



AMERICA'S GAME

THE EPIC STORY OF HOW
PRO FOOTBALL CAPTURED
A NATION

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Michael MacCambridge

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD

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America's Game: The Epic Story of How Pro Football Captured a Nation Michael MacCambridge

It's difficult to imagine today—when the Super Bowl has virtually become a national holiday and the National Football League is the country's dominant sports entity—but pro football was once a ramshackle afterthought on the margins of the American sports landscape. In the span of a single generation in postwar America, the game charted an extraordinary rise in popularity, becoming a smartly managed, keenly marketed sports entertainment colossus whose action is ideally suited to television and whose sensibilities perfectly fit the modern age. **America's Game** traces pro football's grand transformation, from the World War II years, when the NFL was fighting for its very existence, to the turbulent 1980s and 1990s, when labor disputes and off-field scandals shook the game to its core, and up to the sport's present-day preeminence. A thoroughly entertaining account of the entire universe of professional football, from locker room to boardroom, from playing field to press box, this is an essential book for any fan of America's favorite sport.

America's Game: The Epic Story of How Pro Football Captured a Nation Details

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John Johnson says

This is a history of the National Football League, which began in the late 1920's, when a group of team owners gathered in a car dealership and formed a league. However, this book focuses primarily on the modern era, which started on December 28, 1958, when Johnny Unitas led the Baltimore Colts to a 23-17 win over the New York Giants in "the Greatest Game" and professional football proclaimed itself America's Game. This book centers around the NFL commissioners Bert Bell, Pete Rozelle, and Paul Tagliabue, and the challenges they faced during their time in the position.

The NFL has faced challenges from other leagues, including the All-America Football Conference (AAFC) from 1946-1949. The solution to that challenge was to bring three of the AAFC teams (Cleveland Browns, San Francisco 49ers, Baltimore Colts) into the NFL, thus ending the AAFC. Later, the challenge from the American Football League was resolved similarly. However, in that case, every team in the AFL was brought into the NFL, creating the AFC and NFC conferences.

The merger with the AAFC brought a new problem for the NFL to deal with; the movement of teams. The first major move was the Cleveland Rams moving to California. Before that time, most of the owners did not want the NFL to expand beyond the midwest states, but with the San Francisco 49ers joining the NFL, that changed. Also, the Cleveland Browns were in the same market as the Cleveland Rams, and Rams owner Dan Reeves was determined to move the Rams to Los Angeles. Over the years, many more teams would move, and each would cause a stir in the league.

The book delves deeply into the stories of many of the owners, general managers, and coaches that made the NFL great. The stories of Paul Brown dominating the NFL in the early years, and George Halas and Lamar Hunt working to bring about the merger between the AFL and the NFL are explored, as are the stories of individuals owners and how they handled their teams, from Bert Bell (original owner of the Philadelphia Eagles, before becoming the NFL Commissioner), probably the "worst coach in the NFL" to Jim Irsay and his overnight move of the Baltimore Colts to Indianapolis to avoid Maryland's new eminent domain law.

The NFL has become such an ingrained part of American culture that even our government officials have become involved. Senator Russell Long and Congressman Hale Boggs, from Louisiana, were instrumental in getting congressional approval for the AFL/NFL merger, in return for the league adding a team in New Orleans. President Richard Nixon was an avid football fan and even called a head coach once to suggest a play. Ronald Reagan called Paul Tagliabue from Japan to congratulate him when he was named commissioner and to advise him "win one for the gipper." Today it is customary for the President to call and congratulate the Superbowl winners after the game.

This book covers so much of the history of the NFL, from the creation of NFL Films by Ed and Steve Sabol, to the formation of the television contracts that paid every team equally rather than let each team negotiate their own deals. These are just a few snapshots of the stories told in this book. For an NFL fan and a reader, this is a great book.

Patricia Elizabeth says

Fantastic read. I would recommend it to anyone who's interested in reading about the history of the sport. Definitely makes me want to pick up similar books to drill even deeper.

C Baker says

MacCambridge has written an outstanding history of modern professional football known as the National Football League. The primary theme of the book is how football has eclipsed other sports, specifically baseball, to become America's game.

The book starts out with the Baltimore Colts defeat in overtime of the New York Giants on December 28, 1958 in the National Football League championship game. The game was televised and is called the Greatest Game Ever Played, partially because it catapulted the NFL into the national spotlight and sent the league on its way to be the dominant sport in American culture.

For the most part this is a very linear history of the National Football League, and a very well done one. While it is about the game itself, it's more about the business of professional football and the importance of decisions made by those who ran it leading to a thriving game and a thriving business enterprise. Much is discussed about the first commissioner Bert Bell who held a motley collection of owners together and strived for parity in the league, and Pete Rozelle who helped reap millions in television revenue, fostered the revenue sharing agreement between big market and small market teams keeping competitive balance, and maintaining relative labor peace compared to other sports.

Another very interesting and pivotal part of NFL history was its competition with the American Football League in the 1960's and how a group of maverick owners created a rival, viable league of its own and how the eventual merger of the NFL and AFL came about. Interestingly, Lamar Hunt, late owner of the Kansas City Chiefs, was the pivotal figure in both the creation of the AFL and the eventual merger. The merger, in fact, made the NFL even stronger.

There are a few key themes in this book about why professional football became the dominant sport it is today. First, and foremost, is television. The game of football, more so than baseball, is a sport made for television. Television thrust the game into the national spotlight and keeps it there. Second is parity. While there have been some dominant teams in the league and a few dynasties, the revenue sharing, scheduling, and now salary caps which keep the teams on a somewhat even playing field has helped maintain interest in the game. Third, labor peace, relative to other sports, has also helped the game thrive. And finally, the owners and commissioners who have lead the league have been visionary. In these pages you meet the legendary coaches and owners like George Halas, Paul Brown, Vince Lombardi, Wellington Mara, Art Modell, Art Rooney, and others who made the NFL what it is today.

Overall, this is an outstanding history of the modern NFL and I highly recommend it.

Barney says

This text is much more about two commissioners, Bert Bell and Pete Rozelle, than it is about the game itself. The current commish, Roger Godell, gets small mention in the text largely because it was written before his term started. The small mention, though, is telling: "He uses words like 'monetize' and 'commoditize' one owner said with distaste" (pg 427). Rozelle (and his successor, Paul Tagliabue) would never use those words. Rozelle emerges as a brilliant organizer, marketer and all around decent man. MacCambridge's text never explicitly states that the NFL as we know it would not exist without the influence of Rozelle. He doesn't have to.

The NFL started in 1920 and struggled through the 1930s, built around men like George Halas, Wellington Mara, George Preston Marshall and Art Rooney. What is so striking about this text is its illustration that the NFL was, until the advent of the AFL in the 1960s, a club of families. After the great overtime playoff between the Giants and the Colts in 1958, Bert Bell was making the schedules up on his kitchen table. When asked where the league files were, he would point to his balding head and say "Right Here." Bell died of a heart attack...at a pro football game...in his hometown of Philadelphia. After several days of votes, Rozelle, then the General Manager of the Los Angeles Rams, was put forward as a compromise candidate. The league never looked back. His marketing experience and media savvy turned the NFL into a money machine.

While focusing on the off-field game, MacCambridge sheds light on several factors that are overlooked. Namely, the great work of the Sabol family on NFL Films. MacCambridge rightfully points out that the highlight packages, produced for another Rozelle supported show, Monday Night Football, rivalled MNF itself in popularity. One could argue that the advent of ESPN and the like would not have been possible without NFL films. The very idea of the "highlight" was at that point limited to Wide World of Sports. Steve Sabol turned the mundane into the poetic by use of quick cuts, making players and coaches on the sideline and emphasizing the personalities in the game.

What is being forgotten about the NFL is that it was built on personality, not a bland corporate identity. People like Art Rooney with his cigars, Dick Butkus bleeding on the sidelines, Jack Lambert with no teeth, and John Facenda describing it all in overwrought prose...that was the NFL of my and many other's childhoods. This is what makes people like Chad Ochocinco cool, if annoying as hell. Dear God, what the hell would that jerk off Godell do with Billy "White Shoes" Johnson and his end zone dance?

The genius of Pete Rozelle is encapsulated by MacCambridge through the statement "Rozelle never lost sight of the fact that the product the NFL was selling was the game itself." I think in many ways that Godell has forgotten that, and so have many of the fans and writers.

adam says

Goddamnit I am ready for football season. This book did a great job with the Rozelle years of the NFL, but the last 30 years of the league kinda got the short end of the stick. Almost as good a business book as it is a sports one.

Jacqueline says

Really well-written journalistic and historical approach to the business and game of football. I learned a lot and enjoyed reading it. Gives a lot of cultural and social context, as well as antidotes and historical facts.

David Cavaco says

'The Good': detailed account of the rise of the NFL and football, all the main events and personalities are covered. 'The Bad': This book goes only up to 2005, and since then so many milestones in the NFL has taken place, such as the National Anthem controversy. 'The Ugly': the print is way too small, the chapters are too long and some editing would have been nice. Overall, a decent historical journey how football surpassed baseball to be America's number one sport.

Scott Martin says

This was a good overview of how the key owners in the early days of the NFL worked together to help lay the foundation for how pro football came to be the "American Game" While it does mention some about the key games and players, the real focus of this work is the interaction between the key owners, such as the Mara family, the Rooneys, etc. Additionally, much time is spent on the business interactions between the NFL and AFL during the 1960s, which proved critical in the foundation of the Super Bowl. A good fun read for die hard and casual fans alike

Previously read in Oct 10

Regina says

I read this history of the NFL several years ago. It was highly engaging and contained good history through Pete Rozelle's leadership.

After that, I recall that it seemed as if the book became weaker. It was difficult to maintain the same level of interest in these later chapters.

Mike Nolte says

An excellent history of the NFL, however the lack of focus on the Steelers teams of the 70s made 5 stars impossible. Thankfully MacCambridge was able to rectify this with his incredible autobiography of Chuck Noll released more recently. Even still, this was a good read and essential for anyone who wants to understand how the most popular sport in this country got to where it is today.

Mighty_k24 says

In het kort:

Michael MacCambridge, editor bij Sports Illustrated, vertelt de geschiedenis van het American Football, beginnend eind jaren '30 en eindigend in 2004, jaar van de publicatie.

Het boek begint met een proloog, waarin de finale van het kampioenschap van 1958 tussen de Baltimore Colts en de New York Giants wordt naverteld. Deze wedstrijd zette het American Football definitief op de Amerikaanse ontspanningskaart, omwille van de spanning en de onverwachte wendingen. Tijdens de tweede verlenging werd de uitzending van deze wedstrijd afgebroken, waarna de verbijsterde kijkers een aflevering van 'Heidi' zagen beginnen. De wedstrijd staat dan ook in de annalen bijgeschreven als 'the Heidi Game'.

In de eerste hoofdstukken worden we meegenomen naar de jaren '30 en '40, toen American Football nog lang niet de evenknie was van het baseball, toen nog 'America's national pastime.' Figuren als commissioner Bert Bell, eigenaars George Halas en Dan Reeves en coach Paul Brown passeren de revue.

De toon is gezet, en McCambridge diept elk relevant thema grondig uit, van de vroege reglementswijzigingen tot het gebruik van doping, free agency en de introductie van American Football op het internet.

Mijn oordeel:

Om van dit boek voluit te kunnen genieten, heb je toch al wat achtergrond van het spelletje nodig, de auteur gaat soms teveel uit van voldoende achtergrondkennis, waardoor sommige nuances in het ijle verdwijnen.

Daarnaast is zijn gebruik Engels niet van de poes, hij gebruikt adjectieven die je in een gewoon Prisma-vertaalwoordenboek niet zal terugvinden. Daardoor vertraagt de leesbaarheid soms storend.

McCambridge concentreert zich hoofdzakelijk op de beslissingen op eigenaars- en bestuursniveau, en minder op de spelers. Legenden als Walter Payton, Dick Butkus en Jim McMahon worden zelfs niet vernoemd in het boek. Om een gedetailleerde beschrijving van sterspelers te krijgen, ben je in dit boek niet aan het juiste adres. Al bestaan daarover natuurlijk honderden andere boeken.

Ondanks deze drie minpuntjes heb ik genoten van dit boek, vooral omdat van zijn diepgang en grondigheid. Het is mooi om te zien hoe hij bewijst dat American Football meer en meer een perfecte metafoor geworden is van de Amerikaanse samenleving, en daardoor baseball van de troon heeft gestoten als Nationale Sport.

Eindoordeel: ****

Ed Wagemann says

After After World War II, during the Eisenhower years America's national past time was shifting from baseball to football. George Carlin famously characterizes the differences between the two games in his iconic comedy routine Baseball versus Football in which he illuminates the reasons that football has become a much better representative of our national psyche than baseball. Today, as we all know, the NFL is an integral part of American culture. The Superbowl is as important as any national holiday with the exception of Christmas. Millions of fans shun church each Sunday to religiously study the scriptures of fantasy football internet pages and bow at the alter of the large screen plasma game of the week. Other pilgrims journey to the tribal stadiums in painted face or sporting their team's colors and logos, screaming, crying and celebrating like no other time in their lives. Multi-national corporations invest multi-million dollars in the NFL, paying players and teams to promote their products. The NFL has become a symbol of America. Our celebration of the competitive spirit where the strongest, smartest, most poised, the sneakiest, strongest willed and at times luckiest triumph.

It's easy to witness how America's obsession with the NFL is rooted in our nation's political system. Beyond the obvious similarity that political elections and NFL seasons feed America's hunger for competition and the American need for real life heroes and villains, there is a more subtle undercurrent of tension that exists when thinking of the NFL as a representative of the American Way. The NFL really began to come into its own after World War II, when millions of returning soldiers were using the G.I. bill in order to get a college education. College football at that time was much more popular than the NFL, but as this influx in college-educated American males hit the work force after their four years of college, they took their love for football with them--which eventually began to translate into an interest in the NFL. In fact many of the stigmas associated with pro football come from the Eisenhower era of Conservativism of the 1950s. The NFL in fact was the sport of this new 1950s Conservative American male--a distinction that wouldn't be challenged until the late 1960s as best characterized by the brash, long haired AFL Jet's Joe Namath's Superbowl III gaurentey and subsequent victory over the NFL's Johnny Unitas. But in many ways, the American Conservatism that seemed to permeate from every oriface of the NFL was just a front. In many ways the NFL had been actually promoting socialism going back to the New Deal era of FDR.

The Philadelphia Eagles, who were incidently named after the logo on FDR's National Recovery Administration's emblem in 1933, were owned by Bert Bell up until he became the commissioner of the NFL in January of 1946. As the owner of the Eagles, Bert Bell was getting tired of watching the same 2 or 3 teams always winning the league championship and at a league meeting in 1935 he addressed the other team owners, saying this "I've always had the theory that pro football is like a chain. The league is no stronger than its weakest link...Every year the rich get richer and the poor get poorer...I propose, at the end of each football season...that we pool the names of all eligible college seniors. Then we make our selections in the reverse order of the standings--that is, the lowest-ranked team picks first. We do this round after round until we have exhausted the supply of college players." And thus was born the idea of the wieghted draft, in which the weakest teams would get the better pick of the college talent. A direct shot at free market capitalism if there ever was one. I mean substitute the words pro footbal and college players with the auto industry and electric cars and you have the makings of a stump speech from Barack Obama.

In 1947, as Commissioner, Bell also pre-dated Obama's rhetoric when, after a gambling scandal threatened the NFL, he put forth a measure to insure the utmost transparency in terms of the playing condition of each player by requiring the league to "publish in advance of each game a list of players who were injured and would be unable or unlikely to play." This laid the groundwork for the detailed weekly injury lists that have become such a large part of the NFL experience. Bell stated that "Professional football cannot continue to

exist unless it is based on absolute honesty...the game and its players must be kept free from corruption." Once again, a far cry from Romenyesque Deregulation ideology.

By the 1980s as the NFL evolved, it has digested other Socialistic mechanism. Revenue sharing for instance, which allows each team in the league an equal share of all TV revenue that the league brings in--thereby "spreading the wealth around". We have also seen the NFL adopt salary minimums and salary maximums (Those Marxist bastards!!!). We have seen the league adopt Regulations that protect the health and safety and working conditions of its players (too bad we can't just fire the players and replace them with half-clothed children in China, Romney must be thinking). In short, the longest-lasting, most successful Industry in America right now has a socialistic business model. So what possible harm could it do for the rest of America to adapt that model as well?

For a more indepth study of the history of the NFL, I highly suggest Michael MacCambridge's America's Game--which was suggested to me by Victor Harris, the author of <http://smokingmule.blogspot.com>

For making the history of the NFL enjoyable to read I give America's Game a coveted 5 out of 5 WagemannHeads.

NEXT!

Jason Speck says

MacCambridge's history of the NFL is an expansive and exhaustive look at the changes in the game and in society after World War II that combined to propel football past baseball as the centerpiece of American spectator sports. Along the way MacCambridge profiles the people (primarily off the field) who brought the NFL to new heights by continually remembering to put the welfare of the game first, something baseball historically struggled to do. From owners like Halas, Rooney, and Mara, to commissioners like Bert Bell, Pete Rozelle, and Paul Tagliabue, MacCambridge demonstrates how the league worked to survive war, rival leagues, the merger with the AFL, revenue sharing challenges, labor issues, and drug scandals to emerge as successful as ever entering the 21st century.

MacCambridge also profiles some of the early on-field athletes and coaches who brought the game into America's homes in the early years of TV and legitimized spectator sports as appropriate consumption for the middle class. Coaches like Paul Brown and Vince Lombardi brought a degree of professionalism and scientific analysis to a game which had previously been loosely organized and played. He also showcases players like Johnny Unitas, who in the 1958 NFL title game showed America how to be cool under fire; and Joe Namath, who not only courted the spotlight but delivered on the ultimate guarantee.

MacCambridge portrays a league that has almost always hewed to the long-term, perhaps no more so than in their prescient creation of NFL Films and NFL Properties, two NFL units that served to advance the league's prestige and interests, gradually bringing the NFL into more homes and offices, creating endless merchandising and publicity opportunities that other leagues immediately wanted to emulate.

A weakness with MacCambridge's book is that the halves are somewhat uneven. Whereas the first half of the book equally covers the on-field and off-field dramas, the latter half is almost always off the field. This leaves dynasties like the 1970s Steelers to get covered in a page or two, when the 1960s Packers and 1950s Browns get much better treatment. From examining the notes it seems like the book was longer and cut down for publication, and at 600 pages it's not a quick read, but the narrative between the halves just doesn't add

up.

MacCambridge's notes and bibliography are excellent, demonstrating the depth of his research, and his reading list of the best football books by decade is excellent. If you love American football this is a must-read book, and a jumping off point for further exploration.

Chuck says

The best pro football book I've ever read. Comprehensive, but not overstuffed. The writer made a lot of good decisions.

Tom says

MacCambridge wrote an interesting history of Sports Illustrated, but this story of the NFL is the best thing I've read by him. The NFL's is one of the most successful branding efforts in the history of the US, and MacCambridge's account of how it was orchestrated is full of interesting, weird characters.

Martin Born says

Thats a daring read. If you must know about NFL then u must read this book...
For serious NFL and American Football fans only... Whats that AAFL?
How about Paul Brown and Cleaveland Browns... Thye dominated the game.. Really? Find out yourself..
Raiders with Al Davis in charge where the force to be reckoned with..
Bill Bellichek highered a college student as his only assistant to go with him who came to watch all practice games when he was young...

Aneesa says

This was the best book I read in 2006. It was one of the few non-fiction books that I just could not put down. Not only is it well researched but the way that McCambridge has weaved together each tale to make up the larger story of the NFL is amazing. Unless you live under a rock, you know what a huge part professional football plays in our society and this book tells you exactly how and why it came to be this way. I came away with a very good sense of what each league commissioner brought to the organization, as well as the history of many of the franchises that remain today. I recommend this to anyone that has even a slight interest in the NFL.

Jeff Noble says

America's Game: The Epic Story of How Pro Football Captured a Nation by Michael Maccambridge (?)

Red says

This is an instance where the perfect book discovered a person at the exact right time. Growing up I was lucky enough to be in the bay area while the 49ers were making their historic run, and then lost interest as the franchise fell apart and my career required more of my time. The last five years I've found myself more and more taken with the sport, and this former bandwagon fan watched all sixteen games of the niners' 2016 2-win season that resulted in 2 head coaches being fired (Chip Kelly, and the immutable Jeff Fisher, who was responsible for both of the 49ers wins). As I've gotten more invested, I've started actively looking for more about the history of the sport, and come up wanting. And some stray internet comment convinced me this was "the" history of the professional game, and for the first time in my life I'm glad I read the comments.

Football, unlike baseball, seems completely uninterested in its past. Judging by people's knowledge of the game, you'd think football didn't exist prior to the Jets' Super Bowl III victory. People who have followed the NFL since they were children couldn't tell you where the first Super Bowl was held. It was between the Packers and Chiefs in the Los Angeles Coliseum, a stadium that's been derided as decrepit across 4 generations, but still manages to have an NFL team come crawling back every few years. Before this book I didn't know realize this stadium's roots run back to the bedrock of professional football.

America's Game covers the history of professional football from the 1940s up until 2004 in a manner that is both compelling and exhaustive. I found myself repeatedly surprised that this book captures so many engrossing narratives in such detail, yet still captures the big picture changes in the league as a whole. If you're a football fan and want to understand the league, where it came from, why it is the way it is, this is the book. There are others, but this is the starting point where you get a framework of understanding that everything else hangs off of.

It's worth mentioning, this book draws a solid line between professional football and college football, the latter is hardly mentioned unless it's in relation to a player being drafted or a professional coach's previous job. This is forgivable, as this book was already exceeding its limit as a book that could be feasibly printed in one volume. MacCabebridge has several other books related to the college game, and I look forward to reading them.

Mrsculpepper says

thorough
