

A Quaint Relic

Back in the day, the late George Carlin did a “football vs. baseball” rap that almost everyone heard at some point or another. Football is played in a “stadium;” baseball in a “ballpark.” In football, one wears a “helmet;” in baseball, one dons a “cap.” Football has the “two minute warning;” baseball has a “seventh inning stretch.” In football, there are “aerial attacks” and “blitzing” as teams battle between the “end-zones.” In baseball, players try to stay “safe” as they run for “home.” It got a good laugh. Many people thought George Carlin was claiming that football was hard and baseball was soft, that football was contemporary and baseball was quirky, that football was real-world and baseball was a quaint relic. *I* prefer to think that Carlin was distinguishing common barbarism from abiding truth.

In the decades after William Webb Ellis ran with the ball at Rugby School in 1823, football’s “carrying game” held a kind of mystique as a rough sport played by gentlemen. American football put itself above the seediness of more popular sports like baseball and boxing. Football was played by young men who were going places. “College boys” would play it to test their mettle under difficult conditions. Short of war itself, football was seen a kind of crucible for the battleground that is life.

We Americans devised a version of the “carrying game” that permitted the offense to block *ahead* of the ball without being called “offside,” and when a player was tackled, we reset the action with a new “down.” American football was a tough, fast, fun game. But since Americans, regardless of their socioeconomic status, love to win, ringers were recruited to provide a competitive edge. It turned out that, to the extent the gridiron was some sort of testing ground, young men from *all* walks of life were capable of proving their mettle.

As thousands of American kids began streaming through the pipeline, coaches took over from the field captains. The blocking-and-tackling game was reengineered from the top-down. Players on the field were relegated to an intricate division of labor. Eventually, football became what it is today: a game owned and operated by “ranchers” who blow through the “cattle,” leaving them with concussions, life-long injuries, and early death.

Baseball also has a division of labor. You will see it at the ballpark: seven men fanned behind their pitcher, each man in his own position. Four are up close and three farther out, arrayed in the familiar right angle that converges upon the catcher. To paraphrase T.S. Eliot, the division of labor in baseball is “a job for each and a church for all.” After all, and regardless of a player’s station on the field, each takes his turn in the communion of hitting.

Some things are almost preordained and it was probably just a matter of time before football supplanted baseball as the nation’s pastime. After World War II, as returning veterans were sent to college, courtesy of a grateful Uncle Sam, football entered the life of more American families. The game that appealed to the vanities of the American elite now stroked the vanities of John Q. Public. A decade or two passed, and football simply

had more juice than baseball. It looked good on television. As camera angles were refined and production values improved, football looked *great* on television.

Not so much with baseball. Television was not a good fit. Watching baseball on television is like watching baseball with binoculars: fun for awhile, but at some point, one must set the binoculars aside to actually see the game.

Today, football is a sweet piece of salesmanship. The ramp-up to the game will feature off-field theatrics and cheesy media narratives. During the game, of course, the broadcast will do its level best to shoehorn those theatrics and that narrative around the action on the field. The football game rolls through like cheap whiskey and perfume, as the players preen and showboat and thump their chests. Nor is there much to say afterwards. Perhaps there were some thrilling moments and perhaps not, but a concluded football game is rather like a vulgar secret. Like the Oscars, or a forgotten weekend, it fades from memory within a week or two. What won “Best Picture” last year? Who won the Super Bowl? These are things that do not matter much, regardless of how important it seemed at the time.

Baseball is no such thing. Baseball draws its power from numbers and language, and as such, its order rarely falters. A cultural artifact from an era that has Abraham Lincoln and FDR as its bookends, baseball looks great on radio. Heck, it even looks great on telegraph! American baseball is millions of droplets forming a mighty typographic ocean. In the same way as the sea looms beneath every wave, memory looms beneath every baseball game, washing ashore as statistics and biography and anecdotes and even poetry. But there is also high-definition precision. Nothing is forgotten. In a sense, baseball is the hint that history is a science. Baseball is the natural law that formed this republic shaking off its cobwebs and springing to life, albeit in the seemingly trivial form of sport. Baseball is a haunting reminder to Americans of how far we are from what we are supposed to be.

Qoheleth, the prophet who wrote *Ecclesiastes*, said that wondering why yesterday was better than today is not inspired by wisdom. And yet, almost undeniably, in the half-century since football replaced baseball in the popular imagination, there has been a decline in our national character. Not to overstate things, but when baseball reigned, American life was nobler and more inspiring. In the words of Sergeant Joe Friday: “Baseball is the sport for Americans. It teaches our youngsters fair-play.” These days, if you can believe it, “fair-play” is depicted as naïve, if not contemptible.

Americans *do* love to win. We always have, even when it disrupts our alignment to the moral order of things. Still, there are multiple causes for the erosion we all sense. We have not morally declined *because* of our changing preferences in sports. But it is also true our manner of thinking affects how we relate to the world around us. Football draws from one manner of thinking and baseball from another. It seems heedless, even unpatriotic, not to wonder if this correlation between the rise of football and the decline of baseball hints at a deeper truth about how we Americans have evolved as a People.

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