

## Opinion

## Confessions of a 35-Year-Old Middle Linebacker

By Claire Gaudiani

FEW MEMBERS of humanities faculties—male or female—have ever played on a football team, which accounts for a major part of the present crisis in the humanities.

I made this discovery fortuitously, when I found that my experience as a middle linebacker had influenced my work as a teacher and scholar. Having analyzed the problem, I am ready to submit a proposal for a major grant to improve the situation.

Last year, at the age of 35, I played my first full season of touch football. I had always been an unenthusiastic spectator at football games. In fact, I shared the disdain common among humanities faculty members for this violent sport.

A woman reared in the olden days, I had never played a contact sport at all. Field hockey provided my only experience with a team sport, and tennis was the only sport I had ever played with men. Clearly, my tour as a middle linebacker in the under-125-pound class was a significant departure from my previous athletic encounters. I developed more than just courage and a new vocabulary.

Week after week, I saw and experienced the kinds of planning and teamwork that would save the humanities, if only more faculty members knew about them. I know they don't, because I have asked. I began my last four speeches to large faculty groups by asking how many had ever played regularly on a football team, even as little kids. On the average, only 3 of 80 raised their hands, although many raised their eyebrows.

The sample was admittedly small, but I believe that the results reflect a broader reality.

Self-selection has somehow quietly sliced the genes useful for literary analysis and philosophical speculation away from those used to buttonhook and go deep. For many years, the segregation of tweedy individualism from sweaty teamwork went

unnoticed and didn't seem to matter. But now, when a case needs to be made for the importance of the humanities in American society, and for corporate support of liberal education, it matters.

How would humanities faculty members behave if they knew their X's and O's as well as they know Proust and Nietzsche? One answer is that their departments would function differently in planning, teamwork, and action. A football experience would make them realize that success hatches in the huddle, that information from team members inspires and strengthens a plan, especially when it reveals defensive coverages and opponents' weaknesses.

Ultimately, though, the quarterback must call the play. The patterns assigned tend to take advantage of each player's peculiar strengths and weaknesses (I ought to know), and everyone on the team has a pattern to run. Players never sit out because they do not like the play. No one says, "We tried that last year."

Despite the importance of the planning stage, the huddle can last only so long. In the interest of moving forward, the play must begin and put the plan into action. Once the ball is hiked, all players execute their assignments as best they can. This is called teamwork.

IN MY EXPERIENCE, the plays rarely occurred exactly as they had been planned in the huddle. Usually we ran our patterns pretty well and made some gains.

Sometimes part of the play went awry, but we still picked up yardage. Amazingly often, the snap was followed by a surprise: a blitz, an uncanny double coverage of both intended receivers, or someone's totally forgetting his or her pattern. Teamwork mattered most under those contingencies.

After the play, regardless of the gain or loss, we knew that all of us had done our

best. Back in the huddle, a new plan was hatched, built on the experience of the past one.

Of course, the team always meant to make the first down, and always hoped to break for a touchdown. But we settled for whatever gains we could make and were ready to try again. In football, loss of yardage or even a sacked quarterback did not dissolve the team spirit, signal the end of the game, or convince the team we were losers.

The humanities need the spirit, planning, and teamwork that inspired my football team. The competition is on for institutional, community, corporate, and federal resources, and points are waiting to be scored about the value of the humanities to citizens in a democracy. Faculty development and curriculum development are worthy goals for humanities departments. I see no dearth of good plays. I see a lot of teams that don't know how to move the ball.

Humanities faculty members all know quarterbacks who receive the snap and hide the ball for six years, or pass it to spectators or opponents, or even to a previously selected special squad that keeps it away from everyone. On the other hand, some quarterbacks get sacked by their own blockers, or receive the snap only to find that no receiver has moved an inch.

We all know teams that huddle only *pro forma* once a semester and then never call plays at all. Others call one series, fail to make the down, and refuse to call the next one for another three seasons. Our teams often have stumbling blockers. On offense, they listen to the play, criticize it exhaustively, and sit out the down to watch, anticipating their team's failure. On defense, they spend the down lacerating the sidelines with their Weed-eaters, ignoring the play, until the next huddle and their next critique.

Many of our teams have self-selected M.V.P.'s who refuse to play unless they can

be both star quarterback and primary receiver, with a guarantee of enough protection to score every time. In some cases, whole teams decide that a competitive spirit is as unseemly as sweat and the possibility of failure. Members of those teams walk about the field talking to themselves, looking for four-leaf clovers, hoping the ball will disappear.

NOW I ADMIT that some aspects of the football model don't transfer perfectly to academe. After all, chairmen are not quarterbacks. Short-term departmental objectives are not as easy to spot as the sneakers we used as down markers, and it is harder to know when a department has made a goal than when a team has. And who is the opposition, anyway? However, whether we recognize it or not, the game has begun, and not enough of us understand helping out, putting out, and playing hard despite the contingencies.

The current crisis in the humanities comes down to the issue of smaller crowds and loss of leadership, spirit, and mission. If more of us had experience with football, we would recognize that the trend away from the liberal arts toward career education is a reflection not of the students' materialism but of their lack of confidence in the teams they see in our Elysian fields.

I believe that the challenge posed by this situation can be met by a rigorous faculty-development plan. Therefore I am preparing a grant proposal to provide for a series of franchised preseason summer training camps for humanities faculty members. I will submit it for joint financing to the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Football League.

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