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Football and the American Character

John J. Miller
Director, Herbert H. Dow II Program in American Journalism
Hillsdale College

JOHN J. MILLER is director of the Herbert H. Dow II Program in American Journalism at Hillsdale College and national correspondent for National Review. A graduate of the University of Michigan, where he served as editor of the Michigan Review, he has also worked on the staff of The New Republic. A contributing editor of Philanthropy magazine, he writes regularly for newspapers and journals including the Detroit News, the Wall Street Journal, and National Review. He is the author of several books, including The First Assassin, a novel set during the Civil War, and most recently The Big Scrum: How Teddy Roosevelt Saved Football.

The following is adapted from a luncheon speech delivered at Hillsdale College on September 9, 2013.

When we talk about football, we usually talk about our favorite teams and the games they play. The biggest ongoing story in the sport right now, however, is something else entirely. It's not about the Bears vs. the Packers or Michigan vs. Ohio State, but rather the controversy over concussions and the long-term health effects of head injuries.

On August 29, 2013, the National Football League agreed to pay $765 million to settle a lawsuit involving more than 4,500 players and their families, who had claimed that the league covered up data on the harmful effects of concussions. Although medical research into football and long-term effects of head injuries is hardly conclusive, some data suggest a connection. A number of legal experts believe the NFL, which will generate about $10 billion in revenue this year, dodged an even bigger payout.

Football, of course, is much bigger than the NFL and its players, whose average yearly salary is nearly $2 million. Football's ranks include about 50,000 men who play

in college and four million boys who play for schools or in youth leagues whose pockets aren't nearly so deep. A Colorado jury recently awarded $11.5 million to a boy who suffered a paralyzing injury at his high school football practice in 2008. How long will it be before school districts begin to think football isn't worth the cost?

Earlier this year, President Obama waded into the debate. "If I had a son, I'd have to think long and hard before I let him play football," he said. He also called for football "to reduce some of the violence." Others have called for a more dramatic solution: Malcolm Gladwell, the bestselling author of *The Tipping Point* and other books, thinks football should go the way of dogfighting. He would like to see America's favorite sport run out of polite society.

So football's future is uncertain. But the past may offer important lessons. After all, football's problems today are nothing compared to what they were about a century ago: In 1905, 18 people died playing the sport. Football became embroiled in a long-running dispute over violence and safety—and it was almost banned through the efforts of Progressive-era prohibitionists. Had these enemies of football gotten their way, they might have erased one of America's great pastimes from our culture. But they lost—and it took the efforts of Theodore Roosevelt to thwart them.

* * *

On November 18, 1876, Theodore Roosevelt, a freshman at Harvard who had just turned 18, attended his first football game. Destined for great things, he was enthusiastic about athletics in general and eager to see the new sport of football in particular. So here he was at the second game ever played between Harvard and its great rival Yale.

As Roosevelt shivered in the cold and windy fall weather, he watched a game that was quite different from the sport we know today. There were no quarterbacks or wide receivers, no first downs or forward passes. Before play began, the teams met to discuss rules. What number of men would play? What would count for a score? How long would the game last? They were like school kids today who have to set up boundaries, choose between a game of touch or tackle, and decide how to count blitzes.

Harvard's veterans agreed to a couple of suggestions proposed by Yale. The first would carry a lasting legacy: Rather than playing with 15 men to a side, as was the current custom, the teams would play with eleven men. So this was the first football game to feature eleven players on the field per team.

The second suggestion would not shape the sport's future, but it would affect the game that afternoon: Touchdowns would not count for points. Only goals—balls sailed over a rope tied between two poles—kicked after touchdowns or kicked from the field during play would contribute to the score.

In the first half, Harvard scored a touchdown but missed the kick. By the rules of the day, this meant that Harvard earned no points. At halftime, the game was a scoreless tie.

Imprimis (im-prī-mis), [Latin]: in the first place

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After the break, Yale pushed into Harvard territory and a lanky freshman named Walter Camp tried to shovel the ball to a teammate. It was a poor lateral pass that hit the ground and bounced upward, taking one of those funny hops that can befuddle even skilled players. In a split second, Oliver Thompson decided to take a chance on a kick from about 35 yards away and at a wide angle. The ball soared into the air, over the rope and through the uprights, giving Yale a lead of 1-0. No more points were scored that afternoon.

In a letter to his mother the next day, Roosevelt gave voice to the frustration that so often accompanies defeat in sports. "I am sorry to say we were beaten," he wrote, "principally because our opponents played very foul."

More about Teddy Roosevelt and what he did for football in a moment. But first, let me discuss briefly why football matters.

* * *

Love for a college football team, whether it's the Texas Longhorns or the Hillsdale Chargers, is almost tribal. In some cases the affiliation is practically inherited, in others chosen. Whatever the origin, football has the power to form lifelong loyalties and passions and has supplanted baseball as America's favorite pastime. Yet it almost died 100 years ago. Over the course of an ordinary football season in those days, a dozen or more people would die playing it, and many more suffered serious injuries. A lot of the casualties were kids in sandlot games, but big-time college teams also paid a price.

Football isn't a contact sport—it's a collision sport that has always prized size, strength, and power. This was especially true in its early years, when even the era of leatherheads lay in the future: Nobody wore helmets, facemasks, or shoulder pads. During the frequent pileups, hidden from the view of referees, players would wrestle for advantage by throwing punches and jabbing elbows. The most unsporting participants would even try to gouge their opponents' eyes.

The deaths were the worst. They were not freak accidents as much as the inevitable toll of a violent game. And they horrified a group of activists who crusaded against football itself—wanting not merely to remove violence from the sport, but to ban the sport altogether. At the dawn of the Progressive era, the social and political movement to prohibit football became a major cause.

The *New York Evening Post* attacked the sport, as did *The Nation*, an influential magazine of news and opinion. The latter worried that colleges were becoming "huge training grounds for young gladiators, around whom as many spectators roar as roared in the [Roman] amphitheatre." The *New York Times* bemoaned football's tendency toward "mayhem and homicide." Two weeks later, the *Times* ran a new editorial entitled "Two Curable Evils." The first evil it addressed was lynching. The second was football.

The main figure in this movement to ban football was Charles W. Eliot, the president of Harvard and probably the single most important person in the history of higher education in the United States. Indeed, Eliot hated team sports in general because competition motivated players to conduct themselves in ways he considered unbecoming of gentlemen. If baseball and football were honorable pastimes, he reasoned, why did they require umpires and referees? "A game that needs to be watched is not fit for genuine sportsmen," he once said. For Eliot, a pitcher who threw a curve ball was engaging in an act of treachery. But football distressed him even more. Most of all, he despised its violence. Time and again, he condemned the game as "evil."

One of Eliot's main adversaries in the battle over football was Walter Camp, one of the players in the game Teddy Roosevelt watched in 1876. A decent player, Camp made his real mark on football as a coach and a rules-maker. Indeed, he is the closest thing there is to football's founding father.

In the rivalry between Eliot and Camp, we see one of the ongoing controversies in American politics at its outset—the conflict between regulators bent on the dream of a world without risk, and those who resist such an agenda in the name of freedom and responsibility. Eliot and other Progressives identified a genuine problem with football, but their solution was radical. They wanted to regulate football out of existence because they believed that its participants were not capable of making their own judgments in terms of costs and benefits. In their higher wisdom, these elites would ban the sport for all.

Into this struggle stepped Theodore Roosevelt. As a boy, he had suffered from chronic asthma to the point that relatives wondered if he would survive childhood. His mother and father tried everything to improve his health, even resorting to quack cures such as having him smoke cigars. Ultimately they concluded that he simply would have to overcome the disease. They encouraged him to go to a gym, and he worked out daily. The asthma would stay with Roosevelt for years, but by the time he was an adult, it was largely gone. For Roosevelt, the lesson was that a commitment to physical fitness could take a scrawny boy and turn him into a vigorous young man.

This experience was deeply connected to Roosevelt's love of football. He remained a fan as he graduated from Harvard, entered politics, ranched out west, and became an increasingly visible public figure.

In 1895, shortly before he became president of the New York City police commission, he wrote a letter to Walter Camp that read as follows:

> I am very glad to have a chance of expressing to you the obligation which I feel all Americans are under to you for your championship of athletics. The man on the farm and in the workshop here, as in other countries, is apt to get enough physical work; but we were tending steadily in America to produce . . . sedentary classes . . . and from this the athletic spirit has saved us. Of all games I personally like foot ball the best, and I would rather see my boys play it than see them play any other. I have no patience with the people who declaim against it because it necessitates rough play and occasional injuries. The rough play, if confined within manly and honorable limits, is an advantage. It is a good thing to have the personal contact about which the *New York Evening Post* snarls so much, and no fellow is worth his salt if he minds an occasional bruise or cut. Being near-sighted I was not able to play foot ball in college, and I never cared for rowing or base ball, so that I did all my work in boxing and wrestling. They are both good exercises, but they are not up to foot ball . . . .
>
> I am utterly disgusted with the attitude of President Eliot and the Harvard faculty about foot ball . . . .
>
> I do not give a snap for a good man who can't fight and hold his own in the world. A citizen has got to be decent of course. That is the first requisite; but the second, and just as important, is that he shall be efficient, and he can't be efficient unless he is manly. Nothing has impressed me more in meeting college graduates during the fifteen years I have been out of college than the fact that on the average the men who have counted most have been those who had sound bodies.

As this letter indicates, Roosevelt saw football as more than a diversion. He saw it as a positive social good. When he was recruiting the Rough Riders in 1898, he went out of his way to select men who had played football. The Duke of Wellington reportedly once said, "The battle of Waterloo was

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won on the playing fields of Eton." Roosevelt never said anything similar about football fields and the Battle of San Juan Hill, but when he emerged from the Spanish-American War as a national hero—and as someone talked about as being of presidential timber—he knew how much he owed not just to the Rough Riders, but to the culture of manliness and risk-taking that had shaped them.

Like Roosevelt, our society values sports, though we don't always think about why—or why we should. My kids have played football, baseball, hockey, soccer, and lacrosse. As a family, we're fairly sports-oriented. It has forced me to think about a question that a lot of parents probably ask at one time or another: Why do we want our kids to participate in athletics?

Many parents will point to the obvious fact that sports are good for health and fitness. They'll also discuss the intangible benefits in terms of character building—sports teach kids to get up after falling down, to play through pain, to deal with failure, to work with teammates, to take direction from coaches, and so on.

It turns out that there really is something to all of this. Empirical research shows that kids who play sports stay in school longer. As adults, they vote more often and earn more money. Explaining why this is true is trickier, but it probably has something to do with developing a competitive instinct and a desire for achievement.

Roosevelt was surely correct in believing that sports influence the character of a nation. Americans are much more likely than Europeans to play sports. We're also more likely to attribute economic success to hard work, as opposed to luck. It may be that sports are a manifestation—or possibly even a source—of American exceptionalism.

* * *

When Roosevelt ascended to the presidency, football remained controversial and Harvard's Eliot continued his crusade for prohibition. In 1905, Roosevelt was persuaded to act. He invited Walter Camp of Yale to the White House, along with the coaches of Harvard and Princeton. These were the three most important football teams in the country. "Football is on trial," said Roosevelt. "Because I believe in the game, I want to do all I can to save it." He encouraged the coaches to eliminate brutality, and they promised that they would.

Whether they meant what they said is another matter. Walter Camp didn't see anything wrong with the way football was played. Harvard's coach, however, was a young man named Bill Reid. He took Roosevelt more seriously, because he took the threat to football more seriously. Indeed, within weeks of meeting with Roosevelt, he came to fear that Eliot was on the verge of success in having Harvard drop the sport, which would have encouraged other schools to do the same.

At the end of the 1905 season, therefore, Reid plotted with a group of reform-minded colleges to form an organization that today we know as the NCAA and to approve a set of sweeping rules changes to reduce football's violence. In committee meetings, Reid outmaneuvered Camp while receiving critical behind-the-scenes support from Roosevelt.

As a result, football experienced an extreme makeover: The yardage necessary for a first down increased from

five to ten. Rules-makers also created a neutral zone at the line of scrimmage, limited the number of players who could line up in the backfield, made the personal foul a heavily penalized infraction, and banned the tossing of ballcarriers.

These were important revisions, and each was approved with an eye toward improving the safety of players. Yet the change that would transform the sport the most was the introduction of the forward pass. Up to this point, football was a game of running and kicking, not throwing. There were quarterbacks but not wide receivers. It took a few years to get the rule right—footballs needed to evolve away from their watermelon-like shape and become more aerodynamic, and coaches and players had to figure out how to take advantage of this new offensive tool. But on November 1, 1913, football moved irreversibly into the modern era.

Army was one of the best teams in the country, a national championship contender. It was scheduled to play a game against a little-known Catholic school from the Midwest. The headline in the *New York Times* that morning read: "Army Wants Big Score." The little-known Catholic school was Notre Dame. Knute Rockne and his teammates launched football's first true air war, throwing again and again for receptions and touchdowns. And they won, 35-14. Gushed the *New York Times*:

> The Westerners flashed the most sensational football that has been seen in the East this year. The Army players were hopelessly confused and chagrined before Notre Dame's great playing, and their style of old-fashioned close line-smashing play was no match for the spectacular and highly perfected attack of the Indiana collegians.

A West Point cadet named Dwight Eisenhower watched from the sidelines. He was on Army's team but didn't play due to injury. "Everything has gone wrong," he wrote to his girlfriend. "The football team . . . got beaten most gloriously by Notre Dame."

With that game, football's long first chapter came to a close. It had reduced the problem of violence, and the game that we enjoy today was born.

* * *

The example of Roosevelt shows that a skillful leader can use a light touch to solve a vexing problem. As a general rule, of course, we don't want politicians interfering with our sports. The only thing that could make the BCS system worse is congressional involvement.

At the same time, our political leaders help to shape our culture and our expectations. They can promise a world without risk, or they can send a different message. As a father myself, I can sympathize with President Obama's cautious statements about football. At the same time, his comments would have benefitted from some context: Gregg Easterbrook, who writes a football column for ESPN, has pointed out that a teen who drives a car for an hour has about a one in a million chance of dying—compared to a one in six million chance for a teen who spends an hour practicing football.

Americans are a self-governing people. We can make our own judgments about whether to drive or play football—and when we make these choices, we can make them in recognition of the fact that although sports can be dangerous, they're also good for us. They not only make us distinctively American, they make us better Americans. ■

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