

# LIFE IN THE U.S.

## SPORTS

# Football fantasy and class conflict

By Jack Russell

A week before the ceremonies installing True Grits as General Manager of the Big Team, one third of the American people watched Minnesota and Oakland do battle on Super Sunday. To no one's surprise, a dull, one-sided Super Bowl out-drew the inauguration at least two-to-one. For most Americans, the game promised more drama than the formal transfer of state power.

During the past 20 years, Football has become the national game. The combined gross income of all 28 National Football League franchises would place the enterprise 650th on *Fortune's* list, but mere dollars cannot measure the presence of the game in our national life. Millions of folks invest the best hours of their week watching football. For a third of the year, from Friday afternoon to Monday evening, for fathers and sons and lovers and mothers, some version of the game is there.

Our leaders understand. Demagogues seek association with football's demigods. The language of the sport has become commonplace in the rhetoric of bourgeois politics. John Mitchell's game plan for the 1968 Nixon campaign once included Vince Lombardi as running mate.

What kind of game is this, and how should we understand its immense appeal? Many condemn the sport in terms reminiscent of Edward II's denunciation of its English antecedent. The Monarch forbade "footeballe, wherein is nothing but beastlie furie and extreme violence." (He had good reasons. The commoners' delight in the game interfered with longbow practice!) Since we can't proscribe modern football, we'd best comprehend its popularity.

### ► The "official culture" is conservative.

Let me grant from the jump that the "official culture" that surrounds the sport is regressive. It's conservative. The anthem is played before contests. Neanderthal patriotism dominates half-time shows. Military metaphors abound in the game's argot. "Official football" exudes unctuous compassion. The Fellowship of Christian Athletes boasts college and pro stars. The charity spots on N.F.L. telecasts hype the United Fund. Sycophantic civic leaders (called "jock sniffers" by some pros) enlist the athletes' support. The game is a bastion of the worst sexist stereotypes. Nine-year-old girls are organized to cheerlead for their shoulderpadded Pop Warner League brothers. The first woman hired to cover the game on national TV had to be, you guessed it, a Miss America from Texas.

Reactionaries love to wallow in this muck. "It's no accident," wrote Nixon-era St. Louis linebacker Dave Meggysey, "that the most repressive political regime in the history of this country is ruled by a football freak." True, all true.

But not all who love the game are Yahoos. The popularity of football, especially the pro game, should not be seen as a festival of jingoism, some orgy of repressive desublimation. Millions of fans are former high school players for whom the game provides a powerful link with past satisfactions. For many of us football was a rite of passage into the adult world. One learned the rewards of courage and sustained effort. During those autumns of our adolescence countless American men reached peak physical condition for the first time and the last, discovering for a few years the joys of full health before the burdens of work and family began to weigh on the flesh. There was fraternity in the sport, a bond of loyalty in the intricate teamwork, and elation in our collective effort. For legions

in today's audience, good memories are evoked by Sunday's game.

### ► It's also beautiful.

Football can also be beautiful. Offensive design and defensive reaction explode at each other almost simultaneously. Backfield, line, and secondary patterns unfold in a dazzling, violent choreography. Although each play lasts but a few seconds, television's presentation of the game has become so accomplished we can now savor in minute detail the individual contests that make the battle. Slow motion instant replay reveals the covert holding of pass blocker on hard-charging and the flanker's juke that froze the hapless cornerback.

Such goodies are now essential to the success of football-as-commodity. A game of 60 minutes contains perhaps 12 minutes of actual play, but is packaged in a three-hour segment of TV time. You can't endlessly broadcast teams regrouping, balls retrieved, and faces in the crowd. The new techniques that elaborate the action fill the pauses, sustain our attention, and keep us tuned when it's time to sell the Fords. We love it. To assure sell-outs, new stadiums now have giant screens for "live" instant replay. And commercials.

Whatever place patriotism, nostalgia and aesthetics may have in the bond between game and audience, these aspects of football's appeal can not fully explain its following. Even with the end of local TV blackouts, N.F.L. teams still play to near capacity; on any given Sunday, 17 million or more viewing households are plugged in. When so many watch, we must assume the game somehow embodies daily experience, dramatizing and clarifying the fan's comprehension of society and his position in it. But how?

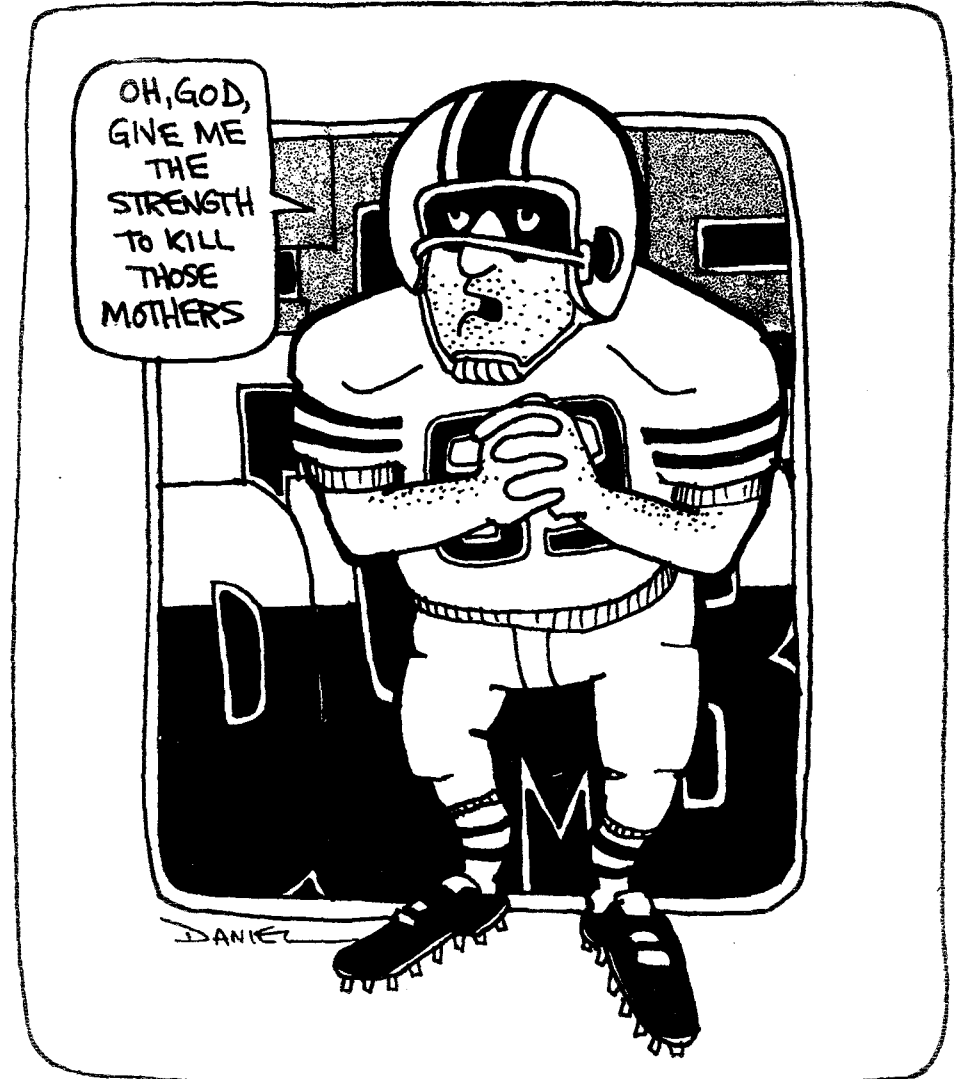
### ► Who consumes and why?

Pro football is consumed by two major groups: the professional/managerial types who can afford the stadium tickets and are the target audience for national telecast sponsors (airlines, car rentals, credit cards, insurance) and the working class males who swell the ratings and buy the beer, gas and cars advertised on the local broadcasts. How does each experience the game?

The executives identify with the offense. They see a contest in which territory is conquered by a series of carefully executed and integrated maneuvers under the firm control of the quarterback and coach. Both the development of a club and the implementation of a specific game plan are discussed as problems of proper corporate management. Working class dudes, on the other hand, dig defense, in which the collective object of smashing the offensive design still allows room for individual stunts. On defense, strength and toughness are especially celebrated, never more so than when laying a big hit on the managerial quarterback, who is almost invariably WASP (only one black, one Chicano and three "ethnics" among this season's 28 starters).

When teams tend to take on some characteristics of the cities they represent, and these qualities are combined with the class oppositions I've suggested in the game's design, contests with the force of a morality play can result. Take Super Bowl X between the Dallas Cowboys and the Pittsburgh Steelers. The Dallas team, owned by oil and banking money, was known for its complex offensive sets, highly rationalized corporate organization, austere Head Coach Tom Landry, and the field leadership of Annapolis trained superpatriot quarterback Roger Staubach.

The Steelers, in contrast, were owned by a stogy-smoking Irish Catholic patri-



arch who made his money on the horses. The team's personality was established by the magnificent defense that featured four black linesmen, fabled cop fighter Ernie Holmes among them, three white linebackers, including Irish and Polish lads native to the region, and a secondary anchored by a black All-Pro who shaved his head and wore a gold earring.

That great game symbolically pitted the corporate elite of the Sunbelt against the motley working class of the industrial

heartland. When Cowboy quarterback Staubach was creamed by Steeler Ernie Holmes, the errant pass picked off by Polish Jack Ham set up a score by Afro-Italian Franco Harris. At that moment, what submerged politics may have been expressed by the gloom in suburban Dallas livingrooms and the joy in steeltown bars along the Monongahela?

Jack Russell lives in Detroit and writes regularly on sports for *In These Times*.

## LANGUAGE

# E's gone and invented a non-sexist pronoun, blimey

A linguistics psychologist is a person who studies the effects of language on consciousness. "E" might do this to learn more effective methods of social control, to stimulate social progress or simply for "es" own intrinsic satisfaction.

Donald G. Mackey teaches psycholinguistics at UCLA. He studies it under various grants including one from the National Institute for Mental Health. He ("a male person") is the inventor of a new word in the English language. Not just any word either, but a pronoun. One of those elite "closed class" of noun substitutes that includes I, we, he, she and they. The word is "E." It means he or she and is parallel in structure to the capitalized "I."

For a number of years now writers and publishers have been rejecting the generic "he" as any kind of a substitute for he or she. "He" does not even pass the test of universal application. "While the doctor does his level best for suffering humanity, his nurse won't try her hardest and his secretary hardly does any of her work at all." A clear case of vocational word-use discrimination.

If we say the doctor does his or her level best, we may again be producing a sex bias by the placement of his before her. If we try alternation we come up with sentences like: "If the doctor thinks that

she or he is better than us, then he or she has her or his head up his or her ass." Sounds like a lot of heads and asses. Now try this: "If the doctor thinks E is better than us, E has Es head up Es ass."

Mackey's is not the first attempt to find the elusive word. Other attempts have included nan, herm, himmer, ver, co, tem, (s)he and shuhe.

But Mackey thinks that E meets certain basic criteria that linguists agree are necessary for a new word to find acceptance in the language. First, of course, there is a recognized need in the search for non-sexist language.

Then there are structural criteria. E is a vowel we're all familiar with, a kind of friendly and distinctive letter as far as letters go. It is non-ambiguous, that is, it won't be confused with other words.

E also maintains an intimate relationship to she (delete sh-) and he (delete h-) and, unlike s(he) has a distinct identity both in verbal and written form.

So if you have a concern for the development of a non-sexist lexicon and enough basic verbal skill to use slang; to get toasted, wasted or slayed on dubbies, bombers or sticks of herb, then by God in all es glory, you could also use this word.

—David Helvarg





Photo by Rachelle Resnick

## Tenants win in San Francisco

*For almost a decade the elderly residents of the International Hotel have resisted efforts to move them out.*

By Chester Hartman

San Francisco. The International Hotel, a 150-unit low-rent building in San Francisco's Manilatown-Chinatown district, has become the focus of intense political activity in this city. In early January several hundred persons, hastily assembled via telephone tree, blocked sheriff's deputies from posting an eviction order. Demonstrations on Jan. 12 and 16—the first with 3,000 people, the second with 5,000—have demanded that the courts stay or rescind an eviction order obtained by the hotel's owner, Four Seas Investment Corp., a Bangkok-based liquor producer sinking its capital into American real estate. The city's liberal sheriff, Richard Hongisto, at first refused to carry out the court's eviction order. As a result he was given a five-day jail sentence and \$500 fine for contempt of court which he is appealing. Judge Ira Brown termed Hongisto's refusal "the greatest threat to every court in this country." But the city's governing Board of Supervisors has reluctantly voted to loan \$1.3 million to the Housing Authority to take the hotel by eminent domain and resell it to the tenants for permanent low-rent housing.

Things came to a head on Jan. 17. Reliable sources within the sheriff's office indicated he was ready to move on the hotel at 6 a.m. the next morning. Threatened with the real possibility of being removed from office for his contempt conviction, Hongisto had decided to go ahead and evict the 75 mainly elderly Filipino and Chinese residents.

The police department was scheduled to move in around midnight and block off the entire area to prevent the expected thousands of protestors from getting near the hotel. All eyes were focused on the courts, where furious legal maneuvers were underway. The Hotel Tenants Association, the Housing Authority and Hongisto were all filing motions in Superior Court, Appeals Court and the California Supreme Court to have the eviction stayed.

The sheriff was reiterating his claim

that his deputies were too few and lacked sufficient training to carry out this mass eviction in the face of throngs of militant supporters.

The Housing Authority and hotel tenants were claiming that eviction was senseless, since the city had come up with a way to save the hotel, via purchase by the Housing Authority.

But Judge Brown was standing firm. He has contempt of his own both for the tenants and the sheriff (who not long ago had infuriated the San Francisco bench by publicly accusing them of not working hard enough). He felt the dignity and the authority of the court's order had to be upheld, and was unmoved by the actions of the Board of Supervisors and Housing Authority. These were being challenged in another court by Four Seas, and although a hearing was just two weeks off Brown was insisting the eviction proceed.

At 6 p.m., just 12 hours before the scheduled eviction, Brown finally granted a stay. The reason he gave was an affidavit filed by Chief of Police Charles Gain asserting that automatic weapons and firebombs had been reported at the hotel.

No one with knowledge of the hotel's supporters believes there is a shred of truth to Gain's assertion, and a few days later the police chief backed away from his statement. But Brown needed a face-saver. According to sources close to the case, the Appeals Court had urged him to ease up, and city officials from the mayor on down simply did not want to risk an eviction. It would have been the most unpopular and possibly bloody police action in San Francisco since the 1934 General Strike.

Why has the I-Hotel become such a rallying point? In part, the hotel and its community are a symbol of resistance to the city's development as "Wall Street West" over the past two and a half decades.

The hotel's population is Third World, low-income elderly. Their \$50-85 a month rooms are all they can afford, and the hotel is partly a communal home, with a

common kitchen and the mutual support system such micro-communities provide. And it is located right next to the stores, parks and community facilities of Manilatown and Chinatown. It and its community are not replaceable.

But because it also adjoins the expanding financial district, the hotel-site has been an attractive development parcel for years. The battle over the hotel dates back almost a decade. First it was Walter Shorenstein, a local real estate mogul, Democratic party heavy and city parks and recreation commissioner, who bought the hotel and tried to evict its residents in 1968. They resisted and embarrassed him into giving them a three-year lease.

In 1973 Shorenstein sold the hotel to Four Seas for \$850,000, and they've been trying to get the tenants out ever since. An eviction trial was finally held last April, with Judge Brown directing the deadlocked jury to find against the tenants.

The long struggle has made the hotel well known throughout the city, enabling the tenants to forge a city-wide support group and to pull together the city's largest protest demonstrations since the Vietnam war. As an almost pure form of the battle between housing/human rights and profit/property rights, old and young of all races have turned out in support of human rights. The city has not seen anything like this in recent times, and its rulers are scared as hell. Passage of Proposition T last November, calling for elections of Supervisors by districts instead of at-large, indicates the possibility of a whole new ballgame in San Francisco.

Things are now in a holding pattern. Judge Brown's eviction stay is good until March 4, and if the eminent domain taking goes ahead, it will supercede the eviction order. In the interim the Housing Authority and Four Seas will be fighting the legality of the eminent domain action. That trial was scheduled for Feb. 1 but, according to reports, Four Seas will ask for a continuance to try to pull together a better case.

If the courts uphold the eminent domain, there still will be further court battles over the taking price. The Housing Authority's \$1.3 million figure is based on two outside appraisals, but Four Seas doubtless will try to squeeze more out of the city, even though that price would represent a 53 percent profit.

Even if the eviction hurdle is finally passed, the tenants will have other problems: how to buy the building back from the Housing Authority—at the inflated price that includes Four Seas' fat profit—how to make necessary repairs, and still keep rents low enough so they can afford to stay. Unless some kind of assistance is found, the tenants may be getting a white elephant.

The building could be sold to the tenants at a marked-down price. (The government does this all the time under the urban renewal program — but that's only for needy shopping center developers, corporations wanting new headquarters, and similar worthy causes.)

Or the Housing Authority could retain ownership of the hotel and allow the present tenants to continue living there at subsidized rentals they can afford, much as they do with other public housing developments. One of the city's new Housing Authority commissioners is Rev. Jim Jones, whose People's Temple turned out almost 1,000 participants at the last big I-Hotel demonstration, so perhaps some creative and supportive proposals may be forthcoming from that agency.

The International Hotel has proved so far how much power will bend when it has to. How the hotel's city-wide support mobilizes over the coming weeks will determine its future.

Chester Hartman is an urban planner and author of several books, including *Yerba Buena: Land Grab and Community Resistance in San Francisco*. Recently he has begun a communication/action network for radical planners and organizers; readers interested in this network should contact him at 360 Elizabeth St., SF CA 94114.