Spanish-American War broke out in 1898, and though he was not part of Roosevelt’s Rough Riders, he would have been the perfect recruit later in life. After the war, John became a cowpuncher in New Mexico, rejoined the Army in the Philippines, joined the Marines in Panama, became a militiaman in Kentucky, and eventually landed as a miner in Nevada’s deserts. He was, in most ways, the ideal man of the time— he was at least passingly smart, acted as a gentleman,

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adventured in the mythic West, fought in the Army, and starred in football. As one newspaper article pull quoted, “‘Johnny’ Poe, hero of the gridiron. Cowboy, miner, now revolutionist.”14

The 1890s were a time of transition in the United States. The Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890 marked the end of military portion of the so-called “Indian Wars,” though cultural and social programs of genocide continued. The U.S. government enacted restrictive immigration legislation—particularly towards Asian and Eastern European immigrants. The working class demonstrated its power through influential labor movements like the Pullman Strike in 1894 and the creation of the American Federation of Laborers in 1886. More Americans lived in urban areas than ever before, and with rapid urbanization came unsanitary conditions, unsafe housing, and a rise in crime. White women’s movements and involvement in the public sphere threatened a traditionally masculine area. Together, these factors led to middle-class white masculinity which increasingly seemed vulnerable to faltering because of “overcivilization, effeminacy and racial decadence.”15

White middle-class men needed something to reinvigorate their masculinity which, as Gail Bederman argues, was inextricably tied to their whiteness. Many men found their vigor through football, particularly at East Coast colleges and universities—like the Poes. As they lived out Frederick Jackson Turner and Theodore Roosevelt’s frontier theses, these men asserted their masculine and racial supremacy through violence

on the football field. Football became a signifier of whiteness and civilization while it salvaged stereotyped pieces of Indigenous identity to create an ever more superior white man. In the 1890s, football was developed and codified by elite wealthy men in order to create a new “frontier” for white, middle-class men to define and prove their manliness. These wealthy men connected football to racist eugenic theories, American anxiety about the close of the frontier and the loss of a location to demonstrate violent white prowess, and as a replacement for in-continent wars to violently reassert male supremacy before the eyes of white women who increasingly demanded their own rights.

“Soldier of Fortune”: John Prentiss Poe, Frontier Theses, and U.S. Empire

In 1893, historian Frederick Jackson Turner, citing the 1890 Superintendent of the Census’ bulletin, declared the frontier closed as the 1890 census showed there were people settled in high density across the U.S. Turner’s major concern was the loss of an economic and social “safety valve” and a locale to differentiate Americans from the rest of the world. Another influential figure, Theodore Roosevelt, also wrote extensively on the close of the frontier during the 1890s. Roosevelt, unlike Turner, was more concerned about the loss of American male vitality and vigor—traits he stated were gained in the frontier. Roosevelt’s worry centered on the loss of the hunter-hero, someone he described as both wealthy and the right kind of white. Roosevelt concluded that without the Western frontier as a “proving ground” for male vitality, a new place was needed in order to demonstrate who was “fittest” in line with his Social Darwinian beliefs. Roosevelt concluded this would be in business—those with the “right” ancestry and “right” vitality would lead corporations and governments. The football field, however, was accessible to
a greater number of men, and as primary sources demonstrate, became a place for men to prove their masculinity.

Turner’s frontier thesis, however, connected to Roosevelt’s anxiety about the loss of vigorous maleness because many of his economic concerns overlapped with views of maleness in the late Victorian era. In the earlier nineteenth century, middle-class white men who attended colleges such as Yale or Princeton would be virtually guaranteed a high-paying, steady career. By the 1890s, though, this was changing with the rise of consumer culture and big business.16 As this certainty decreased, particularly with the Panic of 1893, white middle- and working class men feared they would no longer be able to provide for their families which gave rise to concerns about male dependency.17 Gail Bederman argues this shift led to a rise in leisure culture to define maleness.18 Some of this leisure culture focused on reconnecting with the frontiersman such as mountaineering, camping, and hunting. Examples of the rise in these forms of leisure culture include the Sierra Club, founded in 1892 by John Muir; National Geographic Society, in 1888; the 1890 establishment of Yosemite National Park; and Theodore Roosevelt’s gentleman’s gun club—the Boone and Crockett Club—where he invited his wealthy white friends such as Frederic Remington to hunt as form of productive labor which restored male vitality and prepared them for their historic role of leading civilization.19

17 Hoganson, Fighting for American Manhood, 11-12.
18 Bederman, Manliness and civilization, 13.
While Roosevelt also wrote about economic concerns like Turner, his historical writing focused closely on the progress narrative, white supremacy, and male regeneration through violent conquest. In doing this he tied male supremacy and white supremacy together using discourses of civilization.20 “To prove their virility as a race and nation, American men needed to take up the ‘strenuous life’ and strive to advance civilization—through imperialistic warfare and racial violence if necessary,” Bederman writes in her chapter on Roosevelt’s connections to the discussions linking manliness and civilization.21 She discusses his book *The Winning of the West*, which places white American men as central heroic characters in the racially-framed war for the western portion of the American continent. Roosevelt argued that white American men could trace their conquests through the “perfect” warring history of the British “race,” and that their conquest of America was their “inheritance.”22 He described the ideal man as those in the Southwest US where the fighting was most “ferocious.”23 Bederman argues that “In an era when traditional ideologies of manhood were being actively renegotiated, Roosevelt reinvigorated male authority by tying it to white racial supremacy and to a militaristic, racially based nationalism.”24 To fulfill this violent white male supremacy, and without a large-scale national war, men turned to a new domestic war—football.

Roosevelt’s answer to the close of the frontier was imperial, overseas expansion of the U.S. empire. The first colonial mission he used as a publicity stunt was the

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Spanish-American War in 1898. Roosevelt led a specially picked team called the “Rough Riders,” most famously during the Battle of San Juan Hill. Though there is much to discuss about San Juan Hill and the war itself, Roosevelt’s selection of men demonstrates the connections between white supremacy, U.S. empire, and football in the 1890s.

Roosevelt called his cavalry regiment “peculiarly American,” and it reflected “Americans’ masculine racial power as well as their civilized manly advancement.” He chose many white men from the American West who descended from the men who murdered Indigenous people just years before. To demonstrate the U.S.’s civility, though, Roosevelt enlisted a number of Ivy League graduates, mostly athletes. Of the Ivy Leaguers, Roosevelt wrote, “With hardly an exception [the Ivy League men] entered upon their duties as troopers in the spirit which they held to the end, merely endeavoring to show that no work could be too hard, too disagreeable, or too dangerous for them to perform, and neither asking nor receiving any reward in the way of promotion or consideration.” Many of these athletes were also star football players. In *The Rough Riders*, Roosevelt described Dudley Dean, the “star quarterback” of Harvard; Bob Wrenn, another quarterback; “Devereaux and Channing” from Princeton who played football; an unnamed Indigenous football player; Robb Church from Princeton; and John Greenway from Yale. By highlighting the white American-ness of the Rough Riders as being deeply connected to their status as Ivy League football players, Roosevelt

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demonstrates the deep connections between white supremacy and the rise of football at these colleges.

On December 15, 1890, U.S. officials killed Lakota leader Sitting Bull and some of his followers during an attempt to arrest him. After his death, many Lakota fled from the Standing Rock Reservation towards the Pine Ridge Reservation in what is now South Dakota. The U.S. army and cavalrymen met them near Pine Ridge, and the Seventh Cavalry massacred 150-300 Lakota near Wounded Knee. This horrific war crime, today called the Wounded Knee Massacre, was memorialized as a “battle” and many of the troops involved were honored for their bravery through reports and illustrations by famous journalists and artists like Frederic Remington (see Figure 2). Though there was some dissent within the group when Colonel James W. Forsyth ordered the massacre, ultimately these men followed through and killed an unarmed group of Native men, women, and children, numbering around 270 people. Twenty members of the Seventh Cavalry were awarded Medals of Honor after the massacre. Of those twenty, at least eight later fought in the Spanish-American or Philippine-American Wars. These connections between the early wars in America’s overseas empire and the end of the so-called “Indian Wars” show how the U.S. beliefs about “civilization and savagery” and the “frontier” pushed U.S. colonial expansion to the Caribbean and Philippines. Both the Wounded Knee Massacre and American actions in the Philippines and Caribbean demonstrate the white supremacist, empire-building agenda of the American government. The popular
myths surrounding both these events show that the allure of the whitewashed frontier continues to hold sway in the U.S.

Colleges also upheld white supremacy through their teaching of eugenics and scientific racism, racist theories which Roosevelt drew heavily on. In the 1890s, eugenics was espoused by a number of political and academic scholars and figures including Roosevelt, Francis Galton, Edward Ross, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Therefore, colleges and universities often referred to eugenic and/or scientific racist theory within their curricula. Eugenics was coined in 1883 by Francis Galton and built upon Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution saying eugenics was “the study of agencies under social control that may improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations, either

Figure 2: An 1891 drawing by Frederic Remington, friend of Theodore Roosevelt, depicting the opening “fight” at Wounded Knee. Images such as this one fed into the mythology of this massacre as a “battle” throughout the twentieth century. Frederic Remington, “The Opening Fight at the Battle of Wounded Knee,” Digital Public Library of America: New York Public Library, https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/5ad8e570-c533-012f-7ed5-58d385a7bc34
physically or mentally.”29 There were a number of states such as Connecticut, which adopted eugenic legislation to prevent people with mental illness and physical disabilities from marrying, and the newly founded Immigration Restriction League (IRL) argued for immigration caps based on eugenic reasoning.30 Roosevelt espoused racist and eugenicist ideals and argued that in order to be the “highest” civilization, American men could not stop violent expansion.31 As one antidote to American trends towards a “luxury-loving” and unmanly civilization, Roosevelt suggested football among other strenuous activities.32 For Roosevelt and the Rough Riders, scientific racism backed their invasions of Cuba, the Philippines, and more; it also backed their support of and participation in college football which was seen as preparation for and continuation of the 1890s violent and virile white American masculinity.

The rise of football in the 1890s was intertwined with the rise of eugenics and scientific racism. Men like Theodore Roosevelt and Frederic Remington who espoused eugenic theories also loved football. Remington was a famous painter, sculptor, and journalist who focused on images of cowboys, horses, Native people, and the late-nineteenth century Wild West for his art, often drawing on stereotypes and racist tropes as his illustration of Wounded Knee (Figure 1) demonstrates. Remington, a former Yale football player, especially believed football perfectly demonstrated white manhood, “For Remington, manliness meant actual physical strength and ability and almost a love of

29 Francis Galton, *Inquires into Human Faculty and Its Development* (New York: Dutton, 1907), 17n.
fighting, certainly a love of sport. He especially loved football... He even loved the destructive side of football." Both Remington and Roosevelt saw the American West as a location which differentiated the white, virile, violent American man from those of other “races” and other social classes. After the “close of the frontier,” however, both men looked to the elite colleges of the east coast and their athletes as the ideal example of masculinity. Football’s connections in this era to eugenics include anthropometry and the systemic exclusion of Black people. Though the Carlisle Indian School fielded a football team, the motivations for creating and continuing this team were deeply rooted in white supremacy.

The continuation of virile white masculinity was particularly important for both Turner and Roosevelt as well as many white middle-class men. While Turner saw white male economic power threatened by the close of the frontier, Roosevelt believed American men and women were “overcivilized, decadent, and impotent,” and the close of the frontier would only increase these tendencies in the U.S. Middle-class white masculinity was broadly seen as under threat in the 1890s which drove men to find new avenues to express their manhood. As Gail Bederman argues, “As white middle-class men actively worked to reinforce male power, their race became a factor which was crucial to their gender. In ways which have not been well understood, whiteness was both a palpable fact and a manly ideal for these men.” Both Roosevelt and Turner saw issues

in the 1890s as proving their theses. For Turner, the economic downturn of 1893 and the subsequent increase in unemployment for white middle-class men demonstrated that, without the frontier, American economic progress would end. For Roosevelt, the lack of a violent frontier location for white men to prove their superiority led white American men into the dangers of over-civilization, effeminacy, and racial decadence.\textsuperscript{37} Roosevelt and his followers, as well as Turnerians, then, searched for a new domestic war where white men could prove their racial and gender superiority.\textsuperscript{38} They found this on the football fields of elite universities.

**White Men: Manhood, Eugenics, and White Supremacy**

Football was a site where white middle-class men could regenerate their strength, vitality, and vigor. At the highest levels, the game was exclusively open to white men and promoted by institutions of white supremacy like Harvard and Yale. Those who distinguished themselves on the football field were viewed akin to heroes in war or western romances which were gaining popularity during the late nineteenth century as well. Amy Kaplan argues that during this era white middle-class masculinity was redefined as a corporeal essence identified with the vigor and prowess of the individual male body and was reinforced by imperialist discourse.\textsuperscript{39} While Kaplan focuses on heroes

\textsuperscript{37} Bederman, *Manliness and civilization*, 185.

\textsuperscript{38} Turnerians refers to those historians and academics who admired the Turner frontier thesis and did not question its omissions, clear racism, or grapple with the contradictions even Turner himself saw in his thesis and in his purpose as a historian. More recently academics like Patricia Nelson Limerick have questioned the meaning of “Turnerians.” Limerick argues, Turner believed in presentism—an understanding of the past based on present conditions. She adds that now that we see Turner as being incorrect about the frontier, we can move towards questioning if he was right about presentism as a method of historical understanding which may make more of us “Turnerians.” Patricia Nelson Limerick, “Turnerians All: The Dream of a Helpful History in an Intelligible World,” *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 3 (1995): 697–716.

of fictional romance novels produced in the 1890s, her thesis applies to football players as well. Student newspapers often viewed these men as the best their school had to offer. One Yale article described who should represent the university: “If a man possesses really superior qualities—and if he does not he ought not to represent the university—nothing of this kind is going to daunt him…” If a man has not confidence enough to compete for a place with men who may have already shown their proficiency, he is not made of the stuff that Yale foot ball [sic]… must be made of.”

Like the heroic men of fiction Kaplan describes, football players were presented as “swashbuckling knights” whose actions regenerated the militant manhood of the “frontier.” They were akin to the “Rough Riders” Theodore Roosevelt mythologized during the Spanish-American War, the Army men in the Wounded Knee Massacre, and Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show: all of these men continued and built the mythology of the “wild west,” as did Walter Camp, John Prentiss Poe, and the football programs of what would become the Ivy League universities.

The Rough Riders, Wounded Knee murderers, and football players also shared an admiration of and affinity for violence. These men often believed in “natural masculinity,” which Bederman describes as “a distant, romantic world of powerful, violent masculinity.” This affinity for violence manifested in different ways through these avenues. Football was no less violent. Some colleges and universities—in the wake of the death of West Point cadet Eugene A. Byrne in 1909—discussed banning football

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41 Bederman, Manliness and civilization, 174.
in the early 1900s because young men were frequently hurt, seriously injured, and sometimes even killed. But men, and journalists, took great pride in playing through injury. One article from the New York Times describes, in heroic wording, the typical injuries of a football game, “A crushed foot, a black eye, a barked shin, a broken nose, or a cracked head is nothing more to him than a meme bagatelle that whets his interest in the proceedings. Even if his breath is knocked out and he has to lay in the mud until four comrades… He gets on his feet again, limps around a little, gathers his wandering wits and is as eager for the fray as ever.” 16-year-old Walter L. Rhue was killed; others were gravely injured, and still more suffered lifelong disabilities due to the violence of late nineteenth century football. The violence—in some cases termed “savagery”—of football also served the reinforce the whiteness of its players and institutions.

White men in the US believed they needed to both exploit and colonize the identities of men in colonized areas to assert both their differences and superiority to the colonized men. Without the constant war of the frontier, white American men feared they would not be able to assert their superiority through violence anymore. I argue they asserted their white, racist violence through the violence of football and, in doing so, constructed a salvaged masculinity. Football played into a “savage” slot, while also being

44 For more on the violence of late nineteenth century football see this article about Walter Rhue and two other teenagers who were gravely injured and killed during one weekend of football: “Killed in Football Game: Walter L. Rhue, in Brooklyn,” New York Times, November 27, 1896, New York Times Historical Digital Archive.
played at places of white supremacy such as Princeton, Yale, Harvard, and Cornell and prohibiting players of color from playing at the highest levels. Richard Slotkin argues that Roosevelt and other wealthy white men in the 1890s saw the preservation and continuation of a classed and racialized group of men through the mythic “regeneration through regression” narrative.\textsuperscript{45} James Oliver Robertson discusses how football players act as both “pioneer and Indian” during games: “Football ritualizes the moving frontier, and the teamwork, cooperation, and individual heroism necessary to move that frontier; simultaneously, it also ritualizes the teamwork, cooperation, and individual heroism necessary to resist the moving frontier.”\textsuperscript{46} By choosing and fetishizing the stereotypical “savage” image of Indigeneity, football players colonized Indigenous resistance to white settler colonialism, therefore asserting their superiority to Indigenous people and distinguishing themselves from European white men.

Roosevelt believed that men should act as both “pioneer and Indian” as well, particularly in war. For Roosevelt, the “man who knew Indians” was the hero of western myths, so the colonization of “Indian-ness”— which for Roosevelt and others was primitive savagery— by football players and programs ensured they would become the heirs to the hero of American myth.\textsuperscript{47} White football players and programs colonized Indianness by romanticizing violence and “savagery,” and vocally and tacitly supporting anti-Indigenous, anti-Black, colonial and imperial policies and conquests. These occurred

\textsuperscript{45} Slotkin, \textit{Gunfighter Nation}, 38.
\textsuperscript{46} James Oliver Robertson, \textit{American Myth, American Reality} (New York: Hill & Wang, 1980), 256.
\textsuperscript{47} Slotkin, \textit{Gunfighter Nation}, 33.
both domestically through legislation and policing, and internationally through war, economic sanctions, and diplomacy (or a lack thereof).

The print media reinforced the continuation of the frontier and frontier violence in football by using war metaphors and Indian war terminology. Articles in the *New York Times* drew comparisons between the bedlam of football pile-ups and an “Indian war dance.” They regularly described football using war terms such as “generals,” “battlefield,” and “soldiers.” In an article for *Outing* magazine, former Harvard trainer James Lathrop wrote about training men in “the killing process.” The most egregious articles featured metaphors for the so-called “Indian Wars” when discussing the games the Carlisle Indian Industrial School played. One example, from a close loss to Yale in 1896, began with “Yale’s football players walked off Manhattan Field yesterday with the scalps of the Carlisle Indians dangling from their belts.” Another article from 1897 described the Carlisle Indians with regard to their heritage, “unlike his treacherous ancestry, the Indian fought man to man with a fierceness which perhaps he has never before shown on the gridiron.” Despite the connections in the media with the struggle of the frontier between civilization and “savagery” or whiteness and Otherness, football was solidly in the sphere of white settlers. Ultimately, football reinforced white supremacy and masculinity as it was confined to institutions that upheld white men.

Those who could not conform closely enough to whiteness were not allowed to play at

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the highest levels. The Carlisle Indian team was only allowed to play because the goal of the school was to make Indigenous children “white.” By playing—and winning—football games the Native men who played for the Carlisle football team demonstrated their ability to “become white” as they won the football frontier from white college men.

Though many top-tier football programs were mostly white and sponsored by institutions of white supremacy, there is one important, partial exception. The Carlisle Indian Industrial School, a boarding school for Indigenous children, fielded an accomplished football team (see Figure 3). Players from this program included Jim Thorpe and Frank Mount Pleasant, as well as several others who went on to be professional athletes and Olympians. While it is important to recognize the differences in racial makeup of the team, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School—and boarding schools in general—was a white supremacist institution which aimed to strip Indigenous people of their culture and remake them into “white” people and assimilate them into white culture. Carlisle was the blueprint for many of these schools in America. The school was founded in 1879 by a military officer named Richard Pratt who coined the infamous phrase “Kill the Indian, save the man.” Pratt described how he viewed the mission of his school—which today is seen as genocide—and the goals to have others like it: “The Indians would be civilized in one generation, their tribes disintegrated, the whole 250,000

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52 It is important to note that residential schools existed (sometimes by other names) in many settler colonial states including Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.
soon absorbed by the whites, and the standing disgrace of the country a story of the past."53

Figure 3: Above is the Carlisle Indian Industrial School football team from 1909. Also featured here (farthest left in the middle row) is Glenn “Pop” Warner, the longtime coach for Carlisle and later Stanford. Carlisle vs. Pennsylvania: Franklin Field (Philadelphia: John C. Winston Co., 1909), Image 3, U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center, Extent: 16 Paper, Unit Date: 30-OCT, https://emu.usahec.org/alma/multimedia/458515/20183041MNBT995890461F3487511001.pdf.

Pratt used various methods to violently take Indigenous culture—and lives—at Carlisle, including his support for and regimentation of the football team. Within the school, Carlisle fielded a football team starting in 1893—just three years after the Wounded Knee Massacre—and the program went on to become the most successful, now defunct, college football program in history with a win rate over 60 percent.54 These wins are important and should be celebrated; the work of Indigenous people to create a

team— when Pratt disapproved— in the 1890s should also be recognized. John Bloom argues that Indigenous people at boarding schools found pan-Indian pride and could express identities outside of those allowed by boarding schools. He also acknowledges, however, that from other perspectives boarding school sports were elements of conservativism, assimilationism, and colonialism. Pratt developed a militarized, regimented, and uniformed alternative to the military. It was an institution of white supremacy and the military, and I argue that, because of its parallels to the U.S. military and collegiate white supremacist institutions, we can see the football program at Carlisle as an attempt to further indoctrinate and enculture Indigenous people into white supremacy.

The missions of these schools were centered on “civilizing” Indigenous people. By the 1880s, some saw America’s treatment of Indigenous people as a “dark and bloody stain on the nation’s honor.” These reformers wanted to create a method to subjugate Indigenous people without murder, so they settled on residential or boarding schools, which attempted to instill values of “civilization” through a regimented, scheduled, and uniformed facility—not unlike the military. These values included individualism, industry, private property, Christian doctrine and morality, Christian family values, capitalism, and the conquest of nature. These were also the values football attempted to

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instill. Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that football fit well with the other goals of residential schools. Both football and residential schools also aimed to teach specific skills associated with specific jobs and functions—a Fordian ideal. The military does and did this as well. Each “part” knows its function, and together they function to create a society, a team, a military force. Football at the Carlisle Indian School was a tool of white supremacy and a method of asserting Pratt and the school’s success in “civilizing” Indigenous people.

In the 1890s, football was a location where white men signified their strength, vitality, power, and, above all, their whiteness. I argue it creates an imagined masculinity, which regards femininity as weakness, and centers on salvaged stereotypes of “savagery” which borrow from the fierce warrior trope of Indigenous men yet concoct a new salvage man who has elements of white racists—like Theodore Roosevelt and Frederic Remington—in addition to pieces of the “fierce warrior.” Men who played football went on to participate in U.S. empire at home and around the globe—often violently—such as with Roosevelt in Cuba during the Spanish-American War. By fetishizing violence and “savagery” while emphasizing the scientific nature of football, players and coaches created a “white savagery” which they deployed across the U.S. in various ways, from the Rough Riders to eugenics to the election of Theodore Roosevelt. General Pratt, who founded the Carlisle Indian School, believed that by playing football, the Indigenous students under his tutelage would “become white.” Their prowess at football demonstrated their assimilation into white society as football was the epitome of whiteness. Yet, at the same time, Pratt was also forcing Indigenous girls into his policies
of assimilation, women were attending college, and the “New Woman” was making waves and causing anxiety amongst men.

**Women and Football: The Violent Spectator**

“You’re not a real coach unless you’re onto your second wife,” a prestigious white, former college football coach told me once.59 Another coach nearby agreed, saying he was already onto wife number two. I was shocked that they believed I would be receptive to this line of conversation, but it is a perfect example of the misogyny within the football world even today. It also demonstrates how fans of football who identify as women are supposed to act, in short, as a pun and an appendage. In the 1890s, white women’s rights activists pushed for the right to vote which led to concern some middle class white women were becoming “masculinized.”60 This connected to the lack of domestic wars. Whereas in the past women watched men fight—think picnics at the Battle of Bull Run—by the 1890s, domestic wars in the U.S. were over. The frontier moved overseas to Guam, the Philippines, and Cuba; white women in the U.S. were not watching men fighting anymore. I argue that football took the place of domestic war as a location for white women spectators to watch men demonstrate their violent prowess so white men could reinforce the heterosexual patriarchy.

There were already anxieties about college women before the 1890s. Many popular press articles were concerned that these women would not be satisfied with domesticity, and often overplayed their non-academic attributes—like beauty and

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59 The white former head football coach of an NCAA Division III institution, September 2021 in conversation with the author.
frivolity—to frame them as nonthreatening to men and ease anxieties.\textsuperscript{61} By the 1890s, however, concern about threats to white masculinity in the U.S. were widespread. At the 1893 World’s Fair, white masculine superiority was communicated via technological advancement.\textsuperscript{62} In football, and at universities more broadly, it was communicated through physical regeneration, “In the 1890s, health became almost an obsession, one that could best be indulged in the outdoors, as far as possible from the decay of urban life.”\textsuperscript{63} The individual male body came to symbolize the national body; the male demonstration of superiority over women became a demonstration of the nation’s superiority and civilization over the landed empire. Women, in the colonial era, symbolized fertile land and civilization, so subconsciously, and consciously, this made sense to the anxious nation.\textsuperscript{64}

White women, however, were increasingly asserting different roles for themselves which allowed them to leave the private sphere and create lives in public. There was also continuing anxiety around college women or the “New Woman.” Amy Kaplan writes that masculine virility proponents often responded to the “New Woman” by advocating for her return to more “womanly” pursuits, “Advocates of masculine rejuvenation… are usually seen to respond to the threat of the New Woman by urging a concomitant return of women to their traditional roles as home-makers and childbearers.”\textsuperscript{65}

\textsuperscript{63} Huhndorf, \textit{Going Native}, 67.
\textsuperscript{65} Kaplan, “Romancing the Empire,” 675.
Hoganson extends this analysis by asserting that, within gender role renegotiation during the 1890s, “Those who spoke of national struggle and national survival generally believed that these depended on… domestic women who dedicated themselves to raising the next generation of vigorous heroes.”\(^6^6\) Kaplan’s concept of “manifest domesticity” adds to this analysis arguing that middle class white family ideal of domesticity operates in opposition to the foreign, so domesticity can rationalize the dispossession of Native people and their cultures while also domesticating, simply through their presence, the frontier— in this case the football field.\(^6^7\) In order to become a part of this white supremacist project, and support the “next generation of vigorous heroes,” I argue that women had to become appendages and spectators to the violent, vigorous domestic war— football— to support their families and as football grew in spectacle, this spectator role evolved into the famed Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders who were known, literally, by their appendages.

Women in the 1890s are few and far between in football articles. Their only mentions come as spectators, but these mentions are flowery, verbose, and without fail further feminize women at the games. One such description comes from an article describing Yale’s defeat of Harvard in the 1887 championship game, “The ladies were out in great force. They all wore ribbons and the wearers of the blue glared at the wearers of the crimson as if an Amazonian war of the roses were to be revived.”\(^6^8\) This

\(^6^6\) Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood*, 12.


description highlights the number of women at the game and re-feminizes women in two ways. The description is feminizing and dehumanizing as their only physical traits are the colors they wear in relation to “their” men. Therefore, it implies, for women readers, that in order to maintain the domestic sphere—both in its private meaning and in opposition to foreignness—within the ever-expanding American empire they must stick to their “colors” and stay with the men. This also racializes the space and encourages white women to continue to support white supremacy. Secondly, this quote explains that women can be heroic; they do this by rescuing the hero from his more “primitive” nature through spectating. As Amy Kaplan writes, “The female spectator unleashes the brute in the man yet holds him in check.”

On the football field, with its boundaries and territory like the frontier, the spectating also becomes a part of empire building. As women watch men act as “soldiers” or players on the home battlefield (or football pitch) or in newspapers, the pitch becomes a window through which women view manly exploits abroad, in other words, empire-building and overseas war. This also serves to domesticize empire; women—especially mothers—support and participate in imperial war and subjugation without crossing into the public sphere as they expand the empire of the mother or domesticity.

Later in the article this connection between feminine gaze and masculine empire building is clarified further. The *Times* writes, “When the players came in [the women spectators] clapped their hands and said “Oh my,” and took a long look at their favorites

69 Kaplan, “Romancing the Empire,” 677.
70 Kaplan, “Romancing the Empire,” 677. I have built from Kaplan’s descriptions of women readers of historical novels to examine football and the football press.
in order to be able to distinguish them when they became a homogenous set of tramps, with their faces decorated by mud or blood, and spread it several unnatural directions.”

In this quote, the men are described similarly to soldiers both with the grime and the homogeneity. Yet, in another interpretation, this quote demonstrates how masculinity is salvaged and remolded during a football game. The men walk on as distinct people. As they don the uniform they are homogenized by the helmets, padding, and colors. Then, their faces are decorated by “mud or blood,” invoking images of “savagery” and/or war. Finally, it is spread in unnatural directions which implies that the men are different somehow— remade into the “man who knows Indians,” until the victor reclaims their whiteness. All of this, however, occurs through the feminine gaze. By creating the reader’s entry point as the white women spectators, the Times and other news companies created, as Kaplan wrote, a domesticized window into a frontier war. In football, men recreated “frontier” or “Indian” wars despite the actual wars of empire moving overseas and the women spectators’ attendance at these games intwined the virulent masculine nationalism with domesticity and therefore white womanhood.

There are further examples of this phenomenon which continue to prove the importance of football in maintaining a domestic “frontier” war. In one New York Times article from 1894, Dr. Rev. John L. Scudder explained that the “barbarism” in football was concerning because the “ladies” watched it, “Football was degenerating into slugging

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72 As Roosevelt would say.
73 Kaplan, “Romancing the Empire,” 677.
matches and was no longer fit for the eyes of ladies to behold." The concern for the feminine spectator, not the men who died or were gravely injured, shows that American colleges were, in many ways, fighting for the domesticating gaze of white woman. Kaplan describes the implications of the fight for the feminine gaze using *The Virginian* and westerns, “The Western neither banishes woman from a rugged male terrain… nor simply tames her… it co-opts her desires and includes her in its pleasures of romancing the empire.” Her desires, in the case of football are to see her team, her “favorites” win on the football field, an imagined frontier. Therefore, her desires—and the readers’—are used to tell a sweeping, happy, white supremacist story of football men and the frontier.

In other articles, America is personified as a feminine entity, tying the conquered continent to new empire-building endeavors. In his speech, Scudder continued to speak about Walter Camp’s 1894 reforms during the game he attended, “The game showed vim but no venom. It demonstrated that America will tolerate no elements of savagery in her favorite sports.” In Manifest Destiny and colonial documents, land is often personified as a woman to invoke white men’s right to pillage, settle, and colonize the land—plainly to dominate it. The continued invocation of America’s distaste for savagery in this speech implies that the feminine spectator is driving the containment of masculine power.

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75 Kaplan, “Romancing the Empire,” 684.
76 This speech was delivered a prelude titled “Is Football Degenerating?” in Jersey City which was reprinted in the *New York Times* the next day. “Not A Brutal Game: Dr. Scudder Thinks Football Rougher on Spectators Than Players,” *New York Times*, December 3, 1894, The New York Times Digital Archive.
It also restates Theodore Roosevelt’s arguments that the ideal white settler should be a violent masculine figure who is willing to fight for his racial power, “In an era when traditional ideologies of manhood were being actively renegotiated, Roosevelt reinvigorated male authority by tying it to white racial supremacy and to a militaristic, racially based nationalism.” Roosevelt argues in The Winning of the West that overcoming “ferocious” groups (Indigenous Nations) created the superiority of white Americans. The continued implication that football players must overcome their “elements of savagery” creates a new frontier thesis in America— the football field.

Therefore the feminine personification of America and the U.S. continues to invoke white supremacy and racist frontier concepts to celebrate and warn about the violence of football, particularly in the 1890s.

In the 1890s, football was a location for white women spectators watched men demonstrate their violent prowess in a domestic version of imperial wars the U.S. waged overseas. These women as wives and mothers had to become appendages to their men who participated the violent, vigorous domestic war— football. As anxieties loomed about women leaving their traditional household sphere and into the public eye, football became a location to reassert male supremacy and a way for women to push the boundaries of the private, domestic sphere while reinforcing the domestic in opposition to the foreign or “Other.” Football showcased masculine violence and prowess in front of women spectators. This reinforced male power and supremacy. The football field itself was not a place for women. Commentators and writers reminded women of this by

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78 Bederman, Manliness and civilization, 214.
79 Roosevelt, The Winning of the West, 11.
discussing the negative effects simply watching the violence of football could have on women. Yet it also created a desirable, powerful masculine figure who fought for territory; this figure is described and created through a feminized gaze therefore reminding women that a desirable man is an “Indian fighter.” Finally, feminine personification of America and elite colleges invoked settler colonialist admiration for the violent pillaging and destruction of land and non-white people to both warn white men about being “too violent” and reinvoke frontier concepts of “race war” and “overpowering savagery.”

Conclusion

Football became the new domestic frontier in the 1890s, particularly for white, upper-class, and middle-class men. Football was the location where these men redefined masculinity and male supremacy, reinforced and demonstrated violent white prowess, and proved both manhood and whiteness all before the eyes of white women spectators who served as both a warning of over-violence and a desiring gaze directed at the winning man. Despite their differences, both Roosevelt and Turner’s theses lamented the supposed end of the frontier since there was no longer a location for white men to prove their “civilized” masculinity. Football, though, provided that space. At elite, East Coast institutions, young, elite, white men played football to demonstrate their virile masculinity—just as Roosevelt wanted. Many of these men, like John Prentiss Poe, ended up on colonial military battlefields, working to expand the U.S. empire in the Spanish-American War and Philippine-American War. Schools like the Carlisle Indian Industrial School used the regimentation and whiteness of football to forcibly assimilate Native children, while universities and the media used frontier war metaphors to describe
their games against Carlisle. White women, the symbolic heralds of civilization, were always present as spectators in these games, watching the violence. Their approval symbolized the “civilized” aspect of the brutal games, ensuring that these men would be seen as heroes, not villains.

As football moved into the 1900s, the game came under fire for the absurd levels of injury and death. Impassioned reform from none other than Theodore Roosevelt “saved” the game—though his role is overexaggerated—just in time for World War I. As most young men went off to fight a war in Europe, football subsided for a time. The game, though, bounced back with a vengeance in the 1920s, providing a calming balm for yet another era of anxiety in the U.S.

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Chapter 2:
“Clean, Decent, Supervised Amusements”: Football, Whiteness, and Morality in the 1920s

John Prentiss Poe passed away during World War I, as did thousands of American men. Thousands more returned home bearing visible marks of war, and many of them were permanently disabled which meant they were unable to hold the jobs that previously defined their lives. 81 Leisure, then, became a method of defining a man’s masculinity. And no man was more hailed as an American hero than Bo McMillan. McMillan was a student and athlete a Centre College from 1917 until 1921, with a break in 1918 to serve in World War I. 82 During that time, he led Centre, a small college in central Kentucky, to a legendary victory over Harvard among other well-known football schools. McMillin grew up in Texas, and several articles about him mention his moral compass, as well as the Centre Praying Colonel’s “clean” and “scientific” play. 83 According to Sports Illustrated, McMillin never smoked, drank, or swore, and a legend followed the Centre team that they prayed prior to every game. 84

McMillin’s underdog hero story was so perfect that adolescent adventure and sportswriter Ralph Delahaye Paine decided to rewrite his life as a sports adventure story called First Down Kentucky. 85 The hero of that book, Bowman McMurray, was simply a

84 Reed, “I’d rather be Bo McMillin than governor.”
renamed Bo. Bowman’s story begins with a police chase, which is supposedly how the Centre coach “discovered” McMillin in Texas. McMillin, and his fictitious counterpart McMurray, were the perfect hero men of the 1920s. As former soldiers who distinguished themselves through their leisure activities, were “morally pure,” and, importantly, were white and Christian, the sports world could not ask for a better hero to call, “President of the United States for the time being.” The real McMillin did not live up to legend. He was a continual gambler, always looking for the next deal and more money. He was likely not as poor as he claimed, and his service in World War I was in the Naval Reserves, so he saw little action. Yet his story made for the perfect hero. As anxieties rose about changing gender norms, class conflict, immigration, and morality, celebrating and creating media about someone who embodied the “ideal” man, worker, American, and morally pure person seemed to be the best way to promote those qualities—even if this storytelling masked the realities of McMillin’s lived experience.

McMillin’s story, like that of other famed footballers in the 1920s, was a reassuring escape from the realities of everyday national anxiety. He demonstrated that the working class had an opportunity to move up in the world—without the labor movement—which many prominent voices argued was led by immigrants from Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Bo’s story showed that men who followed Christian morals would succeed in life, something several sportswriters and Ku Klux Klan (KKK) newspaper authors argued football did too. Finally, his story was seen one of American

87 Reed, “I’d rather be Bo McMillin than governor.”
exceptionalism and civilizing heroics—like frontier heroes who dominated advertisements, Wild West shows, and dime novels. Where McMillin and Centre played “clean” football, other teams played “savage” or “barbaric” games. This set up a civilized/savage dichotomy which sportswriters, radio producers, and novelists drew on as they churned out press about football games during this era.

In this chapter I argue that during the 1920s, football in the intercollegiate and professional sphere was a space of white Americanization, a location to build white supremacy and white American empire, and an opportunity for white men to “play savage/Indian.” Football spectatorship was a location where white women could support their race and protect their home, family, and children by imbuing football—and more broadly American empire—with moral purity. I begin by describing the pervasive national anxieties in the 1920s focusing on fears of immigration, integration, changing sex and gender roles, and class conflict. I then describe the changing makeup of the football world as the first professional league was established in 1920 which allowed for a broader class participation but continued to enforce racial segregation—with important exceptions. This section describes the Americanizing influence of football and its importance as a space of white leisure. I then move into analyzing how prominent voices—coaches and sportswriters—historicized football as a game of European descent that America perfected. This reinforces American exceptionalism and football’s whiteness. In the next section, I describe how football’s whiteness was also reinforced by colonial rhetoric, particularly that of the civilized/savagery dichotomy which popular press writers clung to as they sensed other parts of America changing. This is a direct continuation of the imagined frontier of football I described in Chapter 1. In the 1920s,
the rise of Native mascots, ubiquitous “Indian Wars” metaphors, and mass redface
further extended football’s imagined frontier. This provided comfort to white men who
saw their power under threat from immigrants, people of color, and women. Finally, I
discuss the importance of white women’s presence to the maintenance of American
empire and white supremacy in football. Building on Chapter 1, I add more about their
importance as spectators or appendages, characters in fictional football stories, and the
rise of the Women of the KKK (WKKK) organization which specifically endorsed sports
as a method of teaching young boys morality and the correct form of leisure. Football
continued, ultimately, to be a space of whiteness, even as some resisted the white
supremacy deeply ingrained in the game; this game which simulates a war over territory.
Like other imagined frontiers of the 1920s, football was a location of reassurance for
white people—acting as an opportunity to reminisce and reinvigorate their belief in
American empire.

**Football and American anxieties in the 1920s**

The precursor to the National Football League (NFL), the American Professional
Football Association, played its first season in 1920. By 1922, it was renamed the NFL,
though the general area of operation stayed the same throughout the decade. Almost all
these teams were based in industrial cities in the Midwest or mid-Atlantic such as
Cincinnati, Chicago, and Buffalo, N.Y. Many of the men who played on these teams
were first- and second-generation immigrants to the U.S., and they were almost entirely
working class. The NFL faced some stigma as a space for the urban working class and ethnic minorities (such as Italians) until the late 1950s. Richard D. Loosbrock, “Book Review: Keepers of the Flame: NFL Films amd
company sponsored teams with the goals of Americanizing immigrants by increasing loyalty to the company and promoting capitalist working habits, and soothing class conflict. This was the first sanctioned professionalization of football in the U.S., and it signified one of the many changes that came to football in the 1920s.

College football, on the other hand, continued to be a space for elites, but the powerhouse teams were not the Ivy Leagues. Instead, the Big 10—the Midwestern college conference—surged to prominence led by Notre Dame University and the University of Iowa. Despite the shift to the Midwest, football was still viewed as a sport to train the next generation of the middle class in the ways of the “strenuous life.”

World War I, however, shifted the commercialization and professionalization of college football. As Ronald Smith argues, college athletics in the 1920s were no longer elitist, amateur games: instead, they were intensely commercialized and professionalized at U.S. colleges. This commercialization often went hand-in-hand with enormous influxes of funding from ticket sales, which proponents of commercialization argued funded all other sports within the university and fed university prestige. College football fans — as well as universities — looked down on the “pay for play” model in the fledgling NFL, since


they believed it denigrated two important pillars of character-building in football: amateurism and sportsmanship.\(^9^4\)

College football, though, was not without its financial issues. Despite avowed commitments to amateurism, commercialization through national press and radio meant most college teams were rife with corruption, under-the-table payments to players, and a developing cult of celebrity around both players and coaches.\(^9^5\) The ballooning popularity of college football also meant schools needed to accommodate the increasing number of fans with the means and opportunity to see games due to gains in labor rights. Schools throughout the country—including every university in the Big 10—built new stadiums during the 1920s. Though many of these stadiums were much larger than earlier fan areas, their low prices meant they still could not accommodate all the fans. Therefore, many people listened to games on the radio at bars and in homes throughout the country. The increased attention on football also meant pageantry around the games and their celebrities grew larger and drew from popular ideas of masculinity, race, gender, and the nation. Leisure spaces are viewed as an escape from national and personal anxieties. But like in the 1890s, football during this era also reflected national worries about masculinity, immigration, and class conflict.

The 1920s, like the 1890s, were a period of intensifying anxieties throughout the U.S. These anxieties swirled around urbanization, immigration, miscegenation and racial unidentifiability, changing sex and gender roles, the first Red Scare, class conflict, and

\(^{94}\) Schmidt, *Shaping College Football*, 7.

\(^{95}\) Schmidt, *Shaping College Football*, 4; and “The Big Scrimmage over College Football,” *The Literary Digest*, November 9, 1929, EBSCOhost: Reader’s Guide Retrospective, 58.
Prohibition. Further urbanization fueled fears of moral deterioration of white, young people— which compounded with anxiety about miscegenation and changing gender roles— to create a white backlash against the perceived threats posed by free Black people, particularly those who moved north during the Great Migration to cities in the Midwest and mid-Atlantic.

Victoria Wolcott argues that recreation and leisure activities were a central racial battleground in the 1920s because leisure and commercialism were key motifs in American life. Wolcott describes “recreation riots”— racial conflicts in spaces of leisure— which occurred in the northern states such as Illinois and Ohio. These Midwestern states had large Ku Klux Klan (KKK) chapters and also featured the premier collegiate football conference, the Big 10, and several early professional football teams. Many of the same white working-class who followed football passionately also overlapped with local KKK chapters. While there is little direct evidence that the KKK sponsored football teams like they did baseball, it is clear that the KKK and the spectacle of football both worked to reinforce Protestant, white America during the 1920s. Ultimately, the goals of white mobs during these recreation riots were to reestablish and restabilize racial hierarchies which Black people’s use of leisure spaces undermined.

Masculinity, in the wake of World War I, was in question in the U.S. As Beth Linker describes, the thousands of war wounded could no longer work—something that

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98 One example is in Akron, Ohio where local rubber workers joined the KKK which maintained social relationships among the otherwise alienated group. For more see Thomas R. Pegram, “The Ku Klux Klan, Labor, And The White Working Class During The 1920s.” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 17, no. 2 (April 2018): 373–96.
had defined masculinity within households and nationally.\textsuperscript{99} Particularly for Protestant Americans, work was seen as space which defined morality.\textsuperscript{100} Without the ability to work, Protestant white men were left adrift both in masculinity and morally. As Kim E. Neilson argues, white Americans were looking for male heroes to strengthen the nation after World War I.\textsuperscript{101} During the war, Americans had wartime heroes to feed into their hero worship and demonstrate white supremacy, but afterwards, they looked for new places to find these heroes. Some of those heroes were mythic Wild West men like Buffalo Bill and Kit Carson, others, however, could be found on the football field. Whether coaches or players, football people in the 1920s were covered by media as heroes and often wrote advice columns for young boys and men. Neilson argues that in the uncertainty of the early interwar era, Americans turned to new heroes to strengthen, protect, and redeem the nation: “Their success as heroes depended on a combination of antiradicalism, physical strength, male leadership, and loyalty to family, wife, and nation, as well as their white, native-born status.”\textsuperscript{102} Football players combined all of those traits to become a new class of heroes during the 1920s.

The first Red Scare, subsequent immigration laws, and class conflict also fed into racially based anxieties. The post-World War I Red Scare centered on fears that immigrants from Eastern Europe were bringing anarchist, communist, and socialist ideas into the U.S. Many of these immigrants were Jewish, which fed into eugenicist and

\textsuperscript{100} Linker, \textit{War's Waste}, 3.
\textsuperscript{101} Kim E. Nielsen, “What’s a Patriotic Man to Do?: Patriotic Masculinities of the Post–WWI Red Scare,” \textit{Men and Masculinities} 6, no. 3 (January 1, 2004): 240.
\textsuperscript{102} Nielsen, “What’s a Patriotic Man to Do?” 251.
antisemitic theories that were popularized in the early 1920s by Francis Galton among others. These immigrations laws also extended to countries outside of Europe—particularly to China, Japan, and Mexico—as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 continued to be renewed and the Immigration Act of 1917 implemented the first legal restrictions on Mexican immigration.\textsuperscript{103} Ultimately, white, Protestant, middle-class Americans felt they were losing power, and their xenophobia, racism, and misogyny combined to revive the KKK, create other white supremacist and nativist organizations like the Better America Foundation, and refocus on key cultural activities which reinforced racist, nationalist, and patriarchal norms. One such activity was football.

\textit{“Red blood qualities”: Americanization through the gridiron}

Tales of football figures from the 1920s abound, whether it’s the Minnesotan frontiersman Bronko Nagurski, Red Grange the professional, or NFL president Jim Thorpe, who all were and continue to be classic American heroes. Running backs in college and professional football are, even today, compared to Grange and Thorpe while Nagurski retains folklore status comparable to Paul Bunyan in Minnesota.\textsuperscript{104} In the 1890s, football was the realm of East Coast elites at Ivy League colleges and prep schools. By the post-World War I era, the game had changed—as had the country. As the epicenter of football talent moved westward and into industrial cities of the Midwest,


those who dominated college teams changed as well.\textsuperscript{105} Greater numbers of people began to attend college. Therefore, football became a space for both the upper and middle classes—whether they were playing or spectating. Meanwhile professional teams grew out of blue-collar company work. Oftentimes, professional players were newly American, having immigrated during and after the war. As the makeup of the football world changed, journalists, academics, and scientists argued that football was what set white American men apart from Black and Indigenous people, white women, and immigrants, so football was continually configured as a cultural tool to implement white supremacy, nativism, and American exceptionalism.

One of the most storied examples of the Americanization of immigrants through football is University of Minnesota and Chicago Bears player Bronislau “Bronko” Nagurski. Nagurski was a second-generation Ukrainian immigrant, born in a small town in northern Minnesota to working-class parents.\textsuperscript{106} His life both in the 1920s and today is surrounded by legend: young players today hear stories of how he plowed fields

\textsuperscript{105} It is important to note that this era also saw the rise of football at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Prior to the 1960s, the majority of Black athletes came from these schools. Many of these schools had dominant and talented teams such as the Tuskegee football teams in the 1920s. During these early years of HBCU competition, football was the most popular sport and generated the most revenue and attention. After assimilation and desegregation efforts in the 1960s, many Black players were recruited and went to NCAA Division I historically white institutions which significantly changed the dynamics of football both at these institutions and the HBCUs. In the 1920s, Black players were segregated, but this changed dramatically by the 1970s. Native players, though, were not segregated in the 1920s or 1970s. These segregations in football paralleled the segregation in the U.S. military, making football even more similar to the military and empire building. For more see Joseph N. Cooper, J. Kenyatta Cavil, and Geremy Cheeks, "The State of Intercollegiate Athletics at Historically Black Colleges and Universities: Past, Present, and Persistence," \textit{Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics} 7, (2014), 307-322; Derrick E. White, \textit{Blood, Sweat, and Tears: Jake Gaither, Florida A&M, and the History of Black College Football}, (Durham, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press Books, 2019).

barehanded, walked four miles to and from school, and ate raw meat. As Kevin Britz argues, sportswriters believed that Nagurski’s power and skill could only be described by looking beyond civilization, so they cast him as a frontier hero.\textsuperscript{107} Newspapers confirm this characterization, describing him as a “demon” on the field, but “modest and self-effacing” off it; his defensive play is described as “savage;” and credit his success to his “pluck” and “dogged determination.”\textsuperscript{108} The most vivid parallels, though, come in his games against the Washington football team (named at the time with a slur towards Native people). Bronko was billed as a “warhorse” and a “menace” against the Washington team.\textsuperscript{109} Britz also featured a photograph in his article of Nagurski strongarming a man of unknown ethnicity in full Native regalia (see Figure 4).\textsuperscript{110} Through football, Nagurski moved from an Eastern European immigrant to the


\textsuperscript{110} See Figure 1, “Of Football and Frontiers: The Meaning of Bronko Nagurski,” 114.
quintessential white American man— the frontiersman, and in doing so added to the uncertainty of white identity in the late 1920s.

Even though Indigenous people played football at boarding schools and in the early NFL, journalists, coaches, and academics often wrote about the differences between Indigenous players and white players. They drew on other discussions in popular science and culture including eugenics, scientific racism, and anti-Indigenous policymaking. Instead of talking with Indigenous players to provide insight into their experience of football, most writers opted to talk with coaches like Glen “Pop” Warner, the former Carlisle Indian School coach. In a 1920 Literary Digest article, Warner described Native footballers as “sensitive” and having both a “natural cunning” and “powers of
observation.”¹¹¹ All three of these descriptions draw on classic mythic tropes surrounding Indigenous people in the U.S. Warner and other coaches’ descriptions of Indigenous players also racialized Native people as “other.” Even when Native athletes like Jim Thorpe excelled at the sport of white America, Warner was there to remind white spectators that it was not because Thorpe was better. Instead, it was because Thorpe was “cunning” and possessed mythic and otherworldly power, due to his Indigenous heritage.¹¹² Warner began coaching at Stanford in 1924, where he coached Ernie Nevers whom Warner later called his best player ever. In a 1925 interview, Warner said “Thorpe had a weakness, characteristic of the Indian race—carelessness, it might be termed.”¹¹³ Warner cited this “weakness” as the reason Nevers was a better football player than Thorpe—forwarding racist ideas about Native football players and people in general. In World War I, as Olivia B. Waxman writes, Native military recruits were often assigned to the most dangerous missions because commanders in the U.S. military viewed them as “naturally warrior-like.”¹¹⁴ By continually connecting Thorpe’s athleticism to racist conceptions of Native people, Warner further solidified anti-Indigenous sentiments in the 1920s and reinforced that true greatness in football was the realm of white men only.

The continued categorization of white footballers and “others” did, however, provide an avenue for working-class white immigrants to become “white” at a time when

¹¹¹ “The differences between red and white football material,” The Literary Digest, December 11, 1920, EBSCOhost: Reader’s Guide Retrospective.
immigration was extremely unpopular. The Immigration Act of 1917, Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, and the Red Scare both drastically decreased the number of immigrants allowed into the U.S. and further stigmatized those already here. In addition, many of these immigrants were Jewish and faced rising antisemitism in the U.S. Working-class white immigrants of Eastern and Northern European descent looking for a way to “become American” saw football as an easy inroad.

Many of the early professional teams, like the Green Bay Packers, grew out of company teams. These teams were implemented by companies and management as a facet of welfare capitalism and to promote wholesome leisure habits; deter the working-class from labor unions, Bolshevism, socialism, and anarchism; and promote work habits which management believed would increase productivity. Though college football proponents looked down on professional football in the early 1920s due to its association with the working-class, they unquestionably continued to associate any football player with America. In 1922, Harvard coach Perey D. Haughton said, “Football is inherently an American game… in it we find the most of the red-blooded ideals which we are proud to believe are particularly American.” When the legendary University of Illinois footballer Red Grange went straight into the NFL after his collegiate career ended, he demonstrated that all football was, well, football, and the elitism of universities was

115 Gems, “Welfare Capitalism and Blue-Collar Sport,” 44.
116 Schmidt, Shaping College Football, 62.
117 “Football as our greatest popular spectacle,” The Literary Digest, December 2, 1922, EBSCOhost: Reader’s Guide Retrospective, 52.
waning as upper- and middle-class football players decided to play for pay in the professional league.\textsuperscript{118}

**White Leisure: segregation, white resistance, and football**

In the early 1920s, American anxiety about white masculinity was greater, in some cases, than white identity more broadly. After World War I, several societal changes shook the patriarchal foundation of U.S. society including white women’s right to vote, a greater place for leisure in American life, and moral panics as white birth rates declined, and “radical” elements seemed to infiltrate cities.\textsuperscript{119} The war also left America with hundreds of thousands of casualties, and many men who were unable to work for the rest of their lives.\textsuperscript{120} Football was both a space of anxiety about white masculinity and a location where masculinity was celebrated and refined. Much of the anxiety about football, whiteness, and masculinity centered on the game as a space of leisure. As Erica Ryan contends, leisure boomed after the war, solidifying the commercialization of leisure and the place of leisure in lives of Americans were solidified, particularly those in the working class.\textsuperscript{121} Leisure, though, was an uncertain space for the white men who dominated American society. Victoria Wolcott argues that recreation and leisure was a central racial battleground during the interwar period due to, in part, the increase in

\textsuperscript{118} Schmidt, *Shaping College Football*, 75.

\textsuperscript{119} For a great overview of these themes see Erica J. Ryan, *When the World Broke in Two: The Roaring Twenties and the Dawn of America’s Culture Wars* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2018); for further reading about radicalism and the American family see Kim E. Nielsen, “What’s a Patriotic Man to Do?: Patriotic Masculinities of the Post–WWI Red Scare,” *Men and Masculinities* 6, no. 3 (January 1, 2004): 240–53.

\textsuperscript{120} For more on the effects of mass casualty on American masculinity see Beth Linker, *War’s Waste: Rehabilitation in World War I America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

\textsuperscript{121} Ryan, *When the World Broke in Two*, 10.
leisure’s place in American life. She describes how leisure spaces like amusement parks destabilized racial hierarchies which led to racial conflicts— which she terms recreation riots— in these spaces. White owners and customers believed that recreation would continue to be a space of virtue and safety by excluding African Americans and promoting a sanitized version of white leisure. Along with increasing xenophobia directed at immigrants, white American racism surged across the nation, but particularly in the Midwest, the new football stronghold.

The extreme popularity of football in the popular press led to many fictional stories about the game, many of which were romances. Football romances were a genre of magazine-driven literature which boomed in the 1920s particularly in weeklies such as Collier’s and Saturday Evening Post which sportswriters termed “the Golden Age of Sport.” Generally these articles were lengthy stories which laid out an imagined ideal for collegiate football. The whiteness of these stories demonstrates the importance of segregation to football followers and reasserts white supremacy through stereotypical analogies directed at Native and Black people. Though no direct sources on recreation riots specific to football exist currently, it is clear from the dearth of football romances, commentaries, and universities’ goals for football that it was a location of segregation, white resistance, and sanitized white leisure. Football’s importance in reasserting white American exceptionalism demonstrates the sport’s deep connection to white supremacy.

122 Wolcott, Race, Riots, and Rollercoasters, 8.
123 Wolcott, Race, Riots, and Rollercoasters, 14 and 19.
124 For more specifics on the popular press and the importance of spectacle in the creation of the “golden age” as well as an in-depth survey of 1920s and 1930s popular press on football see Michael Oriard, King Football: Sport and Spectacle in the Golden Age of Radio and Newsreels, Movies and Magazines, the Weekly & the Daily Press (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).
Regardless of where these romances are set, they are almost always completely white. Though, in some examples, writers emphasize the white man’s mannerisms by comparing him to Black and Indigenous people. In *Collier’s* “Bull Pup and Tiger Cub,” for instance, writer Lawrence Perry describes one of the main male characters saying, “Football players are as stoical as Indians when it comes to such things, and more often than not they cherish through the years vengeful memories that are altogether aboriginal in their depth and bitterness.”

Throughout the 1920s, commentators in popular weeklies rose to prominence through flashy sports writing and selecting “All-American” teams at the end of the college season. Notably, starting in 1925, Grantland Rice wrote a weekly column in *Collier’s* and he named the All-America team after Walter Camp left. Rice’s writing was notable for the flowery, descriptive prose he used, which is emblematic of the era’s sports journalism. In his first All-America column Rice begins stating “Before the harpoon, dipped in poison, is lifted too high, before the American war whoop of rage and wrath is sounded through each section because certain stars have not been named, there must first be a complete understanding of how this All-America Football Team for 1925 was assembled.” Within this opening line is an important delineation of who can enjoy and play football and, implied, who can be American. Rice uses the “American war whoop of rage and wrath” to conjure images of white colonizers and white men moving west fighting Native people because a war whoop is stereotyped as an Indigenous and

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126 Grantland Rice, “Collier’s All-America Football Team,” *Collier’s*, December 19, 1925, EBSCOhost: Reader’s Guide Retrospective.
“primitive” sound. Yet all the selected players are white and play in front of majority white crowds. Rice builds on Theodore Roosevelt’s arguments that white Americans are the natural successors of world domination because they combine European characteristics with those of Indigenous people. Philip Deloria writes that white Americans “play Indian” to create an identity, and Rice’s prose is a clear example of defining American whiteness in opposition to and as an act of “Indianness.” Other commentaries identify football as the perfect combination of European and “savage” elements including a *Literary Digest* article which describes football as, “the great Anglo-American game, [where] we might find that substitute for real war for which numerous philosophers have been searching.” As Chapter One demonstrated, Frederick Jackson Turner viewed the frontier as a meeting point for savagery and civilization, and the football field continued to act as an imagined frontier in the 1920s as the “scientific” game met the “savagery” of the field. The continued descriptions of football as a pinnacle of civilization also echo racist arguments for white, segregated America. The violence associated with these descriptions makes it clear that to protect this characterization, white people are willing to enact violent resistance.

Though professional football started in the 1920s, for most of the decade, collegiate football continued to be more popular. Universities capitalized on this by using football ticket sales to fund other sports, emphasizing the importance of white masculinity worshiped in football, and relating the stuffy academics of the ivory tower to the broader public through sport and spectacle. As Brian M. Ingrassia argues, many

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127 “Football as a ‘Fighting Game,’” *The Literary Digest*, November 19, 1921, HathiTrust Public Domain: University of Michigan, 53.
university professors and administrators and writers and politicians saw intercollegiate football as a cultural ritual which would publicize universities, train young men and preserve social order by disseminating patriarchal and white ideals about the body and society.\textsuperscript{128} Other scholars such as Raymond Schmidt and John Sayle Watterson describe the changes to college football in the 1920s as “radical reshaping.”\textsuperscript{129} In collegiate football this involved building stadiums to increase ticket sales and changing the place of football at universities and in American society. In the 1920s, universities pushed for football to be seen as an essential part of college, where men learned to be men. They did this through the nationalization of the game, increased media coverage, and the post-World War I boom in college enrollment. I add, in this section, that white universities emphasized the place of football, a sport rife with colonialism and segregation, to maintain and reinforce the white supremacist, patriarchal social order of the U.S. and educate “elite” men about this order. Celebrated coaches like Pop Warner, Knute Rockne, and Fielding Yost pushed for football to be a white, male space, even as athletes, students, and spectators worked for change.

Football at universities was used by coaches and administrators to reinforce white supremacy, masculinity, and social stratification via class and race. Knute Rockne, one of the most famous coaches of this time, is also one of the most notorious in this respect. Rockne coached the University of Notre Dame between 1918 and 1930, and he remains


one of the collegiate coaches with the highest career winning percentages (see Figure 2). During that time, Rockne coached a team with a back line so intense in 1924, Grantland Rice nicknamed it the “Four Horsemen” in a reference to the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.130

Rockne also wrote articles locating the origins of football in Greece and Rome, tracing its evolution through Western Europe before it became the “red-blooded American” game of today. Rockne wrote an article in 1929 titled “Football… a man’s game,” tracing what he calls the “football romances” from legendary Greek fullback Aristonico Caristo, crowned champion of Athens, to 1920s American star Red Grange.131 The article traces football history as white-centric history, claiming that “With the decline of Greece and Rome as military powers virile football passed from continental Europe as a folk game. But Roman soldiers had imported it as their garrison pastime during their years in Britain, and the Nordic Jutes, Angles, Saxons… adopted the game as their very own.”132 Rockne continues, somehow painting King Henry VIII as a football hero, and finally explaining that only Americans could create a proper formula for football: “I know of nothing more expressive of the verve and vigor of American life, of the militant energy of the American spirit, than a football game between two well-matched university teams.”133 By rewriting history to build football as a triumphant evolution of civilization, similar to how other facets of history are rewritten to justify colonialism and racism,

130 “Football or Baseball the National Game?” The Literary Digest, December 6, 1924, EBSCOhost: Reader’s Guide Retrospective, 61.
133 Rockne, “Football… a man’s game,” 71-2.
Rockne and the university system reinforced the whiteness of football and academia. In addition, this supported the elitism of collegiate football and denigrated professional teams because, as Rockne writes, the most important characteristic of a good football player is “unselfishness,” meaning amateurism and not being paid.\footnote{134}{Rockne, “Football… a man’s game,” 72.}

Collegiate coaches and commentators also used the popular press to share what ideal white American boys and men—meaning ideal football players—should act like. In an article titled “How to be a football star,” Rockne claims that “Football is supposed to bring out the Spartan in the young boy, which means to make as little out of an injury as possible.”\footnote{135}{Knute Rockne, “How to be a football star,” \textit{Popular Mechanics}, October 1926, EBSCOhost: Reader’s Guide Retrospective, 558.} Similar to his other articles, Rockne alludes to Sparta in order to locate the warlike aura he wishes the boy to have, and he further connects this to war by encouraging ignoring injuries. The entire article lays out a blueprint for how young boys should act, behave, and present in order to become a hero—otherwise known as a football star.

Similarly, in 1922 Allan Harding, a writer for \textit{American Magazine}, described how the kind of men who win in football also win “in the game of life” through a discussion with another famous college football coach—Fielding Yost.\footnote{136}{Allan Harding, “How to “Play Your Game”—Whatever It Is,” \textit{American Magazine}, November 1922, EBSCOhost: Reader’s Guide Retrospective, 24; Akin to Rockne, Yost was a household name in the 1920s for his leadership of the University of Michigan’s football team both before World War I and after. In 1921, he was also named athletic director at Michigan. For more on Yost and his efforts to maintain segregation at Michigan as athletic director see Tyran Kai Steward, “In the Shadow of Jim Crow: The Benching and Betrayal of Willis Ward,” (Ph.D. thesis: The Ohio State University, 2013).} Tyron Kai Steward has discussed how Yost maintained a system of segregation at Michigan.\footnote{137}{Tyran Kai Steward, “In the Shadow of Jim Crow: The Benching and Betrayal of Willis Ward,” (Ph.D. thesis: The Ohio State University, 2013).} Yost also
reinforced the segregationist system of the U.S. through his rhetoric around how the ideal football player should present himself. His advice in this column centers on character, which Yost, whose father served under Robert E. Lee in the Civil War, used to veil his racist views in order to maintain a system of segregation at Michigan. “If you want to see how the finer qualities of character inevitably carry men forward,” Yost said, “you won’t find any better examples than on the football field.” Like Pop Warner and Rockne, Yost describes an idealized vision which to him—and his readers—must be a white man. In more private circles though, as John Behee uncovered in 1974, it is clear Yost and other powerful men at Big 10 universities worked hard to prevent Black men from joining their athletic teams.¹³⁸ Yost himself, never allowed a Black player on his football teams.¹³⁹ For these powerful men, football at its finest and without qualifications could only be played by white men. This was unlike civilizing missions of the Carlisle School and company teams which stipulated that football was a method of assimilating and Americanizing non-white and/or non-Protestant men.

The football frontier: “playing Indian” in the 1920s

By the 1920s, the physical American frontier was 30 years in memory, but the imaginary frontier was booming. Stereotypical images of Native people were used in advertising images from cigars to cornstarch to baking powder across the increasingly consumer culture of the U.S. Wild West shows continued to traverse the U.S. with Native

dancers performing in front of city crowds and at World’s Fairs. The Wild West craze also capitalized on radio, though the most famous show, *The Lone Ranger*, did not begin until 1933. White America’s fascination with the mythic West, offered a way to construct “a national norm of ‘whiteness.’” Football, similarly, integrated stereotypical Wild West concepts to aid in its construction of white male masculinity during the 1920s.

American football is centered on gaining yards—or territory. This makes it incredibly similar to white American’s goals during the 1800s which centered on eradicating the other side (in this case Native people) and controlling their stolen land. The early years of football, as I discussed in Chapter 1, coincided with the Turnerian “close of the frontier,” and this was not a coincidence. Without land to prove their supremacy on, and exhibit it for white women, white men turned to a new method of becoming virile young men—sports, namely football. Several sources from the 1920s point to the continuation of this trend. In the wake of World War I, however, many saw this as preparations for another great war, instead of further colonialization as Theodore Roosevelt argued. As 1920s University of Minnesota President Lotus D. Coffman said, “[Football] represents the fighting spirit and clean sportsmanship. The same kind of red blood qualities are required on the football field that animated the men on the battlefields of France and Belgium.” Yet the pervasive racist imagery of Indigenous people crept

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142 Coffman is a noted racist and antisemite, who was the subject of the University of Minnesota’s “A Campus Divided” investigation in 2017 which investigated the histories of surveillance and discrimination
into football, even as players like Jim Thorpe created all-Native professional teams in the NFL. In the 1920s, several schools adopted Native mascots, professional teams used several slurs as names, and coaches and writers used frontier metaphors to describe the game, all of which reinforced the othering and anachronizing of Native people in the 1920s.

In the early twentieth century professional baseball teams began to adopt Native mascots, which fell in line with the federal government’s policies of allotment and assimilation which continued through the 1920s. Baseball’s Boston Braves coined their name in 1912, and the Cleveland Indians in 1915 which unleashed the floodgates for the proliferation of mascots in the 1920s and beyond. Philip Deloria argues that Native people became a symbol of national identity prior to the Boston Tea Party and have remained extremely influential to white American’s collective identity. By the 1920s, the federal government implemented “civilization regulations” which confined Native people to reservations and criminalized all aspects of cultural rituals and traditions. In 1924, all Native men were granted citizenship. An article from The New Republic in 1927 described the conditions facing Native people in a paternalistic way, asserting that it was the calling of white people to “save” Indigenous people. Interestingly for the time, the

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143 Erik Brady, “The real history of Native American team names,” USA Today, August 24, 2016, https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/2016/08/24/real-history-native-american-team-names/89259596/. It is important to note that today’s Washington Football Team was founded as the Boston Braves in 1932.


145 Several of these regulations including the banning of Native languages in schools, compulsory attendance at boarding schools, imprisonment for practicing Native spirituality, and the Dawes Act were passed in the 1870s and 1880s but remained in effect up through at least the mid-1930s (and often longer).
writer asserted that Commissioner for Indian Affairs Charles H. Burke and those who implement his policies were creating conditions which would lead to the “vanishing” of Native people.\textsuperscript{146} Yet, this article presented a classic myth about Indigenous people, that they were “vanishing,” and their cultures needed to be preserved by white Americans.

White masculinity was supposedly and simultaneously in crisis. As C. Richard King argues, this paved the way for the proliferation of Native mascots in the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{147} The use of Native mascots also incorporated elements of nationalization in a sport that prior to World War I was viewed as an occupation for the elites. Professional teams used this to their advantage, with teams like football’s Cleveland Indians, Duluth Esk*mos, and Akron Indians using the imagined “Indian” to create a touchstone of familiarity for Americans. King and Richard Slotkin have argued, the imaginary “Indian” is a space where white America can remake and regenerate its identity.\textsuperscript{148} In the aftermath of World War I, that is exactly what white people were looking for, so they turned to Native mascots in football.

Several colleges and universities also adopted Native mascots during the 1920s to reinforce the white masculinity of universities and offer a relatable national identity to broader segments of white America. Both goals stemmed from perceived threats to powerful university people’s “way of life,” which echoes the KKK mottos of this time. There were no overt laws of segregation in the North as there were in the South. Instead,

white administrators and coaches needed to create other methods of asserting white supremacy in the university. Some methods, like those used by Coffman and Yost, prevented Black students from certain aspects of campus life such as football. Other schools such as the University of Illinois, Stanford, and Miami University in Ohio began to use Native imagery and mascots, drawing on the erstwhile national identifier—Native people.149

Drawing large crowds and full of spectacle, football games were the space many people saw these new Native mascots. At Mississippi College, one of the few schools which the NCAA allowed to keep their Native mascot, students advocated for the mascot to be the Choctaw because of “shared traits” between Choctaw people and their football team.150 The University of Utah, today known as the Utes in reference to the Nunt’z people whose ancestral homelands lay in Utah, also adopted their earlier moniker—r*dskins—during the mid-1920s.151 Unlike the University of Illinois, who adopted Chief Illiniwek as their mascot in the 1920s, Utah did not incorporate pageantry into their games until later. Illinois, however, incorporated their mascot into every game in 1926

151 Throughout my thesis, offensive words and slurs used as names and monikers by football teams will be censored. This is because the Native American Journalism Association has produced several studies detailing how media and the use of slurs as mascot names is detrimental to the mental health of young people and these names reinforce racist stereotypes about Native people. They have called on news media to not broadcast the mascot names of these teams, and to treat them as they would any other slur. In addition, the AP Style Guide recommends censoring all slurs or offensive words in publications. While the Chicago Manual of Style has no information on this beyond avoiding bias, it does fall under that broad umbrella as well. For more on the University of Utah’s historical use of r*dskin see Danielle Endres, “Utes Nickname Project: History,” University of Utah Communication Institute, Accessed January 22, 2022, https://institute.communication.utah.edu/projects/utesnicknameproject.php#text=Has%20the%20University%20always%20used,Utes%E2%80%99D%20nickname%2C%20abandoning%20others.
and after. Throughout the 1920s, the university continued to incorporate the chief into more university events—from fraternity meetings to the alumni magazine. Throughout this time all the men who portrayed the chief were white students at the university who wore redface makeup and costuming. The university took stereotypical images of Native people—war bonnets and tomahawks—and incorporated them into the costume (see Figure 5). Chief Illiniwek, even in the first year of the character’s performance, led the band to the field at halftime and “threw down his hatchet of war and extended the pipe of peace to the rivals of the day.” While only one student was literally in redface, the man performing as the Chief, the team name and caricaturized mascot redfaced the entire student body, fanbase, and university by extension—including the football team. With the spectacle, dominating football team, and increased sporting press, this redfacing spread far and wide.

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155 “Indian Band Leader Welcomes Quakers Before Grid Crowd,” *Daily Illini*. 
This mass redfacing is an example of a university football team creating an Americanized and national identity. Redfacing, like blackfacing, is when people who are not Indigenous perform as Native people on TV or in movies, discursively through writing, or as mascots; oftentimes these performers call upon racist and stereotypical images like darkening their skin and holding a tomahawk. As Michelle Raheja writes, “redface performances by white actors operated significantly under the assumption that Native Americans as a distinct group of peoples had disappeared and therefore were not available to fill ‘Indian’ roles.”

Similarly, the increased redface mascotry in the 1920s

156 Michelle H. Raheja, Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 72.
played into the columnist from *The New Republic*’s assertion that Native Americans were vanishing. By inventing new “Native” people through football, white Americans ensured their “heritage” stayed intact. These mascots like Illiniwek always played into stereotypes like the “noble savage.” When universities made these stereotypes the face of their athletic teams, it implied their teams held these characteristics and this land, and were the rightful controllers of it. King contends that when white people are, “occupying the Indigenous other (both fans dressing in feathers and mascots performing at sporting events), Euro-Americans sanction their claim to occupy the land.”

Through this occupation, white Americans claim control over who, how, when, and what Indigenous representations look like. In football, these early adopters of Native mascots moved the frontier-esque game of football from one with tacit frontier connections to overt and violent claims to land and Native representation. These claims were not contained to the performer or the team itself, especially as fans began to wear branded merchandise, headdresses, and carry tomahawks themselves. The influx of Native mascots in 1920s football violently reasserted white supremacy and white identity at a time when faith in those systems was shaken.

In addition to redface mascotry, the language used to write about football called upon “noble savage” stereotypes which established a connection that white football players and coaches were the rightful inheritors of this land. Football was seen as both violent and full of problems—and as a space ripe for developing the next heroes of

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158 King, “This Is Not an Indian,” 5.
159 King, “This Is Not an Indian,” 5.
America. Oftentimes, these articles also included military connotations. When discussing Notre Dame’s team, for example, columnist Grantland Rice said, “The Notre Dame quarter of last fall led the interference, took out tacklers with deadly effect by bringing them to earth with the keen aim of a sniper.” Sometimes these columnists compared football players directly to Native people, particularly when their team mascots or names were Native names, “The cocky young Indian eleven, then reaching the peak of its fame, met the Soldier team on the field of battle. The 26-to-0 defeat administered by the Service lads is still fresh in the memories… of the Southwest prides.” Both these writers drew upon the “savagery” in football—the gruesome injuries which might happen, the murderous metaphors about war, and the deep feelings of revenge which Lawrence Perry says are “aboriginal.”

Many commentators also extolled the virtues of football players, comparing them to ancient European nobility. Rice described football as “a game that calls for loyalty, service and team play, for clean living, for fine spirit. It is a game that demands quick thinking under fire, a game that builds up confidence and control of self.” In a 1929 article about an Army-Stanford game, Charley Paddock wrote, “This clash between Cagle and Fleischhacker should prove a battle within a battle, a duel between speed and weight. The elusive, rapierlike thrusts of the Army captain will be matched by the

hammerlike plunges of a twentieth-century Porthos." As discussed earlier, Knute Rockne and Fielding Yost often located the origins of football in Greece, Rome, and European nobility. White American footballers and their coaches presented football as the quintessential game of noble savagery, and the continuation of the uniquely American combination of white European and Native American traits.

Football furthered the American identity of the imaginary Native through its comparisons to frontier wars and territorial growth. As discussed in chapter one, the entire game centers on the acquisition of territory and, on the flip, the dispossession of the other team’s territory. This echoes the 19th- and 20th-century American legal, extralegal, and social processes which worked to dispossess Native people from their land. As Americans saw Native people as a “vanishing” race, football became a nostalgic reminder of the frontier wars of the 1800s. This is clear through the rhetoric used in popular press during the 1920s. A 1922 article, about a game between Michigan and Wisconsin recalled how “A barrier of flesh which refused to be crushed, and a spirit which refused to be cowed; that was Michigan, Saturday afternoon, on its first invasion of Badger confines in sixteen years.” Discussing sports through war metaphors was not unique, but this, coupled with continued comparisons to Native people, “noble savage” imagery, and the influx of Native mascots created an imagined frontier out of the football field. The land battle imagery invoked by this quote conjures images of American

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expansion and Native dispossession across the world whether in the American West, Puerto Rico, Guam, or elsewhere.

Some popular sources even more heavily compared football to the murder and dispossession of Native people. Several discussed “scalping” as a metaphor for winning or when fans looked for change. Scalping, overwhelmingly, in American history was used as a genocidal tool to legally, and for reward, murder Native people. The use of this term in relation to winning football games continued this American tradition of murder, but those who were “scalped” were white people playing Indian. Though white Americans expressed nostalgia and paternalism towards Native Americans in the 1920s, they also searched for a frontier replacement where they could reimagine violent masculine traits. They found it on the football field. Here, for Albert Britt, the editor of Outing, “When you go farther West the first name that you strike is Iowa, winners of the Western Conference. Not content with five conference scalps the Hawkeyes stepped outside and added Notre Dame for good measure.” Other articles described Minnesota fans demanding the “coach’s scalp” after a spate of losses, Holy Cross seeking “Harvard’s scalp,” and the Navy seeking to bring the “Army’s scalp” back to their campus in Annapolis.

Though scalping was historically perpetrated by white Americans in pursuit of their genocidal agenda, the myths that Native people scalped settlers held and holds considerable sway. Some Native nations, prior to European arrival scalped enemies, as did different cultures around the world. But popular culture’s adoption of violent Native people scalping white settlers, while ignoring the huge numbers of white Europeans and Americans who made money from murdering Native people, effectively creates a myth that only Native people scalped. Therefore, when these magazines described football victories as “taking scalps” they also communicated to readers that the winning team was the most “savage” team because they had successfully played the imaginary Indian.

Playing football was akin to “playing Indian” during the 1920s. Football used stereotypical “Indian” and Wild West images, rhetoric, and costuming to aid in its construction of a nationalized white male masculinity in this era. Due to the proliferation of popular press and national radio media in this decade, football was, for the first time, broadcast nationally. Therefore, team identities could no longer be only regional, decided by where one lived or went to school. So, football marketing turned to an erstwhile American identifier—Native people. Promoters did this through mascotry such as the r*dskin mascot at the University of Utah, and Chief Illiniwek at the University of Illinois, who were also known as the “Fighting Illini.” Popular press and media perpetuated the

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frontier connotations of football discussed in Chapter 1 by using language that invoked the “noble savage” dichotomy and stereotypes, and through liberally using the term “scalp/scalping” to refer to winning— which holds a deep history of settler colonial violence and genocide against Indigenous people. The use of racist mascots and their associated chants and team slogans further entrenched the white American conception that they were different from their European counterparts because their “conquering” of Native Americans meant they had some “savage” elements. This is echoed in the language of popular media and in the performances of racist mascots. By “playing Indian,” white men developed a nationalized American identity with football as a centerpiece, and their wives, sweethearts, and supporters aided in the creation of this identity as well.

**It’s a Spectator’s Empire: White women, empire, and football**

During the 1920s, white women gained legal political power for the first time in the U.S. with the passage of the 19th Amendment. Greater numbers of women also began to work outside the house, in part due to shifts in the labor force during and after World War I. Some white women, however, continued to support segregation and racist beliefs, even as they fought for their own liberation. At least half a million women were members of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan (WKKK), the women’s chapter of the KKK white supremacist organization renewed in the 1920s. This organization focused on reinfusing American politics with “family values,” as Nazi women’s organization in Germany would during the 1930s. These family values advocates saw new moral codes,  

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new media, growing cities, and declining white birth rates as evidence that America was being corrupted. Their goals were to protect their families, homes, and children from nefarious influences— which for them meant non-American, non-white, and non-traditional. As shown throughout this chapter, football was a space of whiteness, traditional gender roles, and Americanization. White women involved with or peripheral to the WKKK, then, believed that football was a location of leisure where their spectating would support the continuation of white, masculine power in America— and the game would teach their children traditional roles, keeping them safe from “nefarious influences.”

These white Protestant women saw the increase of private leisure spaces during the 1920s as dangerous. In cities, the nightlife scene with its flappers and speakeasies was viewed as morally corrupt. Theaters, and cars, which offered darkness and privacy were risky for a woman’s sexual purity. Football, many commentators argued, was the antidote to these “impure” and “immoral” leisure locations, and they claimed that the rise of leisure culture demanded that white women and men to participate in moral leisure. Prolific Collier’s football columnist Grantland Rice also wrote about the moral values of football: “College drinking is being done on a larger scale than many believe it to be. Football and other competitive sports are the main barriers set against this mode of living.”

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flaunting of Prohibition was symbolic of the degrading morals in the U.S. led, in their view, by immigrants and radicals.\textsuperscript{173} And so, football was seen as a space to teach the correct ways of living in the U.S., both due to the disciplinary regimens and their maintenance of traditional racial and gender divisions.

The popular press continually described football’s appropriateness as a space of leisure for white people. Writers described coaches as moral, pure, and ideal men, ignoring the overt corruption and racism. Fielding Yost, said to be the ideal coach despite his virulent racism, was praised by Grantland Rice for his apparent moralism: “Among [Fielding Yost’s] four assistants there isn't one who has ever taken a drink, ever smoked, ever used profanity or ever told a dirty story… They are men of the highest order, and their influence will carry far beyond the football field.”\textsuperscript{174} This heroic description of football coaches put football on a leisure pedestal as an appropriate and upper-crust use of time—since any football man worth his salt would “influence” beyond the grass. It also drew spectators further into the fold of football. By letting credible accusations and reports of racism, corruption, and assault fall by the wayside, while promoting the “moral” values of football coaches, this 1925 description promoted football as a safe leisure activity for white people—whether they were playing or watching. Regardless, it ensured that parents believed their children on the football field would grow up with the “right” values, and the continual stadium building at college campuses—which kept

\textsuperscript{173} Though there is considerable overlap in membership, the WCTU did not support the Klan’s racist agenda. They did, however, often collaborate with the KKK on their anti-alcohol agenda because of their common goal in this regard. For more see Kelli R. Kerbawy, “Knights in White Satin: Women of the Ku Klux Klan,” (Master of Arts Thesis: Marshall University, 2007), 25-28.

\textsuperscript{174} Rice, “What football pays for,” 19.
football teams away from the “corrupting influence” of big cities—was financially supported by from wealthy parents and alumni.\textsuperscript{175}

Football was also seen as a traditional battlefield where men fought for the hearts of the beautiful white women who attended games as appendages to their families. Several sources—from popular fictional stories to false histories to journalistic descriptions—demonstrate this connection. All often discuss the “sweethearts” who watch their boys fight it out on the field and are scared by its violence. Some locate the origins of patriarchy in Europe and draw connections between ladies watching knights joust and women watching football players tackle each other. Women are rarely named in these descriptions and often act only as supporting characters in these grand frontier-esque narratives—not dissimilar to Western film in the later twentieth century.

One vivid example is the 1925 \textit{Collier’s} story “Bull Pup and Tiger Cub,” which follows a failed love and a future love over a generation. Within this story, the man writes the woman a love poem centered on football, where she watches him play and her features remind him of all the Ivy League schools’ colors.\textsuperscript{176} Throughout, the two women watching the game are shooed away as the men watching or playing tell them the scene is too gruesome, or that if they are disturbed, they need to get over it. In one such moment, the main character says to his former crush, “Good heavens Lucy, football is football!” in response to her accusations that his son was too “vicious” of a tackler.\textsuperscript{177} This story

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\item \textsuperscript{175} Ronald A. Smith, “Far More Than Commercialism: Stadium Building from Harvard’s Innovations to Stanford’s ‘Dirt Bowl,’” \textit{The International Journal of the History of Sport} 25, no. 11 (September 1, 2008): 1455.
\item \textsuperscript{176} Lawrence Perry, “Bull Pup and Tiger Cub,” \textit{Collier’s}, October 31, 1925, EBSCOhost: Reader’s Guide Retrospective, 18.
\item \textsuperscript{177} Perry, “Bull Pup and Tiger Cub,” 45.
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reinforces a patriarchal order of the U.S.— and of football. In addition, it normalizes the violence present in football, which many at the time criticized due to the many deaths which had and continued to happen on the field. Ultimately, these stories also demonstrate a classist vision of the world in which wealthy men and women can participate in a spectacle which calls to mind those of European royalty. Yet this iteration of it is decidedly American, by having wives, daughters, and other women present it symbolically extends the domestic sphere of the nation, similar to the extension of the domestic in Chapter One. This builds an American identity centered on white masculinity and reaffirms patriarchy.

As noted earlier, coaches like Knute Rockne wrote long articles locating football’s history in ancient Greece and Rome, tracing it through European royalty, and finally describing the development of football in America. These histories often made long and disingenuous leaps which did not accurately describe the evolution of the game. When Rockne’s article in The Mentor discusses King Henry VIII’s development of football in “Christiandom,” he is referring to the development of soccer—or what people outside the U.S. call football. Despite his questionable historiography, Rockne does mention the importance of women to the development of football, describing how “the co-eds and sweethearts who today flock to the gridiron with gay pennants and shrill cries had their prototypes in English countrywomen who assembled to see the flower of youth

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178 “Are the American rugby rules to blame for dirty football?” The Literary Digest, April 9, 1927, EBSCOhost: Reader’s Guide Retrospective, 70-73.
deflower one another in massed formation.”

Rockne asserts the “royal” origins of the game, explaining that this is and was a space of leisure for all white people. While his use of the term “deflower” is interesting given its more sexual connotations, his goal is to demonstrate that football is a historically important, approved, and appropriate leisure option. He does this by tying European royalty, common people, and women in with the athlete “heroes.” Rockne, therefore, demonstrates how the game teaches the “right” morals for twentieth-century life, morals which reinforce white supremacy and patriarchy. Rockne centered these morals on how Americans made football exceptional—just like the country had done with democracy, for example—he ends the article by discussing how this game “is more... American than any other [game] played in America.”

Journalism also worked to demonstrate the safety and morality of certain leisure spaces including football. Journalists relied on stories of women to temper the more violent accounts of football injuries and deaths. The participation of women was always vital when describing the spectacle of games. This emphasis ensured that football was not seen as a space only of men because that could be morally questionable due to possible gay subtexts. In one *New York Times* article about the Harvard-Yale game of 1920, emphasis is placed on the presence of the white women at the game—and their beauty,

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180 Rockne, “Football... a man’s game,” 25.
181 For Rockne these morals include heroics on the field, American exceptionalism, militant masculinity, and patriarchy. Rockne, “Football... a man’s game.”
182 Rockne, “Football... a man’s game,” 74.
183 For more on gay subtext and homoeroticism in football see Thomas P. Oates, “The Erotic Gaze in the NFL Draft,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 4, no. 1 (March 1, 2007): 74–90. Oates explores the white supremacy and racial hierarchies present in today’s NFL draft, which evaluates the bodies of Black players with an erotic gaze. White players are not subjected to the same kind of gaze, and in the 1920s there is even less desire to demonstrate an homoerotic gaze towards white players.
“Of these present the fair sex was so well represented by pulchritude as to lead one to believe that the beauty marts of the world must have been culled for the occasion. Surely it is the greatest beauty show in the world and of all time.”

The emphasis here and in many articles of the “fairer sex’s” beauty and appeal clearly creates an atmosphere where women are the objects of sex appeal; they are appendages to both the game and the men. As Chapter 3 demonstrates, this becomes enshrined through the cheerleader craze in the 1970s. By pushing forward this narrative of female sexuality, sports journalists paint a morally appropriate image of the spectacle of football—one which does not support any potential gay subtext. Instead, it objectifies white women while also ensuring their participation in the spectacle, and as Amy Kaplan argues, “By turning women into spectators, the romance [of football, in this case] posits an additional collaborative relation with women in the constitution of masculinity and the establishment of empire.”

White women as spectators were vital to the development of football as a space of white masculine power. They participated in football as a location of leisure where their spectating supported the continuation of white, masculine power in America—and the game would teach their children traditional roles and proper morals—even if the white women themselves fought for gender equality. Their spectating at football games, support for their husbands, boyfriends, and children gave legitimacy to the claims of coaches,

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journalists, and players who spoke of football as the perfect game to teach young boys “moral courage,” “the militant energy of the American spirit,” and even knighthood.\footnote{Allan Harding, “How to “Play Your Game”— Whatever It Is,” \textit{American Magazine}, November 1922, EBSCOhost: Reader’s Guide Retrospective, 25; Rockne, “Football… a man’s game,” 71; Merle Crowell, “David Whips Goliath Again,” \textit{American Magazine}, 1922, EBSCOhost: Reader’s Guide Retrospective, 52.} During a time where leisure time defined masculinity, morality, and class more than work did, creating football as a “proper” space was particularly important. By maintaining the whiteness, spectacle, and sanctity of football games using the image and description of young and beautiful white women cheering on teams, football boosters were able to inextricably link football players with knights of old, ancient Greece, and the British empire— and imply these players were the rightful heirs to those stories. Football players, through the eyes and support of white women, were destined to win and make an empire— the American empire. As Knute Rockne said, “I, for one, am tempted to appropriate and adapt a familiar saying… the World War and any future war in which America may participate will find its victory secured on American football fields.”\footnote{Rockne, “Football… a man’s game,” 74.}

\textbf{Conclusion}

Professional and intercollegiate football during the 1920s was framed a location for whiteness, Americanization, masculinity, and reinforcing American empire as white men played “Indian” to assert America’s dominance over the world. White women participated in this as well. Their attendance at football games, as appendages of their families, helped mask the violence of white supremacy and protected their children and families with moral purity. I argue that Americanization occurred in both the collegiate and professional sphere, using examples like the “frontiersman” Bronko Nagurski to
explain how Eastern and Northern European immigrants leveraged their whiteness and football skills to “become white Americans” through football. Football legitimized American empire by creating the field as the imagined frontier and using its terminology to otherize and anachronize Native people. Teams and the media did this through Native mascotry, racialized media rhetoric, and convoluted historiography which told the history of football in a traditionalist “march of civilization” way. I explain that white women, seen as beacons of morality and purity, aided in the softening of football’s violent image—and therefore empire’s violent image. The focus on their beauty, for male players, also heralded the cheerleader craze I discuss in Chapter 3. Their perceived morality also demonstrated that football was a proper leisure location where boys could be taught the “right” way to live. As the Golden Age of Sport wound down, the beginnings of the next football craze were being planted.

The 1920s ended with the establishment of one of the most infamous Native mascots, the Washington R*dskins. Founded in 1932 as the Boston Braves, the team changed its name to the slur the following year, then moved to Washington in 1937. The founder George Preston Marshall was a noted segregationist who forced his team to be the last in the NFL to integrate in the 1960s.\(^{188}\) Marshall, like McMillin, fought in World War I before creating the Braves. After renaming them the R*dskins and moving them to Washington, D.C., Marshall created one of the best-marketed teams in the NFL during the late 1930s and 1940s. He did this through entertainment—something his wife Corrine Griffith was an important part of. She embodied the white woman spectator, even writing

a book in 1947 titled, *My Life with the R*dskins.*\(^{189}\) Griffith and Marshall decided to up the entertainment factor of professional football to draw in more women, who they believed needed to see more than just a game.\(^{190}\) This same logic drove another huge step for women and football during the 1970s— the creation of the hypersexualized cheerleader. Marshall’s underlying racism—he famously marketed the R*dskins as the “South’s team”— and development of sport-entertainment in football was an early iteration of the Dallas Cowboys’ 1970s takeover in Texas. Building on the Wild West, nuclear anxieties, and post-Vietnam masculinity concern, the Cowboys created one of the most successful made-for-TV teams of the early live television era—yet they continued to reinforce white masculine supremacy through similar methods to teams in the 1920s.

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Chapter 3:

“Pro Football Gives Us Heroes”: Recreating American masculinities and femininities through the 1970s Dallas Cowboys organization

“They said they were Cowboys football fans and were going to get even with Tom [Landry] putting me on the bench,” Dallas Cowboys wide receiver Bob Hayes told the New York Times in 1971 after paying extortionists $200 to prevent them from kidnapping Hayes’ daughter and bombing head coach Tom Landry’s home. Hayes thought this type of reaction by fans to a football game was ridiculous. But football, as we saw in Chapters 1 and 2, inspires fan riots—in victory and loss, violent and patriotic spectacles, and displays of state, national, and masculine power. By the 1970s, the National Football League (NFL) had surpassed baseball in viewership and monetary power, Richard Nixon was peppering football metaphors into his briefings on Vietnam, and the Dallas Cowboys were consistently winning games and championships. The U.S. was also experiencing changes to power structures on both a national and international scale. Not only was the Vietnam War controversial domestically, but America’s loss shifted the global balance of power for the first time since World War II. The second-wave feminist movement gained traction in the U.S. and challenged established structures of gender, sexual, and racial power. Despite these apparent threats to power structures, America ended the decade with former actor Ronald Reagan as

president and the Cold War reignited. This chapter explores how racial and gender relations were reasserted through football during the fear-ridden 1970s.

Sports mass media touched on all these issues as it presented games, controversies, and star players through ever more available TV and film, newspapers, and photography and magazines. Using rhetorical and visual techniques, sports media inextricably tied American anxieties about shifting power into sport discourse. Despite protestations— which continue today— that sports and politics can’t be intertwined, it’s clear that in the 1970s, political issues were tackled every day on the field and in the media. One realm where sports, power, and politics continue to intersect is gender relations. Media organizations both independent of and affiliated with the NFL portray athletes, teams, and coaches as idealized heroic figures. I will argue that the Dallas Cowboys organization, and more broadly the NFL, in the 1970s was another example of football redefining, reinforcing, and demonstrating proper gender and racial divisions amid national anxieties about masculine failure, feminism and foreign policy. The first section explores the context of the NFL’s relationship with media, war, and feminism during the 1970s— yet another era of fear and anxiety about national and international events. I then move into an analysis of the coverage of the Dallas Cowboys football players and head coach which demonstrate proper masculinities, drawing on historical stereotypes of whiteness and manliness. Finally, I discuss the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders and how mass media assigned them various modes of femininity during the 1970s. All these roles were subordinate and passive, which reaffirmed the masculine power of football players and refuted the second-wave feminist push for women to move into traditionally masculine roles.
Media coverage of the Dallas Cowboys in the 1970s recreated idealized masculinities and femininities to ease political and social anxieties stemming from military defeat in Vietnam and the second-wave feminist movement. The NFL closely affected and reflected anxiety around changing gender expectations brought on by the defeat in Vietnam, ongoing proxy wars, and public feminist victories such as *Roe v. Wade*.\(^{193}\)

Football and sports, but especially the NFL, rely on masculine power to appeal to audiences and attract new viewers and participants. In the nineteenth century, amid concerns about the “feminization” of culture, men turned to “physical ‘crazes,’” those of competitive sports, fitness, and the outdoors.”\(^{194}\) By the 1950s, Patricia Vettel-Becker argues, sports photography emphasized the violence and action present in football, which mirrored idealized masculine traits.\(^{195}\) Mark Moss extends this analysis by explaining how, through analysis of entertainment media, “participation in sport is a seminal characteristic which defines masculinity.”\(^{196}\) He explores how football-themed media like *Friday Night Lights* reinforce masculine power and gender relations through their ubiquity, moral messaging, and continual centering of masculinity.\(^{197}\) Douglas Hartmann explains the connections between media, masculinity, and sports, “The media is a critical part of perpetuating sports’ masculine ethos today, because most adults participate in

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193 American tensions about race also play out in the NFL. Scholars like Louis Moore and Damion L. Thomas write extensively about this.
195 Vettel-Becker, 119. She discusses this through the example of *Sports Illustrated* which was founded in 1954 and notably popularized color photo spreads of famous athletes.
197 Moss, 166.
sports as spectators and consumers… the media accentuates the masculinity of male athletes”198 The NFL itself relies on this masculinity and the organization’s lack of action on domestic and sexual violence—both today and in the 1970s—demonstrates its commitment to maintaining the status quo.

In the 1970s, masculine power was challenged by the rapidity and visibility of gains made by women, especially middle-class white women. In other words, there was another crisis of masculinity.199 Here, as in the 1890s and 1920s, media offered a site for redefining masculinity. Moss discusses how the media provided and built on a diverse array of templates to redefine and recreate ideal visions of masculinity.200 This is not to say, of course, that the real-life football players, coaches, and cheerleaders exalted in the media live up to these idealized visions of masculinity or femininity—often they do not.201 R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt note, however, “these models do, in various ways, express widespread ideals, fantasies, and desires,” provide examples of gender relations, and loosely mirror characteristics of men in everyday situations.202 Moss explores the creation of different models of masculinity through the lens of TV and movie heroes, but sports players and coaches hold a similar place in American culture. In some cases, these individuals became TV heroes through broadcast strategies like “Monday Night Football” and NFL Films made-for-TV movies, but their message was also disseminated through print media like the New York Times and Sports Illustrated.

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201 R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” Gender & Society 19, no. 6 (December 1, 2005): 838.
Most strikingly, though, masculine power was demonstrated in contrast to hypersexualized images of women on the football field—professional cheerleaders. Similarly, as we saw in Chapters 1 and 2, in the 1890s and 1920s, masculinity was defined against the female spectators. Where men were “violent” and “warlike,” women were “beautiful” and dressy throughout press coverage. Women also tempered the violence of football; their spectatorship was an act of sanitizing war, empire, and violence as press metaphors demonstrate in both eras—and in the 1970s.

Since the 1990s, a number of feminist historians and sociologists have written about cheerleading and its relationship to gender and power. Mary Ellen Hanson examined the cultural history of cheerleading using journalistic and entertainment media, including its transition from a masculinized to feminized role over much of the twentieth century. She writes that, in the 1970s, cheerleading was “perceived as a feminine subsidiary to masculine athletics, cheering thus became trivialized.” Cheerleading, like white women spectators in the 1920s, demonstrated women’s support for the violent colonial metaphors of football and reinforced their place in the white supremacist structure of football. Molly Engelhardt agrees in her chapter on cheerleaders as cultural icons in the 1970s. Engelhardt furthers Hanson’s discussion on media trivialization by connecting cheerleading and the second-wave feminist movement in the 1970s. She argues that the devaluing of cheerleading is connected to the backlash against second-

203 Mary Ellen Hanson, Go! Fight! Win!: Cheerleading in American Culture (Bowling Green, OH: Popular Press, 1995).
204 Hanson, 3.
wave feminism and constructed a dichotomy which allowed popular media to vilify both feminists and cheerleaders. Though the idealization of cheerleaders and football players was directed at American fans, this reassertion of gendered power connected with national anxiety about decreasing U.S. power on a global stage.

Football is so singular to America that existing scholarship about the sport avoids discussion of international events. Michael Oriard’s book *Brand NFL* analyzes the marketing and branding of the league during Pete Rozelle’s tenure as commissioner. Oriard focuses specifically on the monetary moves by the league and its teams. Social issues are touched on throughout the book, but he avoids discussion of broad political implications or effects. An exception to this is scholarship on racism and the civil rights movement’s connection to football. Scholars like Damion Thomas explore the geopolitical implications of the integration of sports leagues during this period, and Louis Moore discusses Black activism in sports during the Civil Rights era. Other NFL-specific histories such as *America’s Game* and *The League* focus intently on the NFL and its minutiae. In the 1970s, the dynamics of football seemed to shift. Integration, begun in the 1950s, came to a head with most teams having majority-Black players. This supposed shift, though, was illusionary. The broader structures of football remained the

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206 Engelhardt, ““Airheads, Amazons, and Bitches,”” 55-56.
208 Oriard, 5.
same with all white owners, general managers, and coaches in the NFL. By examining
the relationships between gender, race, and power in the media surrounding the NFL, we
can explore how it intersects with the larger contexts these relationships are developed in.

As domestic liberation movements continued, so did decolonization movements
across the globe which threatened to change the global balance of power. Barbara
Zanchetta explores the intersections of foreign policy and domestic upheaval with rising
national anxiety about the changing international role of the U.S. in the 1970s.\footnote{211}
Scholars like Richard Crockatt explain the 1970s era as an “episode in Cold War
fluctuations,” characterized by the rise in power of countries in Latin America, Africa,
and Asia and economic power in Western Europe.\footnote{212} Litwak, in his book on the Nixon
Doctrine, agrees with Crockatt and argues Nixon-Kissinger policies like détente were
continuation of ideas from the Truman Doctrine.\footnote{213} Daniel Sargent asserts that in this era,
the Cold War ceased to define world relations and instead presented new challenges—
globalization, transnationalism, and decolonization.\footnote{214} Despite these different threads,
historians agree that the 1970s was an era of disruption and disjuncture in the realm of
world politics, signifying a changing world order.

Zanchetta discusses these changes by exploring how the legacy of the Vietnam
War fostered an exaggerated sense of weakness in the U.S.\footnote{215} Sargent adds that global

\footnote{215} Zanchetta, \textit{The Transformation of American International Power}, 293.
economic changes also contributed to perceived American weakness within the U.S.\textsuperscript{216} Zanchetta alludes to feelings of American impotence which was demonstrated by the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980.\textsuperscript{217} The feeling of impotence increased as second-wave feminism gained visibility and power during the 1970s.\textsuperscript{218} Like in the 1890s and 1920s, feminist movements and women’s rights activism—especially white women’s activism—increased anxiety about white, patriarchal power. There were a number of prominent legislative victories for women’s rights: Title X in 1970, Title IX in 1972, and the \textit{Roe v. Wade} decision in 1973. The main beneficiaries of these gains were the most powerful and most visible class of women—middle-class white women.\textsuperscript{219} Through the decade, white women continued to make gains in the U.S. which combined with fluctuating global politics to threaten men in spheres where they traditionally held power.\textsuperscript{220}

Legislative and employment changes for women ensured that women—at least those in the white, middle- and upper-classes—had equal access to education, sports, and athletics. Sociologists like Richard Lipsky conceptualize sports as a utopic escape from

\begin{footnotes}
\item[216] Sargent, \textit{A Superpower Transformed}, 299-300.
\item[218] Though both are incredibly important (and interconnected) social movements, this paper will focus specifically on feminism’s impact on the domestic situation and the disruptions it created.
\end{footnotes}
everyday American life and its anxieties.\(^{221}\) Sports act as a “fantasyland” for Americans and both create idealized visions of identity and romanticize the American Dream.\(^{222}\) However, sports are intimately connected with the events of the real world and reflect and exacerbate real fears and frustrations. Sociologists like Lawrence Wenner and Harry Edwards write about the overlaps between sports writing and political writing arguing that, while “Sport is not directly involved in political implementation, it does share with the polity the function of disseminating and reinforcing values that are influential in defining societal means and in determining acceptable solutions to problems.”\(^{223}\) Sport institutions may not implement specific political actions, but they remain idealized and separate from the “real” political world. By creating this ideal fantasy land, sport reflects, eases, and plays up existing fears of a country’s population. Imperial and Western nostalgia is also an imaginary location where Americans find escape from their everyday national problems. In the 1890s, 1920s, and 1970s, football melded sporting escapism with underlying frontier aesthetics to create the ultimate white distraction and diversion from the “real” political and social world. Since the 1960s, especially, football has been the most popular sport in America, and therefore it has an important role in redefining American identities and recreating divisions of power particularly in periods of national and international change.

**America’s Team Creates American Masculinity**


\(^{223}\) Edwards, *Sociology of Sport*, 91
“Roger [Staubach] back to throw, has a man open in the endzone, caught by — dropped!... Oh, bless his heart! He’s got to be the sickest man in America,” the Super Bowl XIII announcer said as the Dallas Cowboys lost to the Pittsburgh Steelers off a fumble in 1979. The dramatic conclusion of the 1978 National Football League season shut the door on a repeat championship for the Cowboys. However, their NFL Films highlight reel, titled “America’s Team,” summed up the team’s journey through the 1970s (see Figure 6). Founded in 1960, the Dallas Cowboys lost most of their games through the 1960s, but by 1970 they were a regular sight in the playoffs. In the 1970s, the Cowboys’ continual playoff appearances, high win percentage, and two Super Bowl victories made them one of the most dominant teams of the decade. The media, laser-focused on football, made sure to frame them as such by equating players with soldiers, coaches with generals, and their success with manliness. Media coverage of the Dallas

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Cowboys recreated idealized masculinities and masculine relationships during the 1970s using portrayals of both individual players and team interactions and relations.

The Dallas Cowboys were a site for the redefinition of masculinity during the tumultuous 1970s. In the post-Vietnam era, the football field was one place to recreate masculine models that were disrupted by the loss and controversy surrounding the war. Aided by TV and *Sports Illustrated* magazine, their rising popularity and accessibility meant more people than ever were able to view football games and players. The *New York Times* and *Sports Illustrated* emphasized the emotionlessness, Christian values, and intelligence of Cowboys quarterback Roger Staubach and head coach Tom Landry. NFL Films contrasted the Cowboys’ stoic and technology-driven team with the emotional

*Figure 6: A screenshot from the 1978 film reel “America’s Team” which chronicled the Dallas Cowboys journey through the decade. Bob Ryan, America’s Team (Mount Laurel, NJ: NFL Films, 1978), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbz7jN018I.*
anxiety underlying the opposing teams. The media also highlighted the appropriate man-
to-man relationship exemplified by Staubach and Landry.

Staubach, a former soldier, was one of the sites for the recreation of the warrior-
hero archetype after the American loss in confidence of the military during the Vietnam
War. Following the embarrassments of Vietnam, there was a crisis in the American
vision of the warrior-hero. This cultural archetype is described by Richard Slotkin as one
of “regeneration through violence.” Slotkin traces this back to European colonists in
the 1600s who saw the means for the “regeneration” of their culture and values through
the violent displacement and murder of Indigenous people. The myth was disrupted in
the late 1960s and early 1970s when the violence of the Vietnam War did not yield an
American victory; therefore, there was no regeneration of American culture. This identity
crisis asked, “If Americans were no longer winners, then who were they?” He proposes
the answer was found through paramilitary figures, but it was also found through the
football player. In an article ahead of the Super Bowl VI, the section on Staubach calls
him “an officer to the rescue,” and his Midwestern roots and military service are heavily
featured (see Figure 10). This pivots Staubach’s Vietnam service, which symbolizes
American anxiety, into an experience which created the “officer” seen on the field today.
This demonstrated to other veterans that their experience in the war was beneficial and
would yield Slotkin’s promised “regeneration.”

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226 Slotkin, 5.
Roger Staubach’s competitiveness and the Cowboys’ winning record also show the framing of him as a new model of Slotkin’s cultural regeneration through violence. Staubach is continually described as competitive and winning: “You know the guy who will stay on a basketball court until you beat him? That’s Staubach.”\(^\text{229}\) He embodied the American myth of rebirth through violence and competition on the football field. Therefore, the media reasserted this myth by lionizing football stars like Staubach as the exemplars of regeneration through violence and the warrior-hero. The military no longer offered a route to regeneration, so the next best place was the football field. Staubach’s former military service and win-at-all-costs mentality made him a site for the recreation of the American warrior hero in popular media post-Vietnam.

Photography of star players like Staubach conveyed ideal masculinity through framing and focus on the body. *Sports Illustrated* used photography to evoke emotional responses from readers.\(^\text{230}\) Photography of male athletes naturalized masculine power and repeatedly inscribed maleness on the bodies of football players.\(^\text{231}\) Similar to combat photography, the focus on the masculine body and its relation to other masculine bodies creates a narrative about masculine bonding which both insists on the lack of difference among the men and implies that some men have more power.\(^\text{232}\) Expanding on Vettel-Becker’s conclusions about combat photography, football players’ uniformity in outfit (like soldiers) gives the impression that all the men are the same, yet the positioning of


\(^{230}\) Vettel-Becker, *Shooting from the Hip*, 120.

\(^{231}\) Vettel-Becker, 120-121.

\(^{232}\) Vettel-Becker, 43.
certain bodies implies they are more masculine. A 1977 *Sports Illustrated* article features a two-page spread of Staubach scoring the game-winning touchdown by literally rolling over a Minnesota Viking (Figure 7). The subtitle describes how Staubach, “took charge in overtime” to win the game. The photograph backs this assertion showing Staubach penetrating the endzone as others look on—rendering him the manliest body in the image. The other players seem passive since they aren’t running or moving forward, the exception is the Viking player Staubach is vaulting over. Both this image and the following article which describes one of Staubach’s throws as “sail[ing] a destroyer through [the Vikings],” demonstrate that he was the most active and penetrating body on the field. The photographic framing of players like Roger Staubach create power distinctions among masculine bodies to show who is the manliest.

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234 Jenkins, “Roger, Over and In.”
235 Dan Jenkins, “Roger, Over and In.”
Sports Illustrated coupled powerful combat-style photography with rhetorical use of sport/war metaphors to construct Roger Staubach as the ideal post-Vietnam warrior-hero. Jansen and Sabo write the sport/war metaphor is one of the most important rhetorical tools in mediating, constructing, and invoking patriarchal values and hegemonic masculinity through sports.\textsuperscript{236} The magazine repeatedly drew on war-like language in the 1960s and 1970s. A 1974 feature is titled “Cowboys Call on the Mad Bomber,” continually referring to the backup quarterback Chris Longley as “Bomber” or “Mad Bomber,” mentioning his nickname eight times in total.\textsuperscript{237} Additionally, during this period sportswriters like Tex Maule began to use “blitz” in reference to rushing the

\begin{figure}
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Figure7.jpg}
\end{figure}


quarterback, “sack” in reference to hitting the quarterback, and Tom Landry began calling one position a “flexed tackle,” recalling a flexed bicep ready to hit.\textsuperscript{238} Sports Illustrated writer Tex Maule describes how this language helps induct football fans into a special sect of people, differentiating them, in a superior manner, from those who don’t know the jargon.\textsuperscript{239} This article demonstrates that the sport/war metaphor is both important and growing during the early 1970s, and that football fans were part of a certain model of masculinity—one who, like soldiers, geared up for “little wars” every Sunday.

Oftentimes the sport/war metaphor was paired with sexual innuendos and sexually charged language which provides insight to ideal gender relations on the football field. In the “Mad Bomber” article descriptions of the action include numerous innuendos, “The Mad Bomber pumps and throws… On the sideline you can feel the stadium quake as the energy released by one huge, incredible cry rockets around the walls and soars through the hole in the roof.”\textsuperscript{240} Together the militarized and sexualized language work to create a sphere of masculinity where the connection between the quarterback and the receiver holds all the power. This normalizes the close masculine relationships on the football field and reasserts the masculine dominance of the quarterback. Additionally, the sexualized sport/war metaphor reimposed American power both at home and abroad during the post-Vietnam era as America’s military and economic status seemed to

\textsuperscript{239} Maule, “It’s Cliché Time Again.”
\textsuperscript{240} Shrake, “The Cowboys Call on the Mad Bomber.”
weaken globally.\textsuperscript{241} In the absence of military victory, the media turned to sports, which already drew parallels to war, to redefine ideal models of masculinity within the U.S.

The construction in the media of Dallas Cowboys head coach Tom Landry demonstrates another mode of ideal masculinity. Both \textit{Sports Illustrated} and the \textit{New York Times} profiled Landry multiple times throughout his 29-year career with the Cowboys. In a 1972 profile, he was described as a man who cares only about family, football, and Christianity: “Outside of football and my family, I spend most of my time speaking to various organizations about the joy and fulfillment of having Christ in your heart.”\textsuperscript{242} Another Landry quote places Christianity ahead of even football, “Football is not the main thing in my life; my relationship with Jesus Christ is the main thing.”\textsuperscript{243} He was also close friends with the evangelical preacher Billy Graham and was chairman of the national board of trustees for the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, one of the most well-known Christian sports organizations.\textsuperscript{244}

Landry is presented as both moral and religious, which was part of recreating the morality of U.S. leadership after Vietnam losses demonstrated the moral corruption of the military and government. Because the regeneration through violence myth relied on winning to reaffirm the moral goodness of America, many in the country were disillusioned with America’s moral standing after the loss.\textsuperscript{245} Emphasizing Landry’s commitment to God, also contrasted him with the “godless” image of the Soviet Union

\textsuperscript{241} Jansen and Sabo, “The Sport/War Metaphor,” 8.
\textsuperscript{243} Amdur, “Landry, Staubach: 2 Businessmen at the Pinnacle.”
\textsuperscript{244} Shrake, “Why is This Man Laughing?”; Frank Deford, “The Word According to Tom,” \textit{Sports Illustrated}, April 26, 1976, 64.
\textsuperscript{245} Gibson, \textit{Warrior Dreams}, 10.
and more broadly communism. By comparing Landry to a general and the Cowboys to the nation at war, their victories helped rebuild the moral image of the U.S. military and government. In contrast to the 1890s and 1920s, where the American empire was viewed as a righteous and moral undertaking, this era was one of disenchantment with the American Dream. Football, and its frontier dynamic, recalled a time of moral purity for white Americans— the Wild West. The Cowboys’ themselves— named after the oft-mythologized rugged frontier man— seemed a living embodiment of the dreamy past.

The idealized portrayal of Landry also remade masculinity for the American Christian man (see Figure 8). During the Vietnam War a number of prominent anti-war activists were clergy members.246 The fractures between moral and religious good and American foreign policy added more fuel to the disillusionment with the Vietnam War. America’s loss in Vietnam, and the declining domestic support for the war, marked a distinct shift in America’s view of itself. Now, America seemed to be immoral and un-Christian.247 The consequences of this change in state morality, the displeasure of prominent clergy members with the War, and later the dishonesty of the Nixon administration all contributed to anxiety about American morality and, more specifically, Christian anxiety about America and American leadership. The NFL provided the white

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247 Gibson, Warrior Dreams, 10.
middle-class a new image for a quasi-religious leader through a culture of Christianity, family, and football—Tom Landry—even nicknaming him “God’s Coach.”

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Figure 8: Comics from the 1973 Tom Landry comic book which focused on his relationships to Christ, his family, and football. Billy Zeoli and Al Hartley, *Tom Landry and the Dallas Cowboys* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1973), Sports Illustrated Vault.
Landry was depicted as a businessman through his use of technology and inventive ideas. Players, coaches, and sports writers routinely praised Landry’s new, innovative ideas on the football field, many of which were driven through intense data analysis using computers which were still relatively new to sports. His acceptance and reliance on computers earned him monikers like “IBM-machine mind,” “Head Programmer,” and “Old Computer Face.” Some modes of masculinity rely on men harnessing the power of technology—as Landry did in order to create a winning and powerful football team. With economic stagnation and the influx of women to the workforce, the business seemed like it was no longer an exclusively masculine sphere. Landry, though, exemplified how men could maintain power, through both an acceptance of and reliance on technology.

Landry’s creation of new defensive maneuvers demonstrated his similarity to a modern military general—especially when paired with the sport/war metaphor. A 1978 article describes how he developed a new type of football defense, the 4-3 or flex defense, while he was a player for the New York Giants in the 1950s. This defense, which he perfected with the Cowboys, was later nicknamed the “Doomsday Defense.” This nickname both alluded to persistent fears of nuclear war and implied confidence in Landry as a leader. Though the U.S. and Soviet relations in the nuclear realm were easing during the 1970s, nuclear warheads still loomed in the national consciousness. In the late

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250 Moss, *Media and the Models of Masculinity*, 141.

1970s, after a report on Soviet arms buildup was leaked, the Cold War reheated. The report also fueled fears of America’s declining military power and further brinksmanship.252

The media framed Tom Landry as a military leader and his “nuke,” or weapon, was the doomsday defense. Landry was described in news articles as someone who exuded calm, made decisions without emotion, and was incredibly consistent.253 He was often compared to the opposing team’s coach through the lens of emotion: “The Rams and the Cowboys are as different as their coaches. Under their quiet, austere coach, Tom Landry, Dallas practices and plays with cool efficiency. The Rams in turn, emulate the emotional Allen.”254 The Super Bowl VI highlight film contrasts the losing Dolphins riding an “emotional crest” with the Cowboys, led by Landry, and their “somber resolve.”255 By emphasizing Landry’s—by extension the Cowboys—emotional control, sports media implied that he could be trusted with the “doomsday” defense since he wouldn’t flinch or let his feelings show.256 His reliance on computers encouraged viewers to replace his rational and emotionless visage with a computer or robot, “A computer assembled [the Dallas Cowboys], a computer instructs them and a computer even inspires them.”257 It also demonstrated his transition into the “modern” world. Since Landry’s

252 Sargent, A Superpower Transformed, 265.
255 NFL Films, Super Bowl VI Highlights (Mount Laurel, NJ: NFL Films, 1972), 00:01:07-00:01:14
image was that of the ideal masculine leader, it could be extended to political and military leaders, many of whom lost the country’s trust in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Later in the 1970s this trust had to be regained to create support for continuing and new proxy wars in Angola, Iran, and Afghanistan. By building trust in popular culture leaders like Landry, the military was able to capitalize on these rebuilt masculinities through the use of sport/war metaphors. The ideal mode of masculinity exemplified by Landry—emotionless, stoic—was how ideal men should behave. Those who didn’t conform to this were less manly, less successful and often characterized as the losers in sports contests.

In addition to Landry and Staubach, the Cowboys as a team demonstrated ideal masculine relationships both with other masculine figures and with femininity. Even their name, the Cowboys, calls to mind images of idealized and mythologized men on the frontier like Kit Carson and Buffalo Bill. The 1970s Cowboy defense was described as “the big D.”258 While this reference likely alludes to their Dallas base and the more famous doomsday name, its innuendo is impossible to ignore. This name fed into an idea that the entire team held the most masculine power. Even losses were “honorable” as long as the defense was strong and especially if the other team was feminized—described in the media as passive or emotional.259 When the defense didn’t live up to the ideal masculine image though, they were described as passive, which threatened their active, masculine power. “This team is too passive… People are intimidating us physically and jawboning at us, and we’re not responding. If they want to continue to take all this and play passive football, then I don’t want to be part of this team,” one player stated in 1978.

259 Maule, “Big Ifs in Big D.”
after a string of losses. Similar to comparisons of other coaches to Landry, opposing teams’ defenses were described as imprecise and fueled by “flaming emotion.” In media coverage during the 1970s, the Cowboys as a team are imbued with manly innuendo, computerized precision, and emotionless-ness. These three themes work together to present the team as an ideal group of men. Staubach and Landry were the leaders of these men and therefore ideal models of masculinity; media profiles highlighted their interactions to present ideal images of masculine relationships. Staubach and Landry’s relationship also falls into an intergenerational model of masculinity, the father/son relationship. One method of reproducing gender hierarchies and hegemony is through the father/son relationship; sports, especially football, is one arena of masculine power fathers and sons build relationships on. Staubach and Landry were often profiled together with their similarities—military service, family and faith commitments, and appearance—played up, “They are men cut from the same competitive cloth, with family, church, and football the priorities.” Their differences, though were highlighted too. Landry was often described as the more serious and mature of the two. One article begins with an anecdote in which Staubach tries to convince Landry to run a “fun” play at the end of a game the Cowboys were winning by multiple touchdowns; Landry doesn’t react. This shows Landry’s emotional control, emphasizing the war-like seriousness of football games. By creating a father/son dynamic, the Cowboys

ensured that different generations of men would identify with their culture of white masculinity. Staubach and Landry’s relationship created an archetype which could be replicated by young men when they became fathers themselves, therefore producing a continuous ideal man.

The Dallas Cowboys were a site for the redefinition of ideal masculinities and masculine relationships. *Sports Illustrated*, NFL Films, and the *New York Times* framed Landry and Staubach as ideal men, their relationship and exemplar for intergenerational interactions, and the team as an ideal group of masculine relationships. Often framed in contrast to losing teams and their “feminine” or passive traits, the Dallas Cowboys were constructed as the more powerful and dominant team—their winning record served, like America’s wins in war, as confirmation of that. This came in an era where uncertainty ruled in the economy, foreign relations, and the position of men in American society because the Vietnam loss prevented a cultural regeneration. By utilizing the sport/war metaphor and sexualized rhetoric the media encouraged the transposition of these ideal models of masculinity to military and political leaders. The team itself played up these conflagrations through their “Big D” and “Doomsday” defenses. Staubach and Landry recreated and reproduced ideal models of masculinity rooted in American myth and masculine confidence was slowly regenerated among the white middle-class who much of the media was geared toward. As one *New York Times* writer noted, “For those who feared a few years back that American society was coming apart, it is a comfort to find
the reliable Dallas Cowboys, from the heart of middle America, back in the Super Bowl.”

**Propaganda and Pompoms: Defining Femininity through Football**

Sports like football are often discussed in relation to the development of models of masculinity. Few journalists or scholars, though, touch on football’s implications for femininity and gender relations. Gender is relational, and masculinity is frequently defined in conjunction with and contradiction to femininity. Football remained a hyper-masculinized spectacle. Women’s presence and opinions at these events is minimized, whether through willful amnesia and ignorance about sexual assault allegations against multiple men across the NFL’s history or hypersexualized like Miley Cyrus’ pregame cheerleader outfit in 2021. In the 1970s though, women were not involved in coaching, refereeing, or playing football, on this national stage. Ideal femininity in football, therefore, was defined through cheerleading and losing or passive teams; women involved in football were seen and defined by and as their bodies. The Dallas Cowboys were one of the first teams to establish a “professional” cheer team in 1972, and franchises across the NFL and other professional sports leagues like the National Basketball Association (NBA) soon created their own squads. The Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders were viewed through film and journalistic coverage during the

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266 Connell and Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity,” 848.
268 Hanson, *Go! Fight! Win!*, 52.
1970s to recreate and regenerate idealized and subordinate femininities in a backlash against second-wave feminism. Like the 1920s women in the stands, the 1970s cheerleaders on the sidelines also demonstrated the tacit support of white women for the spectacle of violence and empire—even if the women themselves did not support these ideas.

The Cowboys established their original cheer team in 1960 during their inaugural season. Local high school girls and boys made up the team, known as the CowBelles & Beaux. Through the 1960s the popularity and visibility of the cheer squad gradually increased, and in 1972, Cowboys owner Tex Schramm decided to substantially change the cheer team. Focusing more on dance and athleticism, the Cowboys created a tryout system and asked for women 18 and older to apply. During the first year of tryouts, five judges evaluated 100 prospective team members, many of whom didn’t realize they were trying out for a cheer team. As the football team’s success increased through the 1970s, the cheerleaders experienced a similar rise in stardom. Though their names aren’t enshrined in halls of fame, the fascination with their bodies continued through the end of the twentieth century. In the 1970s, a number of movies, TV shows, documentaries, and articles about the squad drew large numbers of readers and viewers. In 2001, a \textit{Sports Illustrated} article followed up on the original seven members of the squad, demonstrating

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{271} “Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders,” \textit{Sports Illustrated}, July 2, 2001. On woman in this article believed she were trying out for a dance squad.
  \item \textsuperscript{272} These include made-for-TV movies \textit{The Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders} in 1979 (which drew 48\% of the viewing audience) and the sequel \textit{The Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders II} in 1980, TV specials like \textit{The 36 Most Beautiful Girls in Texas} in 1976, and numerous articles in \textit{Esquire}, a men’s magazine.
\end{itemize}
that almost 30 years later these women held onto public imagination.\textsuperscript{273} Their uniforms also haven’t changed in general style since the original design by Paula van Wagoner in the 1970s— they have become smaller and more revealing (Figure 9).\textsuperscript{274} The team even donated a number of old uniforms and memorabilia to the National Museum of American History in 2018; curators praised this donation as a reevaluation of the athletic contributions of women.\textsuperscript{275}


\textsuperscript{275} Duff and St. Thomas, “Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders Donate Artifacts to National Museum of American History.”
Tex Schramm’s cheer squad was a departure from earlier cheerleading teams across levels and leagues. Archival photos and video from the 1920s and 1930s show mostly male cheerleaders who led the crowd in various songs and chants for their teams. But, by the 1970s, the cheerleader was viewed as the “dumb blonde.” This transition in the media from talented athletes to hypersexualized and hyperfeminized bodies recreated an ideal femininity. It also demonstrated the response of conservative America to the radical second-wave feminist discussion about completely reordering society. Even more liberal second-wave feminist goals such as the legalization of abortion and questioning the nuclear family structure pushed for change to gender hegemonies in the U.S. In a hyper-masculinized space like the NFL, this was a dangerous proposition as the NFL’s image and appeal relied on ideal, and often hegemonic, masculinity. Teams like the Cowboys, therefore, needed to create a submissive, passive model of femininity. They did this through hypersexualized media coverage of cheerleaders; through this coverage, the Cowboys cheerleaders became a site to redefine femininity.

The Cowboys cheerleaders quickly became a national sensation—or their bodies did. While women who made the team were talented athletes, the media focused only on their bodies, ignoring the immense amount of work these women did every day. It also, for the most part, avoided mentioning that most of these women were college graduates and had careers outside of cheerleading, though the New York Times coverage is an

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276 Hanson, *Go! Fight! Win!*, 14-16.
277 Engelhardt, “‘Airheads, Amazons, and Bitches,’” 57.
278 Engelhardt, 59.
279 Engelhardt, 59.
exception to this.\textsuperscript{280} The 1978 Cowboys highlight film, “America’s Team,” for example, featured a number of shots of the cheerleaders. But most frames of the squad were cropped to show only their bodies—between neck and knee.\textsuperscript{281} By emphasizing the body and cutting their heads out of the frame, NFL Films implies that their ideal femininity isn’t concerned with intellectual pursuits because the women do not have heads. This was a rebuke of second-wave feminist work to include women in traditionally masculine academic and business fields and expand their access to education and politics.

The only on-field shots of women in these films are of cheerleaders, which reinforces the masculine sphere of the game by relegating women to sexualized and supporting roles. In the highlight film from Super Bowl VI, there are three consecutive shots of the cheerleaders during the first minute. The first features long, skinny legs leading to short, frilly pinkish skirts; the second two shots show slightly more of the women’s bodies, but their faces are still indistinguishable.\textsuperscript{282} By showing short glimpses of sexualized areas of cheerleaders’ bodies, NFL Films implies that cheerleaders, ideal models of femininity, are sex objects. Since the NFL tightly controlled reproduction of game broadcasts, NFL Films produced a large percentage of any non-live game film.\textsuperscript{283} Given the shots of cheerleaders NFL Films decided to include in these highlight reels from the 1970s, fans and casual viewers likely only saw flashes of cheerleaders’ tiny crop tops, short skirts, and “hot pants.” Showing only sexualized parts of women’s bodies contributed to an

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{281} Bob Ryan, America’s Team, 00:01:31-00:01:41.
\bibitem{282} NFL Films, “Super Bowl VI Highlights,” 00:00:43-00:00:47.
\end{thebibliography}
hypersexualized image of cheerleaders in popular media. As the only shots of women on
the football field, the message from NFL Films was clear; proper femininity is displaying
the sexualized body for the (often masculine) viewer in support of the team on the field.

Print media did not offer a more nuanced view of cheer squads. *Sports Illustrated*,
for example, described cheerleaders as a “concession,” like popcorn or a hotdog, for fans
to enjoy. “[The cheerleaders have] got their vinyl boots and their pompons [sic] and
Niagaras of blow-dried hair cascading down their backs, and you could just go to pep
rallies and commit the cheers for Sunday's game to memory. Life is a series of small
concessions, and this is one you can enjoy.”284 Equating women with concessions, which
fans purchase and consume throughout games, recommodifies the bodies of these women
for masculine spectators. Despite second-wave feminist efforts to move media away from
the commodification of women’s bodies,285 sports media continued to frame cheerleaders
as objects to sell. Another connotation to referring to women as a “concession,” is the
assumption that football is a masculine space. They may need to concede some ground to
make football more palatable, but according to journalist Bruce Newman, the
cheerleaders are an enjoyable concession. As we saw in Chapter 2, having women at
football games made them seem less violent. The violence of football continued to be a
concern in the 1970s, so having women closer to the action would temper this violence
on TV.

285 One example is the feminist protest against the exploitation of women at the Miss America pageant in
1968. Feminists originally intended to attack the pageant structure, but the protest ended up attacking the
contestants themselves. For more on this protest see Engelhardt, “‘Airheads, Amazons, and Bitches,’” 61-62.
Cheerleading uniform designs connected the Dallas cheerleaders with the Texan, and American, histories of commodifying women’s bodies. Broadly, cheerleading outfits recalled images of pinup girls made famous in World War II, which also drew on commodified images of women, and by 1979 the Cowboys cheer squad fulfilled that role by performing at USO shows. Pinup girls were commodified to sell war bonds, and, in the same vein, cheerleaders were commodified to sell football tickets. Both pinup girls and cheerleaders urged viewers to support their team—or their nation. In Texas specifically, comparisons were continually made in the media between Miss America and Miss Texas pageant winners, supermodels, and the Cowboys cheerleaders. Farrah Fawcett, a Texan model and one of the most famous models in the 1970s was often featured in these comparisons. The *New York Times* discussed Fawcett as the archetypal Texan woman, “the [cheerleader] tryouts were just the beginning of a climb to the rarified heights occupied by that personification of the Texas Woman, Farrah Fawcett-Majors [sic].” The article goes on to discuss that about a quarter of the cheerleader hopefuls had adopted and improved on the Farrah look. The Cowboys created a “Little Miss Dallas Cowboys Cheerleader” contest in 1978; by 1981, the yearly contest had attracted over 40,000 entrants. Cheerleader executive Suzanne Mitchell explained that “I understand that where little girls used to dream of being Miss America, now they dream of becoming a cheerleader for the Cowboys instead.”

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built on historically sexualized imaginings of femininity—pinup girls, Fawcett, and Miss America—to regenerate a hypersexualized feminine mode: the professional supporter, otherwise known as the cheerleader.

Print media directly connected the growth of cheerleading in Dallas, and more widely the U.S., with the second-wave feminist movement. Feminists were vocal in their opposition to the sexual exploitation in the structures of the pageant world: “The surge in status for cheerleaders has come at a time when women’s liberation groups have denounced them as sexist tools.” Articles and books by feminists denounced the mode of traditional femininity cheerleaders filled in the media. In one New York Times article about Cosmo Girls, a performer is asked how she would respond to a feminist who called her a “sex object.” The cheerleader and the feminist were often presented in print media as opposite sides of femininity, which masculinized feminists and further feminized cheerleaders. Artificially dividing femininity into two binary modes intentionally pitted women against each other, which allowed the media to vilify both groups. One eighteen-year-old writer for the New York Times explains how she viewed feminists and more traditional women in high school: “Media-vulnerable, I wanted to be on the side of the beautiful, graceful people, and Women’s Libbers seemed… plain and graceless.” For her, and many other young women, the media showed two options—

289 Amdur, “Cowboy Cheerleaders: Sexist or Just Sparkling? Protests are Voiced on Selection Criteria.”
cheerleading or women’s liberation. Often these two options were placed in opposition to each other.

The idolization and obsession with the Dallas cheerleaders show that commodifying women’s bodies and labor was profitable for the media. Though some writers in *Sports Illustrated* bemoaned the hatred directed at cheerleaders—“anyone who is tagged as a cheerleader for any cause is dismissed as a narrow, addle-brained boob”—other articles made it clear selling images of scantily-clad women alongside football players was the perfect marketing scheme. One writer imagined a world where cheerleading has eclipsed football, “One day, long after the National Football League has finally abandoned football altogether and turned into a coast-to-coast string of peep shows, someone will make one of those 37-part made-for-TV movies about the Great Cheerleading War of 1978.” While cheerleading was framed as something frivolous for women, writers also acknowledged its astronomical popularity. The media continued to portray cheerleaders as an ideal mode of femininity because it was profitable and reimposed the gendered power structures which were upset by the feminist movement.

Cheerleaders were paid next to nothing and their image and actions highly controlled by the organizations they worked for, especially the Cowboys franchise. The cheerleader’s entire life was controlled by the structures of the Cowboys organization. Women on the squad made just $15 a game in 1978. Suzanne Mitchell described the requirements of the job in 1978: “stringent conditioning and diet control, rehearsals four

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293 Newman, “Gimme an S Gimme an E, Gimme… .”
294 Crewdson, “Cheering for the Cowboys.”
or even five nights a week, five hours a night. Miss two rehearsals and you’re off the squad forever.” They were not allowed to be pictured with alcohol in order to “preserve” the Christian image of the team, they had strict diets and workout routines, and any missteps immediately cost them their jobs. The individual women were nuclear technicians, teachers, and secretaries as well as talented athletes, yet sports media focused only on the “three Bs,”—belly buttons, busts, and backsides. By reducing their identities to headless bodies and tiny uniforms, the media and NFL regenerated an ideal mode of femininity as a woman’s commodified and controlled body.

Film and journalistic coverage almost exclusively focused on cheerleaders’ bodies during the 1970s, which reaffirmed the subordination of feminine identity as the ideal and demonstrated backlash from dominant structures of sports media against second-wave feminists. In contrast to “masculine” feminists, cheerleaders were presented in the media as feminine because they showed off their sexuality for men to consume. The media criticized cheerleaders by implying they were unempowered, dumb, emotional, and only concerned with appearance and sex. It also, however, idolized cheerleaders because the structure of professional cheerleading didn’t advocate for change in dominant society. Though cheerleaders themselves were often college graduates and talented athletes, the image of them perpetuated by the media recreated the “pinup” style of World War II and regenerated femininity as dumb, blonde, emotional, and subordinate.

295 Crewdson, “Cheering for the Cowboys.”
296 Crewdson, “Cheering for the Cowboys.”
297 Newman, “Gimme an S Gimme an E, Gimme…”
Conclusion

In the 1970s, the NFL’s Dallas Cowboys and media coverage of them recreated and redefined ideal modes of masculinity and femininity that had been disrupted by national and international events like the Vietnam War and second-wave feminist movement. Through independent media organizations like the New York Times and Sports Illustrated gender relations and power structures were adapted to the post-Vietnam America. In their coverage, men like Roger Staubach and Tom Landry were hailed as heroic cowboys, embodying the historical model of regeneration through violence. The NFL’s in-house publicity machine, NFL Films, aided in this by creating war-like movies and highlight reels about teams, games, and seasons. NFL Films also reasserted masculine dominance by hypersexualizing cheerleaders and reimposing an objectified femininity—rooted in World War II pinup girls—on women in sports. Print media further masculinized the perennially winning Cowboys by describing the opposing teams as emotional, passive, and ultimately feminine. By reinstating gender hierarchies which praised violent, active, and unemotional masculinity, the Cowboys, and more broadly the NFL, created an environment with little accountability for off-field actions.

Sports are often viewed as a utopic and disconnected mirror of our society. But the power relations created through sport and sports media mirror, extend, and even create real issues in international and domestic politics, in social justice struggles, and between individuals. The NFL as an institution, is not held accountable for the sexual violence it perpetrates; the racist language and actions it fosters and allows to continue; or the model of war-like masculinity and sexualized femininity it markets to millions of
young people around the world. Understanding how the NFL has created and recreated
gender and power relations in the past can offer us a path forward, especially now.
Conclusion: Today’s football fields

The Haskell Indian Industrial School celebrated the opening of its stadium in 1926 amidst a wave of stadium building across the U.S. Their stadium was unique, though, in that it was funded by Native people. Haskell’s success in football during the 1920s was a source of pride for many Native people. This is demonstrated by the massive fundraising efforts to pay for the brand new 10,500 seat stadium where Indigenous donors raised over $250,000.298 The stadium featured a World War I memorial arch and, during Halloween weekend in 1926, a homecoming dedication and powwow with representatives from over seventy Native nations.299

There were two prevailing views of Haskell’s new stadium. Secretary of the Interior Hubert Work believed that the construction and dedication of the stadium as well as the memorial arch were symbols of assimilation.300 Other supporters of boarding schools and assimilation believed that it was a sign that Native people would take part in the social and industrial worlds of the 1900s— that they had reached the height of assimilation.301 Ultimately, supporters of assimilationist programs hailed Haskell’s stadium as a sign that Native people had fully assimilated.

Native people, though, did not view the stadium building and dedication the same way. The dedication featured a powwow which was “an opportunity for Native people to assert their ethnic identities and express their resistance to white civilization in a

299 Vučković, Voices from Haskell, 157.
300 Vučković, Voices from Haskell, 155.
301 Schmidt, Shaping College Football, 168.
ritualistic and symbolic way.”³⁰² As people from over seventy nations gathered at Haskell, it was also an opportunity to grow pan-Indian identity, display ethnic pride, and practice cultural autonomy in front of the thousands of white and Indigenous spectators who gathered at Haskell.³⁰³ The display of Native pride and culture, in the face of an institution built to strip away those identities, demonstrated Native survivance and resistance to the cultures and structures of white supremacy in football and in America.

Over the past 150 years, football was a location of leisure which used imaginary frontiers, distortions of Native culture and imagery, and mythic cowboy-heroes to reinforce and (re)create a comforting culture of white male supremacy both on and off the field. Players, coaches, team owners, and spectators all contributed to the maintenance of white supremacy. White women’s support of football as spectators and appendages both tempered the violence of the game and reaffirmed their support of heterosexual white supremacy in the U.S. Football had remarkable continuity in its use of Wild West imagery and rhetoric during its first 100 years of existence, particularly in times of crisis.

During the 1890s, the close of the frontier meant white men could no longer prove their “civilized” masculinity in a domestic sphere. However, they found a new space—the football field—where they could demonstrate their prowess before women and against Native people on an imaginary football frontier. Many young men who played football at elite college campuses, like John Prentiss Poe, ended up on colonial battlefields in far-flung parts of America’s fledgling world empire—from Puerto Rico to the Philippines to Panama—as newspapers used the same language to describe their

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³⁰² Vučković, *Voices from Haskell*, 153.
³⁰³ Vučković, *Voices from Haskell*, 156.
exploits on the field and in colonial wars. The U.S. government implemented football and other sports at boarding schools like the Carlisle Indian Industrial School because they believed it would “civilize” the Native students at those institutions and teach them democratic ideals. All the while, white women— classic symbols of civilization— watched the white, elite men battle on the football field. Their gaze both softened the violence of the game and “civilized” any brutality occurring on the field.

The 1920s continued to feature many of these aspects of football, which similarly was an entertainment balm for an anxious nation in the wake of World War I, the 1918 influenza pandemic, and the first Red Scare. Football’s Americanizing and democratizing influence expanded through the creation of the NFL to include immigrants like Bronko Nagurski while continuing to be used at boarding schools like Haskell and Carlisle. In this decade several teams established Native mascots and the expanding popular press used distorted metaphors about Native culture to describe games. This forwarded the 1890s appropriation of the frontier by football; it became, instead, a cooption of Native identity as athletes “played Indian.” White women continued to be heralds of civilization on the field— their approval of football as a “moral” location of leisure ensured the violence of the game was discounted by officials. Coaches and team owners continued to enforce segregation, ahistorical narratives of football’s founding, and elitist structures; players and fans, however, did work to create spaces of resistance like Haskell’s stadium building and Jim Thorpe’s Oorang Indians NFL team. The NFL, though, was not fully integrated until the 1960s.

Even in an “integrated” NFL, the 1970s continued to present a cowboys versus Indians frontier on the football field. White-hat cowboys like Roger Staubach and Tom
Landry were described by their love of family and God. These two men even played and coached, respectively, for the Dallas Cowboys—a team which fully embraced the mythical history of its name. Through both independent and in-house media organizations the Cowboys used all resources available to them to reinforce gender and racial hierarchies which praised violent and unemotional masculinity—similar to the “pure” maleness of mythic cowboys like the Lone Ranger. The Cowboys’ cheerleaders—created in the 1970s by general manager Tex Schramm—were the ultimate feminine spectator. Media and football reasserted masculine dominance by hypersexualizing cheerleaders and reimposing an objectified femininity on them. They also, like in the 1920s and 1890s, softened the image of football—making it seem more a performance than a war. Media coverage, though, continued to frame the games as wars, just as it had since the 1890s.

Football, despite increasing calls for change, has not significantly shifted from its imaginary “civilized/savage” frontier. The most successful movements to resist this have been led by Native people and Black people. From Thorpe’s Oorang Indians team in the early NFL to the Haskell stadium to Brian Flores’ lawsuit against the NFL in 2022, marginalized football players have fought to change the game. 304 Though each of these eras—the 1890s, 1920s, and 1970s—features whiteness and masculinity in supposed crisis, they also are times where women and people of color demanded change. Ultimately those demands are what led to supposed “crises” of masculinity and

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whiteness. Even though the larger American and football cultures continue to be spaces of white supremacy and patriarchy, football and sports also is location of resistance and survival. In the 1890s, students at boarding schools found pride in their Indigenous heritage through football.\textsuperscript{305} The 1920s featured the Haskell stadium’s fundraising and powwow celebration by and for Native people. In the 1970s, the American Indian Movement (AIM) and the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) challenged the racist mascot and name for the Washington R*dskins through protest and scholarly writing.\textsuperscript{306} Their work to end racist mascots continues today, though the Washington team recently changed their name to the “Washington Commanders.”\textsuperscript{307}

Despite these changes, the ultimate composition of football remains the same. The vast majority of players in the NFL today are Black athletes, yet most coaches, general managers, and team owners in the NFL are white. As Letisha Engracia Cardoso Brown argues, “the metaphor of plantation still holds when it comes to conversations about Black athletes at the college and professional level.”\textsuperscript{308} This plantation structure is demonstrated by the divisions of wealth and labor in the institution. The 32 NFL owners— who are all white— profit hugely from the labor of the mostly Black NFL players. Many players make hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars, but these

\textsuperscript{305} John Bloom, \textit{To Show What An Indian Can Do: Sports At Native American Boarding Schools} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), xii.
players put their bodies on the line every Sunday which often results in debilitating injuries such as ACL tears, CTE induced by repetitive concussions, and more. The whole while, the owners reap profits in the billions. Some sportswriters frame these dynamics through racist myths that Black people are more predisposed to athletics. In reality, the plantation-like structure of the NFL is perpetuated because America offers fewer economic opportunities to poor boys of color; the only ticket out of poverty for many of these boys is sports like football and basketball.

Even as people like Jim Thorpe, the Haskell stadium organizers, and Brian Flores try to challenge the racist imagined frontiers of football, they remain the same, simply morphing their discrimination. The NFL continues to reinforce white supremacy and patriarchy through frontier metaphors, racist mascots, and more. This will not change unless we understand how and why the sport developed in close conjunction with American empire. Examining histories like this is critical for understanding power both in the past and today— and taking the first steps towards change.

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