

Sports and their ideologies

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"Sports are too important to be left to the sportswriters".

Most so-called "serious" analyses of sports deal with their wider cultural implications as mass spectator circuses on the current North American landscape, their relationship to the ideology of business and consumption, and sometimes muckraking on various "stars" and "heroes" who have seized the Main Chance and have parlayed their physical skills into a ticket for entry into the business elite, mainly through advertising and television. Rarely, however, has anyone analyzed the actual ideological implications of the games themselves, and their relationship to other modes of thought and development in society.

We have thus chosen three of America's most important (from a financial angle, at least!) sports, to see what there is about them that makes them unique.

First, there is ice hockey. This game corresponds most closely to a tribal vision of the world. The roles of the individual players (with the exception of the goaler) remain very unspecialized and the team as in the case of a tribe plays with a type of intuition every player "knowing" where he must be on ice etc. This differs greatly from the actual explicit and formalized "plays" of a football game with its much greater division of labour and hence loss of organic cohesion, thus requiring, as a modern state actual "discourse" (the huddle) about actions to be taken.

Also in hockey, the concept of territory is meaningless, there being only one object, to score a goal, this being the **only** way to gain points. Thus the opposing team's goal assumes the role of a temple and the goaler a guardian-priest, or holy area, to be conquered as one primitive tribe conquered another by ap-

propriating its gods and village, since there were no actual formal boundaries between tribes. The goal is all, it is quite literally the only goal in the game, possession of the puck being very haphazard and position on the ice almost meaningless. (It is of course very relevant to note at this point that hockey probably did have its origins in lacrosse a type of surrogate for tribal war fought between different villages among Indians).



HOCKEY: A tribal vision of the world.

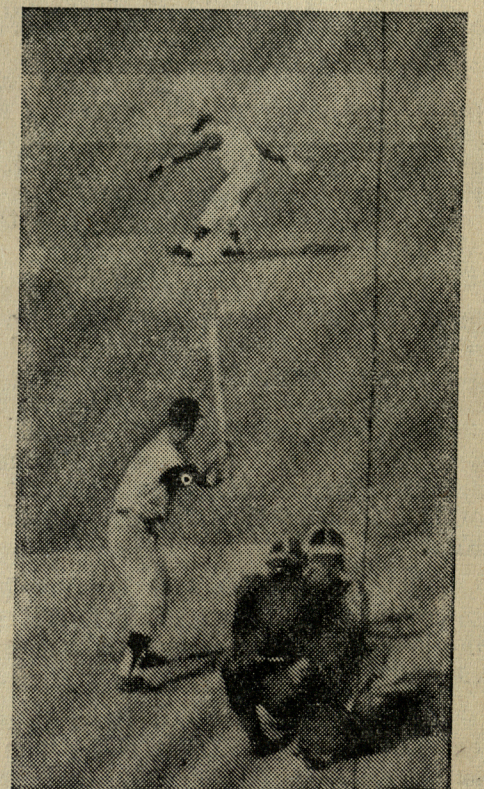
The game of football corresponds most closely to modern nation-states at war with one another. The field may be seen as representing the total territory of the two states, with the 55 yard line as a boundary, and both armies engage in ceaseless marching into the others' terrain, with one side mounting an offensive that cannot be stopped until possession of the ball changes hands something much more difficult to accomplish than in hockey, of course, since it depends except in cases of inter-

territory is a more complex matter, and is rewarded and recognized (through the concept of "downs")—indeed, if one can penetrate the enemy's area deeply enough, even without total conquest (a touchdown) one is still given a lesser reward (a field-goal). In hockey, with its lack of territorial principle, this would be meaningless and points are rewarded only when the other tribe's holy area is conquered.

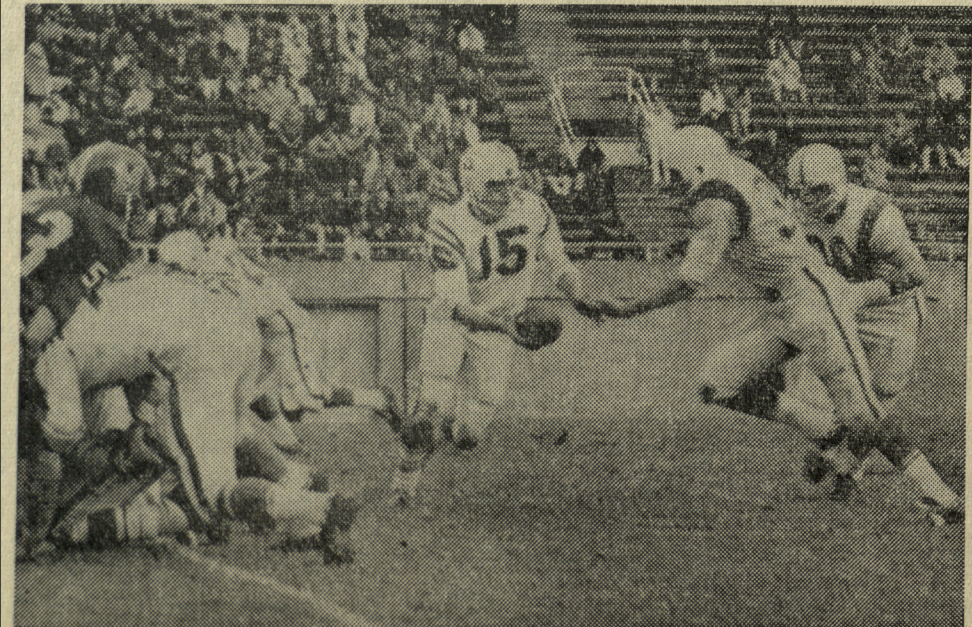
The third game is most complex of all representing a more advanced form of economic principle, that of Lockian liberalism and mediated conflict. This game, baseball, (a game very much in tune with the ideals of 19th century America), sees conflict as necessary but is hopeful that actual brutality may be kept to a minimum. Thus there is no actual physical contact between the teams (indeed offense and defense are totally separate, with each team having "turn at bat" per inning, and with the offensive team represented by the batter alone). In baseball, the ball and the umpire are thus mediators of conflict (true, football and even hockey also have officials, but only to watch that rules are being observed—in effect, were you to have a perfect infractionless game, in theory the whistle might never be blown during the entire 60 minutes. In baseball, however, the umpire is an **integral** part of the game—it cannot go on without him, as he

calls balls and strikes). Baseball, too, is unconcerned with territory, not in the sense hockey is (for there the concern is merely underdeveloped), but because the teams are not scoring **directly against** each other, they are not attempting to attack the other team's area. The field thus remains entirely irrelevant, it is merely an area of importance for the **mediator** (the ball), and players of the two teams see no need to conquer or gain control of it. (Indeed, the offensive player in baseball is severely circumscribed as to where he may move—only along the base lines). In this way the teams never directly oppose each other, physically or even territorially (as, say, in a game of checkers)—instead, both are concerned with the **ball** which becomes a surrogate for conflict and point-scoring.

The rise of football and the decline in the popularity of baseball in the United States since World War II takes on a sinister implication, therefore, when one sees the ideological implications behind both games. From a nation of merely competitive businessmen they have become a vast army conquering other fields (or at least deeply penetrating them). From the World Series to the Super Bowl—this can now be seen as part of the larger movement which has transformed America from a largely self-contained private enterprise country to the greatest imperial power of our age.



BASEBALL: Lockian liberalism and mediated conflict.



FOOTBALL: Halting the enemy territorially along the front line