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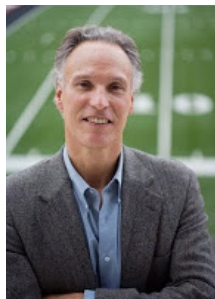
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## INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL ORIARD, SPORTS SCHOLAR AND FORMER NFL PLAYER



Michael Oriard is a Distinguished Professor of American Literature and Culture and the Associate Dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Oregon State University. A former Notre Dame and Kansas City Chiefs center, Oriard pursued his Ph.D during the off-seasons throughout his NFL career and has gone on to publish many books and articles on the relationship between sports and American culture, including *Sporting With the Gods: The Rhetoric of Play and Game in American Culture*, *Reading Football: How the Popular Press Created an American Spectacle*, *King Football: Sport and Spectacle in the Golden Age of Radio and Newsreels*, *Movies and Magazines*, *the Weekly and the Daily Press*, and *Brand NFL: Making and Selling American's Favorite Sport*. His book, *The End of Autumn: Reflections on My Life in Football* was originally published in 1982 and republished in July of this year. I just read it, and I would recommend it to anyone, sports fan or not. Yes, it is about football, but to say the book is only about football would be selling it short. It is also about life, finding oneself, and the way sports interacts with the

American populace. It just so happens that football is how he was able to find himself. The writing is sometimes cinematic, especially when describing the often overlooked offensive line battles with amazing detail and clarity, and always honest, absorbing the reader completely. Recently, Professor Oriard was kind enough to answer some of my questions.

**A major theme throughout the *The End of Autumn* is the heroism of playing football and how those "heroic illusions" become "deflated" in the NFL. Is this a realization that occurred to you while playing or something you became aware of in retrospect or during the writing process?**

After my near story-book experience at Notre Dame (where I was wholly caught up in the mystique of the place), playing in the NFL was in itself "deflating." Whether I consciously thought of it in those terms while I was playing is another question. I doubt it.

**One of the most striking things in the book is the way you write so openly and honestly about football and team relationships that usually remain hidden from the public. Did you ever have any reservations about writing about yourself or your teammates and coaches this way?**

In writing about myself, I consciously maintained a boundary between the public and the private, deciding just how much of my private self I was willing to expose, and no more. In writing about my teammates, I was very conscious of not simply using them for my own purposes; I was willing to be more frank about teammates and relationships in the abstract than about individual teammates by name. In writing about my coaches, I faced a challenge in that they could not remain anonymous. In writing about Ara Parseghian and my other coaches at Notre Dame, there was no problem, because I had nothing but positive things to say about them. In writing about my high school coach and about Hank Stram in Kansas City, I simply tried to be fair—with Hank in particular, as generous as I could be while still being honest. I believed that honesty was an obligation once I chose to write the book.

**You write that "the football team is in many ways the heart of the university...the center of student enthusiasm and emotional involvement." Why do you think football (and athletics in general) has this role and such a lasting effect on students both during and beyond their college careers?**

University leaders discovered as early as the 1890s that the popular enthusiasm for college football could be exploited to promote and build their institutions. Football was an integral part of American higher education as it developed over the twentieth century, not something tacked on. And individual institutions developed their own local football cultures within the national football culture. Football in particular and athletics in general became the center of "college life," the Greek system, and the social calendar on campuses; as such, it became the principal connection of many alumni to



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their alma maters. American universities became known (and remain known) to outsiders mostly by their football (and more recently basketball) teams; I doubt that most faculty and administrators would choose for this to be the case, but it's what we have.

**You're now a professor at Oregon State University; are you involved with Oregon State athletics or any of the academic programs that support student-athletes?**

No. When I arrived at OSU in 1976, I feared that word would get out that there was a jock in the English department, and I'd have every athlete on campus in my classes expecting an easy time. It didn't happen, but I retained a wariness against involving myself in athletics. I also was conscious virtually from the day I left football of not being an ex-jock who lives in his past and needs to hang around players and teams. I have informally mentored a few genuine student-athletes who sought me out, but except for a one-term appointment as acting director of academic services in the athletic department, I have had no formal involvement with OSU athletics.

**How, if at all, do you feel the student-athlete has changed since your college career?**

When I was at Notre Dame in the late 1960s, I received the best education that my institution offered, while playing college football at the highest level. I doubt that that is even possible today, because of the greater demands on "student-athletes" time, and because the larger sports culture has so changed that it has become increasingly unlikely that an athlete good enough to play at the highest level will arrive at college with academics as his highest priority.

**How has the game, both college and the NFL, changed from when you played?**

I've pointed toward an answer with the previous question. And college football has changed because the NFL has changed. As the average salary in the NFL increased from around \$20,000 in 1970 to nearly \$2 million today, somewhere along the line a boundary was crossed, at which point the possibility of playing in the NFL overwhelmed every other consideration for a college football player. The money is directly a consequence of the media. I grew up with three national TV networks and "The Game of the Week." ESPN and the rest of the cable sports networks, at the center of a 24/7 world of sports media (which is now expanding even more into the blogosphere) have generated not just revenue but a depth and breadth of attention to sports that was inconceivable in my playing years.

**You write about football providing you with an identity, especially in college, but you say in the NFL, you thought of yourself as a graduate student who happened to play football. How did this transition happen?**

Football provided me with an identity during my adolescence, when the confirmation of my success at Notre Dame helped me navigate the typical adolescent anxieties. I arrived in the NFL without thinking I had anything to prove; what had happened at Notre Dame was sufficient. (And had I been unsuccessful at football at Notre Dame, I would have navigated my adolescence in a different way. I was fortunate in my family, my upbringing, and my early education.) In college I also had an identity as a student and as whatever my education would eventually lead to. After graduation that identity remained important, while my athletic identity had served its purpose and was no longer necessary. I should add that my "identity" today includes being a former football player. What I have been informs who I am.

**Do you feel that football has a greater impact on American culture than other sports? If so, why do you think that is?**

Since the 1960s (a Harris poll in 1965, to be precise), professional football has been recognized as Americans' favorite spectator sport. Pro football currently outpolls Major League Baseball about two to one, with college football number three, ahead of the pro and college basketball, hockey, NASCAR, and the rest. What exactly it is about football that so appeals is a matter for speculation and debate. I would point to the fact that each game of a 16-game season matters more than 162 MLB games or 81 NBA games. I would emphasize football's relationship to a seemingly widespread desire for intense experience. And I would also point to the relationship between football and masculinity in this country. By a different definition, baseball has had a greater impact on "American culture" in that it has spawned considerably more literary art—fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. There is a long tradition for explaining this by baseball's leisurely pace, pastoral and cerebral nature, connection to fathers and sons, and so on.

**Why do sports in general seem to have such a large influence on American culture?**

I would point to my comment in the previous answer about the longing for intense experience. It's a cliché that sport is life with the volume turned up. That's an apt description (and a not-yet-clichéd corollary follows that football is life at 500 decibels with a massive subwoofer). Sports generate narratives that address the most fundamental dimensions of human existence (symbolic good and evil, life and death, heroism and sacrifice, etc.), with a clarity in the contest and the outcome that is utterly missing from ordinary human existence. With their unscripted plots and uncertain outcomes, sporting events provide entertainment that reaches much deeper than mere entertainment. In today's fragmented media university, where "mass culture" has given way to niche cultures, sports come closest to constituting an actual common culture.

**How do certain cultures, (regional or racial cultures, for example) influence sports and vice versa?**

Sport in its fundamental nature is local and tribal: my team against yours, home confronting invaders. Local cultures become imprinted on local sports, as in small-town high school football or college football and NASCAR in the South.

Racial cultures are “local” by a different definition. The most obvious in the U.S., of course, is our sense of a distinctive African American style, particularly in basketball and football. Nationally televised sport, through which viewers far removed from the NFL or MLB or NBA teams they root for, runs counter to this fundamental local nature (and probably means that these sports move away from “sport” and more toward “entertainment”).

**Even in 1982, when the book was first published, you wrote that football was becoming less about the sport and more about entertainment. What are your thoughts on football and the NFL now, 27 years later?**

I seem always to be anticipating the next question. Yes, when I wrote in *The End of Autumn* that NFL football was becoming more about entertainment, I had no idea that cable television in general and ESPN in particular (and *SportsCenter* even more particularly) would soon be transforming our sports culture, a process that is now moving to the Internet as well. What the players do remains real, and this is the source of NFL football's power, but as the NFL markets its brand ever more aggressively a question inevitably arises, whether it risks undermining the sport by appealing to an ever-wider audience as entertainment. My recent book, *Brand NFL*, explores this possibility.

**Given the extreme media coverage on sports now, I'm curious about what the team's relationship with reporters was like when you played.**

I had a sense that my teammates regarded the local reporters essentially as parasites, while the local reporters generally resented having to cater to nonintellectual physical performers. I suspect that that fundamental relationship continues in part, but what's new today is the increased celebrity of some players and the increased celebrity as well of some reporters—the TV guys who are stars themselves. The power of the media to create celebrities gives these celebrity reporters and studio hosts a kind of status and power beyond anything that even the premier sportswriters of my day in New York and Los Angeles had.

**Regarding the subject of players as employees and the effect football has on players, such as their shortened life expectancies, what has the NFL and NFLPA done to help players during and after their playing careers?**

Over just the last couple of years, damaged former NFL players have succeeded in calling public attention to the long-term consequences of even short-term playing careers. These players create an interesting dilemma for the NFL and NFLPA—“interesting,” that is, beyond the real human misery they represent—in that it confronts them with the prospect of assuming financial responsibility for a player's lifetime after just a few years in the league. The NFLPA is chiefly responsible to current, not former, players, yet it has systematically improved the benefits of retired players with each new labor contract. (Gene Upshaw became furious at the criticism of former players who would not acknowledge these efforts on their behalf.) The NFL and NFLPA truly became partners as much as adversaries with the 1993 labor agreement, and both of them cannot afford to appear uncaring toward former players. (The fact that labor peace is now threatened does not really change that fact.) This concern about the NFL “brand,” in fact, is the most powerful factor working on the former players' behalf, and both the NFL and the NFLPA have recently addressed the need for more research on concussions and for streamlining the process of applying for disabilities payments.

**You write that you let go of football and football let go of you, but do you miss it?**

Some 35 years after I left football, it is too distant a part of my past for me to “miss” it. But I periodically have dreams in which I'm somehow playing again, invariably under very strange circumstances, so perhaps there is some part of my unconscious that misses it. At my age and with my physical ailments (that are most likely a consequence of my having played football for so many years), I find it increasingly strange that I once did what I did in college and the NFL.

**I noticed that the colors of the hardcopy of *Brand NFL* are orange and black, did you have a say in making this book Oregon State colors?**

Orange and black? Not my copy. In any case, I had no say about the cover design (though if I had complained about it when it was proposed to me, I assume my objections would have been considered).

**You have a book coming out in October, *Bowled Over*, about college football; can you tell me a little bit about it?**

My new book is a companion to *Brand NFL*. They started out as a single manuscript on football since the 1960s, until it became apparent that the subject was too large and that the NFL and college football were different (though related) worlds. *Bowled Over* is divided into two parts: the first on college football in the 1960s, with an emphasis on the integration of the Southeastern Conference and the black protests on northern campuses in the late 1960s; the second on the continuing struggle since the 1960s to untangle the contradiction at the heart of an extracurricular activity conducted as a popular entertainment. Criticism of distorted priorities in college football is nearly as old as the game itself, and I took on this topic somewhat reluctantly. But doing so forced me to come to terms with my own ambivalence about a sport that benefited me enormously but fails too many others, and it completed my multi-volume cultural history of American football.

\*Photo courtesy of Oregon State University

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