

Smells Like Team Spirit

Even in a superstar age, high-school football is still about community.

By Steve Sailer

EACH YEAR ROUGHLY 1.2 million boys play and 100,000 men coach high-school football. It's one of those social phenomena that is so big that nobody thinks much about it. Yet prep football—by uneasily combining the norms of the middle of the last century, which seemed in the 1940s to be the Century of the Common Man, with our own Century of the Superstar, in which many watch but only a chosen few perform—offers a window into America's past and future.

The new age of elitist high-school football was epitomized by the nationally televised game played Sept. 15 between *USA Today's* #2-ranked squad, the well-drilled Dragons from exurban Southlake Carroll, winner of three straight Texas championships, and the star-packed #1-ranked Bulls of inner city Miami Northwestern, the 2006 Florida titleholders. Yet this type of made-for-television exhibition remains more the exception than the rule. At least compared to basketball, high-school football hasn't much changed culturally since Paul Brown was coaching the Massillon, Ohio Tigers to glory in the 1930s. For instance, a huge crowd of close to 20,000 fans showed up Nov. 2 for the 73rd meeting of Garfield and Roosevelt, two all-Latino high schools in East Los Angeles that seldom send players to college programs. This "East L.A. Classic" remains one of the countless local football rivalries that thrive despite the homogenizing dominance of the national media.

High-school football continues to be a repository of many of the authority-respecting and communal virtues of the WWII-winning Greatest Generation. On

the field, America's old struggle between nurture and nature—between the faith that winners can be molded out of the common folk versus the ever spreading suspicion that success is mostly in the genes and in private tutoring—can still battle it out on relatively equal terms.

Foreigners have long been astounded by the extravagant number of players on American football teams and by the expensive armor in which they are encased. Yet because only the most carefully rehearsed teamwork can prevent chaos on the gridiron, their numbers and anonymity have helped retard the growth of superstaritis

Basketball, with its fewer and more recognizable players, can be dominated by one or two stars freelancing. Indeed, successful coaches increasingly emphasize recruiting genetic anomalies over training normal kids. USC basketball coach Tim Floyd recently promised full scholarships to two eighth graders!

Sacramento-area basketball coach Brian McCormick lamented his sport's decline:

Colleges hire the best recruiters, not coaches. High school players enhance their recruitment not by improving their skills, but by being more exposed. And, even youth coaches ignore skill development, focusing on attracting new players with better skills or athleticism. None of it makes sense, but it is consistent. From the top down and the bottom up, recruiting rules American basketball, ruining the game year by year.

The overall quality of basketball appears to have suffered, especially on offense, a trend lowlighted by the ignominy of a team of top NBA players losing at the 2004 Olympics to Argentina, Lithuania, and Puerto Rico. In contrast, most prep football offensive records are no more than 15 years old, suggesting that teams are executing better than ever.

Even the scandals besetting high-school football can sometimes be redolent of an older America. Shedding light on what one coach was willing to do to win, an October report by a retired federal judge looked into the goings on at Hoover High School, winner of four straight Alabama crowns and the subject of the 2006-2007 MTV reality show "Two-a-Days." Located in an affluent, 88-percent white suburb of Birmingham, Hoover's football booster club raises \$300,000 annually.

The controversy began with a complaint by a math teacher, with the wonderful name of Forrest Quattlebaum, that the Algebra II grade of senior football hero Josh Chapman had been "rounded up" by an administrator so the 280-pounder would be eligible to play this season for the University of Alabama Crimson Tide. According to the report, Hoover head coach Rush Propst makes an official salary of \$93,000, takes in another \$15,000-27,000 running football summer camps on public-school property, earns \$3,500 from a local TV show, and receives a new pickup truck from a car dealer every 60,000 miles. It's enough to support "a not-so-secret second family."

It's all quite shocking, but even Propst's rake-off is pocket lint compared to University of Alabama coach Nick Saban's contract for \$32 million over eight years. In today's Big Money America, coaching high-school football is a relic of the old middle-class nation. Despite the sins of the Propsts, the game mostly remains endearingly small time. Outside of Texas, most football coaches are also schoolteachers. For example, Florida public-school head coaches get a bonus of \$3,000-5,500 per year over their teachers' salaries in return for working 100-hour weeks during the season.

Why do so many, including the vast array of assistant coaches, put in so much effort? Primarily, for the love of the game. Good coaches can still mold a random selection of boys into a fine football team.

Little of the political correctness that infests the rest of the educational system is allowed to touch the sport. Unlike, say, English or math, football is just too important for any such tomfoolery. It remains a barely disguised war game, in which combat platoons try to conquer enemy territory.

Despite the pervasive push for gender-equality in school sports, girls mostly keep to their traditional place in football—on the sidelines, in short skirts, cheering the boys on. Indeed, the numbers of cheerleaders at some schools have exploded as administrations have, amazingly enough, responded wisely to the differences between boys and girls. While masculine competition can build formidably functional hierarchies, feminine forms of competition, such as cheerleader tryouts, too often generate cliquishness and backstabbing, as personified by the notorious 1991 Texas Cheerleader Mom Murder case. So some schools have stopped picking the six prettiest and perkier applicants; they just let every girl who wants to be a

cheerleader be one. And a lot of girls want to. At one predominantly Latino school I visited, there were about 50 official cheerleaders.

The book, movie, and TV show *Friday Night Lights* has made Odessa's passion for high-school football famous, as its athletes strive for scholarships that will get them off the God-forsaken plains of the Texas Panhandle. But high-school football mania is hardly restricted to the hinterlands. My old high school, Notre Dame in Sherman Oaks, California, just over the Hollywood Hills from Beverly Hills, has built a football machine since it went 3-6 the year I graduated. In my day, the game program was a mimeographed sheet listing the players' numbers. Now it is a glossy magazine 236 pages thick, square-bound like *Vogue*, crammed with ads congratulating the school's 6'5", 228-pound quarterback.

Not surprisingly, as Notre Dame H.S. teams triumphed on the field, donations poured in, with superb new buildings replacing the plywood shack in which I took many classes. You don't have to be good at football to rake in gifts these days, as Harvard's \$34.9 billion endowment shows, but it definitely helps for a school to be good at something. As George S. Patton observed, "Americans love a winner."

High-school football also displays some modern virtues, such as a reasonably good relationship between whites and blacks, based on the common goal of victory and an informal division of labor. Football mania builds social solidarity, which is helpful in getting things done, especially in multiracial communities.

The missing pieces of the puzzle have been Hispanic athletes. Latinos make up 20 percent of public-school students, but they don't make much of a splash in the sports pages. For example, David Lopez, a 6'3", 225-pound linebacker at Garfield, is expected to be only the second participant in the East L.A. Clas-

sic during this decade to earn a Division I-A scholarship. In contrast, last year's graduating class of 149 at Oaks Christian in posh Westlake Village, California saw 11 players receive free rides to Division I-A football factories.

One reason that Mexican-Americans don't compete more evenly with white athletes is due to the early specialization and intensive training that middle-class youngsters now undergo. Today, when tennis pros typically grow up at costly boarding academies, it seems unimaginable that the greatest player in the world from the mid-'50s into the early-'60s was an ex-juvenile delinquent from East L.A. named Pancho Gonzales, a public-courts player who never took a lesson.

There used to be more room for individual initiative, but children are increasingly dependent on their parents. The *USA Today* 2006 Offensive Player of the Year, Oaks Christian's Jimmy Clausen, was raised to be a quarterback by his father, an insurance executive. Two older brothers had started at quarterback for the University of Tennessee. All three brothers were kept out of kindergarten until age 6 and repeated sixth grade, so they were 19 instead of 17 as high-school seniors. From seventh grade onward, Jimmy worked ten hours per week during the off-season with his private quarterback coach. He arrived at the press conference to announce his signing with the University of Notre Dame in a Hummer limo—though lying behind the miserable 2007 Fighting Irish's porous offensive line has been a less glitzy experience for him.

Although there have been periodic calls by black leaders and intellectuals for the community to de-emphasize football and basketball in favor of studying, there can be intense pressure on suburban middle-class black youths to play, since coaches often see themselves as dependent upon their schools' small number of black students. Many of the

best high-school teams are built around a mass of white spear carriers along with a few black standouts at running back, wide receiver, and at defensive positions where speed is at a premium. In September's Texas-Florida showdown, the tailback of the almost all-white Southlake Carroll Dragons, for example, was Tre Newton, son of the popular retired Dallas Cowboys lineman Nate Newton.

Southlake, a prosperous 89-percent white exurb northwest of the Dallas-Fort Worth Airport, illustrates one of the less discussed trends of recent decades. Even as African-Americans now make up half of Division I-A football players and two-thirds of the NFL, predominantly white high-school squads prosper. In much of the country, the prep game is ruled either by Catholic schools, such as De La Salle in Concord, California, which won 151 straight games from 1992-2005, or by exurban public schools, such as Canyon, north of Los Angeles, which last year upset nationally #1-ranked De La Salle to win California's big schools championship. The white team with a black back is so common that it was a surprise when Canyon triumphed with an Italian-American tailback named J.J. DiLuigi, who scored 82 touchdowns in two seasons.

These mostly white teams often win by doing the little things right, such as placekicking. My old high school was carried to its first championship in 1994 by 11 field goals in four playoff games from Chris Sailer (no relation), including a last-second game winner from 58 yards in the rain. Sailer's now a professional placekicking guru, and under his guidance, Notre Dame's last two kickers each connected from at least 56 yards.

In contrast, Washington D.C. public high schools, whose students seldom play soccer, are dogged by inept kicking. Journalist Dave McKenna described a

game between Woodson and the otherwise powerful Dunbar: "The teams combined for 11 touchdowns, but just one kicked an extra point that day. Woodson also had a 3-yard punt and several horrendous kickoffs, including one in the fourth quarter that actually went backward." Many inner city black kids seem to view practicing kicking as a nerdy white activity incompatible with keepin' it real.

Southlake Carroll's opponent, Miami Northwestern, located in the Liberty City slum, is a 90-percent black school, with 66 percent of its students getting subsidized lunches. Only eight players had ever been on an airplane before flying to Dallas for the big game. The school is famous for "athleticism," a term that today is more or less synonymous with "fast" and "black." Northwestern epitomizes the stereotype of southeastern speed.

The school is recovering from a notorious brouhaha. Early in the 2006 season, the 18-year-old star running back was discovered in a school bathroom with a naked 14-year-old girl. The young lady's mother demanded that charges be pressed, which the school administration assured her would happen, though they never quite mentioned the incident to the police. Finally, the angry mother went to the cops herself, and the tailback was charged two days before the state championship game. Yet contrary to policy, he was allowed to play, rushing for 157 yards in the victory.

Similarly, in September, when Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton led thousands of demonstrators in a march on the small town of Jena, Louisiana to protest supposed racism in the treatment of six black high-school students accused of beating unconscious then stomping the body of a white schoolmate, the assembled national media got the story almost 180 degrees backward. We weren't wit-

nessing a revival of the Emmett Till Era of lynchings, as the pundits insisted, but another example of the O.J. Simpson Age of stars athletes whose off-field misdeeds are excused until they finally go too far.

The Jena Six hadn't been despised outcasts: they were the best football players in a gridiron-obsessed small town. Mychal Bell, the only one of the Six tried so far, was an All-State junior who scored 18 touchdowns in the 2006 season. A local minister, Eddie Thompson, explained, "For the most part, coaches and other adults have prevented them from being held accountable for the reign of terror they have presided over in Jena." As Abbey Brown wrote in the *Alexandria-Pineville Town Talk*: "Bell was adjudicated—the juvenile equivalent to a conviction—of battery Sept. 2 [2006] and criminal damage to property Sept. 3. ... A few days later, on Sept. 8, Bell rushed 12 times for 108 yards and scored three touchdowns."

With Miami Northwestern, fortunately, the problem of covering up for stars was recognized. In the ensuing scandal, the coach, the principal, and 19 others were fired, and new principal Charles Hankerson has instituted stricter discipline. The Northwestern Bulls reportedly behaved well on their trip to Texas, where they beat the Carroll Dragons 29-21.

For all high-school football's troubles handling 21st-century vices, the glass, while clearly part-empty, remains far more than half-full. No doubt the sport, like most other aspects of American life, will slowly continue down the path blazed by basketball toward an ever-worsening case of Superstar Syndrome. But the deep-seated conservatism of the game and the sheer numbers involved mean that prep football will long endure as one of the best ways our culture has left to inculcate the old American talent for teamwork. ■

Arts & Letters

FILM

[*No Country for Old Men*]

Take the Money and Run

By Steve Sailer

DEVELOPING VIDEO GAMES is consuming more and more of today's creative talent, with little benefit to show for it in the broader culture. Traditional art forms such as poetry, music, and painting tended to inspire each other forward in a virtuous cycle, but video games, a solitary vice, have been a cultural black hole. Game-inspired films, for instance, have mostly failed because watching a movie star frenetically shoot bad guys is missing the point of playing, which is to shoot them yourself.

Finally, Joel and Ethan Coen, the most gifted of the many brother-act *frauteurs* making films today, have figured out how to bring the pleasures of a problem-solving first-person shooter game to the movie theater. Strangely enough, they've done it in their first literary adaptation, a faithful rendition of *No Country for Old Men*, the 2005 novel by Cormac McCarthy, an acclaimed master of American prose.

Despite the 74-year-old McCarthy's august reputation, his book is a surprisingly high-energy art-pulp Western. It's essentially a chase featuring two highly competent antagonists: a West Texas good old boy who, while antelope hunting, finds \$2 million among the bullet-

riddled bodies of Mexican drug runners, tracked by a relentless killer hired to retrieve the money.

Josh Brolin plays the Pac Man being pursued, a trailer-park protagonist with the blue-collar likeability of character actor John C. Reilly and the technical resourcefulness of TV hero MacGyver. A skilled welder, he's smarter than he looks but not quite ruthless enough. He could have made a clean exit with the \$2 million, but instead, after telling his wife, "I'm fixin to go do something dumbern hell but I'm goin' anyways," returns to save the last survivor of the drug deal shootout he had stumbled upon.

This act of mercy unleashes upon his trail a pitiless "Ghost," a hit man played by Spanish actor Javier Bardem as a Terminator-style juggernaut. Like Schwarzenegger's cyborg, he even performs surgery upon himself after a shootout.

The Coen brothers have discovered that the paradoxical key to making a video-game movie is to slow down the action, allowing the viewer to think along with the hero and villain. Not since the sniper scene that makes up the second half of Stanley Kubrick's Vietnam film "Full Metal Jacket" has a movie played fairer with the audience in detailing the physical puzzles confronting the characters. How, for example, could you best hide two cubic feet of \$100 bills in your motel room? And how could your enemy find such well-concealed money?

I know I've seen a well-crafted film when I walk out of the theater and still feel like I'm living in the movie. Leaving the amnesia thriller "Memento," for example, I was convinced I'd never remember where I'd parked my car. With "No Country," this post-movie syn-

drome lasted longer than I can ever recall. Even the next night, every car that passed me on a quiet street seemed an eerie, sinister harbinger of sudden violence.

"No Country" inverts numerous elements from "Fargo." The crime in that Coen film, for instance, was solved by a wonderfully unlikely sheriff, a polite and very pregnant Frances McDormand. Here, however, Tommy Lee Jones is typecast as the archetypal Texas sheriff, yet he proves frustratingly ineffectual at stopping the mayhem. Thus the plot winds up as anticlimactically as most video-game plays, with the (male) viewer wanting to try it again so the hero won't make the same mistakes twice.

For reasons I don't fully understand (and am not sure I really want to think about), most of us guys, no matter how blameless our lives, enjoy doing some contingency planning about how we'd handle it if we ever had to climb into that white Bronco and make a run for the border. Thus many men hated the great chick flick "Thelma and Louise" less for its supposed feminism than for how dopily Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon let their feelings botch up their escape from Arkansas to Mexico. I quickly worked out for them an itinerary for their getaway over the Rio Grande to Matamoros, but they weren't equally serious about route selection and ended up in northern Arizona, where they fell, deservedly, into the Grand Canyon.

You can rest assured that the hero and villain in "No Country for Old Men," a guy movie if there ever was one, wouldn't miss Mexico by 500 miles. ■

Rated R for strong graphic violence and some language.