
Play On!

BY ERIC MILLER

If sports have become the playthings of irresponsible corporations, and being a fan often turns into a hollow, pseudo-religious semblance of true belonging, there yet remains the undeniable beauty of the sports themselves and the creatures of God who find themselves irresistibly drawn to them.

I did not want to move to Brazil. The reasons were many, and readily discernable to anyone with a whit of insight. But the one that played most painfully upon my day-to-day longings had something to do with this: the Pirates had won the World Series the previous fall. The Steelers had won the Super Bowl four out of the previous six Januarys. A native of western Pennsylvania, thirteen years old, I loved sports. And I knew victory. Both were *sweet*. Indescribably sweet.

Within two years I would be swept up in a sports storm that even now bursts from my memory with titanic force. Upon hitting that red Brazilian dirt, in the summer of 1980, I began what turned out to be a shockingly rapid conversion to *futebol*, trading glove and cap for *kichute* and *camisa*, the soccer cleats and team-shirts my new friends wore. They were *Americanos*, yes, but where it mattered they were Brazilian: on the field. They took me and my brothers into the wonder-world of Brazilian soccer—*futebol arte*, as the Brazilians joyed to call it—where legends lived and heroes danced, sweeping across the field with delicacy and force, with vibrancy and focus and delight, magicians with a ball, making magic for the world.

And the world was watching. This I discovered early on, as the national team—known simply as the *Seleção* (“selection”)—played its way into the 1982 World Cup, the storm that would take my past experiences of vicarious participation to new degrees of intensity. As the Cup neared, the sense

grew, game by game, that this Brazilian team was unusual, even by Brazil's standards. It was armed with a midfield quartet as creative and dominant as any since the fabled days of soccer's undisputed greatest player ever, Brazil's own Pelé, who had led the country to World Cup championships in 1958, 1962, and 1970. I was scrambling to learn Portuguese by reading, dictionary in hand, the weekly sports magazine *Placar*, trying to absorb the scene as fully as possible. By the time the world's soccer powers converged upon Spain that June, anticipation had turned to climax, a month-long climax, filled with mystery, stars, jubilation—and defeat.

But first came the victories. Brazil, led by fabulous athletes with mythical names—Zico, Sócrates, Falcão, and Leandro—dispatched each of its early opponents with such potent *joie de vivre* that the final victory lap seemed only a blink away. Russia, Scotland, and New Zealand fell in the first round, mere apprentices. All Brazil swelled with glee. Argentina and Italy awaited in the second round—past champions both, always dangerous. But the Brazil-Argentina showdown proved to be simply one more Brazilian show. Now a victory over Italy would mean a semi-final berth.

To that point Italy had played drab, uninspired soccer. Suddenly it found inspiration. Brazil went for broke, putting its *jogo bonito* (“beautiful game”) on brilliant display, with an unending medley of fluid passes and pounding shots. But in what turned out to be the greatest game of the tournament, Italy held them to two goals and managed three of their own, taking advantage of the ever-attacking Brazilian midfield and a surprisingly weak goaltender. The all but certain coronation never came. Italy went on to win its third *Copa*, creating legends of its own.

The anguish of the loss was exquisite, the precise opposite of the overwhelming, samba-fired joy that had rumbled and raged through the country the previous two weeks. All Brazil—*all Brazil*—had shut down for its five games: no shoppers served, no mail delivered, no gas pumped. The *feita* seemed eternal; the joy at victory called up weddings and homecomings. The defeat they greeted with abject disbelief, a mourning echoing deeply down the soul of a long-floundering, ever-rising nation. The dream abruptly died—for a time, at least. But although Brazil has since won the *Copa* twice, its victorious sides have never equaled the grace and verve of that 1982 *Seleção*. Even in defeat, it made history.

It was the public nature of the joy that so affected me. I'd had a taste of it the previous February, when I watched the miraculous USA hockey team skate to the gold in the 1980 Olympics, Cold War passion and sporting love coursing through the nation's heart, and my own. When the United States defeated the Soviets, I had marveled—and, instinctively, rejoiced—at seeing the news clips that showed cars pulled off along the roadside and people spontaneously breaking into “God Bless America.” This was my point of reference for national celebration and patriotic unity. But what had happened in Brazil during those two weeks completely eclipsed it.

I was changed forever. When I entered Brazil in July of 1980, I was wearing the brassy yellow t-shirt an uncle had given me at a farewell party. It featured a muscular eagle wrapped in stars and stripes, with a banner waving beneath it that read *American and Proud of It*. When I re-entered the United States four years later, I was sporting yellow again. But this time it was the shimmering, golden, green-trimmed jersey of the *Seleção*. I was all-American no more.



It is striking that this is the title we drape across the shoulders of our athletic champions: *All-American*. The 1940 film *Knute Rockne, All-American* suggests, with blunt but sweet directness, how this came to be. “The life of Knute Rockne,” ran a prefatory declamation as the film began, “is its own dedication to the Youth of America and to the finest ideals of courage, character, and sportsmanship for all the world. Knute Rockne was a great and vital force in molding the spirit of modern America...”¹

America, an invented and enlightened nation, always required this molding, this worried attention to spirit and shape. But by the turn of the twentieth century something new had to be found to ensure that the recently electrified, urbanized, imperial nation had a great, upstanding citizenry to match—especially in view of the massive, darkly kaleidoscopic movement of migrants and immigrants that was transfiguring cities from Boston to Los Angeles. Modern industry had made modern cities. But it was still human beings—energetic, anarchic—who would inhabit them. Once outside the factories, what would people do? This was the troubling question.

Sport became the city’s way of preserving the ancient field, and sports teams a means of preserving the venerable village, both so necessary for any vital experience of the good life. As the maelstrom of modern living wove people into a colossal tangle, open space and communal impulses took new forms, and anxious gatekeepers were left hoping that, despite the ruckus of it all, something like a dance might emerge. Sport—closely tied to religion—was one of the dances they turned to, and with an intensity that can only be called innocent.

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The movie *Knute Rockne, All-American* gives a taste of this innocence. The child of parents who immigrated from Norway in 1895, young Knute, jammed with thousands of other children into Jane Addams’ Chicago, even-

tually finds his way onto a football field, and soon after declares to his parents that “We’re all Americans now – especially me: I’m a left end!” Years later, after he had become head coach at the University of Notre Dame, Rockne wins his players’ allegiance with a passionate, gruff, principled approach to coaching, and to life. The film is now remembered as a Ronald Reagan movie, and Reagan’s George Gipp delivers the tribute to Rockne that reveals precisely what “All-American” was to encompass. “He’s given us something they don’t teach in schools,” Gipp tells Mrs. Rockne. “Something clean and strong inside – not just coaching but a way of living, something we’ll never forget.”

It is a jock-flick best seen as a dream, a species of all-American romance. Like all romances, but especially those of this variety, it seeks to preserve cherished ideals – virtue, harmony, joy, fraternity – but, it turns out, at the expense of the person. We cannot believe in these characters; such nobility and fellow feeling and all-around jollity go down way too easily. We know there must be another side of the American story, however dreary and dark.

In her book *The Real All Americans: The Team that Changed a Game, a People, and a Nation*, Sally Jenkins gives it to us, revealing, among other things, the mangled, unholy relationship between modern sport and modern America that *Knute Rockne* will not probe. And she shows us why we, in our times, must be on guard even against sport.

Jenkins’s tale centers on the remarkable and forgotten connection between the game of football and that part of American history that *Rockne*, Reagan, and any number of other all-Americans have so easily elided: the fate of the indigenous people who fell before the mighty all-American engine. Her candor intensifies pathos. If she too tilts steeply toward romance (of a distinctively postmodern variety: not the romance of the conqueror, but of the conquered), she writes with subtlety and even-handedness, with a pleasing sympathy to all sides of this ugly, beautiful story.

In the midst of the great modern change, Jenkins shows, the feverishly popular game of football indeed helped us define ourselves as a nation – but not necessarily in ways we can be proud of. “The game, like the country in which it was invented, was a rough, bastardized thing that jumped up out of the mud,” she notes.² By the late nineteenth century, the annual Yale-Princeton match-up was so huge that churches in Manhattan held services an hour early to ensure that fans could make it to the game; 40,000 showed up at Polo Grounds in 1890 to watch these Ivies slug it out. The era of the mass spectacle was underway, though even football, remarkably, was an arena that reflected the persisting grip of old-stock elites on the nation’s public life: it was Harvard, Yale, and Princeton that were the titans of the gridiron.

This is where the lowly Carlisle Indians come into the story, and where the marriage of nation and sport is revealed in all its corrupt complexity – as well as its redemptive worth.

Carlisle was a team of actual Indians, students at an experimental school just outside of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, founded in the fall of 1879 when its earnest, quintessentially inner-directed architect, Captain Richard Henry Pratt, corralled a pan-Indian collection of youngsters (including many who were the children of chiefs), back East for (re)education. His sympathy for and devotion to the Indians are just as evident as his own repellent cultural stamp; among his mottoes was “*Kill the Indian, save the man.*” It is no wonder that Jenkins describes Carlisle as a “violent social experiment,” where English was required, braided hair (on boys) was shorn, and members of tribes were separated (p. 5).

And yet Pratt loved the Indians, Jenkins makes clear. When several years after the school’s launch some boys asked permission to start a football team, he, nervous about the violence of the game, cautiously said yes, and then watched in wonder. “Their grace and exceptional speed in getting all over the field was a revelation,” he recalled (p. 32). In 1900 Harvard’s coach (as it turns out, the grandson of Ralph Waldo Emerson) declared that football was “the ultimate expression of Anglo-Saxon superiority” — precisely the kind of culture-defining conceit that irked Pratt. When he gave the go ahead to football, he did so with two utterly characteristic conditions: first, that the players practice charity and self-control in the face of provocation; second, that they prepare themselves to shortly “whip the biggest football team in the country” (p. 123).

They fulfilled both conditions amply, and managed to change history, too, creating in effect the game we know today. In the face of the steam-rolling, bone-crunching Anglo-Saxon style, the Indians, with the same poise, mystery, and wit that gave Colonel Custer and friends fits, showed the now-watching world another way to play. “They had invented a whole new brand of game,” Jenkins writes. “Carlisle football, mixing the run, pass, and kick with elements of surprise, was the game of the future. The traditional powers would cling to their old tactics at their peril” (p. 230). Between 1911 and 1913, taking on the most dominant, best-financed teams in the country, the team would pile up thirty-eight victories against only three defeats. After the climactic episode in the book, the 1912 Jim Thorpe-led defeat of the powerhouse Army Cadets, the *New York Times* itself declared Carlisle’s “the most perfect brand of football ever seen in America” (p. 286).

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Their innovating coach, Glenn Scobey “Pop” Warner, had helped channel the genius of the Indians’ own place, people, and time into a form that has stood the test of time (including, contra the blatantly false claim of *Knute Rockne*, the perfecting of the forward pass as a primary offensive weapon). And it was Warner who lauded their achievement most poignantly. “Whenever I see one of those All American teams,” he mused in his memoirs, “I cannot help but think what an eleven could have been selected from those *real* All Americans who blazed such a trail of glory” (p. 295).



Can the trail of glory ever truly emerge from anything so tangled in the thorns of this corrupt world? For as readily as *Knute Rockne* applies varnish, Jenkins strips it. She forces us to confront the malign motives, the violent impulses, the idolatrous yearnings—often on a grand, national scale—that modern sport has been mixed up in since its birth.

This seedy reality is bound to trouble those charged with setting themselves apart as a holy nation, those Christ himself described as “not of the world any more than I am of the world.” Sports, like so many other of the social forms concocted in the modern world—from the shopping mall to the stock market to the U.S. Congress to the United Nations—seem coated in compromise, lethal to body and soul. These social forms attract a degrading kind of allegiance, effected by both brazen seduction and sickly dependence, and leave decent folk longing for far truer forms of membership, of belonging, of citizenship.

Yet, as all of these stories make evident, it is both wheat and tares that fill our fields, tares that invariably choke life, wheat that miraculously gives it. There is no escaping this tangle. There is only the persisting need to dedicate ourselves to preserving the good that is miraculously here, and by that preserving expose the evil that threatens it. If sports in our day have become the playthings of catastrophically irresponsible corporations, and if becoming a fan so often turns into a hollow, pseudo-religious semblance of true belonging, there yet remains the undeniable beauty of the sports themselves to uphold, and the marvelous reality of the actual human beings, the creatures of God almighty, who find themselves so irresistibly drawn to them.

Consider the story Jenkins tells about the Carlisle-Yale game of 1896, in the early years of Carlisle’s football history. The Indians were coming off of a brutal 22-6 loss to Princeton, after which the *Philadelphia Press* had chortled, “The race with a civilization and a history won the day. It was a clear victory of mind over physical force” (p. 142). Just a few days later Carlisle was to take its grandest stage yet, Polo Grounds, to play mighty Yale. The team was a curiosity in a nation of citified consumers, and the game attracted a huge crowd, including Russell Sage, the railway magnate, philanthropist, and sometime politician, who played host to Pratt for the occasion.

After Carlisle went up by a score early on, Yale came back, and took a 12-6 lead into the closing minutes. But near the game's end the Carlisle left end broke away from a pile-up with a mighty burst of strength and spurted down the field for a touchdown. The unthinkable was happening.

And then it happened again — this time in the other direction. As Carlisle was lining up to kick the extra point, a late whistle sounded. One of the referees — a Yale alum and also (in a situation not uncharacteristic of the day) the Carlisle coach — was calling the play back. The players were stunned. The crowd started to boo, louder and louder. The Indians threatened to leave, talked out of it only by Pratt himself.

The clock wound down, and the game ended. But as it did the crowd, breaking into a mighty ovation, took a completely unexpected step — one giant step for mankind, as it were: it stormed the field and carried the Indians off the field. The *New York Sun*, as did most of the press, hoisted the players as well, declaring, with sudden historical clarity, that the now infamous call was “characteristic...of nearly all the crimes committed against the Indians by the whites, for it was accomplished by the man of all men who should have looked out for their interests and their rights” (p. xx). After the game Mrs. Sage herself took off her corsage and pinned it on the Carlisle quarterback Frank Cayou, who had scored the first touchdown.

How we glory in exceptional play, we creatures of God. We delight in honest, fierce competition. We thrill to witness the fruit of difficult, demanding training. We watch, enchanted, as our athletes hurtle themselves toward their dreams, wholehearted, full-spirited, focused on the prize, acting together, giving all. We sense our spirits rise. It is just a game, we know, we know. But it hints, somehow, at that which lies beneath the game, yet is also deeply integral to life on this wondrous earth. The swell of admiration, the giving of affection, the ennobling of sacrifice: it all reminds us so sweetly of who we finally are, and where we are bound.

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We are certainly bound for a land that transcends these particular identities — American, Brazilian, Norse, Lakota — even as it redeems and honors them. And it is this difficult but wonderful tension, the tension between the universal and the particular, that is perhaps the most redemptive effect of modern sport. It previews a day when we will know ourselves for what we at root are: human beings, distinct but united, many but one, destined for an

eternal dance—destined for play—in the kingdom of God.

Until that day, those who know that hope can surely honor it with beautiful dives, bravura goals, and bountiful cheers. Somewhere, some confused teenager, or marginal man, or aged woman, will see.

And will know.

NOTES

1 *Knute Rockne All American*, DVD, directed by Lloyd Bacon (1940, Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2006).

2 Sally Jenkins, *The Real All Americans: The Team that Changed a Game, a People, a Nation* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 1. As I summarize the story Jenkins recounts, further references to quotations will be in the text.



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