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Football and Feminism¹

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Ever since I have been writing on the issue of ethics in sports I have pushed one theme, the moral significance of sport. This theme is the title of one of my essays and is still the title of an ongoing book manuscript. I argue that sports, because of their nature and design, are of moral significance for both the individual and the society in general. Sports are physically challenging, rule governed, unalienated activities designed for self-development and self-esteem. They exhibit ethics through competition. Sports also serve as a microcosm of society, but they are more than that. Sports do not simply reflect passively; they are active in the sense that they affect what they reflect. Although this is likely controversial, I want to claim that sports affect society in more ways than almost any other activity, and I hope to show why that is the case. It is actually in this vein that the moral significance of sport is played out.

It is also the case that sports have traditionally been reserved for men and that there is a sport for every male body type. Sports were for the development of men, not women; as one judge claimed in ruling against a girl who wanted to play Little League Baseball, baseball is for developing the kind of character we want in our men, not in our women. In fact in the original Olympics, women, on pain of death, were forbidden not just from competing but from even being in the “sacred area” of the Olympics. You may be familiar with the story, which may be legend, of a woman who disguised herself as a trainer to watch her son compete. When her son won, she jumped over to greet him and her disguise was revealed—after which, so the story goes, all trainers had to be in the nude like the Olympians. But as many of us are aware, women have played sports for years and although there are not sports for every female body type, since the passage of Title IX in the United States at least, participation in interscholastic sports by girls has jumped from fewer than 300,000 in 1971 to 2.4 million in 1996. And of course before the passage of Title IX college athletic scholarships for women, no matter the talent, were extremely rare, with fewer than 50 being offered, as compared with 50,000 for men. Today nearly one third of all athletic scholarship dollars are awarded to women (5).

But Title IX and feminism have not come without costs. Some have been unhappy about women’s increased participation in sport—mainly men, of course, but of course, not all men. To show the effects of this increased participation,

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Mariah Burton Nelson has written a fascinating book titled *The Stronger Women Get, the More Men Love Football: Sexism and the American Culture of Sports*. She argues that football is the last bastion of male dominance. It is an exclusive “men’s club,” the one place where men can protect what is their own that excludes women. “Football is male, masculinity, manliness” (4: p. 11). And there was the “fear on the part of many men that women’s growing athleticism somehow threatened not only men and men’s sports but the very nature of things: men on top” (4: p. 11). Perhaps this is why it has been speculated that women are more in danger of being battered by their male partners. Intruding on men’s turf serves as notice to women that if they want to play with the big boys, they’d better be prepared to fight! Taking away the opportunities that had been traditionally reserved for men will not come without a fight. This is one way to look at it, but I want to take it in another direction.

Traditionally, ethics makes a distinction between the rational and the emotional. Some philosophers (most notably Plato and Kant, although Plato allows that some emotions such as spirit could support reason) see the basis of ethics as reason divorced from passion. Reason must control our passions. Moreover, reason has traditionally been associated with men, passion and emotion with women. Thus the men of reason are to control the passions of women and, I assume, of themselves, as well. This separation has been at the heart of the history of ethics and the moral development of humans, a development that isn’t really human but gendered and male biased. But this gender-biased view of ethics, while it works to the detriment of women by marginalizing them, also works to the detriment of men by denying a central part of what makes us human—emotion or passions. Men must not show emotion or passion; they must be “men of steel,” disciplined, rational, and of strong will. This is at the heart of a sexist society.

In my discussions of ethics of sports, for the most part, I assumed this same view of ethics, but I now realize that this bias affected some of the conclusions I drew about the moral significance of sports. One of these points was that sports are controlled expressions of emotion—again accepting that the emotions must be kept under control. I still think there is some truth to this. Men’s sports insisted on passion, but it must be kept under control; for example, they must not be overzealous in victory, swagger, and so on (If you watched the Olympics you might have noticed the Chinese coaches preventing a display of emotions from their gold-medal winners.) But while this may be true in part, something else is going on, as well. There is another morally significant aspect of sports, which perhaps explains why the stronger women get, the more men love football. Football, as well as other sports, allows men to show emotion, something that they must not do in society for fear of censure. In football, it is fully acceptable for men to show their emotions even while they control them. For example, we do expect control of emotions that show contempt, disrespect, or belittling of another. But these are not the kinds of emotions I am talking about. I am talking about the kinds of emotions that support morality, such as respect, compassion, and love of teammates and opponents. In particular, football players express these emotions that result from bonding during training and the course of the game. But once off the playing field, these same men must not show these emotions in society for fear of being thought of as sissies, or feminine. This is the kind of constraint that sexism promotes. So, if we could overcome sexism, we would liberate not only women but men, as well.

Why have sports been traditionally the domain of men? Sports are the one place men can allow their emotional side to be displayed, where they can be complete. Why are sports fun? They are fun because sports allow our passions and emotions to be exhibited without censure. Men are supposed to be in control; it is unmanly for them to let their emotions to be shown. It is unmanly to be called anything related to women, which is why coaches often motivate men by calling them sissies or by telling them that they play like or act like girls—that they are, to use Governor Schwarzenegger’s term, “girlie men.” These are all insults. But what is the appeal of sports, in particular team sports, and more particularly sports like football? It is bonding—something women are permitted to do every day and openly. This bonding involves a loving relationship. Men are allowed to show this in family relationships to some extent, but they must also show control and independence. Women are supposed to be dependent on these men in control. Once women begin to enter into traditionally male-dominated areas, they become stronger, they become more independent, they resist being controlled, and they demonstrate their rational side along with their emotional side. In essence they become complete—they can be both rational and emotional or passionate. Humans are interdependent. Humans also have the capacity to reason, to be emotional, and to be passionate and compassionate. Developing these capacities makes one more complete as a human.

But what does this do for men? Where does it leave them? How does it allow them to be complete? How does liberating women liberate men? Many have claimed that it has not, but it has served to cause anxieties. Some go farther, claiming that women’s liberation emasculates men and by extension undermines men’s development, especially in circumstances where men can express emotions and develop loving relationships. As a result, men begin to see the place where they traditionally were allowed to develop loving relationships, where they could safely show emotions, disappear. So the stronger women get, the more men turn to the safe haven of sports, where they can display emotions and develop bonding loving relationships, especially to sports from which women are excluded. Unfortunately, what this reinforces is more hatred of women, because women no longer want to be controlled—women are the cause of this loss of control; women have undermined men’s manhood. So men who reason this way turn to what they believe allows them to be real men and what keeps real women out—football. This is the moral significance of sport!

What I had not been taking into consideration is that my training in ethics accepted this gender-biased approach, and so I accepted it, as well. But I have come to realize that ethics as traditionally taught has not been a search for universal or truly human guidance; rather, it was a gender-biased enterprise, an approach that separated reason and emotion, whereby reason was associated with male strength and emotion associated with female weakness, where reason must always control emotion. Reason must guide humans from the blindness of passions. Reason must conquer the female forces of unreason, so man must control woman. Man is active, determinate, and defining form, whereas woman is passive, indeterminate, inferior matter. The associations between reason, form, knowledge, and maleness have persisted in various guises and have permeated what has been thought of as moral, as well as scientific, knowledge. According to this biased picture, men are the truly human because they reason; women are simply natural, or as Plato says, “women imitate the earth.”

All this has played out nicely in sports. Early games that girls play have few rules; they just “play” and sometimes change the rules as they go along so that everyone can participate, enjoy the activity, and develop emotional ties. On the other hand, boys are taught at an early age to abide by the rules of the game, and although they disagree about their enforcement, they adhere to the strictness of the rules. So what has changed? Girls are now playing according to the rules; they have shown that they can be rational, they can be truly human, and they can reason, but in so doing, they have not abandoned emotion. They have come to realize that being rational does not mean supplanting emotions. For the same reason, men do not abandon emotion when they engage in sport. Thus, by extension, ethics and emotion do not need to be separated; they are conjoined, and indeed emotions are as necessary a component of ethics as reason is.

Furthermore, women, as others, have shown that both emotion and reason are necessary to be completely human and that to deny either one is unhealthy, leaving a person incomplete. A healthy person exhibits both. While reason and rationality are necessary for human development, so, too, are emotions. With women entering into careers and activities traditionally reserved for men, in the workplace as well as in sports, they are able to exercise their rationality, not to be *like* men but to be complete, to be fully human. As I said earlier, this does not mean that emotions are completely suppressed. But this approach has left men who cling to the idea that they must be in control of their emotions, as well as controlling those who are emotional, frustrated and incomplete and not understanding women. Many have said that the strides women have made have left men emasculated; they have lost control of what they were traditionally supposed to control—emotions and, by extension, women. On the other hand, it is with women that they are supposed to show the emotion of love. But love that demands one be in control exhibits a kind of pathology of love. So the stronger women get, the more men love football. Here at least men can show their manliness; their masculinity can be verified. They can show emotion and not fear a loss of control.

What is it that they are revealing but perhaps are not able to articulate? What they see as their masculinity being restored may be more like their allowing themselves to flourish as complete humans, without censure. Here they don't have to control all their emotions. (This doesn't mean of course that all emotions are appropriate.) To be sure, there are a great many rules to follow, and for the competition to make sense all the participants must abide by them. But the appeal of football isn't simply its rational aspect; its appeal is the emotional. “Emotions inject humanity into sports” (2: p. 26).

In sports, participants can show their emotional side, their humanity. They can express emotions, but of course not all emotions are appropriate. As Jeffrey Fry points out, in sports, participants can show emotional integrity by controlling some expressions of emotion that would be inappropriate responses to events. In this way, participants in sports reveal their character and their ethics, an ethics that recognizes the importance of care and connection. To succeed in sports as in society we need each other as partners—to be human we need each other as partners; we need to connect with one another. This is a true of sports as it is of society. Relating to one another, not just as individuals in conflict but as people connected with one another in various relationships, is important not only for human flourishing (i.e., for self-development), but also for being a part of society; relationships that require care,

connection, and cooperation recognize interdependence. As John Rawls claims, we live in a social union, a community of people with shared ends; as such we are all partners, so cooperation is essential. This makes Robert Simon's definition of competition—a mutual challenge to achieve excellence—so poignant. Competition does set individuals in conflict, but the success of the competition requires a mutual undertaking. All participants agree to abide by the rules, play fairly, respect the officials, and treat each other as opponents who challenge each other to be better, rather than enemies to be defeated. All this transfers to society, as well. What is necessary for success in society is cooperation, an interdependence that involves caring for one another. Success is a mutual challenge, a mutual undertaking. Ethics lies at the heart of this mutual undertaking, and reason and emotion are essential for a complete ethics.

In sports, this ethics may be epitomized by the display of sportspersonship. Sportspersonship not only requires abiding by the rules, playing fair, and so on, but it also is the vehicle for displaying emotional integrity. Emotions are most definitely a part of sports, but while I claim that emotions are part of what makes us human, it doesn't mean that expressing any emotion at any time is appropriate.

In a wonderfully written essay, "Playing with Emotion," Jeffrey Fry makes the claim that fits perfectly with my theme: "Because emotions are so prevalent in sport, and since the whole gamut of emotions is experienced in sport, sport is a powerful vehicle for modeling and educating the emotions" (2: p. 33). He continues, "Ideally, participation in sport helps us find an appropriate mean between unbridled expressiveness and rigid self-control, not only with respect to emotions, but also with respect to behaviors that may ensue from them" (2: p. 33).

The mistake made by many in sports and in ethics is to fail to recognize distinctions that Aristotle first pointed out and that Fry, Martha Nussbaum, I, and many others, have continued to point out. Emotions are not morally neutral, nor are they without cognitive content. Fry makes the statement that "playing with emotion and playing with emotional integrity are integrally connected with broader issues of control and autonomy in sports" (2: p. 34). I absolutely agree with him on this, and I would even take it farther; emotions are integrally connected with broader issues of ethics in both sports and society. Emotions make us human—they allow us to connect with each other; they allow for the interdependence so necessary for success in society. This is at the heart of Carol Gilligan's "ethics of care."

The ethics of care is played out most vividly in football and other team sports, whereby success is a result of the *interdependence* of the players—both sides. *Independence* is often the problem. Perhaps we saw this most vividly in the U.S. men's basketball play at the 2004 Olympics. The pundits can do all the analyzing and critical evaluation they want, but the one thing that was clear is that they lost sight of what the team game of basketball is all about, how success requires not just passing the ball to one another but also an understanding of interdependence. The U.S. team had the most talent of any team in the Olympics, but raw talent is not what sports is about. The players lost sight of the idea of a mutual challenge to achieve excellence. I honestly don't think they even deserved a bronze medal. The ethics of care emphasizes attachment, inclusion, interdependence, differences in need predicated on equity, responsibility, and compassion. The relationship becomes the figure defining the self and others. Detachment is *the* problem both in sports and in morality. It doesn't mean, of course, that we disregard each other

as distinct individuals with rights and that these rights may come into conflict, as expressed in the ethics of rights; only recognize that the ethics of rights and ethics of care are two crosscutting perspectives that do not negate one another but focus attention on different dimensions of the situation.

Traditionally in society we have focused on the ethics of rights; we are people living in society whose rights conflict with one another. But this is as inappropriate when applied to sports as it is when applied to society. To take that into sports defeats the very justification of sports. Again to refer to the Olympics—in stark contrast to the U.S. men’s basketball team, look at either the U.S. women’s soccer team or the U.S. women’s basketball team. They embraced mutuality, interdependence, in fact dependence; they were the real Dream Teams—of course someone might say that this may be attributed to the fact that they are women. It is interesting to note that corporations in our society have recognized this, as well, and often use sports metaphors to get people to cooperate. (Of course this is sometimes done to gloss over shady ethical practices.) This is not to say that rights are irrelevant, either in sports or in society, but they are not sufficient to complete the picture of interactions in sports and in society.

The essence of sport and the essence of ethics recognize that attachment, the relational aspects—not who is in control, who is the boss, who thinks he is right but how we respond to each other, how we are responsible for one another. Rather than see people as individuals in conflict, the ethics of care requires that we see people in a web of relationships, where we depend on one another for each of our successes and development. Through attachments and inclusion, we seek understanding and, ultimately, love. Love is often thought to be reserved for partners in a marriage-like relationship, and as I said at the outset this is where most men could display their emotions, be human. But often the same people who hold on to this demand that they be in control, undermining the emotional integrity so eloquently discussed by Fry. This is what sexism teaches them. With women becoming resistant to their control, men often resent women, resort to violence, or turn to football, where it is okay to not be in control.

All of us have emotions and the desire to express them; all of us want to love and be loved; eliminating sexism not only liberates women, it liberates men; eliminating sexism allows both men and women to be complete. Human development, for both men and women, does not involve a zero-sum game. Eliminating sexism allows everyone to share in the basic benefits of sports and of society. Eliminating sexism allows everyone to share in real love, not one in which one partner is in control of the other, but one where emotional integrity is intact, where partners truly share in each other’s well being.

This brings me back to team sports, but in particular, football. Other sports may exhibit the same kind of analysis I give, but football more so because it is the sport in which most men see masculinity and manhood epitomized. What is it that makes football so powerful for men? It’s not just a game—it is a place of safe love, where men can share in each other’s successes, because each person is essential for any one person’s success. Although most people understand the latter, they don’t want to acknowledge the love and the emotions that accompany it. I claim that evidence of this is shown by denigrating women, to show it’s not the love or emotion of the weak; so rather than show love, they show violence toward those who do. However topsy-turvy this sounds—the stronger women get, the more

men love football, because it is the one place where they can show the emotions of love without censure, where their manhood isn't questioned. They can share in each other's well being and truly understand this. But then when they reenter the everyday world, they return to a place where they must repudiate the emotions of love they displayed in the game. They return to the world where they believe what sexism has taught them.

Football (and possibly other team sports), as I said, requires a kind of bonding that brings the participants to love one another, such that they give of themselves for the benefit of others. They must train and develop their minds and bodies for the rigors of the game, but they must also develop another strength—the bond that puts their skills together for a shared end. This is precisely what is necessary in war and perhaps is why many have argued that sport imitates war, Santayana probably the most notable. Norman Fischer, in “Competitive Sport's Imitation of War: Imaging the Completeness of Virtue,” eloquently argues this claim very well, but most of his arguments center around competition and courage. I want to take the claim in a different direction, one that Fischer begins to look at, as well—that the bonding, the love of one's fellow soldiers, is essential for success. War requires a bonding, a love, whereby soldiers know that they can depend on each other, just like in football. They are not individuals in conflict but in partnership, where each is responsible for the other. In competition in war and in sports there is a mutual challenge to achieve a common goal, but to quote Fischer, “Sport promotes competition without cost” (1: p. 21).

War is of course a more serious endeavor, where the competitor is seen as an enemy to be defeated—not, however, to achieve any bodily excellence but to see the demise of the enemy. But for both sport and war, the process is similar. The individuals must develop their minds and bodies for the rigors of the game or the rigors of war. They must also develop another strength—the bond that puts their skills together toward a shared end. They perform as a unit forged by this training. They perform for each other; they depend on one another for their success; they live, laugh, cry, and love together. The bond in a unit allows the members of the unit to be fully human, and when they return it is not surprising they have great difficulty in adjusting, as they have reentered the world where they are to be independent, always under control, where expressing emotions is a sign of weakness, not being masculine, and most of all appearing feminine. The kind of bond they had with the members of the unit cannot be expressed in the “real” world. It would be unacceptable—remember that being seen as female or displaying feminine traits is one of the worst insults, perhaps even worse than being called homosexual.

Denying or repressing a significant aspect of what makes us human can only harm the individual, so it is not surprising that this repression shows up in violence, usually toward women partners, with whom they were supposed to be able to have that bond, to express the human emotions that show emotional integrity. But what often appear are inappropriate expressions of emotions that are harmful; they lack integrity because they have a sexist base. Rather than emotions expressing love, they come out as anger and hatred. It's not surprising that soldiers have difficulty returning, but again, eliminating sexism may help men returning home display emotional integrity. And furthermore, eliminating sexism may also help reduce the power of homophobia. (Of course, there are other reasons soldiers have

difficulty returning to the civilian world—war is hell for a lot of reasons; this is just one aspect.)

The emotions expressed in a military unit are similar to those expressed in a football team. Just as in war, in football the participants perform as a unit; they perform for each other and they sacrifice for one another; the risks are of course much less, but as Fischer points out, “one can be serious toward sport, although one might not be ‘gravely’ serious” (1: p. 23). Both war and sport provide tests of excellence, and honor is involved in both, but the spoils from any victory are very different. Again quoting Fischer, “To the victor in war go the spoils, but they are spoiled spoils” (1: p. 22).

Victory, whether in war or in football, is a team or unit victory. Each member recognizes and celebrates this. They are all keenly aware that the victory belongs to the unit and by extension every member of the unit. It’s more than friendship that accounts for this—it is love. Nowhere is this philosophy taught and articulated more clearly than by Coach Joe Ehrmann of the Gilman School, a former Baltimore Colt who now coaches football based on love. What he hopes to accomplish by this is to train young men to understand that love is the same in football as in society. Jeffrey Marx, in a book called *Season of Life*, has given us insight into Ehrmann’s transformation from a bruiser to this philosophy of love in football.

Coach Ehrmann talks about how to help boys become men within the context of sports, in the context of a team, whereby the players set aside their personal goals, wants, and ambitions in order to put the team first. This, he proclaims, is the real challenge facing us in society, as well—how we learn to come together, across all racial, economic, and geographical divisions, to make a better place. Sport, he says, in particular football,

is nothing more than a context to help connect with boys and teach them, one, a clear and compelling definition of what it means to be a man. Second is to give them a code of conduct for manhood. And then third is to help them figure out what their own unique, transcendent cause should or could be in this world. (3: p. 34)

You can imagine when he says to the boys at first practice that football is about love, when he asks, “What is our job as coaches?” and the boys yell back in unison, “To love us.” And to “What is your job?” the boys respond, “To love each other” (3: p. 3). What I have been saying is that football does exemplify this, but always with the fear that it will be seen as weakness.

Most football players, and many men in general, are taught as Joe was that the “concept of masculinity was that men don’t cry, men don’t feel, men don’t need, men don’t touch—that if you really want to be a man, you learn how to dominate and control” (3: p. 37). And this is played out in the NFL, where what is talked about as being a man centers on sports, money, power, and women. He calls the community of football, the bonding, and locker room camaraderie associated with professional football, a “pseudocommunity.” It is a pretense; it has the trappings by which the outward behavior shows perhaps a man’s search for true friendships, but with the fear that he must always be a man. So to make sure the behavior is not misread, off the field they overcompensate by emphasizing dominance and control. But, Joe Ehrmann points out that to be a man, “first and foremost is the ability to

enter and maintain meaningful relationships.” “Masculinity” he says, “ought to be taught in terms of the capacity to love and to be loved” (3: p. 36).

Clearly what Coach Ehrmann is trying to get his young men to understand is that expressing emotions in football and in life is what makes them men, what makes them human. His code of conduct for manhood is accepting responsibility, leading courageously, enacting justice on behalf of others, and stressing the importance of empathy. He compares this with “the ‘leukemia of masculinity’—the combination of nurturing wounds and shame—that often keeps boys and men blocked from their true potential” (3: p. 37). This is just what the ethics of care promotes, as well.

Now Joe Ehrmann is certainly not the first to recognize this, but it takes more than Joe and other men to succeed. What men and women have been taught for ages is very difficult to change. But this is what feminists have been urging—that the “leukemia of masculinity,” the “pathology of love,” harms both men and women. Football allows men to love in a certain way. It allows them to show emotion, it allows them to exhibit the behavior of love and friendship, and in the context it is real, but once they step out into the world away from the field, they return to the world that they think does not coincide with this. It is not surprising that they seek solace in religion because the tension is too great. But if we all truly adopted feminism’s (and Coach Ehrmann’s) urgings, men and women could be truly human. Both could be rational and emotional without censure.

Men and women could be true partners whereby all accept responsibility, lead courageously, enact justice on behalf of others, and most of all empathize or show compassion. This requires both reason and emotion. It is true that our character is revealed in sports, our ethics play out in competition; the same is true of society. These should be compatible, whereby sports would be a true microcosm and whereby sports can positively affect how we deal with the challenges of society—how to come together to make the world a better place. We see it to some degree every two to four years in the Olympics, when for the most part people set aside differences to come together in friendly competition; they understand and empathize with each other. Participants don’t just compare and compete, they connect. Would that this could be carried out for longer than the fourteen or so days of the Olympics. It certainly isn’t easy. In fact this is very hard—it requires integrity, which is hard, an integrity whereby no matter which way you turn, or what situation you’re in, people will see the same integrity in you in every situation.

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In all my writing and teaching of the philosophy of sport, I emphasize the notion that sports are morally significant for both the individual and society. Sports reveal a great deal about us as individuals and about the society in which the sports are played. One of the values of sport is that it combines reason and emotion. Sports allow us to be human. This is a good thing. It would seem that this would help men and women become true partners, especially since women have now entered into the world of sport. But the stronger women get, the less this seems to be true. Many men see this as threatening, as women wanting to be men, but this is far from what is going on here. What is going on is that women want to be included in the public, rational world that was the exclusive men’s club. Being excluded from the public world of men, women were not allowed to be complete,

not allowed to be human. And the corollary of this is that men being excluded from the private world of emotions were also not allowed to be complete, not allowed to be human. The traditional view of ethics was that being rational and controlling the emotions was what it meant to be human, but this was mistaken and simply a gender-biased notion of what it is to be human. Even men realized this but were unable to articulate it.

As more women entered into the male world, more men turned to the area where women were excluded—football. It was not only the place where women were excluded, it was the one place where men could be human, where they could display what completed their humanity—they could display and express their emotions, especially love, without censure. The difficult part was to transfer this to the everyday world; once they reentered the everyday world, what allowed them to complete their humanity was now perceived as failure of humanity. And if we understand Coach Ehrmann's thesis, what was allowing them to be human in football wasn't real either, because they always had to keep in mind how men are supposed to act in the real (or what I would say sexist) world. So the moral significance of sport here is that the world of sport that allows for emotional expressions provides an arena for individuals to be fully human, and this could provide a basis for moral development for both men and women. The world of sports reflects the idea of society as a social union, but even more, if recognized positively, it could affect society in a way to show that love, compassion, and caring can be transferred from sports to society. If seen as pathology, however, it could also affect society in a negative way that would encourage hatred and violence.

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Notes

1. I should make it clear from the onset that I am talking about American football as played in the United States.

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