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America Meets Football, and Football Meets Frank Merriwell

For us today, trying to think of American football’s beginnings in anything close to their actual historical context is a challenge bordering on the impossible. The game is too much with us. We cannot escape it, especially in its mediated form.

For most people, the first time they encountered a football game was when one form of media or another presented it to them. Early on, that would have been print media creating representations of the game, soon to be joined by radio, then television. Today, all are engaged in more of that than ever before—far more. And still that represents only a fraction of the mediated connections that now flourish between the game and audiences. As with so many other aspects of human activity today, for football those connections beyond any number and variety once imaginable now proliferate in virtually all places and all times via an ever more digitally cyber-networked world.

So football for Americans today exists as a fully formed social institution. It is omnipresent as an obsession for far too many, as just entertainment for others, as nuisance or even scourge for many others. Yet we all believe we know what “football” is. We know it the way we know what Coca-Cola is. It is quite simply a fixture for us today, socially, materially, culturally, economically.

That is what makes trying to picture the game’s actual beginnings so challenging. Trying to imagine what “football” would mean to us if we encountered it unawares as it existed earlier in American history, takes effort. Considering its earliest form as “more or less a series of controlled riots,” as writer Steve Almond has accurately called it, helps us start to readjust our senses from the relentlessly choreographed and monetized media spectacle that saturates them today. But even that still could be a catchphrase from, say, an ESPN documentary, so often casually and routinely employed today to hype a game in which violence plays as intrinsic a role as the ball. So let’s attempt the flashback another way.

“What I seen was this whole raft of people a-sittin’ on these two banks and a-lookin’ at one another across this pretty little green cow pasture,” begins this recounting of an unworldly young man accidentally stumbling into a stadium in which a football game is about to take place. Andy Griffith’s “What it Was, Was Football” comedy routine came forth after the game had been played in the United States for several decades. But it invaluably—and hilariously—captures a historical snapshot of how someone who had never encountered the game before might well have attempted to give meaning to the inexplicable phenomenon before him.