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**A Conversation with Michael Oriard**

Author of *Brand NFL: Making and Selling America's Favorite Sport*

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**Q: You are a former professional football player as well as a professor of American literature and culture. How does your unique background inform your history of the NFL and your inquiry into whether it is a brand or a sport?**

**A:** As a former player, I have an intimate feel for the experience of playing pro football that has nothing to do with "entertainment" (my perspective, of course, is shaped by the fact that I was an offensive lineman, not a quarterback or wide receiver). As a professor of American literature and culture, I understand "sport" and "entertainment" (or "product" or "brand") in more than the visceral way I absorbed as a player. I know that football historically has engaged fans at a level much deeper and more profound than mere entertainment, and as I have watched NFL football become extraordinarily more commercial over the years since I've played, I could not help but wonder whether the game's appeal at this deeper level has been affected.

**Q: What is the most recent estimate of the NFL franchise's worth?**

**A:** According to *Forbes* magazine, which publishes its new calculations each September, the average franchise value in the NFL in 2006 was \$898 million, with five franchises worth more than \$1 billion, topped by the Washington Redskins at \$1.4 billion. In a few months we'll see figures for 2007 that will be even higher.

**Q: What role has television played in the modern image of the NFL? And what did Roy Rogers have to do with the birth of the League?**

**A:** Beginning in the 1950s, television made it possible for professional football to become a truly national sport, instead of an inferior imitation of college football of interest only to fans where NFL franchises were located. Because the NFL football most Americans have known since the '50s has been the one we've seen on television, how and when television has presented the game has crucially shaped the game's place in our lives. Monday Night Football made the sport an inescapable part of American life even for those with a casual interest or no interest at all in the games. ESPN has saturated American culture with NFL football to an extent unimaginable before cable and has been

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the most powerful force in transforming star athletes into full-blown celebrities. Beyond these obvious changes, the most remarkable part of the story of TV and NFL football in recent years has been the soaring rights fees at the same time that ratings have steadily declined.

Roy Rogers' role was more symbolic than actual: when Roy Rogers Enterprises contracted with the National Football League to market NFL-logo products as well as Roy Rogers six-shooters, the arrangement foretold the transformation of the NFL in the 1990s into a commercial brand in an entertainment market that includes X-Boxes and Spider Man movies as well as the NBA and NASCAR.

**Q: What was the waiver system, and how did it affect players' team choices and salaries? How did it affect their passion for the sport?**

**A:** The waiver system was part of the basic structure of the National Football League in the 1960s and 1970s, including my own playing days, which allowed players no freedom to choose their own clubs but tied them to the club that drafted them until the club had no more use for them. When a club released a player, it put him on waivers, available to be claimed by another club for \$100. If he was claimed, his original club could withdraw him from waivers and try to arrange a deal. The player had no say in any of this, not even any knowledge of who or what was being decided about his fate, until the entire process had run its course. Players were most conspicuously "owned" by their clubs in this waiver system. It also helped hold down salaries by not allowing released players to negotiate with more than one team.

**Q: What were the major strikes that were staged in the history of NFL? Were they effective?**

**A:** The NFL experienced three major strikes: during training camp in 1974 (when my own NFL career ended) and during the regular season in 1982 and 1987. In 1982, the owners locked out the players and canceled games. In 1987, they fielded teams with "replacement players" (i.e. scabs). None of the strikes succeeded, in part because of the players' huge disadvantages (their own short, uncertain careers; the owners' greater financial resources and access to the media), but in part because of the players' own failure to maintain a solid front. In both 1974 and 1987, large numbers of players abandoned their striking teammates and crossed the picket lines. All three strikes failed, but they set the stage for a decisive victory in court because the NFL's restrictions on player movement (free agency) clearly violated anti-trust laws. After decades of owners claiming that free agency would destroy the game, the 1993 labor agreement that gave the players free agency became one of the foundations of a new NFL in which owners and players alike (but particularly the owners) have gotten rich beyond levels even imaginable in the 1970s when the conflict began.

**Q: When did the Super Bowl begin to gain such wild public popularity?**

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**A:** The Super Bowl began in 1967 as just another American sport's championship game, but by the late 1970s it had become an unofficial civic holiday and national ritual. Pro football became Americans' favorite spectator sport (as first reported in a poll in 1965) before Super Bowl I, and having a single game instead of a seven-game series made the Super Bowl singularly important. But the NFL's staging of the game as a grand festival of sport, entertainment, super-patriotism, and consumption also had much to do with making the Super Bowl more a cultural phenomenon than a sporting contest.

**Q: Why was 1982 such a "nightmare year" for the NFL?**

**A:** A convergence of factors, related only coincidentally, made 1982 the NFL's "nightmare year." The 1981 season saw the highest TV ratings in the NFL's history to that point (and they have never reached that height again). The Super Bowl concluding that season was also (and remains) the highest-rated ever. But then the sky fell in, not once but three times. In May, Al Davis won his initial antitrust lawsuit against the NFL, which allowed him to move the Raiders from Oakland to Los Angeles and trigger five more franchise shifts in the late 1980s and early 1990s (as well as the threat of several more). (Also in May, a new rival league, the United States Football League, was announced, but it was initially a minor irritant because it did not attempt to compete directly with the NFL for players and fans). In June, *Sports Illustrated* published the sensational "confession" of Don Reese, a former player who claimed that abuse of cocaine was rampant throughout the league. And then in September, the players went on strike for 57 days, disrupting regular-season games for the first time in NFL history. The impact, both short-term and long-term, of all three events was profoundly disruptive for the NFL, both for its stability and for its image with the public.

**Q: How did the leaders of the NFL during Pete Rozelle's time as commissioner differ from those owners who took over after he resigned in 1989?**

**A:** Such generalizations always oversimplify, but in general the owners in Rozelle's time were "sportsmen" who got into pro football with little money but a passion for the game, while those who acquired franchises in the 1990s were millionaire entrepreneurs drawn to the glamour of the country's premier sport but also to the investment possibilities that NFL franchises now represented. Complicating this simple dichotomy of football-for-football's-sake versus football-for-profit, the Old Guard were not just kindly old men with a fatherly concern for their players (such as the popular image of the Steelers' Art Rooney and the Giants' Wellington Mara in his late years), while the New Breed were ruthless capitalists. In their relations with players and particularly with the Players Association, the Old Guard in many cases were ruthless autocrats who believed the players should be grateful whatever was given them. ("You're the cattle, we're the ranchers," Tex Schramm once famously told representatives of the players' union during negotiations). For their part, the profit-minded entrepreneurs of the new NFL recognized the rights and financial worth of the men who actually played the game. From a former player's perspective, both the Old Guard and the New Breed have their virtues and their flaws.

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**Q: Though it is difficult to summarize, what do you think accounted most for the radical rise in NFL revenue during the 1990?**

**A:** I would identify three basic pillars of the new NFL that emerged in the 1990s: labor peace (which stabilized player costs while also preventing another strike from alienating the public), TV contracts (which grew astonishingly due to the bidding of more networks than the number of TV packages up for bid), and the revenues (from luxury suites, premium seating, seat licenses, naming rights, local sponsorships, and so on) that the Cowboys' Jerry Jones demonstrated could be extracted from stadiums. League-wide licensing and sponsorships have provided another smaller but still sizeable pot of revenue, while invisibly supporting the entire financial structure has been tax law through which the public subsidizes the building and financing of stadiums and the leasing of luxury suites.

**Q: What significance did the hiring of Sara Levinson in 1994 as the NFL Properties president have with regard to the NFL's new image?**

**A:** Before she was hired to head NFL Properties, Levinson was co-president of MTV, which represented cultural forces seemingly at the opposite end of the spectrum from the NFL. Her hiring by the NFL sent a clear signal that pro football was emphatically no longer the simple game that first captured the public imagination at the end of the 1950s. Whether Levinson was herself the agent or the symbol of the change, her hiring meant that the NFL now officially saw itself in an entertainment business with a product and a brand in competition with movies, music videos, and the rest of the entertainment options out there trying to attract consumers' money and leisure time.

**Q: What is "black style" and what role does it play in NFL games?**

**A:** I assume that there is popular perception of a black style in football, most evident in the choreographed end zone celebrations by Terrell Owens, Chad Johnson, and numerous other wide receivers and running backs. The NFL tries to legislate against "excessive celebration," but whether these antics are celebrations or taunting, whether they entertain fans or violate ideals of sportsmanship, whether they express an essential aspect of African-American culture or are simply self-promotion, is not self-evident.

**Q: You dedicate a section of your book to "the racial state of the game." What is the racial state of football?**

**A:** In thinking about "the racial state of the game," I am interested in how far we have come since the days of segregation, Jim Crow laws, and openly virulent racism, and also in how far we have to go. It still amazes me that I played games in college against Georgia Tech and the University of Texas before those schools had integrated their football teams. The most obvious measures of "the racial state of the game" are found in the increasing number of black quarterbacks, the more slowly increasing number of black  
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head coaches, the still tiny number of African Americans in executive and ownership positions, and so on. But to me the more interesting aspects of "the racial state of the game" are the hints of how the dominance of black athletes in the NFL has affected our collective thinking about race—as evident, for example, in responses to the "black style" mentioned above, and in the explanations periodically offered to account for black athletic success. The stereotypes of black "athleticism" and "naturally" talented black athletes are subtler than the older, officially discredited racism, but they are still pernicious. NFL football dramatizes a kind of "racial theater" in which fans, perhaps unconsciously more often than not, see their own and their country's racial attitudes play out.

**Q: How is the NFL a representation of the U.S. and Americans' need for competition? Do you think the country might be different without the NFL?**

**A:** All sports celebrate competition, which of course is also a fundamental aspect of American life. From one perspective, competition expresses a kind of ruthlessness in our economic and social and political systems—to the winners go the spoils. From another perspective, competition is tied more positively to democratic values—the spoils (in principle, anyway) go to those who earn them, not to those entitled to them by privileged birth. Part of the sport's appeal lies in the idea that its competition is fair—the winners deserve to win. (This is why we are so troubled by steroids in baseball right now). NFL football is like other sports in celebrating competition. I think its own unique appeal lies in its fundamental tension between violence and grace or beauty or whatever you want to call it, and in its larger-than-life quality. I think that football serves a need that arises from our feeling constrained in our jobs, our aspirations, and our social lives—a longing to "live large" like NFL players seem to do. If I'm right about this, then if NFL football disappeared, we'd presumably create something else to satisfy that need.

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