

# Chapter 1

## America's Greatest Game

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Why football is so special
  - ▶ The reasons that people play football
  - ▶ How the Super Bowl became the sport's biggest event
  - ▶ Football's progression through the years
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**W**hen I was 14, a sophomore in high school, I moved out of Boston to live with my uncle. During my first weekend in Milford, Massachusetts, I saw my first high school football game. I had never seen anything like it. Before the game, an antique fire engine led a parade on the track around the football field while the crowd clapped and cheered. The players then thundered across a wooden bridge over a pond and burst through a banner to enter the stadium. I said to myself, "Wow, this game is for me."

I wasn't necessarily drawn to the game itself; I simply loved what came with the sport: *respect*. For me, football was an opportunity to belong to something, giving me confidence for the first time in my life. It was more of a personal thing than it was about playing football. It wasn't so much the football, but what football did for me. Football gave me a sense of self-worth, which I've carried with me throughout my life.

Sure, I experienced down periods when I first started playing, but I never thought about quitting. My first high school coach, Dick Corbin, was great to me and encouraged me to continue playing the game. Believe me, coaches are important. I've always had the support of football coaches, both on *and* off the field.

Football is responsible for everything that I've accomplished in my life. The discipline and hard work that made me a successful athlete have helped me in other areas of my life, allowing me to venture into new careers in movies and television.

## *Why Football Is the Best*

Baseball may be America's pastime, but football is America's passion. Football is the only team sport in America that conjures up visions of Roman gladiators, pitting city versus city, state versus state — sometimes with a Civil War feel, like when the Jets play the Giants in New York or the Cowboys play the Redskins.

Football is played in all weather conditions — snow, rain, and sleet — with temperatures on the playing field ranging from -30 to 120 degrees. Whatever the conditions may be, the game goes on. And unlike other major sports, the football playoff system is a single-elimination tournament: no playoff series, do-or-die. It culminates in what has become the single biggest one-day sporting event in America: the Super Bowl.

Or, in simpler terms, anytime you stick 22 men in fiberglass helmets on a football field and have them continually run great distances at incredible speeds and slam into each other, people will watch.

Football has wedged itself into the American culture. In fact, in many small towns across America, the centerpiece is the Friday night high school football game. The National Football League (NFL) doesn't play on Fridays simply to protect this great part of Americana, in which football often gives schools and even towns a certain identity. For example, hard-core fans know that tiny Massillon, Ohio, is where the late, great Paul Brown of the Cleveland Browns began his coaching career. To this day, Massillon's high school has maintained a tremendous high school football tradition. With so many factions of the student body involved, plus their families, a strong core of fans is built. For many, this enthusiasm for football continues in college.

You may not think it now, but millions of people are familiar with the strategy of the game, and most of them pass it down through their families. A lot of fathers coach their sons, and on rare occasions, their daughters. Although the focus may have changed in today's society, there was a time when the only team that mattered in high school was the football team. The pace of the game — stoppage after every play with a huddle — is perfect for most people because it allows them time to guess what the team will try next.



On two particular holidays, football has become an American tradition. Thanksgiving Day is reserved for a turkey dinner, a family sit-down, followed by a pro football game. The Detroit Lions started the tradition in 1934, and in 2007 they play in their 68th Thanksgiving Day game. There have been at least two pro football games on Thanksgiving Day every year since 1960. New Year's Day has long been the day for college football bowl games. These bowl games generally match up some of the nation's finest teams.

Paid attendance for the 2006 NFL regular season was the highest in the history of the league. It was the fourth consecutive year that ticket sales increased. Fans purchased 17,340,979 tickets to the league's games. Stadiums were filled on average to 90 percent capacity, with average attendance reaching 67,738 fans per game. Over 97 percent of games sold out ahead of the 72-hour TV blackout, which means home team fans got to see their teams play on television most of the time. Of the 256 games played, only 7 were blacked out.

## Why Anyone Would Play Football



Of all the team sports, football is the most violent and dangerous, with hockey a distant second. I played football for respect, and I believe that it builds character. Considering some of the problems in society today, football can give a youngster's life some structure and can also teach discipline. All the players who belong to a football team are in the struggle together, sharing in the joy and the pain of the sport. Every play can be such an adrenaline rush.

Football is suited to all sizes of athletes. Larger athletes generally play on the offensive and defensive lines — what are called the *trenches*. Leaner athletes who are faster and quicker generally play the skill positions, such as quarterback, running back, and receiver. But no matter how big or how talented you are, you must have inner courage to play football. This game requires strength and perseverance. If you don't believe you're tough enough to play, then you probably shouldn't try.

And if you're not up to the full-force-hitting variety of football, you can still enjoy the sport as a player. Touch football is totally different from tackle football. All you need are a ball and maybe six players, three per team. Anyone can play this game, and the players decide the rules and the size of the field at the start of the game. I've seen people playing touch football on the streets of New York City and in parks and front lawns all across America — the beauty of the game is that you can play anywhere.

### Football is *it* in the United States

Since 1985, Harris Interactive (a global marketing research firm) has been conducting polls to determine which sport is the most popular in the United States. Pro football has been ranked number 1 in all 21 polls. In 2006, 29 percent of Americans polled chose pro football as their

favorite sport. Baseball came in second. Guess which sport came in third? That would be college football at 13 percent. Any way you slice it, football is unquestionably the most popular spectator sport in the United States.

## *How Television Helped Increase Football's Popularity*

Millions of kids learn the game from their fathers and through high school football, like I did. But today, most football fans are introduced to the game through television, which brings the game right into everyone's home. The action in a football game translates well to television. The field and all the action that takes place upon it fit just as nicely on a big screen as they do on a smaller model. Because television networks use up to 12 cameras for most games, viewers rarely miss out on plays. And with taped replay machines — which are housed in those big trailers outside every NFL stadium — the networks can show critical plays from several different angles, including a viewer-friendly angle for fans watching at home or at the neighborhood tavern.

Television shows like *FOX NFL Sunday* also help to make the game more personal by promoting the personalities under the helmets. Fans, for example, can watch and listen to a Drew Brees interview and feel that they know the New Orleans quarterback as a person.

## *Why the Super Bowl Is Number One*

Almost every year, the highest-rated show in network television is the Super Bowl, with whatever the number-two show is running a distant second. Of the ten most-watched shows in the history of television, four of them are Super Bowl games. More people are said to attend Super Bowl parties than New Year's Eve parties. The game has become an event that all of America focuses on; many people have parties on Super Bowl Sunday to watch the game. This game attracts both casual as well as hard-core football fans. For some people, the Super Bowl is the only game they watch all season.

The Super Bowl also has become an international event. More than 200 countries and territories, including Iceland and the People's Republic of China, televised 2007's Super Bowl XLI. In the United States, an estimated 93.15 million fans watched, representing 42.6 percent of all households. The game was broadcast in 32 different languages. People all over the world saw the Indianapolis Colts defeat the Chicago Bears on that Super Bowl Sunday.

The main reason that the Super Bowl is so popular is that pro football is the only major professional men's team sport with a single-elimination playoff system. The other major sports declare their champions after a team wins four games in a best-of-seven series. The Super Bowl is do-or-die; that's what makes the game so special.



## The road to the Super Bowl

I played in my only Super Bowl after my third season in the NFL, and I thought I'd make it back at least two or three more times during my career. Unfortunately, that never happened.

The media attention back in 1984 wasn't nearly as expansive as it is today. In fact, tracing the growth of the media from 1984 to today is like comparing the size of Rhode Island to the size

of Montana. I remember taking a cab to Tampa Stadium to play in the Super Bowl. The traffic was so bad that I ended up walking the last three-quarters of a mile to the stadium. Today, the NFL provides police escorts for the players. The fanfare surrounding a team's arrival is as if the president is coming to town.

And it isn't just the game itself that attracts viewers. Companies pay Madison Avenue advertising firms lots of money to create commercials. In fact, watching the Super Bowl to see the commercials has become a part of what makes Super Bowl Sunday so special. All the commercials are judged and summarized because hundreds of millions of potential customers are watching. The stakes are almost as high as those on the field.



The Super Bowl has even gone high-tech! Every Super Bowl has its own Web site and offers its own cybercast of the game. Generally, several experts provide instant analysis of the game. The National Football League created the site [www.nfl.com](http://www.nfl.com), which fans can visit on Super Bowl Sunday to access live play-by-play of the game, *drive charts* (how many and what plays a team used during a scoring drive), and statistics, in addition to live audio of the press box and public address announcer. Nothing gives you a better feel of the stadium atmosphere. The site also provides audio and video clips from the game telecast, including a clip from the overhead blimp.

And the Super Bowl's audience continues to grow. Based on what the networks recently paid to maintain their television rights fees, they believe that America's appetite for the game remains strong.

## Why Millions Cheer Each Year for College Football

As much as I prefer the NFL, I have to acknowledge that for many fans, college football is the game to watch. The level of play isn't as high in college, but the collegiate game has more history and pageantry. Marching bands,

mascots, pep rallies, and cheerleaders add a fun dimension to college football. Some teams, such as Notre Dame and Michigan, are steeped in folklore and tradition. Notre Dame, for example, has the Four Horsemen, the Seven Mules, and the Gipper. College football fans can be every bit as passionate as NFL fans, especially when they root for a team that represents the college or university they attend or once attended.

Los Angeles doesn't have an NFL football team. The Rams left for St. Louis in 1995, and the Raiders returned to Oakland that same year. Nevertheless, football fans in the nation's second largest city have been able to do without a professional team on the strength of two college football teams, the USC Trojans and the UCLA Bruins. USC and UCLA consistently field excellent teams that vie for the national championship nearly every year.

Chapter 16 looks at college football in detail; Chapter 25 describes ten of the fiercest college football rivalries.

## *How Football Began*

Just as many fans get caught up in the hype and hoopla of today's NFL, many others love the game for its sense of tradition. The game itself has endured for more than 130 years.

Games involving kicking a ball into a goal on a lined field have existed for more than 2,000 years. American football evolved from two particular games that were popular in other parts of the world: soccer (as it's known in the United States) and rugby. Both the Romans and the Spartans (Remember that movie *Spartacus*? Now those guys were tough!) played some version of soccer. Soccer and rugby came to North America in the 19th century, and historians have noted that the first form of American football emerged on November 6, 1869, when teams from Princeton and Rutgers, two New Jersey universities, competed in a game of what was closer to rugby than football. Rutgers won the game 6-4.

## *The rules get defined*



Walter Camp, a sensational player at Yale University and a driving force behind many new rules, is known as the father of American football. Camp helped write the first rules for football — which was already being played in universities on the East Coast and in Canada — in about 1876. In 1880, he authored rules that reduced the number of players per team from 15 to 11 (today's total) and replaced the rugby *scrum* with the center snap to put the ball in play. (In a scrum, players from both sides close up tightly together, the

two teams butting heads while the ball is thrown between them. The players then try to gain possession of the ball with their feet. Using your hands to gain possession is unique to American football — both rugby and soccer forbid it.)

Camp also championed the rule that a team needed to gain 5 yards in three plays in order to maintain possession. Today, teams must gain 10 yards in three plays or decide to punt on fourth down. (See Chapter 3 for more information about these and other rules.)

Camp devised plays and formations and instituted referees. However, his biggest proposal was tackling, which was introduced in 1888. Tackling — which allowed players to hit below the waist for the first time that year — made the game more violent. It also popularized an offensive strategy known as the *flying wedge*, where an entire team (ten players) would mass in front of one ball carrier in the form of a wedge. Football was almost banned in 1906 after a dozen and a half deaths (and many more serious injuries in the preceding season), but President Theodore Roosevelt saved the game by convincing college representatives to initiate stricter rules to make the game less brutal and dangerous.

The game has been cleaned up a great deal over the years. It's come a long way from close-line shots and quarterbacks taking late hits and direct blows to the head. But let's not kid one another: Football is a high-impact collision sport, and with collision comes pain and injury. Even with the rules being adjusted to protect today's quarterbacks, it's rare to look in the paper on a Monday morning and not see that at least one quarterback sustained a concussion. Players are bigger, faster, and stronger. Let me put it this way: You're driving down the road traveling at 35 miles per hour. Would you rather be met head-on by a car of similar size or by a truck? Well, that's the difference between 20 years ago and now. Only thing is, the truck's now going 45 miles per hour rather than 35.

## ***Grange helps to spread the popularity of pro ball***

Americans started playing football in colleges and on club teams in the 1870s. Football became a source of identity for collegians and a regular Saturday afternoon activity by the turn of the century.

In the first 90 years of football, college football was far more popular than pro football; it was (and still is, at many schools) all about tradition and the many rivalries between colleges. (Chapter 25 describes some of these heated college rivalries). Eighty years ago, having more than 50,000 fans attend a great college game was not unusual. During that same period, games in the NFL — which officially began in 1920 — were fortunate to draw 5,000 fans.



Two days after the 1925 college season ended, Illinois All-American halfback Harold “Red” Grange (see Figure 1-1) signed a contract to play with the struggling Chicago Bears. On Thanksgiving Day of that year, 36,000 fans — the largest crowd in pro football history at that time — watched Grange and the Bears play the league’s top team, the Chicago Cardinals, to a scoreless tie in Cubs Park (now called Wrigley Field, the home of the Chicago Cubs baseball team). The Bears went on to play a barnstorming tour, and in New York’s Polo Grounds, more than 73,000 fans watched Grange — nicknamed “The Galloping Ghost” — compete against the New York Giants. Although Grange did attract new fans to the pro game, fewer than 30,000 fans attended championship games in the early 1930s.

Pro football emerged as an equal to college football after its games began being televised nationally in the 1960s, but it took decades for the NFL to supplant college football. And to this day, many colleges have as much fan support as some NFL franchises. Universities like Nebraska and Notre Dame can claim more fans than, say, the Atlanta Falcons.

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**Figure 1-1:**  
Harold  
“Red”  
Grange  
(left), who’s  
also called  
“The  
Galloping  
Ghost,” and  
Earl Britton  
(right) of the  
Chicago  
Bears in  
1925.

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Photo credit: © Bettmann/CORBIS





## Football immortals

With every sport comes a list of immortals — those great players who nurtured the game and made it what it is today. Following are some of the legends of American football:

- ✓ **Walter Camp:** Known as the father of American football, Camp was a player and coach at Yale and was the first to snap the ball from center, form a line of scrimmage, design plays, and use numbers and words as a form of signal-calling.
- ✓ **John W. Heisman:** The annual award given to the nation's best college player — the Heisman Trophy — is named after this Brown University (and later University of Pennsylvania) player. Heisman was also a member of New York's Downtown Athletic Club, where the award was presented every December until the building was damaged in the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Heisman was an early advocate of the forward pass.
- ✓ **Fritz Pollard:** Pollard starred for Brown University in 1915 and 1916 and was the first African-American player to appear in the Rose Bowl. He's also considered the first African-American football player to turn professional, the first to be selected to the college All-American team, and the first African-American pro head coach (of the Akron Pros in 1921). He was also the first

African American inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 1954.

- ✓ **Amos Alonzo Stagg:** Stagg was a famous University of Chicago coach who developed the "Statue of Liberty" play, in which a half-back takes the ball from the quarterback who has his hands raised as if to throw a forward pass. He was also the first coach to put numbers on players' uniforms.
- ✓ **Jim Thorpe:** A Native American who won the decathlon and pentathlon in the 1912 Stockholm Olympics, Thorpe was an All-American at Carlisle (Pennsylvania) Indian School and was the first big-time American athlete to play pro football. He was paid the princely sum of \$250 to play a game for the Canton Bulldogs in 1915. Today, Canton, Ohio, is the home of the Pro Football Hall of Fame.
- ✓ **Pop Warner:** The national tackle youth league is named after this famous coach, who developed the single-wing formation, which snaps the ball directly to the running back and has four linemen to one side of the center and two to the other side. Warner was the first to use the hidden ball trick, in which an offensive lineman slipped the ball under his jersey. The first "hunchback play" went for a touchdown against Harvard in 1902.

## *How the Football Season Is Set Up Today*

Football as an organized sport has come a long way since the early years. Teams at every level play during a standard season and are governed by various football leagues, such as the NFL and NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association).



The heart of the football season is during the fall months. However, training camps, practices, and preseason games often begin in the summer, and play-offs and bowl games are staged after Christmas and into February. Here's how the season breaks down for each level of play:

- ✔ **High school football teams** usually play between eight and ten games in a season, starting after Labor Day. If teams have successful league seasons, they advance to regional or state playoff tournaments. Some schools in Texas play as many as 15 games if they advance to the state championship game. Most high school teams play in a regional league, although some travel 50 to 100 miles to play opponents. You can find out more about high school football in Chapter 15.
- ✔ **College football teams** play between 10 and 13 games, the majority in a specific conference — Pac-10, Big Ten, SEC, ACC, and so on. The top teams from Division I-A (generally the largest schools that offer the most money for athletic scholarships) advance via invitation to post-season bowl games, which take place at more than 32 sites across the country. At the top level is the BCS, or Bowl Championship Series, which pits the two top-ranked teams in a game for the national championship that is held each year at a different site — the Rose Bowl, Sugar Bowl, Fiesta Bowl, or Orange Bowl. Read more about college football in Chapter 16.
- ✔ **NFL teams** play 16 regular-season games, preceded by a minimum of 4 preseason games that are played in August. The 32 NFL teams are divided into two conferences, the NFC (National Football Conference) and the AFC (American Football Conference), and the top six teams from each conference advance to the playoffs with hopes of reaching the Super Bowl, which is played in early February. Chapter 17 gives you all the details about the NFL.

Football is pretty much a weekend sport, although the NFL began *Monday Night Football* in 1970, offering a marquee matchup between two of the league's better teams. (The Monday night game is almost always ranked in the top ten television shows for the week, and *Monday Night Football* is the longest running prime-time television series.) A few Thursday games are broadcast during the college and pro season, and ESPN recently began televising games on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. However, in general, the football season, which begins in earnest right around Labor Day, follows an orderly pattern:

- ✔ High school games are generally played on Friday nights.
- ✔ College games are played on Saturdays, mostly during the day, although a few are held at night and showcased on prime-time television.
- ✔ The NFL plays on Sundays. For television purposes, games start at 1 p.m. EDT and 4:15 p.m. EDT. One Sunday night game is played and televised nationally by NBC.