

NFL Films and the
Re-Production of Pro Football

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Edward Schiappa, Adviser

July 2010

Acknowledgements

Writing a dissertation is not a task to be completed on one's own. Instead, it requires the support of an array of individuals. It is a pleasure to thank those who made this dissertation possible.

Firstly, I am grateful to my family for their love, humor, and generosity. In times of joy and in times of sorrow, they have always been there.

Secondly, I am thankful to my professors at Saint John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota. Fr. Robert Koopmann, Dr. Richard Ice, Dr. Joan Steck, Dr. Gary Prevost, and Dr. J. Scott Johnson engaged me in profound ways and greatly contributed to my intellectual, spiritual, and emotional development.

Thirdly, I am appreciative to my committee members at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. Dr. Mary Vavrus, Dr. Laurie Ouellette, and Dr. Douglas Hartmann challenged me to ask questions, think critically, and dig deeper. Ultimately, they all played an influential role in shaping my research and giving it direction and purpose.

Most importantly, I owe my deepest gratitude to my adviser, Dr. Edward Schiappa, whose leadership on this dissertation journey was irreproachable and unfailing. It would have been next to impossible to write this dissertation without Ed's help and guidance. I am so very fortunate to have had such a wise, caring adviser.

Dedication

To Bradley and Bonnie Johnson, my parents.

Abstract

The choreographed work of NFL Films in their first documentary, *They Call It Pro Football* (1966), offers a fitting case study in which to examine the construction and promotion of pro football in the 1960s. Using techniques of textual analysis and social/cultural historiography, I investigate the representational dynamics of pro football in this film. In order to explicate the ideological, sociological, historical, and cultural significance of the film before, during, and after its release, I describe the emergence in the twentieth century of pro football and television, proffer the view that televisual texts perform cultural and political work and are open to multitudinous readings, apply the theory that gender is socially constructed and performed, and draw upon the concept of “emotional branding.”

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Chapter One: Introductory Matters

In one of the opening stanzas of powerfully emotive narration in NFL Films' first picture, a documentary written and produced by (then) 22-year old Steve Sabol entitled *They Call It Pro Football* (1966), John Facenda, the "voice of God," commands in his rich, oaken baritone, "It starts with a whistle and ends with a gun. 60 minutes of close-in action from kickoff to touchdown. This is pro football, the sport of our time."

In this landmark film, Steve Sabol's use of the five channels of communication: image, written language, voice, music, and sound effects (Metz, 1974) fuse to form a groundbreaking mythic style of filmmaking constructing "the sport of our time" as an iconic and romantic "ballet of brutality." The product of Sabol's "love and admiration for the players and the game," *They Call It Pro Football* is "the *Citizen Kane* of sports films" (Sabol, 2010). According to Sabol, "If you look at *They Call It Pro Football*, everything you see today on ESPN's *SportsCenter*, on Fox; all of the elements can be traced back to this one film." This is NFL Films' seminal film, but how do we get to the point when this film comes to fruition? What made this film so pioneering? How did this film influence televisual constructions of professional football? Furthermore, what ideologies are parts of this film; and what does this film tell us about pro football, social life, and human actions and motivations within the socio-historical context of the 1960s? My answers to

these questions are based on four ideas: the emergence in the twentieth century of pro football and television, the view that televisual texts perform cultural and political work and are open to multitudinous readings, the theory that gender is socially constructed and performed, and the concept of “emotional branding” that involves engaging audiences on the level of the senses and emotions.

I

The National Football League has many memorable moments defining its storied history. Each state, each city, each family, and each fan, all have one, or in many cases, more than one snapshot in time possessing a particular mystique. They know they were by themselves at a hole-in-the-wall in Boston, or with a college buddy at a party in St. Louis, or with their extended family at a home in Atlanta. The moments touch them. They resonate with them. And, they feel the emotion of the pro football event ten, twenty years after their team was bitterly defeated or gloriously victorious. For San Francisco 49ers faithful, “The Catch” is one such event.

Trailing the Dallas Cowboys, 27-21, with 0:58 to play in the NFC Championship game on January 10, 1982, 49ers quarterback Joe Montana had driven his team downfield and positioned them at the Cowboys’ 5-yard line. The next play . . . Sprint Right Option. Montana took the snap from

center and was hurried out of the pocket by three Cowboys, including 6'9" Ed "Too Tall" Jones. Backpedalling and approaching the sidelines with each ginger step, Montana scanned the field for a receiver.

Broadcasting on CBS Radio, the legendary Jack Buck had the call: "Montana lines up at the five . . . and on third-down-and-three he rolls right, looking to throw . . . looking to throw . . . and he throws into the end zone . . . Touchdown! Touchdown! Touchdown, San Francisco, by Dwight Clark!" On CBS Television, the equally renowned Vin Scully described the play: "Montana . . . looking, looking, throwing in the end zone . . . Clark caught it!" (CBS, 1982).

I was a two-year old boy (likely being doted on) in a small town in southeastern Minnesota when this play happened. I didn't hear it live on CBS Radio. I didn't see and hear it live on CBS Television. And, I surely didn't witness the pageantry of the game live in person at Candlestick Park in San Francisco. Frankly, I likely didn't even know the laced ellipsoid situated neatly in my crib was a football. But, I know this play.

"The Catch," as filmed by NFL Films, has been presented to me many, many times in highlight reel after highlight reel on television channels ranging from ESPN to the NFL Network. This repetition plays a factor in why I can envision the play upon its mere mention, but the style in which it has been communicated is why such moments are glorified and romanticized in my

mind. It was this style, the NFL Films style, which first emerged in *They Call It Pro Football* (1966). And, it was this style that impacted how pro football has been communicated to audiences across the United States since the film's release. According to Sabol (2010):

When you look at sports it's sort of two realms. There is the realm of yards and inches and seconds and scores and numbers and then there is the realm of the heart and the soul and the emotion and the passion. The latter realm is what NFL Films brought to the public's attention. In many ways we humanized pro football. We took what people loved about the game – the fierce physical nature of it, the guts it took to play it well, the courage, the athletic grace, and we distilled those images on film and emphasized them with our music and our script and magnified the very things people loved about the game and made the game even larger than life.

While the creative and technical innovations encompassing the NFL Films style brought the nuances and intricacies of pro football to the viewing public in a mode never witnessed before, the advent of television in the American household was the foremost culturally-transformative occurrence that set the table for the originality of NFL Films.

As television found its way into homes, the dynamic of the domestic space in which viewing of the television occurred, as well as the uses of television and the rituals of its reception, were made over. According to Lynn Spigel (2001), "During the period of its early installation after the Second World War, popular literature, intellectuals, and corporate executives spoke of television as both a 'home theater' that brought spectator amusements into the

living room, and as a ‘window on the world’ that would imaginatively transport viewers across the globe” (p. 386). Key to these ideas is mobile privatization, Raymond Williams’ central concept in *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (1975).

In what many scholars consider the founding text of television studies, Williams goes well beyond addressing the content of the medium and examines institutions, technologies, forms and effects. He notes how the most pleasing televised coverage of sport has a very distinct, appealing quality to it, but it is his concept of mobile privatization that explains television’s ascension as a technology and cultural form, and furthermore, helps explain why pro football and television made such amiable partners.

Williams uses mobile privatization to outline the fantasy of bringing the outside world into the private home. For example, definitions of family leisure and recreation began to become more centered on television, a technology that could both communicate and transport, and its viewing space, where a family could gain access to happenings in places from New York to Los Angeles and everywhere in between (Boorstin, 1973). People were vicariously mobile because as a live event was occurring in one part of the country, the event was being broadcast in their living rooms, in yet another part of the country. While they were entrenched in their own domestic space, they were also traveling to a public space through television.

But, what does mobile privatization have to do with pro football? To understand why pro football and television were able to grow so well there are a few questions that must be answered. For instance, how did the domestication/privatization of society, combined with the notion of vicarious mobility through television images, provide the context in which pro football thrived? Also, how does this also explain in part the cultural acceptance of the shift from local to national broadcasts?

II

Any such analysis must begin with the understanding that televisual texts perform cultural and political work and are open to multitudinous readings. While a text is constructed and offers mediated representations of objects and ideas, the meaning of a text varies based on the specific conditions of cultural production, as well as the sociohistorical conditions and reception rituals of those reading the text. Thus, proclaiming a textual representation of an individual or group as incorrect, inaccurate, or (in some cases) inhumane, is an individual critique rather than a final definitive critique (Schiappa, 2008). Because the readings of texts can be multitudinous, the meanings of representations lack stability. To understand different decoding positions, Stuart Hall (1980) offered the following:

- *Dominant-hegemonic reading*: they can identify with the hegemonic position and receive the dominant message of a text in an unquestioning manner.
- *Negotiated reading*: they can negotiate an interpretation from the visual and its dominant readings.
- *Oppositional reading*: finally, they can take an oppositional position, either by completely disagreeing with the ideological position embodied in a visual or rejecting it altogether.

Hall's (1980) influential encoding/decoding model, originating from British Cultural Studies, stressed the audience's ability to actively view, and thus, decode texts. As Edward Schiappa argues, "To know what sort of political and cultural work a popular media is accomplishing requires audience research to ascertain how texts are being read" (2008, p.160). If a critical analyst wants to really understand the meaning an audience gleans from a text it is imperative to communicate with that audience through interviews, surveys, and focus groups. While the art of the individual critique is valuable, incorporating various methodologies into research can explain how texts function, in addition to what the audience does with those texts.

How texts are being "read" does require a critic to delve beyond their own expert reading, but before such steps can be taken an understanding of the culture from which the text emerges is important. According to Douglas Kellner (1995), media culture has become the primary cultural form that shapes our dominant worldviews. Because pro football has become such a vibrant part of media culture it is ripe for its own critique.

Like other texts, pro football is mediated. Subsequently, *They Call It Pro Football* is a mediated text possessing impact and meaning. Pro football is not just presented to audiences, but is rather, re-presented. Furthermore, words are not just words, but narratives. Visuals are not just visuals, but images. According to Jay Coakley (2004):

In other words, a telecast of an American football game is a representation of certain people's ideas about football, social life, human beings, what is important in the world, and what the viewing audience wants to see and hear. Although different people interpret media images and narratives in different ways, many people use mediated sports as reference points as they form, revise, and extend their ideas about sports, social life, and human actions and motivations. (p. 426)

In *Reading Football: How the Popular Press Created an American Spectacle*, Michael Oriard (1993) focuses on the sport from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. In *King Football: Sport and Spectacle in the Golden Age of Radio & Newsreels, Movies & Magazines, The Weekly & The Daily Press* (2001), he attempts to answer the question: "what did football mean to the actual millions who followed it, whether casually or passionately, during this period?" (p. 2). In order to get at the question, Oriard culls information from media texts ranging from *The Saturday Evening Post* to 1930s college football programs. Key to both of Oriard's texts is how he approaches football as a cultural artifact in an effort to explore its most significant role in American life. Just as "football was created as a popular spectacle by the daily newspaper" (1993, p. xviii) at the turn of the century, football was articulated in

its own way by Ed and Steve Sabol and NFL Films in the 1960s. Essentially, NFL Films constructed and promoted pro football in ways that did not resemble previous media presentations of the game.

The re-presentation of pro football in the media landscape has obviously varied in scope since the game's inception, but key questions emerge when specifically analyzing *They Call It Pro Football* (1966). Again, how do we get to the moment when this film comes to fruition, and what is the social and cultural context that led to its emergence? How do the film's creative and technical innovations such as slow-motion imagery, symphonic-contemporary music, melodramatic narration, and complexity editing combine to form a filmic phenomenon where certain ideologies materialize; and what exactly does this film tell us about pro football, social life, and human actions and motivations? Finally, what impact did this film have on future constructions of pro football and how publics would come to understand the sport in the American cultural lexicon?

III

In any type of examination of sport, specifically pro football, an analysis of gender is imperative. In the case of *They Call It Pro Football*, a consideration of its overall impact as it relates to gender is central.

My view is that gender is socially constructed and performed. As Sandra Lipsitz Bem (1993) notes in *Lenses of Gender*, unlike sex, gender is something people articulate and are taught to articulate. Picture the following:

In 1985 I was a five-year old teacher's kid clearly exuding Scandinavian/German heritage and even more clearly, a fan of the Minnesota Vikings. My sister, Elizabeth, was three. For Halloween (you guessed it) I was a football player and she, a cheerleader. Were we forced to wear these costumes? By no means were we forced. I proudly donned Viking purple, strapped my plastic chinstrap, and laced my soon to be game worn cleats. If I remember correctly I wasn't just ready to go trick-or-treating. I was ready to throw for 300 yards and 3 touchdowns over the Packers. In Lambeau. In December. In the snow. For the NFC title.

Earlier I mentioned that my parents, in particular my father, placed a football in my crib at the outset of my time in this world, but they did not force me into football. They were proud to support me in whatever I pursued. So, why was I, like so many other American boys, drawn to football? More broadly, why were 'us boys' drawn to sport?

In his analysis of sport and the problem of masculinity, Michael Messner (1992) explores an understanding of the relationship between the development of masculine identities and the structure of sport as a social institution. His approach to the lives of male athletes is as follows: "First, sport

is not an expression of some biological need; it is a social institution. . .

Second, rather than defining masculinity as some buried biological ‘essence of manhood,’ I maintain that it too is socially constructed, and thus that masculine identity tends to vary historically and cross-culturally” (p. 8). By conducting interviews with thirty male former athletes, Messner was able to delve into how sport was socially constructed for these men. While many factors can be considered as social constructions, the televisual construction of pro football and the male body is particularly salient.

In his study on ABC’s *Monday Night Football*, Nick Trujillo (1995) examines how the male body is constructed over the course of a year’s telecasts. According to Trujillo, all sports contain a certain degree of violence and aggression, but there is not a game in existence as violent as pro football. He states, “In all sports, the body is an instrument of production. But in American football, that instrument is a weapon, and its production is a reproduction of war” (p. 140). In addition, Trujillo notes how violent impacts, often related to inflicting injury, were treated as ceremonial through the use of slow-motion replays and detailed discourse.

Other scholars, including Sabo & Panepinto (1990), have illustrated the “body as weapon” and “contest as warfare” metaphors. When the body is defined as a machine or a tool it is telling because it addresses the body as a tool of destruction rather than a tool of compassion. With this in mind, the

presence of violence is again, paramount. The focus of the self becomes using the body as an instrument – an instrument of alienation where others are seen as object of pleasure subject to manipulation and subordination (Messner, 1992, p. 62). In this rationale, emotions are suppressed and replaced by stoicism and abusive behavior. Sabo and Jansen (1998) conclude, “Sports media valorize the athletes who surmount injury, endure pain, and return to the field of hierarchical endeavor. Ironically, as the athletes’ body is ‘built up’ in order to ‘move up’ the competitive hierarchy, it is increasingly worn down” (p. 209).

In reference to how sports should change, Whitson (1990) sees little use for characterizing sports as battlefronts through the use of military metaphors. He indicates, “Throughout the century, sports have frequently been associated with military training. Instead, I suggest we consider sports glorious improvisations, dialectical play, or collective theatre; although competing athletes are cast as antagonists, they need each other if the discoveries and the pleasures of the contest are to be enjoyed by all” (p. 43). Here, Whitson alludes to the idea of “sport as joyful play.” In her book, *The Rites of Men: Manhood, Politics, and the Culture of Sport* (1999), Varda Burstyn notes the “sport as joyful play” approach that “deplores the attachment of instrumental commercial and political agendas to sport” (p. 134), but ultimately argues that sport and commercialized media culture promote

hypermasculinity. For Burstyn, the idea of “sport as joyful play” is an idealized position that fails to recognize the commercialization and commodification of sport.

It is clear that pro football and its mediated constructions of masculinity are open to intense critique, but where does NFL Films’ *They Call It Pro Football* fit into this equation? What does their expression of pro football and masculinity construct and represent?

IV

In addition to the telling of basic mythic stories about human actions and motivations, *They Call It Pro Football* and its overall impact did a lot more than just tell a few stories. The mythic personification the Sabols gave pro football functioned to brand the game. Little did they know, but they were performing “emotional branding” for their brand, the NFL, by beginning to engage audiences on the level of the senses and emotions.

According to Marc Gobé (2001), emotional branding “focuses on the most compelling aspect of the human character; the desire to transcend material satisfaction, and achieve emotional fulfillment” (p. xv). This is done by building relationships between product and consumer. In the case of NFL Films, this is done by building relationships between product and audience. According to Ben Yagoda, an author of numerous books and a freelance

journalist for publications such as *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and *Rolling Stone*, “It could be argued, in fact, that even more than the live telecasts of the games themselves, the work of NFL Films has shaped America’s sense of what professional football is about” (in MacCambridge, 2005, p. 287). How is such an argument valid? How did NFL Films, the in-house film company of the NFL, serve the NFL and make it a brand that engages audiences on the level of the senses and emotions?

V

The choreographed work of NFL Films in their first documentary, *They Call It Pro Football* (1966), offers a fitting case study in which to examine the construction and promotion of pro football in the 1960s. Using techniques of textual analysis and social/cultural historiography, I investigate the representational dynamics of pro football in this film. In order to explicate the ideological, sociological, historical, and cultural significance of the film before, during, and after its release, I continually come back to the four premises that which are the foundation of this dissertation: the emergence in the twentieth century of pro football and television, the view that televisual texts perform cultural and political work and are open to multitudinous readings, the theory that gender is socially constructed and performed, and the concept of

“emotional branding” that involves engaging audiences on the level of the senses and emotions.

In the chapters that follow, *They Call It Pro Football* is traced through periods of the before, the during, and the after. In Chapter Two, ‘Pairing Pro Football and Television,’ I outline the institutions and forces involved in the early years of the pro football and television union. In order to get to NFL Films’ intervention in pro football on television in the 1960s, I provide a brief history of sports on television and place this history into conversation with the concept of mobile privatization. My historical argument is that pro football’s materialization on television effectively engaged emerging domestic viewing patterns and rituals.

In Chapter Three, ‘Key Figures and Formations of NFL Films,’ I investigate how we get to the point when *They Call It Pro Football* comes to fruition. I also highlight key characters and important events that shaped them and their style. My historical argument is that this film succeeded because of a unique coalescence of social practices, sports economics, and an aesthetic that humanized pro football.

In Chapter Four, ‘Analyzing the Moving Image: NFL Films’ *They Call It Pro Football* (1966),’ I conduct moving image research, a form of textual analysis, on the film. Specifically, I perform Barthian semiotic analysis, a type of analysis that attempts to uncover myths, or cultural meanings, in an effort to

reveal the significance of this groundbreaking documentary. My argument is that this film constructs mythic stories, and thus, produces cultural meanings, about masculinity, militarism, and nation building within the context of post-war mobile privatization.

In Chapter Five, 'Branding Pro Football,' I explore the full extension of these normalized forms and meanings and place them in conversation with sponsored film and consumer culture. My argument is that this film branded pro football, and thus spearheaded the branding of the NFL in the 1960s and ultimately, enabled pro football and television to build a cooperative empire.

Finally, in Chapter Six, 'Conclusion,' I fittingly offer conclusions about NFL Films place as a storyteller and mythmaker, the legacy of this storied American institution, and its cultural value. Additionally, I offer an alternative reading that centers on play, art, and performance. But, ultimately, my argument is that the influence this film has had on the representation of pro football to the television viewing public is unparalleled, and thus, this film functions as a distinct cultural marker.

Chapter Two: Pairing Pro Football and Television

In this chapter, I outline the institutions and forces involved in the early years of the pro football and television union. In order to get to NFL Films' intervention in pro football on television in the 1960s, I provide a brief history of sports on television and place this history into conversation with the concept of mobile privatization. My historical argument is that pro football's materialization on television effectively engaged emerging domestic viewing patterns and rituals. I begin in the late 1930s.

As the director of sports publicity for Columbia University in the late 1930s, Robert Harron had an idea: to televise a college baseball game. He interested William Burke Miller of NBC in doing the broadcast, and on May 17, 1939, several hundred viewers watched the nation's first televised sports event: Princeton's 2-1, 10-inning win over Columbia University. On September 30, 1939, NBC broadcast television's first football game, Fordham vs. Waynesburg College at Randall's Island Stadium in New York ("TV sponsored sport grows," 1964).

A little less than one month later, on October 22, 1939, at the World's Fair in Flushing Meadow, visitors viewed the first broadcast of a pro football game. At the RCA Pavilion, where RCA chief David Sarnoff was showcasing the attraction of television, NBC's W2XBS screened that day's game between the Philadelphia Eagles and the Brooklyn Dodgers of the National Football

League at Ebbets Field. About 500 people at the Fair, as well as the 13,050, who attended the game, saw the Dodgers prove victorious, 23-14. With just two cameras and no lighting, the picture, and thus, the visibility of the game on television, depended on the sunlight available ("Pro football hall of fame," n.d.). If clouds covered the sun, the picture disappeared (Falk, 2005, p. 64).

Granted, when the picture was visible it was grainy, snowy, and any chance of picking out individual players was non-existent, but as Patton (1984) writes, "The day that pro football came to the screen was a first flirtation that would end in a secure marriage and give television its single most popular program and product" (p. 4).

The 1940s were a fairly quiet decade regarding pro football's relationship with television. Granted, baseball became the first major sport to attract advertising revenue to TV in 1946 and 1947, but pro football was not far behind ("TV sponsored sports grows," 1964).

In 1946, his fellow owners appointed de Benneville "Bert" Bell, owner-coach of the Philadelphia Eagles, as NFL Commissioner. At this time, simple financial survival was of paramount concern for the league and its owners. To put this in perspective, consider the fact that the League was being housed in the back room of a suburban bank in Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania not far from Bell's home (Harris, 1986, p. 11). It was a spot where Bell was most comfortable doing league business in his undershirt at any old table. If he

wasn't there he was often on the phone with team owners from his kitchen table. Regardless of these humble material beginnings, it became clear that the aesthetics of football suited television very well: "the ball was large enough to see and the action sufficiently predictable to allow close-ups without distorting the experiential basis of the game" (Chandler, 1988, p. 58). In a reflective piece on football and television in *Life* magazine, writer John Leonard proclaimed, "The difference between baseball and football is the difference between art and war. Since television is a remorseless mirror of our psychic states, football was destined to become our most popular sport" (Leonard, 1969).

By 1948, ABC, CBS, and NBC had established their own networking program schedules. With programming plans being more of a mystery than a strategy due to an inability to track the wants of the viewer, the networks aired a wide array of program genres. One of those genres was sport. Following the template that gave them large market share gains in radio, Gillette, the razor manufacturer, presented *The Gillette Cavalcade of Sports* on NBC (Neal-Lunsford, 1992, p. 58). The popularity of sport, particularly pro wrestling and boxing, developed rapidly and the networks responded accordingly. At one time *The Gillette Cavalcade of Sports* was on two networks in different weekly shows sponsored by General Cigar, and of course, Gillette ("Networks kayo boxing," 1963). Along with tobacco and razors, beer producers and

automobile manufacturers followed suit and gobbled up sponsorships in an effort to appeal to what was considered a primarily male audience.

Interestingly, but not surprisingly, sports on television also provided an immense boost to television set purchasing. NBC director Harry Coyle noted in 1988, "What some people forget is that television got off the ground because of sports. Today, maybe, sports need television to survive, but it was just the opposite when it first started. When we put on the World Series in 1947, heavyweight fights, the Army-Navy football game, the sales of television sets just spurted" (Luciano & Fisher, 1988, p. 254). For television executives this was a win-win situation. Because NBC, CBS, and DuMont all manufactured television sets the increase of sales of sets not only helped that aspect of their companies, but also increased the television audience, and thus, attracted "increased interest from advertisers in the form of stronger advertising commitments to the new medium" (Neals-Lunsford, 1992, p. 64). Whether or not televised sport was the primary impetus behind consumers purchasing television sets is debatable, but it is fact that in 1948 television set sales jumped from 14,000 to 172,000 (Neals-Lunsford, 1992).

By the early 1950s, media discourses, including magazines such as *Better Home and Gardens* and *American Home* "included television as a staple home fixture before most Americans could even receive a television signal, much less consider purchasing the expensive item" (Spigel, 1992, p.

39). Additionally, whereas the tavern was seen as a space of sports spectatorship in the 1940s, “the rise of the home audience in the late 1940s and early 1950s meant that the tavern screen was not a distinct force of spectatorship for long” (McCarthy, 2001, p. 53). While the tavern screen did become significant in the 1980s and 1990s with the advent of the post-war TV tavern (sports bar), the marriage of pro football and television did not materialize until 1950.

Acknowledging the success of boxing on television and in search of greater revenue, the Los Angeles Rams (an NFL team) accepted an offer from The Admiral Television Company to broadcast their home games in the 1950 season. Worried about the impact television might have on attendance and gate receipts, Rams owner, Dan Reeves, drew up a contract “stipulating that any attendance short of a 10 percent increase would be compensated by Admiral” (MacCambridge, 2004, p. 69). At the end of the season, Admiral paid \$307,000 to the Rams to cover the cost of the decline in attendance. The greatest illustration of this problem came when the Rams beat the Chicago Bears in the playoffs. The game, played in Los Angeles, was not broadcast on local television. The attendance? 83,501. The average attendance of all other televised home games? 26,804. Whereas television would become a bastion for pro football, at this point in history it was a substandard partner. The matter convinced NFL Commissioner, Bert Bell, that the medium of

television, and pro football fans newfound relationship with it, needed to be addressed. Rader (1984) explains:

The experience of the Los Angeles Rams convinced Bell of the need for restricting telecasts. In 1949 the Rams drew 205,109 fans to their home games; in 1950, when for the first time the club televised all of its home games, attendance fell to 110,162. In 1951 the Rams again blacked out home games, and attendance promptly doubled. Bell concluded that, when dealing with the new medium, the league had to act as a single economic unit. He rammed through the 1952 owners meeting amendments to the NFL bylaws that made him virtual dictator of the league's television policies. (p. 86)

Little did Bell know, but his "dictatorship" over the league's television policies was not to be kindly met by the United States Justice Department. The Justice Department claimed the new bylaws "constituted a restraint of trade and thereby violated American antitrust laws" (p. 86). Bell and fellow owners took their case to federal court where they spoke of the danger to live attendance at games if unrestricted telecasts were the norm. In a 1953 ruling, Federal District Judge Alan K. Grim upheld the home-game blackouts but did not allow Bell to assume power over the control of telecasts of all member franchises. Bell was more than happy to accept such a ruling.

Whereas television networks flocked to broadcast baseball, college football, and of course, boxing, they weren't sold on pro football. Did the public care about pro football? Were they interested in watching the game on television? If so, were they interested enough for television executives to look upon pro football programming in a favorable light?

To further illustrate the television industry's reluctance to form any sort of bond with pro football, consider that in 1951, the Chicago Bears had an eleven-city network and actually had to *pay* two of the television stations (in St. Louis and Louisville) to carry the games. In the same year the DuMont network televised five games and three years later covered twelve games, as well as the NFL Championship games from 1951-1955 (Rader, 1984, p. 86-7).

In 1956, after seeing DuMont increase the profile of pro football, particularly on sleepy Sunday afternoons, Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) acquired the TV rights to the NFL for a package of less than \$750,000. According to Steve Sabol (2010), pro football on television was a visual mess:

It was all top footage. There were no ground cameras. There were no end zone cameras. The game was only shot from a very wide top angle on the 50-yard line. Players looked like little freeze dried peas with numbers on the back. There was no definition to it. There was no personality.

While the aesthetic of pro football on television left something to be desired, CBS's agreement "provided the lift off" (Rote and Winter, 1969) and changed the landscape of Sunday television.

Prior to the mid-1950s, Sunday afternoons were devoted to intellectual programming that could easily be categorized as highbrow. An article entitled "TV and the 'cultural explosion'" from the January 28, 1963 issue of *Sponsor* (a media industry periodical) claims, "television, in the educated opinion of mass communications experts, including broadcasters, advertising agency

executives, and preceptors, is contributing influentially and immeasurably toward the elevation of American culture” (p. 30). The television industry’s recognition of the value of sport is important, but it is equally important to note that sport didn’t displace programs of “high quality in music, art, and drama” all together because both were seen as ratings stalwarts (p. 32). In other words, the television industry saw great value in both television programs for the sporting types and the “longhairs” (the term the article used to refer to those who take an interest in American cultural endeavors).

Nevertheless, many television executives, including Reuven Frank, president of NBC News, felt Sunday afternoons were their opportunity to make up for the wasteland of programming they produced at other times during the week. This reaction very well might have been the product of the famous “Vast Wasteland” speech from 1961 when FCC head Newton Minnow assailed the television industry for what he considered lackluster and fairly worthless programming and advocated for them to address social issues and provide a public service to audiences.

In relation to Sundays, Frank explained, “God, I used to love the Sunday afternoon ghetto. Now you can’t get in there. They’ve wiped that out. Sports destroyed that” (in Powers, 1984, p. 88). More specifically, pro football “destroyed that,” but it is possible the programming change simply signaled a shift in audience wants.

Pinpointing a moment in time when pro football really became significant to television viewing audiences is debatable, but there is little doubt that the 1958 NFL Championship, played between the Johnny Unitas-led Baltimore Colts and the Frank Gifford-led New York Giants before 64,185 fans at Yankee Stadium proved to be a key moment in establishing the NFL (Morgan, 1997, p. 42). This is when it became clear that this game played with a laced brown ellipsoid in stadiums across America was suited for television. Tied 17-17 at the end of regulation, some thirty million fans watched as Unitas took his team down the field for the winning touchdown. “The 1958 title game, declared Tom Gallery, the director of NBC Sports, ‘gave pro football a tremendous impetus,’ for it had enabled millions to share the excitement of a classic sporting contest. And perhaps even more importantly, the game converted New York’s advertising community into pro football fans” (Rader, 1984, p. 88). Patton (1984) further explains:

Television and pro football, which grew up together, were about to make each other’s fortunes. In a little more than a quarter century, television turned a barely respectable blue-collar game into a major form of entertainment. Watching professional football on television gained a unique status; it became the thing that more Americans’ did together, at the same time, than any other. Football, in turn, helped television realize its mass dramatic appeal. Never did medium and message operate more closely together (p. 4).

Interestingly, Patton indicates, “Football, in turn, helped television realize its dramatic appeal,” rather than “Television, in turn helped football realize its

dramatic appeal.” In her essay, which partly examines the “live” sport on television, Margaret Morse (2003) writes, “The football game on television is received in privacy by an isolated, usually male viewer who must forego the pleasures of the crowd” (p. 47). This is valid, but it discounts the “mass dramatic appeal” binding larger groups of television viewers to a game. When spectacle, in the form of pro football, is brought to the television screen it has a transformative effect on audiences. The idea of spectatorship, thus, changes from not just “live,” but also televised.

In what is regarded as the first important book about television, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, Raymond Williams (1974) took spectator sports on as one of its topics. After noting how radio and television came to fulfill, and elongate, the cultural habit of consume professional spectator sports, Williams writes:

The national and international sporting networks form a social dimension of an increasingly significant kind in urban industrial culture. In all these tendencies, and in their essentially varied effects, television has been a powerful agency of certain trends which were already active in industrial society, rather than a distinctly formative element. At the same time, some of the best television coverage of sport, with its detailed close-ups and its variety of perspectives, has given us a new excitement and immediacy in watching physical action, and even a new visual experience of a distinct kind. (p. 65)

In 1974, when Williams began to conceptualize such thinking in a Miami hotel room, the visual experience of pro football on television was continually evolving, but the popular press, including early radio, newsreels, and

magazines had represented the game to the American public since the late 1890s (Oriard, 1993; Oriard, 2001). Each of these types of media discourse possesses a unique relationship with the game, but what was it about television and pro football's pairing in the 1960s? What were the social and cultural factors that made pro football ripe for television during this time period? One of the keys to understanding this transformation is the concept of mobile privatization.

Like the telegraph, telephone, and radio, television is a distinct cultural product that emerged and excelled because of social and economic conditions. In the 1950s and 1960s, the world became a place of increasing individualization and fragmentation. As populations shifted from "country to city, and from city to suburb," the movements of individuals from private homes to public workplaces became magnified. This was just part of a broader shift toward suburbanization where people became more likely to spend time in the private sphere rather than the public sphere. As populations encountered and grasped television broadcasting and recognized it as a means of being connected with others while having the feeling of mobility while in the private sphere, public sphere activities such as movie viewing lessened in cultural value. The onset of television became a technology "which served an at-once mobile and home-centred way of living" (Williams, 1974, p. 19). Operative in the domesticated and privatized home, television

provided the individual with an opportunity to be mobile, while also enjoying the comfort and isolation of a family home.

In reference to pro football, mobile privatization can be linked to in-home activities on Sunday afternoons (and Monday evenings) in the fall. When television networks brought the viewer, situated neatly in their family room in Indianapolis, Indiana (for example), a game played in Philadelphia between the Eagles and the Washington Redskins, the social processes of public technology was altered. In a *Business Week* article from 1963 entitled “On 50-yard line, 75 miles from game,” it is noted how bus companies and travel agencies ran package trips to TV-equipped motels and hotels for “New York football fans that fled their city because of the league-imposed TV blackout in a 75-mi. radius of all home games” (p. 24). At a Stratford, Connecticut motel, the blackout of Giant home games meant capacity business to the point where TV sets had to be set up in lounges, dining rooms, and cocktail lounges to accommodate guests. The fact that fans drove away from their residences (which were actually closer to the stadiums) to watch their team on television marks an incredible shift in how the American public began to associate pro football with the public technology of television.

Another interesting shift in public sphere activities was especially prominent in 1970, the first year the NFL broadcast Monday night games on ABC. Subsequently, the halftime highlight reels were the first time the work of

NFL Films was seen by the majority of Americans. According to *Sports Illustrated* writer, Robert H. Boyle (1970), “Anytime 35 million people suddenly start spending three hours of a hitherto normal weekday evening watching a pro football game on TV, they are bound to significantly influence mass culture, business trends and possibly the birthrate.” As examples, Boyle points to *Variety* reporting that many theater owners were considering shutting down on Monday nights, that a hospital in Seattle suggested that no babies be born between 7 and 10pm on Monday evenings, and that on a Tuesday morning a grade school teacher in Milwaukee polled his class to find out how many of them watched *Monday Night Football* the evening before: 29 of the 31 students raised their hands.

While the cultural influence of ABC’s *Monday Night Football*, as well as the idea of driving out of a blackout area to situate oneself in front of a motel TV for a pro football game, are both interesting cultural developments from different historical junctures, the idea of situating oneself in the living room in preparation for transport to cities across America for a pro football game, and the shifts in the family dynamic that came about because of it in the 1950s, is of equal, if not greater salience. According to Rader (1984), “In 1956, *TV Guide*, which would soon become the nation’s largest-circulation magazine, began to feature easy-to- make ‘Gridiron Gourmets’ to be eaten from lap-held trays while watching the games” (p. 87). Such shifts often created turmoil in

the domestic space as men often retreated to a Sunday afternoon of pro football where vicarious mobility reigned, while women, who were considered viewers of skiing, bowling, and golfing but who were not considered a part of the pro football viewing audience by the networks and its advertisers until the early 1960s, were seemingly left out of the joys of televisual traveling to Cleveland, Baltimore, or Chicago (“Sponsored sports,” 1963; “TV sports: A magnet for women,” 1963).

Essentially, the early years of televised pro football disrupted the ideal domestic scene of a family joined together by television, the new commodity. In relationship to advertisements for early television sets, Lynn Spigel (1992) writes in *Make Room For TV*, “The illustrations of domestic bliss and consumer prosperity presented a soothing alternative to the tensions of postwar life.” She adds, “In the case of television, these kinds of advertisements almost always showed the product in the center of the family group” (p. 42-43).

When pro football was on television, the ideal of family togetherness that television came to signify was challenged. By 1952, advertisements in the home magazines no longer just depicted the family in a semi-circle around the television set, but rather displayed the joys of watching television alone or in a smaller group (p. 69). What is seen here is that because consumption is at the heart of mobile privatization, tensions of these new domestic roles emerge.

According to Roger Silverstone (1994), “That tension – the tension of dependence and freedom, integration and isolation, which is so powerfully revealed in consumption practices,” must be analyzed (p. 131). With the arrival of pro football on television, tensions over the boys watching the game vs. the family going for a picnic, and eating in front of the TV vs. eating at the table, became very real in homes across America. Family decision-making began to always consider the role of television. Decisions regarding consumption became a vital part of what Silverstone refers to as an “individual household’s moral economy.” How were boundaries between the public and private spheres negotiated? How did television provide the “linking mechanism for a household’s integration into, and separation from, the values and ideas of the public sphere?” A January 5, 1970 article from *Sports Illustrated* entitled “After TV accepted the call Sunday was never the same,” begins by addressing where and how these tensions might emerge:

It has come to be ritual, has it not? Sunday, U.S.A. Church services done and noon dinner, too (mashed potatoes out of a box, but perhaps the gravy is from real sauces of roast beef). The men-folks’ belts go slack, Sunday suit coats are slung across the backs of the dining-room chairs. It is the appointed hour, and there, sleek and ready in the parlor with its glass eye polished extra clear for Sunday, sits the Zenith, the RCA, the Motorola, the Admiral. Yes, it is Sunday, for hear the thunder of drums, the stir of martial music issuing from the glowing innards; and look, the screen is floating full of padded bodies of professional football players. There is anticipation, the breath of violence, the sport of carnival in the parlor ... The National Football League is on the Air! The American Football League in Action! For three, five, maybe even eight hours Sunday is

consumed. Night falls with Unitas, Namath, Kapp, Lamonica ...
and oh how the money rolls in. (Johnson, 1970)

At the heart of the idea of the television set being a product of modern technology for the familial space where tensions merge over the “three, five, maybe eight hours” of Sunday pro football is the ritual view of communication. In the transmission model of communication, a sender sends a message through a channel to a receiver. But, who is the sender? What is the message? What channel is the message being sent through? And, what does the receiver do with the information? To understand the transmission view of communication, “a view that has dominated American thought since the 1920s,” these questions must be answered (Carey, 1988, p. 23). While important, these aren’t the questions that arise from a ritual model. Carey explains:

In a ritual definition, communication is linked to terms such as “sharing,” “participation,” “association,” “fellowship,” and “the possession of a common faith.” This definition exploits the ancient identity and common roots of the terms “commonness,” “communion,” “community,” and “communication.” A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs. (p. 18)

By the mid 1950s, watching pro football on Sunday afternoons was a sacred ceremony consisting of a sharing of common interests, goals, experiences, and views that centered on an infatuation for a particular pro football team. Whereas the transmission model equates communication with product, the

ritual model likens communication with process. With pro football on television, an individual or group's investment in the broadcast has everything to do with the social event it represents. By examining how this communicative act brings people together socially, culturally, and politically, the stakes of pro football on television are better understood, but was it really the case that only men and boys watched pro football?

In an article entitled "Pro football: Does money run the game?" from an October 21, 1969 issue of *Look*, authors Kyle Rote and Jack Winter quote Larry Stapleton, vice president of advertising and sales promotion for Trans World Airlines: "We have found that involvement of the viewer with sports telecasts is much higher than an average evening's TV entertainment. A man watching a football game is a guy who is involved. He isn't reading his paper or talking to other people" (p. 94). Notice how Stapleton does not refer to "a man and woman" or "he and she." Only males watched football, he assures. Based on numerous articles from *Sponsor*, however, women and girls had quite a high viewership when it came to televised sport.

Following findings that the 1960 Winter Olympics showed a higher incidence of women viewers than men, motivational research scholars, advertising executives, and broadcasters began to really recognize that American women did have a fascination with televised sports. The sense at this time was that women were drawn to the well-coordinated, usually

muscular, masculine male prevalent in sports ranging from bowling to wrestling. In other words, the sexuality of the male sporting figure, and its enlarged scope on television, present the “Ideal of the Apollo” which “husbands most likely do not fulfill,” according to Dr. Ernest Dichter, president of the Institute for Motivational Research (“TV sports: a magnet for women,” 1963).

In 1963, researchers indicated, “that even for such traditionally male-oriented entertainments as pro football and outdoor sports shows, women were not far behind men in viewership” (“Sponsored sports: A giant TV industry,” 1963, p. 31). In the same article, Richard Bailey, Sports Network president, said, “The potentiality of sports on television is greater than ever because the entire family is interested in sports. A few years back it was only the man and possibly his son.” Chester Simmons, vice president of Sports Programs, Inc., added, “Sports is gigantic business on television. We’re especially pleased with feminine tune-in on our sports programs. There’s anywhere from 35 to 40% on *Wide World of Sports*. Also, our telecasts of American Football League games deliver almost as large a total audience as the average prime time program; the unduplicated audience is extremely high and the share of audience is climbing” (p. 32). Whereas Gillette and Ford were the top two sponsors of television sporting events in 1963, with outlays of \$11.4 million and \$5.9 million, respectively, based on the evidence there is

little doubt that females were also part of the sports viewing crowd and were to be advertised to accordingly (“TV sponsored sports grows and grows,” 1964).

An increase in the viability of pro football on television for not just males, but females, as well, and the stakes involved with its rise in prominence, was preceded by an earlier event in 1960 when the American Football League (AFL) secured a \$2,125,000 ABC TV contract. In yet another article from *Sponsor*, AFL Commissioner, Joe Foss attributed the ability of the league to stay relevant and profitable during the league’s first season to their television contract. According to Foss, “Television has done a better selling job with this league than anything else could have possibly done. The AFL is well ahead of its timetable of progress in the area of national interest and ABC TV put it there more than any other factor” (“Joe Foss,” 1961, p. 45). As the AFL Commissioner basked in the success his league was finding via its affiliation with ABC TV, the NFL was in a bit of a transition mode. It was about to have a new Commissioner. His name? Pete Rozelle. And, what would be one of Rozelle’s most important decisions? Enlisting Ed and Steve Sabol as cinematographers of the NFL experience.

Summary

In Chapter Two, ‘Pairing Pro Football and Television,’ I provided a historical examination of how pro football and television conjoined with one

another. The Chapter argued that to understand NFL Films, one must first understand the respective histories of pro football and television. I contend that the emergence of pro football as a popular TV pastime emerged in part as a result of changing patterns of private life, and the rise of TV viewing as domestic consumption.

Chapter Three: Key Figures and Formations of NFL Films

In this chapter, I investigate how we get to the point when *They Call It Pro Football* comes to fruition. I also highlight key characters and important events that shaped them and their style. My historical argument is that this film succeeded because of a unique coalescence of social practices, sports economics, and an aesthetic that humanized pro football. I begin with Steve Sabol.

There are many ways to tell the story of Steve Sabol. This is one version:

In 1961, a young man named Steve left Colorado College, where he was majoring in Art History and playing fullback on the football team, and moved home to Philadelphia to try filmmaking for Blair Motion Pictures, his father's new company. Thanks to his superb acumen, diligent work ethic, and ability to construct images and messages, Steve developed into an adept storyteller. After less than four years working with his father, Ed, Steve wrote and produced *They Call It Pro Football* (1966), a documentary that took the trials and tribulations of the game only seen before from a distance in live stadium settings, and displayed them in crisp, majestic detail for viewing on television sets across America. In the world of sports filmmaking, he is an innovator.

That is one version of the story of Steve Sabol. This is another:

In 1961, a young man named Steve left Colorado College, where he was majoring in Art History and playing fullback on the football team, and moved home to Philadelphia to try filmmaking for Blair Motion Pictures, his father's new company. Unknowingly, he possessed just the right background at just the right time. His mother, Audrey, ran an Art Alliance and his father, Ed, a disgruntled overcoat salesman who cherished two things: sports and filming with his 16-millimeter Bell & Howell windup movie camera. While his mother introduced him to the Pop Art movement, his father introduced him to the National Football League. While his mother pointed out how pop artist James Rosenquist adapted the visual language of advertising and pop culture to the context of fine art, his father pointed out how Baltimore Colts running back Lenny Moore used his mind to read the defense and his fleet feet to run by them. Their professions and passions pointed young Steve toward an appreciation for two entities, art and football, typically on opposite ends of the cultural spectrum. With his entrepreneurial father taking care of the business end of things, Steve wrote and produced *They Call It Pro Football* in 1966, just as television became an increasingly intimate fixture in the American household and the idea of watching pro football on television became a ritual. No longer were people relegated to the local, particularly when the television, the new centerpiece in the great American family room, could vicariously take

them to Chicago for an intimate look-in to the Bears/Packers contest from their home in Topeka, Kansas. As a football-focused filmmaker, young Steve could not have come along at a more opportune juncture in media history.

These are both true stories, correct? Yes, they both speak to the success of Steve Sabol, but each in their own nuanced way.

In this chapter I perform a number of tasks. I trace how NFL Films gravitated from a \$3,000 investment and an idea in Ed Sabol's mind into a key reason for why the NFL became associated with a set of emotions reinforcing pro football's prominence in popular culture and everyday life. Along the way, I delve into the building blocks of NFL Films and highlight key characters and important events that shaped the Sabols and their style. While it is true that the grand heroic messages and images the league was built on were the product of Steve Sabol's opportunism and imagination, they were also very much the result of the cultural, family, and idiosyncratic factors that shaped and influenced young Steve in very unique, profound ways.

In order to understand how *They Call It Pro Football* affected pro football on television in the 1960s, it is important to look at two different contexts/stories: personal biographies, and economics and marketing. It is imperative to analyze this film, and NFL Films, as an intersection of these interwoven factors because it allows for a much clearer understanding of the complexity of this film and its affect on pro football on television. Ultimately,

this film humanized pro football and changed the way America watched, and thus connected to, pro football.

Pete Rozelle

While at a summer day camp in the San Gabriel Mountains near his home in Lynwood, California, ten-year old Alvin Ray “Pete” Rozelle had an epiphany. During an assembly with other campers where virtuous ideals were often propagated, one of the counselors said something Rozelle would remember and quote at many junctures of his life. Rozelle recounted, “I still remember it, ‘Character is what you are and reputation is what people think you are, but if your reputation is bad, you might as well have bad character’” (Harris 1986, p. 7). This edict outfitted Rozelle with the groundwork for a public relations career that would last until his retirement as NFL Commissioner in March 1989 (“Pro football hall of fame,” n.d.).

Pete Rozelle, “a born and bred Angeleno,” began as a gofer for the Los Angeles Rams’ public relations department while a student at Compton Junior College. He excelled and continued to work for the Rams until he departed for the University of San Francisco to finish his education. Rozelle was led to USF after meeting Pete Newell, the university’s basketball coach, at a Compton basketball tournament. While at USF, Rozelle served as the part-time athletic news director before graduating in 1950 and taking on the job on

a full-time basis. Because USF was in its glory years in both football and basketball, Rozelle was able to network with many important figures in the sports world, including Tex Schramm, then general manager of the Rams. In 1952, Schramm offered Rozelle the public relations director position of the club, a job he held until 1955.

As public relations director for the Los Angeles Rams, Rozelle transformed fans of Rams football from viewers into consumers. For the Rams fan in Southern California, Rozelle made numerous pieces of merchandise available for purchase, including Rams sweatshirts, Rams seat cushions, Rams footballs, Rams cocktail glasses, etc. (Shecter, 1969). Rather than have Rams fans get excited about the Sunday game just on Sunday, Rozelle wanted Rams football to be integrated into the lives of fans via consumption. While the visibility of a Rams sweatshirt on a fan may not seem that extraordinary, a key term that must be considered here is conspicuous consumption. In his book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (1899), Thorstein Veblen uses the term to describe the lavish spending on goods and services acquired mainly for the purpose of displaying income or wealth. While the products Rozelle was merchandising had a certain financial capital, it is more fitting to refer to the cultural capital they possessed (Bourdieu, 1984). The aesthetic of Rams apparel was not an upscale fashion statement, but positioned those possessing it with a certain

cache that connected them to a successful pro football franchise, thus giving the individual a certain degree of power, or an increase in cultural capital. This capital allowed for visible fan bonding whereas if a Rams fan saw an individual wearing a Rams sweatshirt they just kind of knew that person 'got it' just as much as they did. Along the way, the Rams brand is reinforced. As a public relations director, Rozelle saw the opening for such capital via the Rams brand and capitalized accordingly.

Interestingly, Rozelle resigned from his position with the Rams and moved back to San Francisco to join a public relations firm run by Ken Macker. As Australia prepared for the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, Rozelle, the junior partner, was brought in to turn Australia's bad press around. As with his efforts prior to this point, he succeeded mightily once again (Harris, 1986).

In 1957, at the fairly tender age of thirty, the Rams made him their general manager (Powers, 1984, p. 172-3). Ironically, it was Bert Bell who took a vested interest in bringing Rozelle back to the NFL (Shecter, 1969). In order to do so, Bell actually hired "Joe Kuharich, the USF football coach during Rozelle's tenure there, to work full-time convincing Rozelle to move south and take the GM job" (Harris, 1986, p. 10). After months of courting Rozelle, Bell and Kuharich convinced him to leave San Francisco's Macker Company to lead the Los Angeles Rams, a team whose ownership group and management was on the verge of imploding. As he had done in previous jobs, Rozelle

proved to be a calming leadership force. Little did he know that his skills as a manager and marketer were about to be challenged. On October 11, 1959, while watching his beloved Philadelphia Eagles close out a game against the Pittsburgh Steelers, Bert Bell suffered a fatal heart attack.

The passing of Bell meant not only the loss of one of pro football's great ambassadors, but also meant the NFL needed a new commissioner. Over a ten-day period at the League's 1960 annual meeting in Miami Beach, the issue of the heir to the throne was at the top of the to-do list (Coenen, 2005). Cleveland Browns top man, Paul Brown, refused the job (Patton, 1984, p. 49). Austin Gunsel, the compliant interim commissioner, couldn't get the votes needed (Oriard, 2007, p. 11). Marshall Leahy, the NFL's legal counsel and an attorney for the San Francisco 49ers, didn't exactly endear East coast owners by "insisting that he would move League headquarters from Pennsylvania to San Francisco" if chosen (Harris, 1986, p. 11). After twenty-three ballots and ten days of deadlock, Dan Reeves (Rozelle's boss) and Wellington Mara of the New York Giants met and discussed Rozelle as a candidate for the job. Later that afternoon, Mara and Brown took Rozelle aside and told him he was being considered.

In the meeting that followed, Art Rooney of the Pittsburgh Steelers informed the owners, who were frustrated and tired, that if Mara and Reeves were in support of Rozelle then so was he. With that, votes were cast and

counted, and Rozelle became the new commissioner of the NFL. He was thirty-three years old and about to lead the NFL into a new era. According to Rozelle, “It was the most ludicrous thing I ever heard of, there I was, 33 years old ...” As *New York Times* writer Leonard Shecter (1969) wrote, “It wasn’t ludicrous at all. Rozelle, with the sort of modern cool and athletic good looks that are so admired in the business community, was exactly what football needed as it emerged from the rough and tumble of professional sport into the slick world of business” in the early 1960s.

Pete Rozelle’s initial deed as NFL commissioner entailed a geographical move. As Oriard (2007) writes, “Rozelle’s first official act – moving league offices the short distance from Philadelphia to Rockefeller Center in New York – had both actual and symbolic consequences. Through its alliances with Madison Avenue, Wall Street, and the TV networks in its new neighborhood, the NFL fully escaped its low-rent roots to become a Fifth Avenue sort of operation and the model for every major professional sports organization” (p. 12). While Madison Avenue and Wall Street alliances were vital in building the NFL, the ability to cultivate relationships with TV networks was of paramount importance.

Of the major professional sports in the early 1960s it was the NFL that really paved the way in terms of taking advantage of the opportunities available through network television (Bellamy, 1989; Chandler, 1988; Klatell &

Marcus, 1988). According to Whitson (1998), “Under the leadership of Commissioner Rozelle, the league assumed control of the sale of televised football, and pioneered the idea of a single, nationally televised game. Revenues from the first network contract (with CBS) in 1962 were divided equally among member teams, who were no longer able to telecast their games locally” (p. 64). CBS paid the NFL \$4,650,000 a year, or \$330,000 per franchise (Harris, 1986, p. 15). The reason why this was able to happen was due to two factors. First, due largely in part to Rozelle’s lobbying on Capitol Hill, Congress passed the Sports Broadcasting Act of 1961. This granted team sports leagues an antitrust exemption (Zimbalist, 2006), and furthermore, “exempted the collective selling of ‘sponsored telecasting’ – usually interpreted to mean free-to-air broadcasting” (Syzmanski, 2006, p. 152). Second, Rozelle was able to convince the most powerful owners that the pooling of television rights and revenues would have great long-term benefits (Shecter, 1969). This idea was actually taken from the AFL-ABC contract, in which there was equalized distribution of television revenues to all franchises, as well (Klatell & Marcus, 1988, p. 79).

Along with the Sports Broadcasting Act of 1961, the Green Bay Packers and New York Giants squared off for the 1961 NFL Championship Game in Green Bay, Wisconsin. Behind Paul Hornung’s efforts, the Packers proved victorious, 37-0. As part of his marketing efforts, Rozelle received \$1,500 for

the filming rights from an obscure company. Upon seeing the highlight film on television, an overcoat salesman in Philadelphia decided he could do better (Oriard, 2007, p. 15). The salesman would soon find himself in New York pitching *how* he could do better.

New York, New York

In the early 1960s, clubs such as Toots Shor's, the 21 Club, and Mike Manuche's didn't just serve as after work watering holes, but rather as places where business happened. Athletes, executives, and reporters frequented these spots and made them the type of places where rumors were spread, bids were submitted, and deals were made. This was "an era when chiefs of sports and television met on an informal footing; when everyone who had to do with sports and television socialized together, mixing business and gossip; when, as so many of them will tell you today, 'a deal was a handshake'" (Patton, 1984, p. 78). Patton adds, "In that atmosphere, at Toots and the 21 Club and Mike Manuche's were fought – happily and without complicated rules, as if they were just another sport – the combats among the NFL, the infant AFL, and the networks to shape the televised colossus pro football came to be" (p. 78). Because Pete Rozelle had relocated NFL headquarters to Park Avenue he was one of, if not *the*, major player 'at the table.' In 1961,

Ed Sabol, the overcoat salesman from Philadelphia, and his son, Steve, became new players at the table.

Ed Sabol

While a world-class swimmer (50- and 100-yard freestyle) at The Ohio State University, Ed Sabol was selected for the 1936 United States Olympic Team, but declined the honor and publicly stated that he would not swim in a pool built by Nazi Germany and Adolf Hitler (Ed Sabol). A World War II veteran who took part in both the invasion of Normandy and the Battle of the Bulge, Sabol's background in sports and the military would play a highly significant role in the shaping of his filmmaking (Ross, 2008).

Shortly after the conclusion of his time as an athlete and as a soldier, Sabol married. As a wedding present from his wife's mother, he received a 16-millimeter Bell & Howell windup movie camera. From 1941, the year of his marriage, until his son, Steve, left for Colorado College in the fall of 1960, he filmed his family, particularly Audrey (his wife), Blair (Steve's sister), and Steve continually. As a younger man, Ed had been a vaudeville comedian and appeared on Broadway in an Oscar & Hammerstein musical, but his specific love for film (specifically, filming) seemingly blossomed along with the growth of his family (Sauer, 2006). Ed says, "I shot everything that moved. I have more movies of my wife getting in and out of an automobile than you can

believe.” (NFL Films, Inc.). According to Steve, the head of NFL Films since 1995, his father really did film them *a lot*: “Everything I did as his first and only son, from my first haircut to my first pony ride to my first birthday to my first football game, he filmed. And he got pretty good at it and he filmed more and more of my football games from when I was in fourth grade all the way to when I was a senior in high school” (Steve Sabol – President of NFL Films).

As Sabol’s love for sports and film grew, so did his hatred for the overcoat business (George, 1999). In an interview with ABC’s *60 Minutes* in 2004, Ed told Charlie Rose, “In fact, I used to tell my wife it (going to work) was like going to the dentist every morning” (NFL Films, Inc.). At the age of 48, even though he was making a steady income working for his father-in-law, he quit the overcoat business, took his life savings, and started a film company, Blair Motion Pictures. “I was doing quite well. And it wasn’t the money. It was the fact that I was not happy doing what I was doing, and my hobbies all my life were sports and photography. And I said, ‘If I ever get another job, or go into business, it’s gonna be something that I like, that I wanna get up in the morning and enjoy it’” (NFL Films, Inc.).

Beyond his charismatic personality and his Bell & Howell, Sabol didn’t have a lot to go on and found his first work as a filmmaker to be quite arduous. His first film, *To Catch a Whale*, documented a month in the life of whalers off of Newport, Rhode Island. After getting seasick and never actually seeing a

whale, Sabol did a bit of reevaluating and thought back to the joy he experienced filming his son playing football (Steve Sabol – President of NFL Films). At this time, in 1961, not only was Sabol's career in flux, but also coincidentally, so was professional football's relationship with television.

Sabol and Rozelle: First Encounter

Knowing that Pete Rozelle had accepted \$1,500 for the filming rights to the 1961 game, Ed Sabol decided he would double the bid and approach Rozelle with it. According to Sabol, "I wanted it badly. I had to have it, and wasn't gonna let \$1,000 or \$2,000 stand in the way" (NFL Films, Inc.). After managing to secure a meeting with Rozelle, the two men met over lunch at the 21 Club. After three martinis, Sabol had convinced Rozelle to look past the fact that his company, Blair Motion Pictures (named after his daughter) had very little equipment and didn't have any sort of staff beyond his son who was still enrolled at Colorado College at the time. "When Ed was asked to supply his list of previous football filming experience, he simply wrote: 'Filming my son's grade school and high school football games'" (Ross, 2008). According to Oriard (2007), "Sabol convinced the commissioner by telling him that he would shoot the game with eight cameras instead of four, from ground level as well as high in the stadium, and in slow motion as well as normal speed" (p.

15). Steve explains, “If he could sell overcoats then he could certainly sell his passion for making films” (Sauer 2006).

After securing the rights to film the 1962 NFL Championship during the day, Ed phoned his son in the evening and said, “You know, Steve I can see by your grades that all you have been doing out there is going to movies and playing football. So that makes you uniquely qualified so come home and help” (Steve Sabol – President of NFL Films). Over the course of the next few years, Steve left school to work for his father, “bringing with him an artist’s sensibility and an athlete’s passion for football” (Oriard, 2007, p. 15).

1962 NFL Championship

In a rematch of the 1961 NFL Championship, the Green Bay Packers and New York Giants met once again, although this time in New York. It was the first shoot for Blair Motion Pictures, and December 30, 1962 was one of the coldest days of the year. With 30 mph winds swirling about, coupled with temperatures in the mid-teens in Yankee Stadium, the harsh conditions not only strained bodies, but also nerves. Reflecting on the game in a November 9, 1970 *Time* article, writer Champ Clark indicates, “It was the coldest days since Perry discovered the North Pole, and vast sheets of ice surrounded the playing surface of Yankee stadium.” Steve explains, “We had cameramen with frostbite. And dad was so nervous, he had diarrhea. So he didn’t see much of

the game” (NFL Films, Inc.). At many points both before and during the contest, Ed had reservations as to whether or not he and his crew could pull it off. Ed adds, “The crew started telling me that some of the film was freezing and breaking. I said, ‘My God, there goes the film I promised Pete Rozelle.’ Fortunately, we shot so much film that we were able to scrape together a 27-minute film” (Ross, 2008).

Despite a disastrous showing at Toots Shor’s in which someone tripped the chord catapulting the projector and film into a brief stay amongst a plate of crab meat and shrimp sauce, Rozelle gave the film, entitled *Pro Football’s Longest Day* (1962), high praise, thus paving the way for Sabol to win the rights to film the NFL Championship the following two seasons, in 1963 and 1964 (Posnanski, 2010, February 8). While the wind and cold made filming a treacherous undertaking, it was the aftermath of the game that gave Steve a clear picture of the world he was now a part of documenting:

What I remember about the game in hindsight was it was the first time that I had ever been on the field in an NFL game and in 1962 I was a runner . . . I have gone back to check – there were 17 Hall of Famers on the field for that particular game, which is the most in NFL history. But what I remember most about it was going into the locker room after the game. I had been playing college football and was captain of my team at Colorado College. I was all Rocky Mountain conference and felt that I had a pretty good feeling about what this game of football was like. But, walking into the locker room after that game . . . the first person I saw was Ray Nitschke. His whole face was just caked in dried blood. He looked like Freddie Kruegger from one of those horror movies. Then right next to him was Jim Taylor. He was getting seven or eight stitches in his mouth where he had been hit by

Sam Huff. Seated right next to him taking off his pads was Bart Starr and his whole ribcage just was a ribbon of these big strips of purple and blue welts and bruises. And, at that point I knew that the game I had just witnessed bore very little resemblance to the game I had been playing in college (Steve Sabol – President of NFL Films).

No longer was Steve a player of college football, but rather a documentarian of the pro game. His influence would prove to be extraordinary.

That is one part of the story. What follows is another.

A Young Man Named Steve

In Malcolm Gladwell's 2008 book, *Outliers*, he writes, "It is not the brightest who succeed. Nor is success simply the sum of the decisions and efforts we make on our own behalf. It is, rather, a gift. Outliers are those who have been given opportunities – and have had the strength and presence of mind to seize them" (p. 267). There is little doubt Steve Sabol is a testament to the notion of individual greatness. He worked, he strived, and he persevered. His story is the great American narrative of desire and diligence leading to greatness. But, it is the details and the idiosyncratic factors that shaped Sabol that must be fleshed out for this story to be complete. While a football playing, art history-majoring college student isn't exactly an anomaly; it isn't exactly a commonality, either. But, when your father's two greatest loves are sports and film, and your mother ran the Art Alliance in Philadelphia, the shaping of one of America's greatest filmmakers, Steve Sabol, begins to make

much more sense. Noting the environment he grew up in, Steve explains, “There was this sort of dual creative energy at the Sabol household where my Dad and I were focused on football and then there was this other group sometimes on the weekends that was part of this very new controversial art movement called pop art” (Steve Sabol – President of NFL Films). As one of the first people (Philadelphians, at least) to recognize the art movement called pop art, Audrey Sabol would have pop artists in town for showings at the galleries she managed. According to Sabol (2010):

I had an incredible childhood with a mother who was involved in the Art Alliance. So, as a kid, she would be putting on these shows and she was one of the first people, definitely the first person in Philadelphia that recognized this new trend called pop art. She brought Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, Wayne Thiebaud, Jasper Johns, Albert Alcalay – all these artists she would bring in and they would always have dinner with us the Friday night before the show. So, as a kid, I was exposed to this really revolutionary idea of art and expression and ‘what is art?’ ‘What constitutes art?’ So, right off the bat I had a very open mind.

Conversely, while Steve remembers having arts luminaries stay at his families’ home for days at a time, he also remembers not even having a bar mitzvah “because Hebrew school conflicted with football practice” (Klancnik, 2003).

From the beginning, Ed Sabol conceived of the idea to shoot football games like Hollywood movies, while Steve took that vision and molded the NFL Films style by considering image, sound, narration, editing, and story. As *Sports Illustrated* writer, Joe Posnanski (2010, February 3) notes, “The editing,

the cinematography, the sound, the music, the rhythms – a lot of people are responsible for the NFL Films Style. But the vision comes from Steve.” The particulars of each of these elements did not come full circle immediately.

Steve Sabol (2010) notes:

People think we started our first film in 1962 and that this revolutionary style just happened. It didn't. It took us three years and I think a lot of it was a gestation period in my mind of learning how to edit, learning photography, and coming up with a lot of these ideas, and having my father's support and input in it was very important. And then you get the confidence I had by 1965. That's like 4-wheel drive. Once you get that confidence you switch the car into 4-wheel drive and they you can take off the road and head into uncharted territory. And that's what we did with *They Call It Pro Football*.

While shooting the 1962, 1963, 1964, and 1965 NFL Championship games, Blair Motion Pictures was also showcasing their films – with a projector and a bed sheet. With an NFL player such as Frank Gifford or Del Shofner or Alex Webster accompanying him, Steve would “take our films, put them into the station wagon, and go to a Kiwanis Club, Rotary Convention, or Boy Scout Troop, put up a sheet, and set up the projector” (Sabol, 2010). Interestingly, this is when Sabol first began to analyze his audience:

What I always used to do was stand behind the screen and look at people and their faces while they watched. And I wondered if they would react they way I would react when I did the film. Or, if they would cheer or express surprise. That was how I learned about editing – while sitting and facing the audience and watching their expression as the film played. (Sabol, 2010)

Following this period of filming and barnstorm displaying, Ed Sabol summoned his sales skills once again. In 1965, Sabol's company was still Blair Motion Pictures, but his thinking was the NFL should purchase the company and bring it in-house as a marketing arm of the league (Oriard, 2007; Sauer, 2006). He approached Rozelle and the 14 NFL owners and persuaded them to purchase his company for \$20,000 per club. Compared to CBS TV's \$1.8 million-a-year pact to televise the 1965 and 1966 NFL title games, and their \$28.2 million pact for two-year rights to NFL regular season games, the purchase of Blair Motion Pictures by the league paled in financial comparison ("TV takes over T formation," 1964). The company, consisting of four employees, at this time, was no longer Blair Motion Pictures. It was now NFL Films (Patton, 1984; Steve Sabol – President of NFL Films).

The thing that really sold the owners, and particularly, Rozelle, was the style of movie making the Sabols were doing. They were mythologizing the game and giving it grandeur, but the Sabols hadn't quite yet put all of the elements Steve envisioned into one piece. That is they hadn't until their first full-length film, *They Call It Pro Football* (1966).

***They Call It Pro Football* (1966)**

Moments after viewing *They Call It Pro Football* at its premiere at Walter Reed Theater in New York, Pete Rozelle turned to the youngest Sabol

and said, “Steve, that wasn’t a highlight film, that was a real movie.” The next day Rozelle called Ed and said, “You know, I was thinking, ... after seeing *They Call It Pro Football*, I’d like you and Steve to come up to my office. I’d like to talk to you.” One week later the Sabols walked into Rozelle’s Manhattan office (Domowitch, 2008; Sabol, 2010). Not knowing exactly *why* they were being called to Rozelle’s office, the Sabols were mystified over what might take place. When they arrived, Rozelle handed the Sabols a sheet outlining the Nielsen ratings. Rozelle looked at both men, pointed to the sheet, and said, “Look at this, see what is the most popular sport on TV? It’s baseball. Number two is college football. And here’s the NFL, we’re three.” (Sabol, 2010) As Steve recollects, Rozelle added, “For the NFL to prosper, it has to succeed on television. And in order to succeed on television, it needs a mystique. It needs a certain style. It needs an image. And the film I just saw will give us the mystique I want the game to portray” (Driscoll, 2004). This, according to Steve, was the closest thing to a mission statement he ever received. According to Sabol (2010), “I didn’t understand marketing. There were no focus groups or demographic surveys. For me, it was just my way of expressing my love and admiration for the players and the game.”

The competitiveness, passion, and physicality of pro football were all in the film, and Rozelle “loved the rhythm and romance we added to the imagery of the game in *They Call It Pro Football*” (Sauer, 2006). Steve notes, “My dad

and I thought it was a good film. We weren't that sophisticated to think we were selling or marketing anything and to this day, I still don't believe in that. In fact, like I said, we're filmmakers and we're not marketers but in a way our style of filmmaking helped create an image that helped the league grow" (Steve Sabol – President of NFL Films).

Ed, Steve and their editor-in-chief, Bob Ryan (among others) introduced numerous techniques to the art of sports documentary filmmaking in *They Call It Pro Football*. After three years of Steve being given the room and flexibility to craft the NFL Films style (with Ed's personality protecting them from the inquisitive owners), they had put together a piece that introduced montage editing, super slow motion, the use of wireless microphones on coaches and players, as well as innovative use of narrative and sound (Driscoll, 2004; Oriard, 2007; Sauer, 2006). Sabol (2010) notes:

Our whole idea was to portray football as Hollywood portrayed fiction and that was with a dramatic flair. I also wanted to portray the way I experienced it as a player and that is with the passion, and the sound, and the snot flying and the sweat spraying, and the muscles rippling. Also, there were so many things we wanted to change in the script and in the editing. Prior to this film many of the highlight films were written in a very breezy, kind of cute "Milt Plum takes a peach of a pass to become the apple of Coach George Wilson's eye." Things like that, and I wanted to write a more in a more documentary, more dramatic style using just nouns and verbs, mostly.

Before this film the Sabols were primarily focused on trying to prove themselves to the owners. But, what they had produced was their version of

the pro football game and what happened was that it gave the sport of pro football a mythology. This is when they not only laid the groundwork for becoming “pro football’s troubadour and epic poet,” but also when they put the wheels in motion for the NFL to become a distinct brand in American culture (Oriard, 2007, p. 14). Of the key elements of the NFL Films style, cinematography was of great pertinence.

NFL Films Style: Cinematography

In the 1950s, *Sport* magazine was full of images capturing the gallantry of pro football. After gazing through an issue of the magazine, young Steve would proceed to cut out the full-page color pictures and paste them to the wall (MacCambridge, 2004). For Steve, football was to be thought of seriously and artistically. For him, the grandiosity of a place like Green Bay’s Lambeau Field was a shrine where mortal men transformed into gladiators in search of victory. The significance of this early imagery would later come full circle in NFL Films’ cinematography.

Part of the imagery that NFL Films produces is traced to their use of 16mm Kodak film. Though film costs much more than videotape, the texture of it is much deeper. This is the reason why NFL Films has not shot anything other than film in its company’s history. “We’re storytellers, we’re romanticists. If *Lord of the Rings* had been shot on videotape, it wouldn’t have the same

sense of wonder, of majesty, or magic about it,” says Steve. “We’re historians, we’re storytellers, we’re mythmakers. We’ll always stay on film” (NFL Films, Inc.).

In addition to shooting film, NFL Films shoots *a lot* of film. “Dad always said, ‘Let the film run like water,’” adds Steve (NFL Films, Inc.). When shooting all non-synched sound coverage, they interestingly, always shoot at 32 frames per second (Driscoll, 2004). One of the “rules” of the company is to always have at least one camera shoot the action entirely in slow motion (<32 frames per second), even though it consumes more film and costs more money (NFL Films, Inc.). This move gives this footage a particular graceful, ballet-like quality enveloped in a brutal game. A “ballet of brutality”: a phrase used by many, including the Sabols. Ed notes, “People always marvel at how we were able to predict which plays to shoot in slow-motion because they always looked so spectacular. What they didn’t know is we could never predict the plays. It’s football. So I said shoot everything in slow motion” (George, 1999).

Starting with their very first highlight film of the 1962 NFL Championship, the Sabols used slow motion. Additionally, they invented the shooting of football by what he called “Trees,” “Moles,” and “Weasels.” The Tree was the fixed camera at the 50-yard line. The Mole “had a handheld camera at field level for shooting close-ups of faces, hands, and tight-spiraling

footballs (NFL Films' signature image)," while the Weasel was continually in search of the bizarre in the nether regions of the stadium, including outside with the tailgaters and inside the locker rooms (Oriard, 2007, p. 17).

One of the individuals with NFL Films from the start was cameraman Dan Endy. Endy, a great technician who approached things fairly Conservatively, was often the force that brought Ed and Steve back to earth when they were getting off track (Steve Sabol – President of NFL Films). Today, cinematographers such as Craig Johnson are given full freedom to perform their craft. Klancnik (2003) writes, "For Johnson and his counterparts, typically a soundman, a field-level shooter, and another shooter who patrols the action from press-box level each Sunday afternoon, each game offers a new chance to create their own masterpiece." Johnson adds, "There's no director in your earphones telling you which shot to capture and how they want it done. It's all up to you and your creativity. You've got to know the game to follow the right stories at the right time. You've also got to know where and how to shoot your scene setters – shots like storm clouds gathering, tailgate parties, or stadium fixtures such as the massive pirate ship in Tampa" (Klancnik, 2003). Today, NFL Films employs 10 full-time cameramen and up to 60 independently contracted shooters (Ross, 2008).

NFL Films Style: Sound

As a young boy, Steve was a big fan of the 1960s military drama series, *Victory at Sea*. In *America's Game* (2004), Michael MacCambridge proclaims, "He (Sabol) was transfixed with the gallantry and the gravity of the old black-and-white documentaries, the sonorous tone of the show's narrator, and the bracing martial musical scores that accompanied the combat footage" (p. 282). According to Sabol (2010):

I loved history and I was always fascinated by this documentary, *Victory at Sea*. It was a documentary of the Navy in World War II, but the thing I remember was Richard Rodgers had this lush orchestral score that captures so much of the majesty and the expanse of the ocean and the drama and the teamwork of the sailors. In this documentary a lot of points were made just with music and I thought that would be something we wanted to do with football. You didn't need wall-to-wall script, but rather, music would be able to convey a lot of the emotions that had previously been attempted through script. All told, *Victory at Sea* was always in my mind when we were doing the shows. 'Don't say anything over this. Just let the music play.'

In addition the profound influence his parents and their passions had on him, media discourses such as *Victory at Sea*, as well as *Sport* magazine, significantly influenced Sabols style and approach.

In *They Call It Pro Football*, the Sabols abandoned what they saw as cookie-cutter marching band music in favor of something more contemporary. In an article in *The New York Times* specifically on NFL Films' music, Wise (2005) writes, "Through a recommendation, Steve Sabol found Sam Spence, an American expatriate conducting and composing in Munich. Mr. Spence

was not a football fan, but he was considered versatile and knew how to combine lush symphonic orchestrations with contemporary music.” Hard charging one moment and delicate the next, Spence’s scores worked with the ebb and flow of pro football. “I wanted music that would speak to the passion of the game, and that would also be more contemporary,” Steve said, “Sam took hummable melodies, like British drinking songs, Irish ballads and Israeli music, and updated them.” As a whole, Sam Spence wrote original music recorded in Munich with a 64-piece orchestra from 1966 to 1990. His narrative counterpart, John Facenda, used his baritone voice to captivate audiences for nearly as long as Spence, from 1966 to 1984 (Oriard, 2007, p. 17).

NFL Films Style: Narration

The use of fairly minimal narration was a very conscious choice in the production process of *They Call It Pro Football*. Steve says, “I felt that in order to make our films memorable and different, the script was going to be decreased, which meant that the voice that was used to read the script would be even more important” (Driscoll, 2004). Enter John Facenda, an anchor for CBS affiliate, WCAU, in Philadelphia during the 1960s and 70s (Eye for emotion n.d.). According to Sabol (2010), “I always said that if the Last Supper had an after dinner speaker it would have been John Facenda.”

At a Philadelphia nightclub called the RDA Club, Ed approached John Facenda, now known famously as “The Voice of God,” and said, “We are doing a new film called *They Call It Pro Football* and my son is writing it and we both feel it would be great if you narrated it. Would you be interested in it?” “Yes,” Facenda responded (Steve Sabol – President of NFL Films). Upon showing the script to Facenda, Facenda looked at Steve and said, “These aren’t complete sentences. I’ve never read a script like this with just phrases (“One ton of muscle with a one track mind”). This is almost like Opera” (Sabol, 2010). Sabol replied, “Well, I’m going to take your voice and I’m going to fit it to the picture.” With this in mind, Facenda would write “profundo” (be very dramatic with this) or “libretto” (this should be read lightly) over certain lines. The first words Steve wrote for Facenda? “It starts with a whistle and ends with a gun” (1966). Upon hearing Facenda utter this phrase during the first recording for *They Call It Pro Football*, Ed turned to Steve and winked. “It was one of those eureka moments where you say, ‘Boy, we’re onto something here,’” proclaimed Steve (Sabol, 2010). They knew they had it, which was only further reinforced after Facenda finished the final lines: “60 minutes of close-in action from kickoff to touchdown. This is pro football. The sport of our time” (NFL Films, Inc.).

Summary

Chapter Three bridged from Chapter Two and began to tell the stories of Ed Sabol, Steve Sabol, and Pete Rozelle. The chapter, 'Key Figures and Formations of NFL Films,' provided an account of the key characters and important events that led to the production of *They Call It Pro Football* (1966). I demonstrated that this film succeeded because of a unique coalescence of social practices, sports economics, and an aesthetic that humanized pro football.

Chapter Four: Analyzing the Moving Image: NFL Films' *They Call It Pro Football* (1966)

In this chapter, I conduct moving image research, a form of textual analysis, on *They Call It Pro Football*. Specifically, I perform Barthian semiotic analysis, a type of analysis that attempts to uncover myths, or cultural meanings, in an effort to reveal the significance of this groundbreaking documentary. My argument is that this film constructs mythic stories, and thus, produces cultural meanings, about masculinity, militarism, and nation building within the context of post-war mobile privatization. This film isn't just about pro football; it is rather about a mediated pro football that illustrates mythic themes and elements pertinent to the game itself, social life, and human actions and motivations. I begin with an explanation of semiotics.

Semiotics, the Study of Signs

The visual dimensions of media are often relegated to second-tier status behind written and verbal language. The role of the linguistic message that is present "as title, caption, accompany press article, film dialogue, comic strip balloon" (Barthes, 1977, p. 38) is important because "the text helps to identify purely and simply the elements of the scene and the scene itself; it is a matter of a denoted description of the image (a description which is often incomplete) or, in Hjelmslev's terminology, of an *operation* (as opposed to

connotation)” (p. 39). In the case of *They Call It Pro Football*, the title itself provides a clear denoted description of the text. The title is instructive as it clearly identifies a subject (pro football), but also forces the reader to ask, ‘*who is They?*’ And, ‘*why do They Call It Pro Football?*’ The wording of the title leads the audience, magnifies the potential elements of pro football, and gives the subject a enigmatic quality, but the title is only one element of the meaning-making equation.

While language produces meaning, such is also the case with visuals. Although, the extent of the examination of visuals is at times contentious. Simon Cottle (1998) writes, “Visuals are all too often taken at face-value and simply assumed to ‘reflect’ or ‘mirror’ the events and people captured on film. This naïve realism has failed to interrogate the productive contribution of visuals to the construction of social meaning” (p. 190). While visuals might be often taken for granted, one methodology that specifically engages them is Barthian visual semiotics, a form of visual analysis that enables critics to study press, television, and film visuals in an effort to understand their meanings.

Before digging into Barthian visual semiotics it is important to define a few key terms. First, what is semiotics? According to Paula Freccero (1999), “Semiotics, the study of signs, allows one to treat the elements of a representation – any representation – as a set of signs that signify something to someone, that point beyond themselves to a range of other meanings,

which are in turn partially determined – and limited – by their social context” (p. 5). The set of signs Freccero refers to is multi-faceted. First, denotative meanings are the literal, referential function of a word or visual. A ‘football’ is a category of objects just as a ‘fan’ is a category of objects. Within each category there is a degree of denotative conformity in a given language community. This means a higher percentage of agreement means a more literal understanding. For example, there may be 90% agreement on what an object is or there might be 40% agreement. This is how denotative conformity operates (Schiappa, 2003, pp. 29-32). Conversely, connotative meanings go a step further. Connotative meanings encompass the emotional or other kinds of associative meanings of a visual, or to put it in Roland Barthes’ terminology, “sign” (1967). According to Marcel Danesi (2002), “all mass media texts and genres are grounded in connotation, since they are designed to generate culturally-significant meanings” (p. 36).

For a given group of people, a visual might have a predictable set of connotations. For example, there might be 80% agreement of denotative conformity that a ‘football’ is a ‘football.’ This is because polysemy indicates that objects and texts are open to multitudinous readings, and thus multiple meanings will develop as a result of different groups of people segmented via socio-historical contexts. As a further example, two 12-year old children might look at a picture of a football and be in 100% agreement that the picture of a

football is a football. But, the object might have different connotations. According to Barthes (1973), connotation is a second-order of signification which uses the denotative sign (signifier and signified) as its signifier and attaches to it an additional signified. For instance, one of them might see the football as an escape, or possibly as a ticket to millions, whereas the other might see the football as a means of recreation, or simply something to toss around the backyard at halftime of an NFL game. Their socio-historical contexts dictate such connotations.

If there were shared agreement the two children would be in intersubjective agreement. In other words, two 12-year old children might both see a football as their ticket to millions, but they might also assign other meanings to the football. For such a given group of individuals, this object has connotative predictability, which specifies the object has a predictable set of connotations. But, because 12-year olds come to assign meanings based on different socio-historical contexts, and thus, have differing emotional or associative meanings for an object (or an image of an object), multiple meanings (polysemy) exist.

Further 'Readings'

Influenced by Saussure and originating from British Cultural Studies, the work of Stuart Hall (1980) is of paramount importance to the fields of

communication studies, critical media studies, and cultural studies. Hall applied the concepts of mass communication, which arguably before that had a fairly passive view of the audience, and stressed the active consumer capable of decoding texts, regardless of whether they are written or visual. Rather than view representations as accurate or distorted (old view), Hall emphasized viewing representations as creative and active (new view).

Interestingly, Hall emphasized the role of class to produce readings. As I allude to prior, will 12-year old kids with different socio-economic backgrounds read a visual of a football in the same way? No. One reason for this is that their differing upbringings and accompanying perspectives discourages a common reading of a visual. As mentioned in the Introduction of this project, the readings of a particular visual can be broken down into three categories:

- *Dominant-hegemonic reading*: they can identify with the hegemonic position and receive the dominant message of a text in an unquestioning manner.
- *Negotiated reading*: they can negotiate an interpretation from the visual and its dominant readings.
- *Oppositional reading*: finally, they can take an oppositional position, either by completely disagreeing with the ideological position embodied in a visual or rejecting it altogether.

What needs to be realized is that decoding/encoding is not the primary way to read a visual, but defining meaning through this avenue requires an understanding of the influences of motivation, ability ((education) textual knowledge), and social history (race, class, sex, religion, sexual orientation).

Before delving into negotiated readings and oppositional readings, establishing a dominant reading is of great salience. When looking at a visual, a scholar, regardless of their social history, must ask, “What is the most ‘popular’ reception of a phenomenon?” The answer to this question leads to a hypothesis, which in turn leads to the scholar turning to a method to test said hypothesis.

For a book such as Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), where the historical phenomenon of punk is analyzed, an understanding of the cycle is paramount. In the summer of 1976 there was an authentic moment of resistance that became popularized. Then, the moment undergoes commodification (translating into economic value) or canonization (translating into symbolic value or iconicism). Finally, it is naturalized due to its absorption in culture. From this, the dominant reading has been changed. While Hebdige utilizes semiotics to analyze the nuances of punk style in Britain, similar types of analyses of texts, styles, and phenomena are viable.

Barthian Visual Semiotics

Barthian visual semiotics understands “object-signs” in a sign/signifier/signified relationship (Barthes, 1967). The connotative meanings, referred to as “myths” by Barthes in *Mythologies* (1973), encompass the condensing of everything associated with the object or subject

into a single, distinct whole specific to certain groups. The ideological meanings serve to “legitimate the status quo and the interests of those whose power is in it” (van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 97). While it is presumptive to think that not all ideological meanings serve to “legitimate the status quo” based on Hall’s negotiated coding and oppositional coding, it is important to recognize the validity of the dominant-hegemonic position. There is, indicates Hall (1980), a point of intersection between connotation and ideological meanings:

The level of connotation of the visual sign, of its contextual reference and positioning in different discursive fields of meaning and association, is the point where *already coded* signs intersect with the deep semantic codes of a culture and take on additional, more active ideological dimensions. (p. 133)

Before being able to get at the deeper ideological meanings of visual texts, the reader must understand the connotation procedures part of the visual structure. As Barthes (1977) outlines, there are numerous connotation procedures, including, but not limited to pose, objects, and photogenia.

In examining pose, Barthes indicates there are cultural norms related to human poses that possess meaning. For instance, stereotyped attitudes, a term that is easily interchangeable with cultural norms in this context, might “form ready-made elements of signification (eyes raised heavenwards, hands clasped)” (1977, p. 22). Because attitudes may differ country-to-country, and culture-to-culture, a certain pose may carry a different connotation for a Muslim living in Turkey than the same pose does for an Evangelical living in

the United States. According to Barthes (1973; 1977), Berger (1972), Burgin (1984), and Hall (1980), there is not a universality of meanings to visual images because a researcher can never be certain of how a particular individual may observe a given text, since meaning is created in the interaction between the text and the reader. In thinking about meanings it is important to consider objects, as well:

Special importance must be accorded to what could be called the posing of objects, where the meaning comes from the objects photographed . . . The interest lies in the fact that the objects are accepted inducers of association of ideas (book case = intellectual) or in a more obscure way, veritable symbols (the door to the gas chamber for Chessman's execution with its reference to the funeral gates of ancient mythologies). Such objects constitute excellent elements of signification: on the one hand they are discontinuous and complete in themselves . . . while on the other they refer to clear familiar signifieds. They are thus the elements of a veritable lexicon, stable to a degree which allows them to be readily constituted into syntax. (Barthes, 1977, p. 23)

By understanding that every object, just like a visual sign, pose, or tricking effect, “connotes a quality, situation, value or inference, which is present as an implication or implied meaning, depending on the connotation positioning,” a better understanding of the relationship between denotation and connotation can be gained.

In examining photogenia, a further understanding of how visuals are produced as narrative images is possible. With this connotation procedure, techniques of photography/television and film production are considered.

According to Barthes, “In photogenia the connoted message is the image itself, ‘embellished’ (which is to say in general sublimated) by techniques of lighting, exposure, and printing” (1977, p. 23). For example, if a cameraperson were shooting an individual and were to shoot from a low-angle, the subject would be given more power. Conversely, if a cameraperson were shooting the same individual and were to shoot from a high-angle, the subject would be given less power. Furthermore, the subject would be rendered neutral in power if shot at eye-level (Berger, 1991). Also, when thinking about lighting it is key to understand that it, too, is a signifier. For example, chiaroscuro and flat lighting performed separately with the aforementioned shots would connote additional meanings beyond just a consideration of camera angles and other conventions. While chiaroscuro lends a more mysterious, enigmatic feel to a visual, flat lighting lends a more upbeat, brighter feel to the visual.

“Myth-makers”

According to Barthes (1967; 1973) signs in the second order of signification operate in two distinct ways: as myth-makers and as connotative agents. While a myth refers to ‘cultural meaning,’ “in the connotative order, signs signify values, emotions and attitudes” (Fiske & Hartley, 1992, p. 44).

In relation to the study of signs, I examine signs as myth-makers and as connotative agents in this analysis of *They Call It Pro Football* (196). First, I focus on signs in the second order of signification operating as connotative agents, and examine technical elements such as camera shots, camera angles, depth of field, and lighting, as well as symbolic elements such as color, sound, and mise-en-scène. What do we see, and how do we see it? What do we hear, and how do we hear it? To be able to answer such questions relating to moving image language it is imperative to understand codes, “best understood as the rules which govern the construction of the moving image and thus the way moving image language communicates,” and conventions – “those established practices which have become associated with particular types of moving image product, be they film or television” (Newbold, 1998). Because filmic texts are constructed from codes and conventions, they carry ideological assumptions that are literally structured into the text itself. As Hebdige (1979) notes, there is an “ideological dimension to every signification” (p. 13).

In *Reading Television*, Fiske and Hartley (1978) write, “they (myths) are themselves organized into a coherence that we might call a *mythology* or an ideology” (p. 46). This is how *They Call It Pro Football* reproduces in concrete terms prevailing (ideological) notions about what pro football is, and it is

through this process that pro football produces cultural meanings, and ultimately, a *mythology*.

Interpreting Pro Football

While it was Ed Sabol who imagined professional football as a dramatic story with subplots and mini-dramas, it was his son, Steve, who transformed that vision into the distinctive look and sound of NFL Films. By 1966 the NFL Films style was developed (although still in its infancy) and *They Call It Pro Football* was its showcase. I focus on five key elements of the style: image, written language, voice, music, and sound effects.

First, I examine how images are constructed. In doing so, I pay particularly close attention to slow-motion and tight close-ups. Second, I dissect the film's use of non-diegetic sound (off-screen sound), including the orchestral music of Sam Spence and the narration done by John Facenda, as well as diegetic sound (on-screen sound) such as sound effects and dialogue. Third, I analyze the editing done by Yoshio Kishi, a Japanese film editor. Finally, I probe into the narrative, or story. Because I am analyzing a multi-modal text I scrutinize shots, scenes, or sequences from the film with all of these elements in mind to examine signs as *myth-makers* and as *connotative agents*. I begin my analysis at the start of the 27-minute film and then transition to other segments of the film based on my particular analyses.

To begin, the value of verbal language in defining an image is of paramount importance. Barthes (1977) writes, “At the level of the literal message, the text replies – in a more or less direct, more or less partial manner – to the question: *what is it?*” (p. 39). The presence of a linguistic message invites the viewer to identify in a certain way with a media text rather than through his or her own gaze. Therefore, the denotative function of a linguistic message is that it guides interpretation of an image.

In this documentary, the script, poetically written by Steve Sabol and consisting of mostly nouns and verbs and incomplete sentences (Sabol, 2010), and the delivery of the script, by John Facenda, guide the viewer through the terrain of pro football. In his deep baritone voice, John Facenda presents a certain intensity and conviction. He delivers material with power and with passion, but also with a profound mix of grace and humor to reinforce the dramatic and melodramatic aspects of the sport. According to Mary Ann Doane (1980), the voice, particularly for the child, is “the instrument of demand” even before language. She writes, “In the construction/hallucination of space and the body’s relation to that space, the voice plays a major role” (p. 44). In the case of the male voice of Facenda, “its power resides in the possession of knowledge and in the privileged, unquestioned activity of interpretation” (p. 42).

For Sabol, the decision to use Facenda (as a narrator) was a conscious choice based on how he wanted to produce the film, and thus, construct pro football. His “great oaken, compelling voice,” reminiscent of that of a stern grandfather or an Army General, is the voice of pro football culture (Sabol, 2010). It is from this stylistic element that ideological notions of masculinity, militarism, and nation building begin to seep into the cultural imaginary. In addition to voice, the symphonic-contemporary music of Sam Spence presents a backdrop that greatly influences the cultural meanings of the images in this film.

John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* (1972) notes that “the connotative meaning of a televised painting can be changed by the background music accompanying it” (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p. 45). With this in mind, it becomes clear how Spence’s symphonic-contemporary music is used to create meaning in *They Call It Pro Football*. While the music in the film possesses different ranges and feels, it is surely not the blues, it is surely not country, and it is surely not flamenco. But again, why symphonic-contemporary music? As outlined in Chapter Three, the Richard Rodgers scores of *Victory at Sea* influenced Sabol to a great extent. In addition, the music from Leni Riefenstahl’s *Olympia* (1938), a documentary glorifying the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin were of great influence to Sabol. According to Sabol (2010), “Riefenstahl did *Olympia*. I studied that diving sequence for weeks. I saw how

she edited it, saw the angles she used, and loved what she did with the music.” He adds, “That was the only sports film that ever influenced me in any way.”

After Sabol begins the film with an inductive shot sequence consisting of a medium shot (MS) of the 50-yard line, a MS of a goal post, and a MS of a football being kicked, he transitions to shots of the football in flight interspersed with shots of the yard markers the ball is eclipsing. From here, Sabol dissolves to grainy, black and white shots of college football in the early 1900s. He then follows with a sequence of five shots taken from the POV of a fan entering the coliseum:

- | | |
|---------------|--|
| <i>Shot 1</i> | (a) A close-up of a program for the “World Championship Game AFL vs. NFL”; (b) the camera zooms out and pans right to reveal the man whose hand is holding and selling the program (4 sec). Cut to |
| <i>Shot 2</i> | A medium shot of a man holding a pennant as fans scurry in the middle ground toward the coliseum in the background (1 sec). Cut to |
| <i>Shot 3</i> | A close-up, shot from a low angle, of an usher calling fans in and taking their tickets (2 sec). Cut to |
| <i>Shot 4</i> | A medium shot of the right profile of the program salesman as he works (2 sec). Cut to |
| <i>Shot 5</i> | Beginning in darkness, we walk in (or dolly in) with the camera into the bright light where coaches, players, fans, performers, and others gather (4 sec). (Total: 13 sec). |

This sequential analytical montage functions as a fan’s introduction to pro football from the outside looking in. Along with the visual sequence Sabol uses the literal sounds of the environment to present the pageantry of pro football through the eyes of a fan. While the shots and concurrent sounds flow

sequentially, they also come from very distinct points-of-views (POVs). For example, Sabol give the viewer five-second MS of two businessmen adorned in Redskin headdress, but also give the viewer five-second medium shots of the pumping legs of a marching band member, a 'cowgirl dancer,' and a television cameraman. The montage connotes a feeling of entry into the dramaturgical domain of professional football. Symbolically, the viewer enters when Sabol uses a MS w/dolly in of the dark tunnel leading to the sun-drenched field. He presents it in a manner where the audience is walking out of the depths of darkness and into the light where music, dance, and spectacle are a pleasurable commodity to be consumed as part of a greater community sharing a common bond.

After experiencing the pregame rituals inside the stadium Sabol cuts to a montage of colored balloons floating and white birds (presumably doves) flying skyward. These images are used as a backdrop for the opening credits. The use of the sky in this series of juxtaposed shots further amplifies the drama that has just taken place, and serves as a precursor to the game itself.

From here, the audience begins to hear John Facenda's narration. Accompanying long and medium shots of various highlights, including an opening LS of a kick off, Facenda dictates, "It starts with a whistle and ends with a gun. Sixty minutes of close-in action from kickoff to touchdown. This is pro football, the sport of our time. The men who play it are the best there are .

. . disciplined professionals who perform on a stage 100 yards long.”

Spence’s soaring music is also present. What Sabol is doing here is setting pro football up as an epic and mythic activity played as a means to glory, but Sabol quickly ruptures this ideal by cutting to a sequence of training camp in July. Through the use of reverse chronology, Sabol brings the audience to this aspect of football that underscores the valor of gamedays. To establish an intimacy with the experience of training camp Sabol again uses the source-connected sounds of a player grunting while lifting weights, teammates yelling at one another, and a coach saying, “The screen is like novocaine. You got to wait and let it take effect.” As a whole, this montage connotes the grueling nature of game preparation and the effects training has on the physical bodies of men’s men. It takes the audience away from the glory and sticks them squarely in the beast of a July football practice where sweat drips, bones are broken, and players either make it or get cut. It is here where a warrior ethos emerges.

In the following sequences Sabol composes a series of sectional analytical montages that examine isolated moments from POVs of each of the football positions (quarterback, running back, linebacker, etc.). According to Sabol (2010):

The editing in this film was so very crucial. Prior to this film plays were always shown from the snap of the ball to the completion of the play whether they scored a touchdown or were tackled. I thought that you didn’t need to show the whole play, but could

rather just show the core of the play. You could just show a running back after he got the ball, show some of his moves, and then cut to another shot. You didn't have to show the complete play. This was the element called montage editing.

It is in these montages where Sabol writes poetically of the virtues of each position and Spence uses music to accentuate the qualities being spoken of by Facenda. For example, Sabol opens with a montage of the quarterback. Facenda says, "Eleven trained men face to face on the field of play, but one man stands above the rest." He adds, "He plots, directs, and executes the on field fortunes of his team" while being accompanied by music that has a very mysterious, dark feel. Facenda continues, "The quarterback lives in a world of pressure. How well he lives with it and reacts to it determines how good he is. He must have a cool disregard for danger and the courage to take punishment." What Sabol is beginning to make explicit are the leadership qualities that are key to being a quarterback. In referencing specific quarterbacks, Facenda dictates, "Unitas, a fierce competitor with a flair for surprises" and "Bart Starr . . . a careful field general." According to Sabol (2010), "It was the first time we instructed our cameramen to stay on the quarterback after he threw the ball because I didn't think people realized the punishment these guys took, but if we had a cameraman stay on him that would give you a whole insight into what it is like to play this position." While Sabol does use slow-motion during the montage of the quarterback, it is most prevalent, and telling, in the following montage of the running back.

To capture the fluid movements of Chicago Bears running back, Gale Sayers, Sabol uses slow-motion for nearly every shot of Sayers, including high camera shots and field level shots. In one such shot, taken from a field level, the camera follows Sayers as he moves from screen right to screen left and then vanishes. In the process, Sayers is planting and cutting left and right among blockers and defenders. If shot at normal speed the audience would not be able to capture all of the detail of the magnificent run, but because it is communicated in slow-motion the viewer is able to process and appreciate the grace and power of Sayers. This connotes a certain mythic quality because to understand the man's greatness the viewer needs to have technical elements skewed. The audience is given the sense that football time must be slowed down because real time simply does not do justice to the athletic beauty of the moving image. As the viewer sees the slow-motion shots of Sayers he or she hears Facenda declaring, "Gale Sayers, the halfback, the whirlwind runner that comes along once in a generation . . . a phantom flyer." The music? Jazz played at a very quick, yet fluid pace. This is an interesting juxtaposition because while the images are slowed down the music is sped up. Such juxtaposition is classified as an idea-associative collision montage because the type of sound is contradictory in meaning and feeling to the on-screen image.

Of the sectional analytical montages of each of the football positions, the one that connotes the raw, animalistic dimension of the game is the montage focusing on the linebackers. Facenda calls them “the search and destroy men of the defense” as we see moving images of linebackers shedding blocks and sacking quarterbacks. In an interesting twist, Sabol uses a form of narration that directly addresses the players on screen to act. This is the only point in the film in which he does this, but it is important because it invites us to ‘coach’ or ‘direct.’ At real speed we see a LS of #50 for the San Francisco 49ers preparing for a play. Facenda directs, “#50 search and destroy!” With this, #50 moves to his right, fills a gap, and delivers a violent blow to the running back. In the next shot, a MS, also at real speed, we see #58 for the Minnesota Vikings preparing for a play. Upon the snap of the football, Facenda directs, “#58 search and destroy!” With this, #58 shoots through the offensive line unimpeded and downs the quarterback in a flurry. This sequence of shots connotes the weapon likeness of football players, particularly linebackers whose job it is to “search and destroy.”

The analogies to football players as military personnel, weapons, animals, and machines are highly pervasive in *They Call It Pro Football*. Of particular salience is the sequence of shots succeeding the “search and destroy” sequence. Facenda announces, “This is the face of the tiger,” while CUs of linebackers breathing, cringing, and scowling are cut from one to the

other. The following extract is a sequence of five shots taken from the POV of a teammate on the sidelines:

- | | |
|---------------|---|
| <i>Shot 1</i> | A close-up, shot from a side angle, of a linebacker (3 sec).
Cut to |
| <i>Shot 2</i> | A close-up, shot from a side angle, of a linebacker (2 sec).
Cut to |
| <i>Shot 3</i> | An extreme close-up shot w/ directional panning, shot from a side angle and from below eye level, of a linebacker (3 sec). Cut to |
| <i>Shot 4</i> | A close-up shot w/ zoom in, shot from below eye level, of a linebacker (2 sec). (Total: 10 sec). |

The camera distance from the subjects forces the viewer to have a somewhat uncomfortable intimacy with these defensive players. They are literally ‘in the face’ of the viewer. Additionally, a few of the shots are from a low angle, further heightening the strength and superiority of the respective player. This amplifies how Sabol wants the viewers to see them as heroic warriors ready for battle. Following the CUs, Sabol presents a series of super slow-motion shots showing linebackers pummeling and intimidating ball carriers while we hear Facenda declaring, “and this is the action of the tiger.” Throughout these sequences Spence’s music possesses a certain urgency and danger, thus classifying the montage as an idea-associative comparison montage because sounds are chosen in congruence with the moving images. When all of the signs are considered together they connote the animalistic quality and sheer brutality of the game. To close the montages on linebackers, Sabol juxtaposes images of them making plays with the following narrative: “The

linebackers provide the defense with enormous flexibility. They can charge the line into the enemy backfield or slide laterally against plays to the outside.” This inclusion further amplifies the linebackers as tacticians. This connotes militarism yet again.

While sound is used to accentuate the events on screen, the use of sound to punctuate collisions is also prevalent. In the sectional analytical montage of the wide receiver, Facenda dictates, “They have the hands, the moves, the grace, and a willing disregard for the consequences!” Following this lead-in the audience sees slow-motion shots of a player being upended and landing on his head, of a player running into the goalpost and falling limply to the turf, and of a player being hit in mid-air and once again, landing on his head. While the audience does not hear the diegetic sounds of the play he or she does hear Spence’s music dictating a frenetic flow. Upon each collision, a horn blares, further accentuating the violent nature of the encounter.

Interestingly, following this sequence Sabol cuts to a shot of a Green Bay Packers player being hit at the feet while he crosses the end zone. Rather than just show the collision, Sabol shows the play in its entirety and continues with the shot while other Packers players vehemently protest the perceived late hit on their player. Here, Sabol uses the diegetic sounds so we can hear the force of the tackle, hear players yelling at one another, and hear the crowd roaring. Sabol does this to sum up the previous montages on the

linebacker and the wide receiver, and to illustrate how it plays out in real speed with real sound. After the series of slow-motion shots this transition into a stadium environment free of non-diegetic sound has a high degree of intensity. It's as if Sabol is saying, "Buckle up. We're going live," to us. This structure of this shot also serves as a precursor to the final chapter of the film.

In the final sequences of the film Sabol takes us to field level to hear players and coaches chatting, to hear the whistle blow, and to hear the crack of the pads. Sabol (2010) notes, "We were the first ones to have a camera on the bench. And, this was the first film that ever had a coach (Joe Kuharich) mic'd for sound." The positioning of these field level sequences is such because Sabol has introduced the audience to the ins and outs of the game and now wants to accentuate the human communication of the game through a sectional analytical montage. In one shot, teammates detail strategy for a particular situation while in another shot a coach gives directions to a player. These are some of the most remarkable shots of the film because they capture what is happening on field, including moments of humor and despair. To put this in historical context, audiences had never seen such a thing before. They were accustomed to high camera shots and limited audio on network television. Seeing and hearing *They Call It Pro Football* created a much different set of connotations of the game. It was like an invitation onto the

field. Seeing and hearing *They Call It Pro Football* gave the game of pro football a mythology.

In the final bit of narration in *They Call It Pro Football*, Facenda commands, “A call. The ball is snapped and the play continues. Drama of man on man and a race against the clock. It’s precision. Persistence. Power. The unleashed speed of the kickoff. The whistling feet of a great runner. The reckless fury of a goal-line stand. The crowning glory of a winning touchdown. The swelling roar of the crowd. It’s called pro football.” Three seconds after the final line, a non-diegetic sound, a gunshot, is heard. While this narration takes place the viewer sees numerous slow-motion CUs of bodies in motion, which further mythologize the power and struggle of the sport. After the sound of the gun, the audience sees images of coaches shaking hands, the crowd storming the field, and owners rejoicing. Over this entire sequence is music that has a gladiator-like, climactic quality. In other words, while the opening montage and its music introduce us to the game, the closing montage and its music present the viewer with a sense of finality and satisfaction.

According to Oriard (2007), “The artistry of NFL Films has done more: in an era of debunking, it has not just sustained but increased football’s cultural power” (p. 18). Through their filmic style and its emphasis on slow-motion, tight close-ups, symphonic-contemporary music, collisions, poetic narration, and montages, NFL Films’ *They Call It Pro Football* (1966)

constructed football as a larger than life, mythic phenomenon. As Sabol (2010) notes, “The way we wrote about it, the way we shot it, and the music; we saw the game in dramaturgical terms as opposed to a winner and a loser.”

Summary

The focal point of Chapter Four was *They Call It Pro Football*. The chapter, ‘Analyzing the Moving Image: NFL Films’ *They Call It Pro Football* (1966),’ argued that this film constructs mythic stories, and thus, produces cultural meanings, about masculinity, militarism, and nation building within the context of post-war mobile privatization.

Chapter Five: Branding Pro Football

They Call It Pro Football (1966) is a sponsored film commissioned with a minimal amount of corporate direction. When Steve began this film, he was 22 years old. He was a young man exposed to two very different things: art and football. In producing *They Call It Pro Football*, Steve drew from both cultural influences and ultimately set the table for the representational dynamics of pro football on television. In a *Sports Illustrated* article entitled “How NFL Films transformed football,” sports writer Joe Posnanski (2010, February 3) writes, “There are a million beautiful things about NFL Films – its history, its writing, its voices, its music, the way Films changed the landscape of storytelling in and out of sports. But if I could sum up the thing that made NFL Films different and such a special part of my life as a sports fan, it would be, simply, the humanity of it.”

When Steve worked on this film, he didn’t think about the fact he was branding pro football by identifying and distinguishing it in a way that would differentiate it from other sports. Instead, he had a vision. An idea. He viewed pro football in artistic terms. From this view he communicated pro football to the television viewing public. His vision was not simple, but rather a rich and complex vision produced from, and for, a corporate world. His vision was the product of a particular kind of technological and corporate organization based on sponsored film’s importance as a means of branding a

particular product. In this case, the rituals of regularized television provided the context for the branding of pro football.

In this Chapter, I make a number of claims, including:

- NFL Films' work is an artistic assembly produced to promote a corporation, the NFL.
- NFL Films, a producer of sponsored films, performs emotional branding for their brand, the NFL, by engaging audiences on the level of the senses and emotions.
- *They Call It Pro Football* (1966) is the text that spearheaded the branding of the NFL, and thus, enabled pro football and television to build a cooperative empire.

The NFL, A Corporation

The ambitions of a corporation can be diverse, but the primary motivation of nearly all corporations is to make a profit. Corporations do not throw their cards in the business world aspiring to go bankrupt, but rather to fill their pockets with cash. For a corporation to be recognized as an asset by the consuming public they need a message. And, they need an image.

In *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business* (2001), historian Roland Marchand traces the development of institutional advertising and spin

doctoring in twentieth century America. As factions of the public began to question the degree of power and corruption among emerging big businesses, corporations began to realize their relationships with the purchasers of their products and services was contentious at best. Words such as 'trust,' 'faith,' and 'confidence' were not a part of the American public's vocabulary when thinking about the legitimacy of the American corporation. Already experiencing the perils of industrial strife, some viewed the newly amassed power of big business giants as a threat to their way of life, while others called for greater state regulation of big business. To counteract public distrust and dismay, companies explored an array of tactics in their "quest for consumer favor and moral legitimacy" (p. 7).

In his book, Marchand performs case studies on a number of corporations, including, but not limited to, General Electric, General Motors, and Metropolitan Life Insurance. In one of his early chapters, Marchand probes AT&T, a company that is credited with "the first, most persistent, and most celebrated of the large-scale institutional advertising campaigns of the early twentieth century" (p. 48). Realizing the importance of image, and how "its image could affect its long-term welfare," AT&T began a campaign of coordinated institutional advertising and public relations in 1908. As early as 1909, the public relations campaign was no longer just an experiment, but rather, a company policy.

Via numerous arrays of representations, AT&T established itself as a model for corporate image building. According to Marchand, “Adopting such motifs as investment democracy, corporate neighborliness, the company as employee, or power as service, a number of major corporations accorded AT&T the flattery of imitation” by the early 1920s (p. 80). AT&T had commenced corporate image building. Its public relations program became dedicated to reaching audiences through a number of channels, including newspapers, books, magazines, radio, and film.

Through these channels, AT&T’s institutional advertising was aimed at ridding the company of its designation as a “soulless giant.” By 1937, AT&T PR executive Norton Long concluded AT&T had in fact gained a soul “by clothing itself in “the radiant raiment of a ... service ideology”” (p. 87). Along with “gaining a soul,” AT&T successfully established a corporate identity. As Marchand puts it, AT&T became “the vision of a loved monopoly” (p. 48). In the decades and decades to follow, other corporations such as Coca-Cola, McDonald’s, Harley-Davidson, and Nike have successfully established their own corporate identities (Dowling, 2001, p. 162). While product/service quality and corporate behavior were integral in establishing these companies, public relations and advertising were key to their corporate image formation processes and their subsequent ascents in the business world. Another

corporation interested in identity, image, and performance is, of course, the NFL.

The NFL consists of 32 franchises spread across the United States (NFL.com). While some might consider these franchises 'just football teams,' such is not the case as all franchises are incorporated. Thus, the NFL and its franchises are businesses and corporations. For example, Daniel M. Snyder is the Principal Owner and Chairman of Pro-football, Inc., doing business as The Washington Redskins (Pro-football, Inc.). To cite another example, Zygi Wilf is the Principal Owner and Chairman of Minnesota Vikings Football Club, Inc., doing business as The Minnesota Vikings (Minnesota Vikings Football Club, Inc.). Such corporate arrangements are similar with all NFL franchises. Like AT&T or any other major corporation, NFL franchises are conscious of messages and images communicated to the general public and the potential influence they might have on their individual franchise, as well as the NFL as a whole. This is why the NFL partners with The United Way. This is why the NFL has an Executive Vice President of Communications and Public Affairs. This is why the NFL bestows a Man of the Year award. And in specific relation to this study, this is why the NFL became a maker of sponsored films, and why NFL Films' work is an artistic assembly produced to promote a corporation, the NFL.

NFL Films, A Producer of Sponsored Films

“Many potential sponsors are unaware of what film can achieve and many established sponsors know little of film production techniques. Some seem to believe that films grow on trees!”
(Burder, 1973, foreword)

Sponsored film, institutional film, industrial film, public relations film – a film might be given any or all of these designations. Or, it might be given all of these designations. Why is this the case? Because while each of these terms is different, there is great overlap between them to the point where they are legitimately interchangeable. Irregardless, “By 1940 the sponsored motion picture had arrived as a medium of business leadership” (Bird, 1999, p. 145).

It is easy enough to say that a sponsored film is a film sponsored by a person or group or corporation, but that is far too simplistic. As Klein notes, “When we examine the *uses* of films, sponsored films fit very few categories: public relations, image, publicity, sales promotion, public service, information and education are the words most often heard” (p. 2). While sponsored films fit very few categories in terms of uses, they most assuredly possess different aims, take varied approaches, and target select audiences. For example, while the National Tuberculosis Associated sponsored film, *Goodbye, Mr. Germ* (Ulmer, 1940) is an antituberculosis film targeted at children that drives home its message with live action and animation (Prelinger, 2006, p. 40), the General Electric Co. sponsored film, *A is for Atom* (Ubano, 1953) is a science film aimed at the general public that positions atomic energy as both a

peaceful and warlike force (Prelinger, 2006, p. 1). Of course, these are just two of the estimated 300,000 institutional and industrial films that have been produced throughout the history of motion pictures, but they provide a glimpse of the genre and its variance.

In *The Field Guide to Sponsored Films* (2006), film archivist Rick Prelinger “names 452 of the most significant or influential examples produced during the first century of film” (p. x). Before his short entries on films ranging from *Heads Up Baseball* (Moriarty, 1937), a motion picture produced by the American League to promote interest in the game (Prelinger, 2006, p. 41), to *Highway By the Sea* (Bobker, 1953), a Ford Motor Co. travelogue documenting a journey on U.S. Highway 101 from Tijuana, Mexico, to Puget Sound, Washington (Prelinger, 2006, p. 43), Prelinger presents a summary of the sponsored film genre:

Though definitions of industrial and institutional film have been debated since as early as the 1920s, the more practical approach is to look for shared criteria. Sponsorship heads the list. Sponsorship is the common thread that links films funded by for-profit and nonprofit entities, and it runs through both works made for internal viewing (such as training films) and titles targeting customers, business partners, and the public. Sponsorship also implies the packaging of information from a particular corporate or institutional perspective. Finally, sponsorship denotes direct institutional support, generally through funding, though occasionally through donated services or nonfinancial assistance. Sponsored films encompass advertisements, public service announcements, special event productions, cartoons, newsreels and documentaries, training films, organizational profiles, corporate reports, works showcasing manufacturing processes and products, and of

course, polemics made to win over audience to the funders' point of view. (p. vi)

Based on this encapsulation, *They Call It Pro Football* is a sponsored film.

Why? First, *They Call It Pro Football* (and the many films to follow) was funded by a for-profit entity, the NFL, and targeted “customers, business partners, and the public.” Second, while Pete Rozelle and the NFL gave Ed and Steve Sabol an unprecedented degree of creative freedom in producing the film, it was ultimately in the Sabols best interest to poignantly package pro football poignantly. Rozelle saw NFL Films from a marketing standpoint, and as noted in Chapter Three, after viewing *They Call It Pro Football*, Rozelle met with the Sabols and proclaimed, “For the NFL to prosper, it has to succeed on television. And in order to succeed on television, it needs a mystique. It needs a certain style. It needs an image. And the film I just saw will help us create that image” (Driscoll, 2004). Third, the NFL gave NFL Films (then Blair Motion Pictures) funding to produce the film. And, finally, this film was a documentary, which seats it under the umbrella of sponsored film. According to Nichols (1991), “The status of documentary film as *evidence from* the world legitimates its usage as a source of knowledge” (p. ix). The status of *They Call It Pro Football* as *evidence from* the world of pro football legitimates its own “usage as a source of knowledge” about the many particulars of the game.

A compelling aspect of *They Call It Pro Football* was how the Sabols (particularly, Steve) were able to develop their distinct artistic vision and storytelling style. To be able to do this unimpeded from those in positions of power in the NFL, most notably Pete Rozelle, makes the production of the film all the more intriguing. This was a fortunate situation because Steve was really given room to mature as a filmmaker as Ed, the natural salesman, kept Rozelle and the NFL owners, “a famously conservative bunch,” at bay (Posnanski, 2010, February 3).

As mentioned at the outset of this Chapter, their vision and style were the product of a particular kind of technological and corporate organization, based on sponsored film’s importance as a means of branding a particular product. Ultimately, NFL Films, a producer of sponsored films, performs emotional branding for their brand, the NFL, by engaging audiences on the level of the senses and emotions.

Consumer Culture and Sport

Before delving into a discussion of branding and NFL Films, outlining consumer culture and sport, particularly as it pertains to consumption and everyday life, is a key stepping stone. First, what exactly is consumer culture? The answer to this question must begin with Leo Lowenthal’s Frankfurt School colleagues, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer. For these critical

theorists, the 20th century and its development led to an increased commodification of culture. Culture became something that was for sale. Culture became something that society turned to as a diversion. And, most importantly, culture and the commodification of it became situated squarely in the teeth of the capitalist marketplace.

As Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) wrote, “Entertainment is the prolongation of work under late capitalism. It is sought by those who want to escape the mechanized labor process so that they can cope with it again” (p. 109). This powerful (and still influential) critique of the “culture industry” allows for a further conceptualization of needs, wants, and power. One of their most profound arguments was that “wants” were turned into “needs.” Subsequently, “desires” were turned into “essentials,” suggesting a shift from the “authentic” to the “inauthentic.” In describing the nature of consumption, Adorno and Horkheimer stated, “The products of the culture industry are such that they can be alertly consumed even in a state of distraction. But each one is a model of the gigantic economic machinery, which, from the first, keeps everyone on their toes, both at work and in the leisure time which resembles it” (p. 100). While the work of the Frankfurt School ushered in a discussion of consumer culture, numerous scholars have further outlined consumer culture’s relevance to everyday life both prior to and after the Frankfurt School.

A discussion of the elements of consumer and commodity is incomplete without being mindful of the work of Karl Marx. While modernism and postmodernism have seen societies accommodate new cultural forms and symbolic acts, Marx considered consumption to be a much more basic endeavor. He considered eating, drinking, and reproduction to be the primary modes. Paterson (2006) writes, "For Marx, the consumption of commodities was understood more in terms of a development of 'commodity production', and therefore (he) ties consumption explicitly into a dialectical relation with production. While consumption was not understood in the modern sense, he did notice the ever-spiraling growth of new commodities being sold and consumed" (p. 15). Integral to all of this is Marx's work on the use value and exchange value of commodities.

In thinking about the two values, use value refers to the cost of raw materials and manufacturing while exchange value refers to the cost of the object. In Marx's analysis in *Capital* (1867), he sees the point of contention being that the exchange value is prescribed through social means and is therefore inaccurate in comparison to its use value. The differential is the profit, or surplus value. With this information, Marx's theory of the fetishism of commodities can be considered. For Marx, the economy in itself involves a layer of representation. There is something going on in how the market economy seems to function all by itself, but what is *really* going on? What are

the implications of this abstraction? By focusing on exchange value opposed to use value, a greater understanding of how goods are exchanged can be obtained. Because commodities, and their real value, are the labor power that goes into it, once the commodity becomes exchanged the labor power isn't evident. Instead, values are exchanged. The problem is surplus and the alienation of the worker. The issue at hand is that labor has no control, no worth, and therefore becomes separate from the commodity. The real meaning of the commodity is emptied, but a space emerges for advertising to produce use value. Whereas meaning is applied to a commodity from the energy put into it by the producer and from the use value the commodity has, whether as a symbol or as a means of utility, meaning is also applied to a commodity from the advertising that places a fetishized value on the commodity. In *The Codes of Advertising*, Sut Jhally (1990) notes:

The fetishism of commodities consists in the first place of emptying them of meaning, of hiding the real social relations objectified in them through human labour, to make it possible for the imaginary/symbolical social relations to be injected into the construction of meaning at a secondary level. Production empties. Advertising fills. The real is hidden by the imaginary. (p. 51).

The important idea to recognize here is that if people knew the objectification of human activity that goes into the production of a certain commodity their interaction with said commodity might be affected.

While Marx's work, as well as that of Adorno and Horkheimer, is enlightening as it forces us to think about consumer culture from points of both production and reception, how can we really make sense of the needs of society? Do all individuals have the same needs? Does that not assume homogeneity of the population? If so, are we not assuming that people are passive consumers and can appropriately be referred to as cultural dupes? One scholar who has criticized Marx's work is Jean Baudrillard (1988), who sees commodities given meaning through the operation of a symbolic code or logic of signs. In *Consumer Culture*, Lury (1996) writes at length on Baudrillard's criticism of Marx:

Baudrillard argues that Marx developed his analysis of the commodity and commodity fetishism in relation to a now long-disappeared stage in the development of capitalism. According to Baudrillard, we now live in a society in which the logic of production is no longer paramount; instead the logic of signification is all-important. This latest stage in the development of capitalism is not just an extension of earlier stages, but represents a radical rupture with them, and thus requires new analytical concepts. We have moved, Baudrillard asserts, from a phase in the development of capitalism where the commodity-form was dominant to where the sign-form prevails. Consumption, then, must not be understood in relation to use-values, as material utility, but primarily in relation to *sign-values*, as *signification*. (p. 69)

The important idea to recognize here is a shift from a focus on production to a focus on signification. Thus, the sign-form of cultural items and images becomes vital.

The work of Roland Barthes, particularly his writings in *Mythologies* (1973) and *Image-Music-Text* (1977), explain the connotations of cultural items and images as opposed to their primary signification, or denotation. Barthes (1977) writes:

Connotation is not necessarily immediately graspable at the level of the message itself (it is, one could say, at once invisible and active, clear and implicit) but it can already be inferred from certain phenomena which occur at the levels of the production and reception of the message: on the one hand, the press photograph is an object that has been worked on, chosen, composed, constructed, treated according to professional, aesthetic or ideological norms which are so many factors of connotation: while on the other, this same photograph is not only perceived, received, it is *read*, connected more or less consciously by the public that consumes it to a traditional stock of signs. (p. 19)

Additionally, Barthes wrote of the polysemic nature of signs. Rather than pointing to a singular meaning, a sign instead can have multiple meanings at the same time. For example, we know that some signs denote ideas or qualities directly, such as a baseball cap that represents head coverage. The connotative meaning entails so much more. For instance, the color of the baseball cap may have certain value in certain geographical areas, or the way the baseball cap is worn may connote a certain meaning. Where we derive a connotative meaning from is based on our own cultural know-how and the readings we make based on our knowledge. While photographs and films are texts that may be analyzed and given meaning, advertisements are of vital importance because of the way in which they market goods and services to

the consumer culture. At the intersection of film and advertising is the sponsored film.

For Horne (2006), “critical accounts of advertising have focused on three main dimensions: economic – it is costly and wasteful; cultural – it stimulates consumerism and materialism; and social – it expresses conformist and often reactionary values” (p. 77). The basis of the criticisms lies in Adorno and Horkheimer’s writing on how the culture industry transformed “needs” into “wants.” Granted, I have already questioned, as well as brought forth criticism of this approach, but again, I am suggesting the salient idea to assess is how such commercial and corporate interests influence and shape meanings and identities.

The NFL, a Brand

In addition to the telling of basic mythic stories about human actions and motivations, *They Call It Pro Football* and its overall impact did a lot more than explain the role of the quarterback or middle linebacker. The mythic personification the Sabols gave pro football functioned to brand the game. But, what does that mean, exactly? What exactly is a brand, and what does it mean to brand something?

To begin, there are distinct differences between a product and a brand. A football game is a product. It has specific spatial and temporal qualities.

But, there is more to it. According to Marcel Danesi (2006), “if that product – some “thing” that has been *produced* – is the subject of a further interaction, its use value becomes clearer” (p. 2). A football game might be used as a social outlet, or it might be used as an entity to be gambled on. When that further interaction takes place, the product becomes a commodity or a “good” because it has a particular use value for someone. It is this use value that leads to certain associations from individuals utilizing the product. Danesi remarks, “When a product-commodity becomes a brand, its use value is supplemented by a number of further associations” (p. 3). A football game, when produced under the umbrella of the NFL and presented in an aesthetically pleasing manner, builds associations. From these associations, “brand identities” – “identities that generate a sense of goodwill and care for the product” become realized (p. 7). Without branding, a football game is just a football game. It has no real sense, but the NFL brand evokes certain feelings and values.

Little did the Sabols know, but they were performing emotional branding for their brand, the NFL. According to Sabol (2010):

I never looked on myself or us as marketers or promoters or packagers or propagandists. It was making movies about a sport I loved and hoping and maybe conveying that love to the audience. I never felt we were image-makers and maybe that’s why we were successful. There’s a sincerity, an authenticity – there’s not an attempt to market anything. For example, when the Pope hired Michelangelo to paint the ceiling it was just his vision of what heaven looked like and it appealed to everyone

who saw it. They said, “Hey, this is what heaven is probably like.” And, I think there was a way out films struck a nerve with people by emphasizing everything they really loved about the game.

According to Marc Gobé (2001), emotional branding “focuses on the most compelling aspect of the human character; the desire to transcend material satisfaction, and achieve emotional fulfillment” (p. xv). This is done by building relationships between product and consumer. In the case of NFL Films, this is done by building relationships between product and audience. As alluded to, the premise behind emotional branding is emotional fulfillment. This emotional fulfillment is tied to the intense, symbolic gratification of eating a Chipotle burrito, of driving a Volkswagen, or, of running an Apple. There is a certain spiritual entity in oneself that says, “this isn’t just another burrito,” or “this isn’t just another car,” or “this isn’t just another computer,” that fuels a particularly intriguing connection between the consumer and their product that seemingly provides them with emotional fulfillment. It might be a short period, but it exists, and in the case of *They Call It Pro Football*, a film funded by, and built for a corporation, such fulfillment leads to brand recognition. Prolonged fulfillment, which is what NFL Films has given audiences since 1966, leads to brand loyalty. But, how is such an argument valid? How did NFL Films, the in-house film company of the NFL, serve the NFL and help make it a brand that engages audiences on the level of the senses and emotions? I hold the view that *They Call It Pro Football* (1966) is the text that spearheaded the

branding of the NFL, and thus, enabled pro football and television to build a cooperative empire, but why? To answer this question, a brief discussion of the “sport-media complex” is necessary.

The Sport-Media Complex

Sport sociologists and feminist researchers have concluded that physical prowess is enamored in masculinity, and that sport has played a role in the production of heroic values from Ancient Greece to the present (Malszecki, 1995). Consequently, war metaphors have been entrenched in the idea of physical proficiency of men since that time. Sabo and Jansen (1998) conclude:

From the ancient Olympiad to the present, sport has been a primary site for defining, cultivating and displaying Western ideals of masculinity. The athletic male body – its discipline, symmetry, strength, and performance, - is synonymous with power. It is the prototype valorized in Western art throughout the ages from the friezes on the Parthenon to the neoclassicism of Michaelangelo’s David to Rodin’s rendering of The Thinker. Its visual resonances cut across Euro-American history, cultures, and ideologies. (p. 202)

While the presence of sport and competition in history across cultures, ideologies, and time spans has enabled definitions of masculinity to emerge, feminist scholars have presented research on “hegemonic masculinity.”

According to Robert Hanke (1992), “Hegemonic masculinity thus refers to the social ascendancy of a particular version or model of masculinity that operates

on the terrain of common sense and conventional morality that defines “what it means to be a man,” thus securing the dominance of some men (and the subordination of women) within the sex/gender system” (p. 190). In *Masculinities*, R.W. Connell (1995) defines hegemonic masculinity “as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of the patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (p. 77).

Hence, sport and hegemonic masculinity have a hand-in-hand relationship. According to Bryson (1987), “key features of sport are the linking of maleness with highly valued and visible skills and with the positively sanctioned use of aggression/force/violence” (p. 59). Furthermore, many consider sporting events to be a spectacle shared by men, celebrated by men, and adored by men. Sport, thus, is very much a part of the masculinity market. This was the case in Ancient Rome at the height of the Roman Empire when sport spectacles full of violence and death were sought and enjoyed. Considering all sport spectacles were live events during this time, the fact spectators helped decide who won or lost, and ultimately, who lived or died, is an important characteristic of this time in the history of sport. Bryant, Zillmann, and Raney (1998) state, “Not only did spectators play a major role in Roman “blood sports” like gladiator matches or violent chariot races, often the

most privileged spectators determined whether the losers were sacrificed by the victors – perhaps not the pre-eminent “thrill of victory,” but certainly the ultimate ‘agony of defeat’” (p. 256).

It is true that sport, particularly pro football, has a ritualistic, military-laden element engrained in it throughout history. It is this element that strengthens male hegemony for not only the participant, but also the spectator. In the public arena, men’s sport is celebrated. From the Roman Empire to modern day sport (whether a chariot race or a pro football game) the power illustrated by sport on its own, as well as its media portrayal, breathes life into masculinity’s connection with strength and violence. While the rules regulating these events and the ultimate goals sought in modern day contests are different than a gladiator match in the Roman Colosseum, the rhetoric supplied through the cohesion of media and sport today provides a masculinity base where “proper” manhood is connected to physical and emotional strength, heterosexuality, seductive power, control over one’s emotions, and overall toughness.

Masculinity and Pro Football

Analysis of the connection between sport and the mass media has been performed through many different methods. Critical scholars have argued that sports, as well as sports programming, presents a narrow

construction of masculinity based in stereotypical and gender-biased language and action. Others have argued that sports, particularly “power” team sports such as football, basketball, baseball, and hockey, and participation in them, provides an experience where the body is transformed into a tool for the display of power. Immersed in all of these studies is the metaphorical characterization of the “body as weapon” and “contest as warfare.”

In 1989, media scholar Sut Jhally introduced the term “sport-media complex” to describe the institutionally symbiotic relationship of sport and the mass media. More recently, Messner, Dunbar, and Hunt (2000) expanded Jhally’s sport-media complex concept into the sport-media-commercial complex “in order to capture the complex institutional dynamics at the nexus of sport, media, and corporate promoters and advertisers” (Messner, 2002, p. 77).

In their study, based in textual analysis of sports United States’ boys watch most, Messner, Dunbar, and Hunt (2000) “presents the argument that televised sports, and their accompanying commercials, consistently present boys with a narrow portrait of masculinity, which we call the Televised Sports Manhood Formula” (p. 380). Distinct to this formula is its examination of dominant themes, one of which is “Sports is War.” The authors indicate, “Commentators consistently (an average of nearly five times during each hour of sports commentary) used martial metaphors and language of war and

weaponry to describe sports action (e.g. battle, kill, ammunition, weapons, professional sniper, depth charges, taking aim, fighting, shot in his arsenal, reloading, detonate, squeezing the trigger, attack mode, firing blanks, blast, explosion, blitz, point of attack, a lance through the heart, etc” (p. 388-89).

In their study, Messner, Dunbar, and Hunt specifically noted the sport/war metaphors placed in the commentary and visual stream of ABC’s *Monday Night Football* broadcasts. “NFL *Monday Night Football* broadcasts were introduced with explosive graphics and an opening song that included lyrics “Like a rocket burning through time and space, the NFL’s best will rock this place . . . the battle lines are drawn” (p. 389). By paralleling an NFL football game with war, ABC presents a metaphor between sports and war that is complicated and controversial.

Similar to Messner, Dunbar, and Hunt, Trujillo (1995) also looked in depth at NFL *Monday Night Football* broadcasts. According to Trujillo, all sports contain a certain degree of violence and aggression, but there is not a game in existence as violent as American football. He states, “In all sports, the body is an instrument of production. But in American football, that instrument is a weapon, and its production is a reproduction of war” (p. 410).

In studying television coverage of football games during the 1993-1994 season on ABC’s *Monday Night Football*, Trujillo paid specific attention to the rhetoric of commentators Al Michaels, Frank Gifford, and Dan Dierdorf. Trujillo

found that “The discourse that *MNF* sportscasters used to describe players and plays also reproduced the imagery of war and weaponry in football. During the season, players were described as “weapons,” “missiles,” “shields,” “rockets,” “hitting machines,” and other instruments of violence” (p. 411). Of further note is how violent impacts, often related to inflicting injury, were treated as ceremonial through the use of slow-motion replays and detailed discourse.

Messner (2002) explains further illustrations of the “body as weapon” and “contest as warfare” metaphors:

Through athletic peer groups, boys and men learn to suppress their empathy toward women as objects of the group’s humorous discourse and (at times) aggressive actions. One’s own body becomes a sexual machine or weapon to be used in the conquest of a woman and as a display of heterosexual masculinity for one’s male peers. Men also learn to suppress their empathy toward other men, both on and off the field, as “outsiders” and as enemies to be defeated – through violence, if necessary. One’s body is experienced as a weapon to be used to defeat an objectified opponent. And ultimately, the body-as-weapon comes back on the male athlete as an alien force: As the man learns to suppress his own self-empathy, to endure pain and injury to get a job done, his body is experienced not as a human self to be nurtured and cared for but as a machine or a tool to be used to get the job done. (p. 60-61)

This definition of “body as weapon” is both comprehensive and telling because it addresses the body as a tool of destruction, rather than a tool of compassion. With this in mind, the presence of violence is again, paramount. The focus of the self becomes using the body as an instrument – an

instrument of alienation where others are seen as objects of pleasure subject to manipulation and subordination (Messner, 1992, p. 62).

In relationship to how sports should change, Whitson (1990) sees little use for characterizing sports as battlefronts through the use of military metaphors. He indicates, "Throughout the century, sports have frequently been associated with military training. Instead, I suggest we consider sports glorious improvisations, dialectical play, or collective theatre; although competing athletes are cast as antagonists, they need each other if the discoveries and the pleasures of the contest are to be enjoyed at all" (p. 43). Is it viable in today's society to expect spectators and participants to celebrate the efforts of both winners and losers? Pre-game and post-game handshakes, as well as post-game rituals of prayer provide avenues for such celebration, but is it enough to overcome the emotional and psychological costs of the gladiator mentality?

According to Messner (1990), this idea of a sport utopia is a far cry from reality. He summarized, "It seems reasonable to simply begin with the assumption that in many of our most popular sports, the achievement of goals (scoring and winning) is predicated on the successful utilization of violence – that is, these are activities in which the human body is routinely turned into a weapon to be used against other bodies, resulting in pain, serious injury, and even death" (p. 205). This is where Marx's theory of fetishism of commodities

comes back into consideration. For example, while NFL players are very well paid, they are products. Many, if not all, players understand the physical risks involved in playing a violent game such as pro football, but how would people's interaction with pro football as a commodity be affected if the NFL focused its advertising more on gore than on glory? Also, how would people's interaction with pro football as a commodity be affected if NFL Films didn't emphasize "the struggle, the combat, the warrior ethos" of pro football, but instead focused on the short-term and long-term costs to its human participants? (Sabol, 2010). While I am not about to place any type of blame on NFL Films for what I consider to be magnificent filmmaking, it is important to think about not only what is being communicated, but also, what is *not* being communicated.

Summary

Chapter Five, 'Branding Pro Football,' demonstrated that NFL Films' work is an artistic assembly produced to promote a corporation, the NFL. In addition, I argued that NFL Films, a producer of sponsored films, performs emotional branding for their brand, the NFL, by engaging audiences on the level of the senses and emotions. I also provided an account that established that *They Call It Pro Football* (1966) is the text that spearheaded the branding

of the NFL in the 1960s and ultimately, enabled pro football and television to build a cooperative empire.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

The purpose of the final chapter is to reflect on what I have suggested and uncovered, and to offer conclusions about NFL Films place as a storyteller and mythmaker, the legacy of this storied American institution, and its cultural value. Additionally, I offer an alternative reading that centers on play, art, and performance. But, ultimately, my argument is that the influence this film has had on the representation of pro football to the television viewing public is unparalleled, and thus, this film functions as a distinct cultural marker.

A Look Back

The project began in Chapter Two, 'Pairing Pro Football and Television,' with a historical examination of how pro football and television conjoined with one another. The Chapter argued that to understand NFL Films, one must first understand the respective histories of pro football and television. I contend that the emergence of pro football as a popular TV pastime emerged in part as a result of changing patterns of private life, and the rise of TV viewing as domestic consumption.

Chapter Three bridged from Chapter Two and began to tell the stories of Ed Sabol, Steve Sabol, and Pete Rozelle. The chapter, 'Key Figures and Formations of NFL Films,' provided an account of the key characters and important events that led to the production of *They Call It Pro Football* (1966).

I demonstrated that this film succeeded because of a unique coalescence of social practices, sports economics, and an aesthetic that humanized pro football.

The focal point of Chapter Four was *They Call It Pro Football*. The chapter, 'Analyzing the Moving Image: NFL Films' *They Call It Pro Football* (1966),' argued that this film constructs mythic stories, and thus, produces cultural meanings, about masculinity, militarism, and nation building within the context of post-war mobile privatization.

Chapter Five, 'Branding Pro Football,' demonstrated that NFL Films' work is an artistic assembly produced to promote a corporation, the NFL. In addition, I argued that NFL Films, a producer of sponsored films, performs emotional branding for their brand, the NFL, by engaging audiences on the level of the senses and emotions. I also provided an account that established that *They Call It Pro Football* (1966) is the text that spearheaded the branding of the NFL in the 1960s and ultimately, enabled pro football and television to build a cooperative empire.

In summary: I demonstrated that *They Call It Pro Football* (1966) is a sponsored film that set the precedent for how pro football would be communicated to the television viewing public. In this landmark film, Steve Sabol's use of the five channels of communication: image, written language, voice, music, and sound effects (Metz, 1974) fuse to form a groundbreaking

mythic style of filmmaking branding “the sport of our time” as an iconic and romantic “ballet of brutality.”

Play, Art, and *They Call It Pro Football*

While it is important to recognize that *They Call It Pro Football* operates as part of a masculinity market, an alternative reading of this film is that it explores the artistic and spiritual dimensions of pro football, particularly as it relates to play and performance.

Just as one experiences art, music, and literature, one experiences sport. Granted, the degree of involvement varies drastically from one person to the next, but what NFL Films does with *They Call It Pro Football* is bring a humanistic angle to the game of pro football. When a spectator watches *They Call It Pro Football* (or any NFL Films production, for that matter) they aren’t just watching a quick recap of a game, but rather an interpretation of what exactly pro football is all about. For every torn knee ligament, dislocated shoulder, and broken wrist that brings inevitable questions about the violence in the culture of sport, there are darting runs, pinpoint passes, and shoestring catches that invigorate the imagination and give the game a certain sacredness. In the scheme of things, whether or not one team beats another on any given Sunday is inconsequential, but, when athletes play, some spectators play, as well.

Clifford Geertz, a highly influential American anthropologist whose best known work is arguably *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), asserts sport is powerful, but also wonders, “how can it be taken seriously?” This question arises because those with the critical skills to analyze sports view sports as unworthy of study while those without the critical skills to analyze sports view sports as commodified entertainment. The key becomes how to understand something that is so important, but so easy to trivialize.

In one of his key essays, “Deep play: Notes on the Balinese cockfight,” Geertz (1973) asks, “Why are the Balinese so enamored with cockfighting?” His method of doing ethnography, which he refers to as “thick description,” is a key facet of not only anthropological work, but also of work in communication, film/video studies, and sociology. In his layered descriptive analysis, Geertz points to two key concepts: “deep play” and “the dramaturgical perspective.” According to Geertz, “Bentham’s concept of “deep play” is found in his *The Theory of Legislation*. By it he means play in which the stakes are so high that it is, from his utilitarian standpoint, irrational for men to engage in it at all” (p. 432). Ultimately, the activity produces “net pain rather than net pleasure. Bentham’s conclusion was, therefore, that deep play was immoral from first principles and, a typical step for him, should be prevented legally” (p. 433). When an activity is irrational, what explains its importance? When a sport such a pro football exists “in which the human body is routinely turned into a

weapon to be used against other bodies, resulting in pain, serious injury, and even death” (Messner, 1992, p. 205), what explains its cultural saliency?

In addition to “deep play,” Geertz fleshes out the concept of “the dramaturgical perspective.” This, the dramaturgical perspective, is the idea of taking a cultural form and seeing it as dramatized, and therefore, reflecting society. In other words, the cultural form provides a lens onto social life. Geertz asserts that if you understand cockfighting, you understand Bali. Cockfighting, thus, is an art form that encapsulates a lot about Balinese society. Just as the cockfight reflects Balinese society; Balinese society reflects the cockfight. This is the definition of a dramaturgical reflection because it means interacting with who you are, what you are a part of, your values, your ideals, and your connections. Geertz says what happens in that rooting gives you maps of meaning and indicates what exactly is important to you. It is the building of alliances and reinforcing of ideas. And, it is these cultural events that dramatize race, gender, class, and ethnicity. According to Geertz, “What sets the cockfight apart from the ordinary course of life ... Its function, if you want to call it that, is interpretive; it is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves” (p. 448). With all of this in mind, how might *They Call It Pro Football*, a text about American pro football produced in the mid-1960s, be critiqued? Does *They Call It Pro Football* as a cultural art form capture a lot about American society?

If we understand *They Call It Pro Football* (1966), do we understand one part of America?

In *They Call It Pro Football*, drama is central. According to Sabol (2010):

Before us (NFL Films) there was a pro football tradition, but we gave the game a mythology. The way we wrote about it, the way we shot it, and the music we used. We saw the game in dramaturgical terms as opposed to a winner and a loser and a score. We saw the game, it was the struggle, the combat, the warrior ethos of it. That's what we emphasized.

Sabol uses filmic elements to emphasize the dramas where the stakes are the highest. For example, he utilizes personal dramas by positioning the offensive lineman versus the defensive lineman or the running back versus the linebacker. Additionally, he explicates social dramas by setting big city versus small city or community versus community. In doing this, Sabol asks the spectator to identify with participants and see themselves as an attribute in the efforts of said participants.

Decades prior to Geertz's work, Johan Huizinga, a cultural historian from The Netherlands, discusses the importance of the play element in culture and society in his book, *Homo Ludens* (1937). Huizinga writes

The incidence of play is not associated with any particular stage of civilization or view of the universe. Any thinking person can see at a glance that play is a thing on its own, even if his language possesses no general concept to express it. Play cannot be denied. You can deny, if you like, nearly all abstractions: justice, beauty, truth, goodness, mind, God. You can deny seriousness, but not play. (p. 3)

In this text Huizinga also notes, “one of the most important characteristics of play was its spatial separation from ordinary life” (p. 19). This leads him to assert that play, and the seriousness assigned to it, can translate to a ritual performance where spiritual dimensions of the human spirit emerge. In a similar classic account of play, Roger Caillois (1961) “describes play as free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, and governed by both make-believe and rules” (in Feezell, 2004, p. 13).

Additionally, in *The Joy of Sports* (1976), Michael Novak writes, “Play is human intelligence, and intuition, and love of challenge and contest and struggle; it is respect for limits and laws and rules, and high animal spirits, and a lust to develop the art of doing things perfectly. Play is what only humans truly develop” (p. 33). In this book, Novak reveals his athletic affinities by defending the merits of viewing sports as ritual activity. Like Novak, Paul Weiss (1969) wonders about the attraction of sports, but his inquiries (similar to those of Huizinga) focus on the athlete as participant rather than the person as spectator: “Why are athletes ready to give up so much that is desirable to accept what involves a good deal of wasted motion and boredom? Why are they willing to risk making their inadequacies evident, instead of enjoying the struggle of others from afar, or instead of plunging into a game without concern for how they might fare?” (p. 18).

According to William F. Lewis (1982), “To remain play, writers in this tradition assert, an activity must be separate from the standards and concerns of everyday life” (p. 55). In *They Call It Pro Football* (1966), Sabol constructs pro football as such an activity. In this film, Sabol presents pro football as an uncorrupted activity. It is free of greed, coercion, and subterfuge. It is uninfected. Instead, it consists of the mythic elements of sports and the grace of pro football. Reflecting on their larger body of work, Sabol (2010) notes, “With sports becoming almost overwhelmed with the business component, there’s a special place for what we do in that we present the mythic and romantic elements of the game.” In the specific instance of *They Call It Pro Football* (1966), it is not the outcome, but rather the journey of the game and how it is communicated to the spectator that provides fodder for the alternative reading I offer.

What It All Means

In 1970, ABC began broadcasting NFL games on Monday nights. “35 million people” on a Monday night tuned in (Boyle, 1970). At halftime of each contest the audience, spanning from Portland, Maine to Portland, Oregon, watched highlight reels produced by NFL Films. They sat in their homes, their hotel rooms, and their taverns and experienced a representation of pro football that was essentially a re-production of a game they thought they had

witnessed before and seemingly knew so well, but NFL Films created something different. The symphonic music composed by Sam Spence, the narration voiced by John Facenda, and the story arranged by Steve Sabol produced in unison marked a cultural shift in how pro football would be consumed by a public attempting to make sense of questions unrelated to a pro football field, but, ultimately, these highlight reels marked the first time the work of NFL Films was seen by the majority of Americans (Sabol, 2010). And, it marked the first instances where “NFL Films has tapped into our national penchant for melodrama and made pro football into perhaps the most popular ongoing serial in America” (Yagoda, 1986).

In 1966, pro football was the third most popular sport on television. Today, pro football saturates a media environment possessing breadth and depth. Fantasy football, the NFL Draft, gambling, mini-camps, pro days, 40 times, arm strength, trades, free agency, drug testing, the Super Bowl. With a few key strokes these are just a sample of the litany of football related items that have become part of the vernacular of a common NFL fan who relishes a Sunday consisting of a doubleheader, a review show, and a night game before falling into a slumber in anticipation of the coming week, as well as in expectation of the Monday morning water cooler ritual all so commonplace in corporate America. Pro football is everywhere, but why does the American public care about the game?

In this project I suggest that NFL Films, as one of the key marketing vehicles of the NFL since the 1960s, has positioned pro football as an iconic and romantic “ballet of brutality” in a way that masks the dire consequences of a violent game and celebrates the meaningful substance of a beautiful game. I do not assert that NFL Films *is* the reason why the NFL is the most popular sport in America to be consumed both live and televised, but, instead, suggest NFL Films, as a distinct cultural marker, communicates stories and myths influencing how the American television viewing public has come to envision pro football on the cultural landscape. Pro football isn’t pro football until it has been communicated from a sender through a channel to a receiver. Pro football becomes “the sport of our time” when it is communicated from NFL Films through a television medium to the American public.

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