
The NFL

Critical and Cultural Perspectives

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Introduction: The Political Football

Culture, Critique, and the NFL

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The editors of this book met in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a former steel town transformed by deindustrialization that has recently been hailed as America's "most livable" city by the *Economist* and *Forbes*.¹ As the steel mills on the river that sustained past generations of "Yinzers" (as many Pittsburghers self-identify) lie abandoned or are demolished to make way for shopping malls or housing developments, the city has rebranded itself around the so-called knowledge economy, with health care, insurance, and education at its center. But the city's industrial past is still symbolically very much alive and finds public expression in a passion for the local professional football franchise. As the workweek draws to a close every autumn, streets, classrooms, and workplaces are increasingly awash in black and gold—the city's official colors and those of the beloved Pittsburgh Steelers. The Steelers are one of the most successful franchises in the history of the NFL, winning four Super Bowls during the 1970s and adding two more in the twenty-first century. The names and numbers of past and present team heroes are visible on flags and billboards and on jerseys, caps, sweatshirts, and tattoos donned by fans young and old. For the few residents who could not care less about football, game days in Pittsburgh are particularly difficult to ignore—live coverage monopolizes television screens in bars, restaurants, and corner stores. The "Stillers" are a frequent topic of small talk between strangers, an excuse for gathering friends and family together, and a taken-for-granted connection for local politicians to exploit when convenient. Much has changed in Pittsburgh in the past several decades, but the Steelers remain an intergenerational source of civic pride.

While nearly every native Pittsburgher can offer some kind of opinion on the Steelers franchise or their recent performances, conversations that begin

with the team itself tend to naturally spiral into interrelated webs of memories, emotions, and experiences. These stories, which are intricately wrapped up in the triumphs and tragedies that animate the dramatic mythology of “Steeler Nation,” never fail to casually fuse the personal and political and otherwise place pro football in a broader economic, geographical, and cultural context. Indeed, hearing someone wax nostalgic about the team’s glory days in the 1970s is often as much a lesson in Steelers trivia as it is a meditation on the city’s cultural history, neighborhoods, and labor politics and the blue-collar backgrounds of most of the players who donned the black and gold for a living. One of us (Zack) is the child of someone who played during the Steelers’ heyday and also served as an assistant coach for a stint during the team’s revival in the early 1990s, granting a unique experience of being quite literally born into professional football and reared by a hand that always wore a Super Bowl ring.

The other editor (Tom) was raised by parents who have never attended a professional football game as fans, have never even watched a full game on television, and would have difficulty identifying even the league’s most famous stars. Nevertheless, career moves took the family to Wisconsin and Washington, DC—places where football’s influence was (and is) almost inescapable, especially for a young man being pulled ever deeper into the culture of sports fandom. Visits to the homes of childhood friends, discussions over school lunches, and backyard pickup games all regularly referenced professional football, ensuring that even in the face of parental indifference the NFL became a central preoccupation.

Thus, the process of analyzing pro football as a social phenomenon depends less on one’s lineage than it does on the shared experience of being immersed in pro football *as* a social phenomenon. This experience is the result of lessons that both of this book’s editors (and many others) first learned from the thousands of ad hoc teachers who, collectively, have cultivated what one might call the “public pedagogy of pro football.” As instructive as this curriculum might be, one nevertheless finds that the narratives and facts used to tell both the official and the popular story of the NFL are often rife with distortions, half-truths, and in particular, a slew of blaring omissions—the kind of gaps through which running backs dream of darting toward end zone glory. In addition to the range of untold and otherwise undocumented stories that would necessarily paint a more complex picture of the league’s history, culture, policies, and institutional practices, one especially finds that the kinds of questions that typically get asked about the NFL, let alone *of* the NFL, are those generally deemed fit for polite company, as it were. Whereas fans and commentators routinely spend thousands of hours dissecting games or even the merits of a particular quarterback’s arm, one would be hard pressed to hear a public discussion of the issue that first brought this book’s editors together in conversation—namely, the eerie similarities between the historical slave auction and the televised physical examination and scrutiny of prospective players’ bodies during the NFL’s Scouting Combine. While neither of us naively

anticipates a moment when such issues are subject for debate on a weekly cable broadcast (imagine *ESPN Presents Critical Race Theory and Sports*), the extent of what has long passed for critical inquiry among pro football's legion of analysts has too often been limited to predictable controversies surrounding player indiscretions or, perhaps, allegations of steroid use. The range of public discussion has fortunately been broadened in recent years as a result of, for example, well-publicized debates over labor issues (the lockout of 2011) and player safety, the efforts of brave gay players who have come out after retirement,² and the tireless work of an increasing number of bold sports journalists like Dave Zirin, Mark Fainaru-Wada, and Steve Fainaru, whose books and articles have helped roundly reject the long-standing truism that sports and politics do not mix.³

As interdisciplinary scholars indebted to the public pedagogy of football and committed to critical inquiry, we are confident that there is a distinct role for academics of all backgrounds to play in not only making the NFL more political but also rethinking the very questions we ask about football in the first place.

America's Game

The NFL is one of the most significant engines of contemporary culture, attracting legions of devoted fans, tens of millions of television viewers, and billions of dollars in annual revenue. Indeed, the NFL has played and continues to play a formidable role in shaping not only the economics and aesthetics of professional sports in the United States but also the very contours of modern sport itself. By any reliable measure, the league's dominance is undeniable. For example, polls consistently report U.S. fans preferring football to any other sport by a two-to-one margin, and in February 2012, NBC's broadcast of Super Bowl XLVI became the most-watched program in U.S. television history. The latter milestone was reported without surprise by the press, with sports journalists noting that it was the third consecutive year in which audiences for the Super Bowl had set the mark. In the preceding year, nine of the ten highest-rated television programs were NFL games or analysis programs; the Academy Awards, the only nonfootball program, ranked eighth. Even in the midst of a deep global recession, the NFL continues to prove one of the great commercial successes of late capitalism. Though competing leagues, such as Major League Baseball, the National Basketball Association, the Barclay's Premier League, and Formula One, stake a claim to some of the most visible, influential, and successful brands in the contemporary sports marketplace, they cannot compete with the incredible concentration of wealth and power in the NFL. *Forbes* recently reported that nineteen of the twenty-five most valuable franchises in any sport were NFL teams, and over half the league's thirty teams were worth more than a billion dollars each, with nineteen majority owners at the helm who are themselves billionaires.⁴

As the most profitable sports league in the United States, the immense wealth of the NFL is generated from myriad sources. The league sells the rights to broadcast its games for more than \$20 billion, which is higher than for any other U.S. sport and more than several of its closest competitors combined. Ticket sales and official merchandise produce very significant revenue streams as well, but the rights for games and other league programming unquestionably drive the engine of profit. More than perhaps any other major media player, the NFL has positioned itself to exploit recent changes in the media marketplace. Like no other sporting institution, the NFL “delivers the male”⁵ to advertisers, and the female market is both significant and growing fast. The league also maintains a heavily trafficked website and its own network, which carries live games and league events. The live consumption of pro football is central to its appeal, advantaging football over other television programming that is more frequently seen via recordings. As any fan knows, many people watch the games in groups, including at bars specially designed for multichannel consumption. Fantasy football, played by tens of millions of fans, further encourages the expansion of NFL consumption and builds cross-platform opportunities for marketers to reach audiences. Even off-season events such as the NFL draft have become lucrative levers for generating high exposure for the league months before training camps begin.

Football’s dominant presence in contemporary media culture helps make it a central site for the assertion of hegemonic ideals and the maintenance of dominant social norms. As Michael MacCambridge notes in his extensive and well-researched history of the league, *America’s Game: The Epic Story of How Pro Football Captured a Nation*, “To know America, one may still have to know baseball. But to *understand* the world’s only superpower at the dawn of a new century, its passions and preoccupations, idealism and contradictions, it is necessary to understand the National Football League and its profound effect on its audience.”⁶ MacCambridge’s book is an example of recent mainstream attention to professional football as a driving force in U.S. popular culture. Many other recent works, including some authored by sports journalists and former players, have engaged the league as a cultural phenomenon. With titles like *How Football Explains America* and *More than a Game*, these popular treatments seek to explain the league’s unprecedented influence on U.S. popular culture.⁷

Critical interventions in this growing body of literature have, however, been few and far between. Michael Oriard has led the way through his persistent attention to the league as a cultural force,⁸ while Michael Real, Varda Burstyn, Nick Trujillo, Larry Wenner, and others have contributed to a more robust understanding of the role of pro football in contemporary life.⁹ But overall, there has been a strange dearth of critical scholarship on a topic that is, to put it mildly, highly visible and widely accessible. This may also be partially explained by the delay of critically minded students of popular culture in establishing any sustained and widespread engagement with sport in general, let alone football. Additionally, professional football’s representational strategies

are designed to seem self-evident, albeit in ways that often explicitly reproduce conservative ideas about nationalism, militarism, race, gender, class, and other axes of subjectivity. To the casual observer, these processes can thus appear inflexible, stagnant, banal, and even predictable. To focus attention directly on the NFL as an organized force in contemporary sport and U.S. culture, this book provides a rare example of sustained scholarly attention on professional football. By including the voices of a number of established and emerging scholars from a range of disciplinary backgrounds, we hope this book will enrich critical understandings of an extremely profitable, powerful, and dynamic corner of the culture industry.

Like many other edited collections, this book is in part an argument for a particular perspective on contemporary sport. The works collected here are deeply influenced by theoretical developments in critical and cultural studies, and though attempts to definitively pin down this expansive and multifaceted field of study are doomed to failure, one could safely assert that cultural studies is the theoretically informed study of constellations of power. Whether one's specific object of analysis is a text, practice, event, place, organization, or material artifact, one of the key features of this approach is the attempt to understand cultural phenomena relationally, which is to say, as part of a web of historical relationships, cultural processes, and socioeconomic forces that inform how and why certain things (television programs, technologies, sporting events, etc.) become meaningful at particular moments in time. Context is thus crucial to this mode of analysis because the appropriate cultural context provides a vital framework for intellectual work that is both rigorous and critical and still modest in its aims: "a kind of alchemy for producing useful knowledge."¹⁰ At its best, cultural studies is a practice for interrogating the machinations and politics of culture, as well as a vehicle for telling better stories about what gives shape, substance, and meaning to both the world in which we live and the ones we might think possible.¹¹

Sport, as one can probably imagine, offers some of the most fertile terrain for engaging in such forms of analysis and critique. Susan Birrell and Mary McDonald, in their edited collection *Reading Sport: Critical Essays on Power and Representation*, advocate an intersectional analysis that focuses on particular moments or sporting subjects to elucidate the kinds of meaning produced around and through them, thereby offering "more complicated analyses of sporting events and people by countering the tendency in the media, and often in social analysis, to organize understanding and action by exploring only one axis of power."¹² In *Sports Stars: The Cultural Politics of Sporting Celebrity*, David L. Andrews and Stephen J. Jackson have similarly assembled scholarship that examines the work of commercial culture by centering on how it constructs singular promotional icons, with the goal of "explicating the social significance of sport celebrities as culturally and politically resonant entities" and "counter[ing] the economic fetishism and blind populism frequently associated with celebrity consumption."¹³ Alan Tomlinson and Christopher Young

focus their collection *National Identity and Global Sports Events: Culture, Politics, and Spectacle in the Olympics and the Football World Cup* on the international mega-events in the subtitle, asserting that the collection's focus on discrete historical cases "is an exercise in the analysis of the dynamics of power in international sport."¹⁴

In concert with the emphasis on the cultural implications of the NFL, the focus of this book also asks us to shift our thinking about sport to one of the driving forces in professional athletics: the cartels that organize the games, partner with media companies, organize promotion, and establish, reshape, and enforce regulations. These organizations are central to the operation of modern sport, yet the critical study of sport has rarely trained its attention on them in a sustained manner. Focusing scholarly perspectives on this institutional target allows us to think through the relationships between incorporated sports leagues and their commercial partners and to better understand the role of organized interests in shaping the meaning of contemporary sport and sports culture. This way of organizing scholarship is well established in other academic disciplines, including the field of media studies, in which the editors and many of the contributors to this volume have a stake as scholars and teachers. From Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's influential treatise on the "culture industry" through Robert McChesney's political-economy-driven work on American journalism, critical scholarship in this vein identifies specific actors working within particular industrial, regulatory, and organizational frameworks that produce texts for consumption in a commercial marketplace.¹⁵ Despite the relative dearth of work that situates sport in the context of sporting industries or organizations, a number of scholars offer substantive treatments in this vein. David L. Andrews's *Manchester United: A Thematic Study*, Joshua Newman and Michael Giardina's *Sport, Spectacle, and NASCAR Nation*, and Michael Butterworth's *Baseball and Rhetorics of Purity* are notable and outstanding exceptions that bring book-length, rigorous analyses to bear on single, incorporated sporting formations.¹⁶ This collection similarly builds on these examples by bringing an ensemble of critical voices to bear on both the league and the specific empirical contexts in which NFL entertainment is made both meaningful and financially lucrative.

By drawing on these complementary approaches to sport, we wish to avoid the repetition of analytic binaries that, among other things, take for granted hard-line divisions between the processes of cultural production and consumption. Such a reductive framework would obscure the fact that sport is not merely a form of entertainment or, somewhat differently, a domain for powerful corporate interests. It is also a rich site for cultural participation and performance: Through sports, culture is something that people actively *do*. While this may seem like a mundane observation, participation is one of the key elements that one could use to parse the intellectual parameters of what we can readily designate as sports culture. Participation, in this sense, is what connects the lines of flight that map our various positions as sports amateurs,

professionals, watchers, players, journalists, announcers, historians, critics, and fans. Moreover, the personal dimensions of sports participation are a vital part of the energy and passion that underwrite the NFL's force in contemporary society.

Which brings us to a final and crucial point of orientation: The NFL has wide appeal for the millions of men and (in growing numbers) women who gather in person or online each Sunday in the fall to watch, discuss, and enjoy the games. For many of these fans, professional football is about more than simple contests staged to attract audiences and generate advertising revenue—it is about deeply held connections: friendships, family ties, connections to place, and self-esteem. Ideas about manhood, race, personal responsibility, and collective achievement are exchanged, sometimes with unusually passionate conviction, when the subject is football.

The Playbook (Section and Chapter Previews)

Contributions to this volume are organized around three major themes. Part I focuses on actions by the league and its media partners to produce, promote, and control NFL entertainment. Part II explores productions of meaning about professional football that link identity to ideas of hierarchy. Part III examines the league's role in generating, adjusting, and promoting militarism and empire during the war on terror.

Chapter 1, by Daniel Grano, centers on a recent televised commemoration of the “greatest game ever played,” the 1958 championship game between the New York Giants and the Baltimore Colts, which is frequently cited as the seminal moment at which football began its inexorable rise to dominance in the U.S. sporting scene. As Grano notes, this remembrance has (at least) as much to do with the unresolved tensions and contradictions of the present as with the past it purports to document. His analysis highlights how anxieties about NFL labor relations surface repeatedly in the televised remembrance.

In Chapter 2, Dylan Mulvin takes a unique look at one of the most prevalent if underappreciated media technologies to shape both the game of pro football and the broader sociocultural context in which the NFL is situated: instant replay. Analyzing the institutional history of video replay and the shifting relationships between film documentation, temporality, and notions of facticity, Mulvin explores how video replay became enshrined as an analytic tool for redefining evidence and the “truth” of events as they unfold on the gridiron.

In Chapter 3, Jacob Dittmer turns our attention to the often-outlandish, media-saturated persona of NFL wide receiver Chad Ochocinco. Through his savvy use of social media and his carefully constructed public identity as a football player, reality TV star, and brand name, Ochocinco raises not only eyebrows but also important questions about branding and the capacity for NFL athletes to contest or conform to the dominant narratives of pro football constructed by the league and the larger sports-media complex.

Chapter 4, by Tom Oates, charts how economic imperatives, new media technologies, and deep cultural anxieties about racialized masculinity have worked to reshape the mediated presentation of the NFL, with an emphasis on “vicarious management”—a process by which fans are invited to imagine themselves as team owners, general managers, and coaches and to view players as commodities to be strategically deployed in competition with other fans.

Part II opens with Toby Miller’s consideration of the mobilization and containment of “sporting sexuality” through the marketing of the NFL’s celebrity culture. Miller’s argument directly engages questions of how the left might effectively challenge the outrages against feminine and queer identities that so frequently characterize the dominant discourses generated around the league.

In Chapter 6, Ron Mower, Dave Andrews, and Oliver Rick develop the concept of ghettoentrism: a way of presenting the black body that plays on an expectation of connection between inner-city black poverty and athleticism. Having previously explored this phenomenon in the marketing of basketball, the authors examine how professional football acts as a site to assert and exploit links among blackness, urban poverty, and sport.

On the basis of in-depth interviews with two dozen NFL retirees, Katie Rodgers, in Chapter 7, looks at how pain, injury, and performances of masculinity are conceptualized and quite literally embodied by pro football players. In contrast to the prevailing wisdom that sees bodily injury as a problem that can be remedied in the NFL through rule changes, stiffer penalties, and technological advances in equipment, Rodgers argues that injury and pain will continue to be major factors in the league as long as masculine ethics of physical domination continue to define the players’ identities and the tenor of the game.

Aaron Baker, in Chapter 8, focuses on Oliver Stone’s 1999 film *Any Given Sunday*, a fictional story about professional football. This cinematic depiction was frowned on by the league, which did not approve of the light in which it cast professional football. In this chapter, Baker finds a complex integrationist narrative rife with contradictions that are still relevant fifteen years later. The film acknowledges the emergence of black stars but celebrates them within only the narrowly defined parameters of hegemonic masculine behavior.

In Chapter 9, Nicholas Ciotola draws our attention to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in the 1970s, where the descendants of Italian immigrants found an unlikely vehicle for the expression of their ethnic identity through the rise of Franco’s Italian Army fan club. What started as a flamboyant gesture of local support for the Steelers half-Italian star player, Franco Harris, quickly became both a symbol of Italian pride and a unique part of the broader New Ethnicity movement then gaining momentum in the United States.

Part III begins with Samantha King’s interrogation of the “sport-war nexus” in American culture during the George H. W. Bush era—when the NFL played a prominent role as booster for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and also actively colluded with the U.S. military to hype Pat Tillman’s public transition

from the football field to the battlefield. Using Tillman as a case study, King illuminates how the NFL actively facilitated the militarization of everyday life and simultaneously contributed to the sportification of U.S. politics at the start of the twenty-first century.

Chapter 11, by Michael Butterworth, examines the promotional documentary film company known as NFL Films. His rhetorical analysis considers major films from the first decade of NFL Films, from 1965 to 1975, and argues how these productions addressed the deep cultural anxieties of their time while also establishing the militaristic ethic that saturates contemporary representations of the league.

In Chapter 12, Kyle Kusz offers readers a detailed, nuanced critique of the sports media's representation and subsequent memorialization of Pat Tillman. Building on the groundwork laid by Samantha King, Kusz interrogates the posthumous media spectacle made of Tillman's story to discuss the cultural politics of his being transformed into a potent symbol of American militarism, patriotism, and national manhood.

NOTES

1. Franchesca Levy, "America's Most Livable Cities," *Forbes*, April 29, 2010, available at <http://www.forbes.com/2010/04/29/cities-livable-pittsburgh-lifestyle-real-estate-top-ten-jobs-crime-income.html>; Katharine Crnko, "It's Official: Pittsburgh Is the Most Liveable City in the U.S.," *Marketplace*, February 22, 2011, available at <http://www.marketplace.org/topics/life/news-brief/its-official-pittsburgh-most-liveable-city-us>.

2. Esera Tuaolo and John Rosengren, *Alone in the Trenches: My Life as a Gay Man in the NFL* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2006); David Kopay, *The David Kopay Story: An Extraordinary Self-Revelation* (Gettysburg, PA: Arbor House, 1977).

3. See, for example, Mark Fainaru-Wada and Steve Fainaru, *League of Denial: The NFL, Concussions, and the Battle for Truth* (New York: Crown Archetype, 2013); Dave Zirin, *Game Over: How Politics Has Turned the Sports World Upside Down* (New York: Green Street Press, 2013); and Dave Zirin, *Welcome to the Terrordome: The Pain, Politics, and Promise of Sports* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2007).

4. Brian Solomon, "With New Jaguars Owner Shahid Khan, NFL Has More Billionaires than MLB, NBA Combined," *Forbes*, March 12, 2012, available at <http://www.forbes.com/sites/briansolomon/2012/03/12/new-jaguars-owner-becomes-19th-nfl-billionaire-more-than-mlb-nba-combined/>.

5. Robert Sparks, "'Delivering the Male': Sports, Canadian Television, and the Making of TSN," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 17, no. 1 (1992): 319–342.

6. Michael MacCambridge, *America's Game: The Epic Story of How Pro Football Captured a Nation* (New York: Random House, 2005), 458.

7. Sal Paolantonio, *How Football Explains America* (Chicago: Triumph Press, 2008); Brian Billick and Michael MacCambridge, *More than a Game: The Glorious Past—and Uncertain Future—of the NFL* (New York: Scribner, 2009).

8. See Michael Oriard, *Brand NFL: Making and Selling America's Favorite Sport* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Michael Oriard, *King Football: Sport and Spectacle in the Golden Age of Radio and Newsreels, Movies and Magazines, the Weekly and Daily Press* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); and

Michael Oriard, *Reading Football: How the Popular Press Created an American Spectacle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

9. See Michael Real, "The Super Bowl: Mythic Spectacle," in *Television: The Critical View*, ed. Horace Newcomb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 170–203; Varda Burstyn, *The Rites of Men: Manhood, Politics, and the Culture of Sport* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999); Nick Trujillo, "Machines, Missiles, and Men: Images of the Male Body on ABC's *Monday Night Football*," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 12, no. 4 (1995): 403–423; and Lawrence A. Wenner, "The Super Bowl Pregame Show: Cultural Fantasies and Political Subtext," in *Media, Sports, and Society*, ed. Lawrence A. Wenner (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1989), 157–179.

10. Richard Johnson, "What Is Cultural Studies Anyway?" *Social Text*, no. 16 (Winter 1986–1987): 38. In addition to outlining six characteristics that effectively define cultural studies as an intellectual practice, Lawrence Grossberg places emphasis on the importance of context to cultural studies, going as far as to say that "context is everything and everything is context for cultural studies; cultural studies is perhaps best seen as a contextual theory of contexts in the lived milieu of power." See Lawrence Grossberg, "Cultural Studies, Modern Logics, and Theories of Globalization," in *Back to Reality? Social Experience and Cultural Studies*, ed. Angela McRobbie (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1997), 7–8.

11. Lawrence Grossberg, *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 96.

12. Susan Birrell and Mary McDonald, *Reading Sport: Critical Essays on Power and Representation* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), 5.

13. David L. Andrews and Stephen J. Jackson, *Sports Stars: The Cultural Politics of Sporting Celebrity* (London: Routledge, 2001), 9.

14. Alan Tomlinson and Christopher Young, "Culture, Politics, and Spectacle in the Global Sports Event—An Introduction," in *National Identity and Global Sports Events: Culture, Politics, and Spectacle in the Olympics and the Football World Cup*, ed. Alan Tomlinson and Christopher Young (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 6.

15. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Mass Communication and Society*, ed. James Curran, Michael Gurevitch, and Janet Woollacott (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1979), 349–383; Robert McChesney, *The Political Economy of Media: Enduring Issues, Emerging Dilemmas* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008).

16. David L. Andrews, *Manchester United: A Thematic Study* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Joshua Newman and Michael Giardina, *Sport, Spectacle, and NASCAR Nation: Consumption and the Cultural Politics of Neoliberalism* (New York: Palgrave, 2011); Michael L. Butterworth, *Baseball and Rhetorics of Purity: The National Pastime and American Identity during the War on Terror* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010).