IN THIS CHAPTER

- Discovering why football is America's passion
- Looking back on football's progression throughout the years
- Figuring out how the modern football season works
- Recognizing what makes college games so much fun and the Super Bowl such a major event

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# Chapter 1
# America's Greatest Game

When 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. 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 Dallas Cowboys play their longtime rivals from Washington, D.C.

Football is played in all weather conditions — snow, rain, and sleet — with temperatures on the playing field ranging from –30 to 120 degrees Fahrenheit. Whatever the conditions may be, the game goes on. And unlike other major sports, the football playoff system, in the National Football League (NFL) anyway, is a single-elimination tournament. In other words, the NFL has no playoff series; the playoffs are do-or-die, culminating 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 high-tech plastic 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 American culture. In fact, in many small towns across the United States, the centerpiece is the Friday night high school football game. The 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.

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, increasingly these days, their daughters. Although the focus may have changed in today's society, at one time 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 fans because it allows them time to guess what the team will try next.

## FOOTBALL IS *IT* IN THE UNITED STATES

Since 1937, the analytics company Gallup has been conducting polls to determine which sport is the most popular in the United States. Football has been ranked number one in every single poll since 1972. For over a half-century, between roughly 30 and 45 percent of Americans polled chose football as their favorite sport to watch. Whether you measure by TV ratings, stadium attendance figures, or total revenue, football is unquestionably the most popular spectator sport in the United States.



TIP

On two particular holidays, sitting down and watching football has become an American tradition:

- **Thanksgiving Day** is reserved for a turkey dinner with the family, followed by a pro football game. The Detroit Lions started the tradition in 1934, and they continue to play a game every Thanksgiving. There have been at least two pro football games on Thanksgiving Day every year since 1960, with the Dallas Cowboys also traditionally hosting a contest. And in 2006, a night game was added to cap off the holiday.
- **New Year's Day** has long been the day for several college football bowl games, which generally match up some of the nation's finest teams.

# Who's Playing Football

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 on front lawns all across America — the beauty of the game is that you can play anywhere.



HOWIE SAYS

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.

# 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 150 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 that game 6–4.

The following sections introduce you to the contributions of two key individuals in the football world: Walter Camp and Harold "Red" Grange.

## Camp defines the rules



HALL OF FAME

Walter Camp, a sensational player at Yale University and a driving force behind many football rules, is known as the father of American football. Around 1876, when football was already being played at universities on the East Coast and in Canada, Camp helped write the game's first rules. 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 bunch tightly together, 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 four plays. (Head to 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* — physically forcing a player to the ground— 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 nearly 20 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.



REMEMBER

Football has been cleaned up a great deal over the years and has come a long way from clothesline 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, rarely does a Monday morning come without the news that at least one quarterback sustained a concussion. Players are bigger, faster, and stronger than ever before. Although technological advances to equipment (and a better awareness of the physical toll the game takes) strive to make the sport safer, football will always be inherently dangerous.

## Grange helps 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. Ninety years ago, having more than 50,000 fans attend a great college game wasn't unusual. During that same period, games in the NFL, which officially began in 1920, were fortunate to draw 5,000 fans.



HALL OF FAME

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.

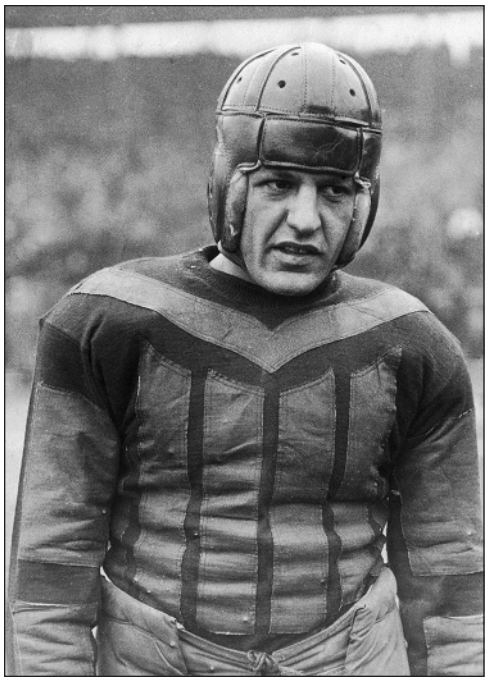


**FIGURE 1-1:** Harold "Red" Grange, known as "the Galloping Ghost," played for the Chicago Bears in 1925.

*Photo credit: © New York Times Co./Getty Images*

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. University powerhouses such as Ohio State, USC, Alabama, and Notre Dame can claim more fans than, say, the Atlanta Falcons or Jacksonville Jaguars.



HALL OF FAME

## FOOTBALL IMMORTALS

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

- **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 an early advocate of the forward pass.
- **Fritz Pollard:** Pollard starred for Brown University in 1915 and 1916 and was the first Black player to appear in the Rose Bowl. He's also considered the first Black

football player to turn professional and the first Black pro head coach, of the Akron Pros in 1921 (a role he held while still serving as the team's running back).

- **Amos Alonzo Stagg:** Stagg was a famous University of Chicago coach who developed the "Statue of Liberty" play, in which a halfback takes the ball from the quarterback who has his hands raised as if to throw a forward pass. (I explain offensive positions in Part 2.) 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 (described in Chapter 15) 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).



REMEMBER

The heart of the football season is during the fall months. However, training camps, practices, and preseason games often begin in the summer, and playoffs 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 up to 100 miles to play opponents. You can find out more about high school football in Chapter 15.
- **College football teams** generally play a schedule of 12 games, the majority in a specific conference — Pac-12, Big Ten, SEC, ACC, and so on. The top teams in

the Division I FBS (Football Bowl Subdivision), which is comprised of the largest schools that offer the most money for athletic scholarships, advance via invitation to postseason bowl games or a tournament-style playoff to determine a national champion. Read more about college football in Chapter 16.

- **NFL teams** play 17 regular-season games, preceded by a minimum of 3 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 four division leaders and three wild card 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 a few games are played on Monday and Thursday, particularly in the NFL. In general, however, the football season, which begins in earnest right around Labor Day, follows this orderly pattern:

- High school games are usually played on Friday nights.
- College games are played on Saturdays, both during the day and at night. A few are held on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday nights.
- The NFL plays most of its schedule on Sundays, with early- and late-afternoon games as well as a Sunday night game. A Monday night matchup has long been a tradition, and Thursday night games have become a regular occurrence since debuting in 2006.

# How Television Helped Increase Football's Popularity

Today, most football fans are introduced to the game through television, which brings the game right into everyone's homes. 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 20 cameras for most games, viewers rarely miss out on a play. And with replay machines, 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 Patrick Mahomes interview and feel like they know the Kansas City quarterback as a person.

In addition, with round-the-clock NFL coverage on sports cable networks like ESPN, FOX Sports, and the NFL Network, fans can get the latest news and updates about their favorite players and teams 24 hours a day. This kind of coverage keeps football at the forefront of fan awareness all season long, and even throughout the off-season.

## 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 usually 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. The annual Army-Navy game pitting the two service academies against one another generally gets its own weekend all to itself and is must-see TV, no matter what the teams' records are. 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) or when they don't have a professional team to cheer on. Los Angeles, for example, didn't have an NFL football team for many years, so its football fans made do with two local college teams, the USC Trojans and the UCLA Bruins.

## What Makes the Super Bowl Number One

Almost every year, the highest-rated show on network television is the Super Bowl, with the second-place show running a distant second. Of the ten most-watched shows in television history, four of them are Super Bowl games. Clearly, the Super Bowl has become an event that all of America, both casual and hard-core fans alike, focuses on. Even if it's the only game they watch all season, people tune in and attend Super Bowl parties in massive numbers. (Would you believe these parties are more popular than New Year's Eve parties?)



HOWIE SAYS

## 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.

The Super Bowl has also become an international event. More than 200 countries and territories, including Slovenia and the People's Republic of China, televise the game. In the United States, the typical audience is over 100 million viewers.



REMEMBER

The main reason the Super Bowl is so popular is that pro football is the only major professional 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 unique.

And it isn't just the game itself that attracts viewers. Companies pay 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, making the commercial stakes almost as high as those on the field.