

Most intellectuals have relatively highbrow tastes. They wouldn't make a great booster club. They don't especially like crowds, they don't like uniforms, they don't like to paint their faces or do the wave. Most professors don't look very good on a dance floor. As a group, we're pretty repressed.

So maybe that morning I was answering a question about faculty attitudes — like why are we so weird about sports. Or maybe I'd just heard Bill Moos say one too many times how football teaches the kids about life. God, I'm tired of that argument: Football belongs in higher ed because it teaches students about life? That's so empty a thought that it's hard to refute politely. To be polite I usually respond (it's pitiful, I know) with statistics from Bowen and Shulman's *Game of Life* that show that the kids actually learn no such thing from football. We happen to know (from a book, naturally) that most players don't have particularly great track records in the business and professional worlds after college, for all their storied leadership skills, team playing, discipline and motivation — though they do a lot of coaching of kids' sports on the side, which is nice. I'm not criticizing the players; I just don't want to hear the AD tell me how much they're learning in the locker room or on the field. Not everything is educational. Some things are just for fun, for entertainment, and football might just be one of them.

Or I might have been responding to a recruiting issue, the prospect of the university luring yet another group of teenage boys into the supremely narcissistic fantasy-world of seeing themselves on billboards 40 feet high in Times Square. That was Bill Moos' idea. BMOC isn't enough anymore; now we can make you a Broadway star!

What bothers me, really, is *what* football is teaching the kids about life. Take a bunch of high school kids, many of them from tough backgrounds, and just shower them with luxuries like private jets and air-conditioned lockers with Xboxes. Fulfilling their crudest teen fantasies is teaching them something? What, that life is a game? Great lesson.

Can I confess that I just *hate* the values celebrated in the mass media and popular culture, all the celebrity stuff that so many students drink up like water? What they call styles, or lifestyles, I think of as just so many addictions — addictions to products, mostly, being pushed on them for a profit. I'm not so sure how innocent these addictions are. You can be addicted to drugs, but you can also be addicted to gambling, or shopping, or credit cards, or "bling," or violence, or TV.

Or sports. I've heard it said often enough that America's addicted to sports. We can't even eat in a restaurant any more without them. I *hate* that! But we don't take the term "addiction" very seriously in this case. Innocent or not, students' addictions to mindless pleasures make it harder for them to take their work seriously. They have a hard time reading, for example. It's too slow, too quiet; there's not enough instant gratification in it. It isn't entertainment.

Well, whatever prompted me that morning, I put aside my usual studied moderation and blurted out something like this: "You know, the relation of football to higher ed isn't exactly natural or obvious. After all, the values of the football field are *the exact opposite* of the values they learn in class. In class they learn that violence and force are wrong, that life's not a contest, that beating the other guy isn't the goal ..."

I could have gone on, but that 15-second buzzer went off loud and clear in both ears. Dave and Bill were staring at me as if I'd just peed on the table. There was an awkward moment of silence before Bill gave one of his great Moos-laughes, shouting, "Well, I don't know about that, Jim!"

I saw in an instant that in the world most men inhabit, my beliefs in the natural superiority of understanding over force and of cooperation and compromise over competition are naïve and idiotic. I might as well have said that the

unexamined life isn't worth living or that money and celebrity aren't the highest goals of a wise man. *What freakin' universe do I inhabit, anyway?*

Suddenly the conference table between us stretched wider than a football field, wider than the Grand Canyon. Me and my big mouth. No wonder the task force ended up thinking that faculty don't understand sports. What kind of American doesn't like competition? What's the free market, after all?

So I backpedaled, and we went on with the meeting. I didn't try to explain any of those obvious truths that literature, religion, philosophy and history all teach — for example, that there's a terrible danger in the roar of the crowd.

Another obvious truth is that football doesn't teach us anything. It's pure entertainment, which is why it's such great entertainment. Entertainment is the opposite of education. We seek entertainment for its pleasure. It reinforces what we already believe — that's much of its pleasure. Football doesn't *teach* America its values; rather, it *reflects* America's values.

What American values are reflected in football? The Greeks had their Olympics, Rome had its arenas and gladiators, medieval knights had their jousts and tournaments, Spain has its bullfights, the Russians have their chess. I'm not sure if sports reflect the deepest or the shallowest values in a culture, but they certainly are revealing of a culture's values. So what does football reveal about ours?

When I think about football, I can't get it out of my head that America's the only country that loves it and the only country where big-time sports are attached to — of all things — higher education. I think about the role of sports in other cultures and over the long course of history. I'm a medievalist; I look at the big picture. Future historians won't have too much good to say about the Super Bowl, I'm afraid, or about the corruption of higher education by the mass media in the age of big-time college sports. They'll look back at a culture governed by mass marketing, a culture addicted to celebrity and violence, whose most popular entertainments aimed squarely at the lowest common denominators in human nature.

If you want to know how a *serious* intellectual thinks about this topic, you should hear Noam Chomsky. He says in an interview, "I suddenly asked myself at one point, why do I care if my high school team wins the football game? ... It doesn't mean any — it doesn't make sense. But the point is, it does make sense: It's a way of building up irrational attitudes of submission to authority and group cohesion behind leadership elements — in fact, it's training in irrational jingoism. That's also a feature of competitive sports. ... That's why energy is devoted to supporting them and creating a basis for them and advertisers are willing to pay for them and so on."

That's pretty harsh, but I guess it's what I was trying to say that morning.

Maybe there's nothing wrong in sports entertainment. Maybe Chomsky's wrong. Maybe *I'm* wrong. Maybe future historians will stand in awe of the sports industry's brilliant orchestration of our cultural energies; the relief it provides for our cultural tensions; the sublimation it allows of our violent instincts into forms as innocent and harmless as they are enjoyable. Maybe.

Actually, the last book I read on the topic, by a social commentator I respect, takes this positive approach. In *Dancing in the Streets*, Barbara Ehrenreich discusses "the carnivalization of sports." She too looks at the big picture, but what she sees is that football has restored to our culture the experience of collective joy, which elite culture has virtually prohibited for the last three centuries, alas and alack. According to her, "television allowed the elimination from the stadium of any fan who did not seek the stadium experience. So by a process of natural selection the people who actually attend the games tend to be those who seek the thrill of the crowd."

She approves — but it's precisely this new emphasis on "the thrill of the crowd" that most alienates intellectuals like me. She goes on: "Rock ramps up the party atmosphere, which encourages the more extravagant forms of costuming, face painting and stadium-wide synchronized motions. Decades earlier, in the middle of the century, sports events in America had been fairly disciplined, thoroughly masculine gatherings, heavy on the marching music and other militaristic flourishes. Rock entered this unlikely setting and carved out a space for Dionysian pleasure."

Which is fine for all you Dionysians, but I'm so Apollonian I don't even *dance*. I did run track back in high school, though! I ran the quarter mile, though in the spirit of the moment I ought to confess I never broke 54 seconds.

OK, there you have it, my most embarrassing moment. Embarrassing as it was, I think I was right in what I said; I just chose the wrong time and place to say it. Then again, there's no right time and place in America to confess you don't like football — except perhaps a faculty meeting. **EW**

Jim Earl is a professor of medieval literature at UO. This essay is adapted from a longer speech he gave recently to a national conference of faculty leaders and NCAA officials at Stanford.