



For the Love of Football

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After sitting through exactly 70 minutes of meetings and film-watching, the players made their way out to the practice field by 8:30 a.m., equipped in pads and helmets. “It’s North versus f*cking South, and it’s damn Bloody Tuesday!” yelled the offensive coordinator to his players. On this chilly November morning just before Thanksgiving, the team was being put through their longest, toughest, and earliest practice of the week. There’s a reason for this day’s nickname. Fourteen periods of stretches, drills, and scrimmages last about two hours, and I could tell that each minute exacted painful effort from the players.

Standing on the sidelines during practice placed me close to the action. At one point, the linemen ran different plays, resetting and tackling each other, over and over again. There’s nothing like the sound of football helmets and pads hitting up against each other in a solid tackle. The scratch, the screech, the muffled union of fabric and plastic and flesh. I still wasn’t used to it, though I doubt I ever will be, the men running against each other with so much force. During this drill, the head coach happened to pass by. He briefly greeted me, then asked why I made a face after each tackle. I tried, and failed, to accurately explain the sound and why I reacted each time. Before he walked away, he chuckled, “I love it, too.”



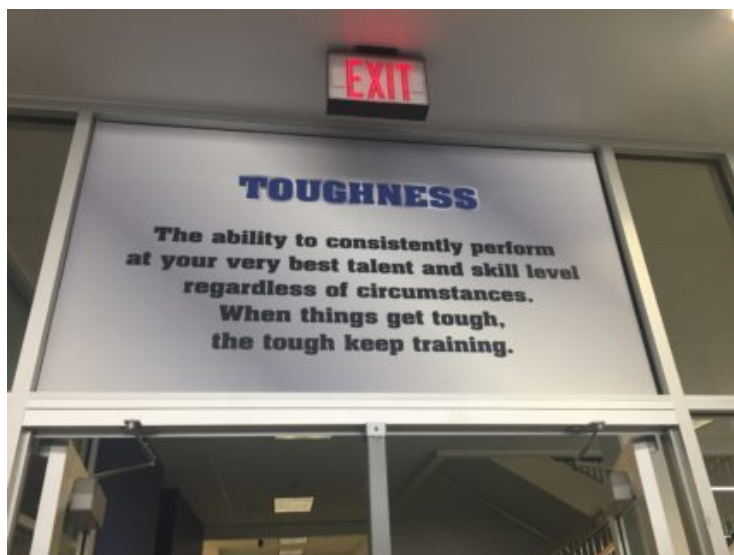
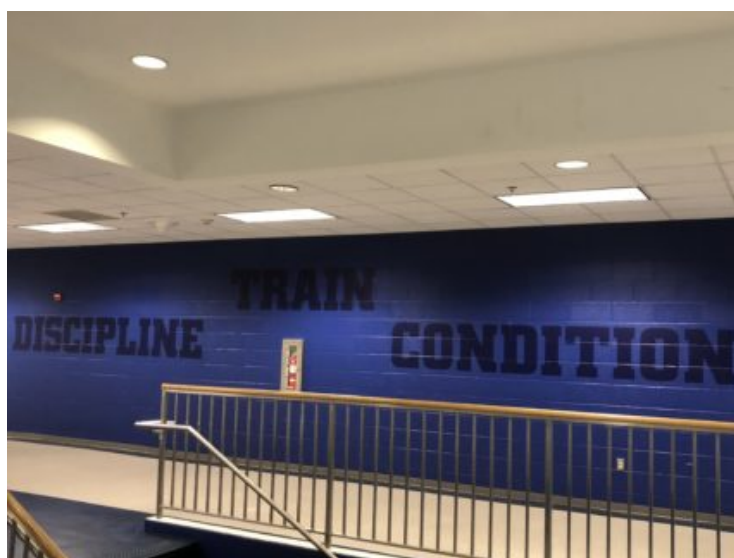
A helmet worn during practice, covered in scratches and marks. Tracie Canada

This Tuesday morning practice occurred in 2017 when I was conducting ethnographic fieldwork with Black college football players in the southeastern United States. It wasn't the first time that one of the men involved in my research—a player, a coach, a sibling, a dad—expressed how much he loved football. For this coach, the physicality and barely controlled violence are admirable achievements. Others describe the pleasure of pushing one's body to its limits; an initial interest in meeting new people through the sport; and the unique opportunities presented by participation in it, including college scholarships for the relative few. My doctoral research questions how participating in football shapes the experiences of the young Black men who play it. Given that this is a large population in plain sight of the American public, but barely understood from a person-centered perspective, I follow Barnes's (2016) call to engage with those whose lived experiences are often rendered invisible. As a North Americanist, I can also use these experiences as a lens for scrutinizing how the sport itself represents particularly American concerns and tensions. What can college football, and its Black players' experiences, tell us about racial-political dynamics in the contemporary United States?

American football mirrors the preoccupation with order and rationality that governs our modern, Western world. Historian Allen Guttman (1978) famously describes sport as a product of new nineteenth century concerns for standardization, counting, and the bureaucratic regulation of competition. Football comes to life through the historical records that mark it; each field is technically the same, so play can be replicated across places like Alabama's Bryant-Denny Stadium and Clemson's Death Valley; only one ball is ever in play to foster competition; the outcome of a winner and a loser creates hierarchy; the same number of athletes play for each team to feign the ideological democratic construction of fair play; different playing positions on the field epitomize the team's dependence on specialization; and each category of person involved—fans, coaches, players,

referees—becomes a body disciplined to perform particular duties and functions in the football spectacle.

It is these bodies, especially those of the players themselves, that should be at the center of any study of sport, as other anthropologists of sport agree (Besnier et al. 2017; Uperesa 2014). Football's standardization not only affects the systemic implementation of the sport, but it's also inscribed in the bodies of individual players, as it configures and constitutes their embodied experiences. For one, the ability to manipulate, train, and discipline the sporting body into docility and compliance to an ordered regime, in a Foucauldian sense, is one of the primary reasons sport is significant for society.



Important reminders found on different campuses. Tracie
Canada

All college football players must deal with these demands as part of being socialized into a team. But white players often have a distinct, more privileged, experience because of the systematic advantages offered by their whiteness, both on and off the field ([Leonard 2017](#)). In contrast, Black players, who are highly visible and over-represented in college football ([Harper 2018](#)), find themselves in need of navigating these normalized spaces that privilege whiteness. And for them, this must be done from the perspective of an embodied experience that is motivated by the distinctive intersection of race, gender, class, masculinity, and athleticism.

During my fieldwork, I've encountered plenty of players who discuss thoughtfully what it means to be marked by a Black, male, athletic body at this tense American moment. For example, Charlie recognizes that as a dark-skinned Black man, when he meets new people, they are often intimidated by his six-foot-seven, two-hundred-eighty-pound frame. His body may be large for the "real world," but the ideal size for his position on the team. To compensate for and attempt to overcome it, he deliberately smiles and approaches any newcomers first. Another player, Braxton, once joked about the nervous response he and two teammates received when they asked someone for directions when on spring break. This contradiction of praise on the field, but stigmatization and sometimes discrimination in the real world demonstrates that Black athletes embody Stuart Hall's ([1997](#)) paradox of both hero and villain, all because of the particular bodies they inhabit.

And the gendered dynamic of the sport cannot be avoided, all the more so for me as a female anthropologist. Football, of course, is almost completely played by, coached by, officiated by, and run by men. During fieldwork, I've been banned from certain areas in football buildings, I've been dubbed "one of the toughest research ladies I've ever seen" by an older male staff member, and I've been told that my level of access was only granted at particular institutions because I was a "pretty girl." This is just a sampling of examples that demonstrate that my mere presence often transgressed, challenged, and reinforced hypermasculine football notions and spaces that again, are primarily occupied by young Black men.

Overall, on behalf of the university, football teaches discipline, honor, loyalty, and school pride, all values that are then extracted and meant to translate to the greater society represented by the nation. I'd argue that it's impossible to disentangle the two—sport and nation—because of the white, Euro-American standards reinforced by both. The fact that politics have blatantly come onto the field of play, [with the ongoing consequences of the protest spearheaded by Colin Kaepernick during the 2016-17 professional season](#), only highlights these entanglements.

Therefore, I'm not sure I agree with the coach. I don't necessarily love football. But I am committed to exploring the stories and experiences of its Black players. Despite its contradictions and

inconsistencies, [about 13,000 Black men compete in the highest level of college football every year](#). Behind the uniforms and helmets, these gridiron gladiators are ordinary young men, of which extraordinary feats are often expected, who are trying to make sense of and succeed within the social world they inhabit. That world can include winning the game at the end of the week, which the team did on that cold November Saturday; making it to class on time; or dealing with different forms of violence, both off and on the field. But by understanding and highlighting their experiences, we can learn not only about our paradoxical engagement with this particular population, but also more generally about what sport has to say about distinctively American lives.

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Note: All people discussed here have been given pseudonyms. As a further precaution, all individual people and institutions mentioned throughout are a combination of two or more entities.

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