

NYPR Network

American Football

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SUMMARY **TRANSCRIPT**

AMERICAN FOOTBALL FINAL WEB TRANSCRIPT

[RADIOLAB INTRO]

JAD ABUMRAD: *All right. Should we get -- should we -- ? Yeah.*

JAD: Hey, I'm Jad Abumrad.

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JAD: And today, just for kicks we're gonna start in a park. So let me set the scene.

ROBERT: Please.

JAD: Couple days ago, we gathered a bunch of Radiolab listeners in McCarren Park in Brooklyn.

✕

JAD: *You guys are amazing for coming out today. Thank you so much.*

ROBERT: This is a random set of listeners.

JAD: Random set of listeners. Whoever showed up as a result of a few tweets and Facebook postings. Got about 70 people. It was a super cold day. Park was covered in snow. And we had brought everybody there to help us make some noises that we would use in this segment. Like ...

[GASPS]

JAD: Gasping. Or ...

[CHANTS]

JAD: Chanting. Or -- it was amazing. You'll hear them throughout the hour. But when people got there, we hadn't actually explained to them why we wanted them to make these noises. So just to start things off, I just asked them a couple questions.

JAD: *Okay. So ...*

JAD: How many of you guys hate football?

[MUTED CROWD]

JAD: *How many of you guys hate football?*

✕₁*[LOUD CROWD]*

JAD: This was not a shocking revelation.

ROBERT: No. Kind of expected.

JAD: *How many of you guys think that football will disappear in the next 10 years?*

[CROWD CHEERS]

JAD: But these anti-football sentiments, I believe they say more about you and I and our fans than the game.

ROBERT: Although I -- in fairness, I mean there are a lot of people who -- I would even consider myself a -- a -- I watch for the ads.

JAD: Okay. Whether you watch for the ads like you or whether you love the game like I happen to, or loathe it like some others, football right now ...

ROBERT: Is huge!



[SPORTS CLIP: Sunday's game was the most watched event in American television history.]

[SPORTS CLIP: Super Bowl Sunday has become a national holiday.]

X
JAD: Its massive.

ROBERT: It's massively popular. That's not the same as ...

JAD: I actually think it's massively interesting, also. Here's a way to think about it. Sally Jenkins, the author of the book The Real All-Americans, she puts it this way. Imagine a thousand years from now, maybe ten thousand, maybe a hundred thousand years from now, we're all gone. All our history has been forgotten. All the silly trifling games we play have been lost to time. Imagine the future human beings looking back on us

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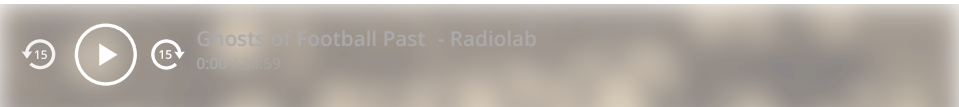
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SALLY JENKINS: And they're gonna understand just like we understand about the Greeks what was really important to us.

JAD: Okay, so here's the thing Radiolab listeners. We're gonna do an entire hour on the game of football. In part, because it just seems to be that there are a lot of questions in the air about football right now, about what it is and what that means about us. What it might or could or can't become.



JAD: Basically, this is a way, and I'm not sure if the people may care how really, but I care about football. And I am willing to wager that at the end they will care more. Particularly because of this first story which comes from Sally Jenkins who just heard. It comes from her book The Real All Americans This is a story, not about the game as you might think of it now, but about where it came from. It didn't come from the people you'd expect.

ROBERT: Okay, I'm folding my hands. And you see here, in my lap. I'm going to listen to this.

X
JAD: Okay, you want to get in the three-point stance?

ROBERT: 71! 71 Hike! We're ready to begin.

JAD: And this is a story about the beginning.

SALLY JENKINS: Well ...

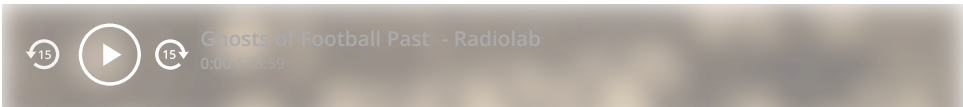
JAD: Or not quite.

SALLY JENKINS: I mean, football -- football is as old as sort of the Celtic civilizations. I mean, you can trace primal games of you know, Danish invaders kicking skulls around the shores of England. I mean ...

ROBERT: That's not football. That's just skull-kicking.

SALLY JENKINS: Exactly. But organized football's really a creation of the 1860s and '70s in this country. It's a post-Civil War creation. Comes along just really a couple of years after, you know, the last great conquering armies settle the West.

JAD: Basically she says, you had these kids whose parents had fought in the Civil War and then



ROBERT: If you're a young student, say back east at a fancy school like Harvard, how are you gonna prove your own toughness? I mean, your older brother, your father they maybe fought at Gettysburg, Battle of Little Bighorn.

JAD: What the hell have *you* done?

✕ **DAVID ADAMS:** *The American frontier experience was over. There was this feeling among a lot of intellectuals that -- that American men were losing their masculinity. They were being feminized in a sense.*

JAD: And so, according to historian David Adams who you just heard, those kids were desperate for opportunities to man up.

DAVID ADAMS: *There was this cult of manliness.*

JAD: Around this time says David Adams, you see a bunch of violent sports take off. And in particular, for our purposes, you see these kids at Harvard and Yale getting together and knocking the snot out of each other in this game that's kind of like rugby, but just more violent.


CONRAD CRANE: *The game used to be basically brutality.*

CHUCK KLOSTERMAN: *The origin of football was such a profoundly different game.*

JAD: Writer Chuck Klosterman, and before him historian. Dr. Conrad Crane.

CHUCK KLOSTERMAN: *You know, a first down instead of 10 yards was only five yards.*

CONRAD CRANE: *You had three downs to get five yards.*

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and on these events, and a strategy, all the teams are was sort of, stand into each other and try to move the ball incrementally. It was almost as if every play of the entire game was a goal-line stand. You know, the metaphor people always use when discussing football of course is military. It's the idea of taking land and giving, like -- well, the origin of football that was even amplified.

JAD: There were formations and strategies and that kind of thing, but it was pure, like, right out of Napoleon's military playbook. I mean, where you -- you concentrate your force.

✕ **ROBERT:** Yeah, my shoulder next to your shoulder next to his shoulder. It's like a line.

JAD: Yeah, you bunch up all -- all your men, and then pierce the other guy's army.

ROBERT: Yeah.

JAD: That was the basic idea.

ROBERT: And so you just end up with piles of guys.


JAD: Yeah, and inside those piles?

CONRAD CRANE: *There's all kinds of things that go on in those scrums. I mean, there's kicking, there's biting, there's gouging.*

SALLY JENKINS: *Eye-gouging and crotch kicking, and ...*

JAD: *Wow!*

SALLY JENKINS: *Head-wrenching.*

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JAD: *I have to work to imagine that because I think of Harvard and Yale now and I think of, like, I think of...*

SALLY JENKINS: *Pencil-neck geeks?*

XAD: *Yeah, I don't think it was big guys.*

SALLY JENKINS: *Well, at the time they were the -- I mean, there are all these wonderful stories about these chops that they would eat for dinner. I mean, they were drinking milk by the gallon and lvs were the great power of the time physically as well as intellectually.*

JAD: *But then along comes this school, this tiny little school founded in 1879 in the middle of nowhere, that if you're a football fan or just a fan of American history kind of changed everything.*

JAD: *Where was Carlisle?*

SALLY JENKINS: *Carlisle was in Pennsylvania, right -- very close to Gettysburg.*

ROBERT: *Well, let's go there. So -- so tell me about Car -- what is the -- when is it formed? And what was it there?*

SALLY JENKINS: *The Carlisle Indian School is formed by a former -- well actually, he was an active military officer at the time named Richard Henry Pratt.*

JAD: *Big guy. Shock of white hair. Large nose.*

SALLY JENKINS: *Pratt had serve gallantly quite gallantly in the Civil War. And then he had actually*

1870s now, that Pratt had a change of heart. And he -- he suddenly became concerned about the very people he had just been fighting.

CONRAD CRANE: *The fact of the matter is that Indians were in a very, very desperate situation. The bison were almost extinct. They were being pushed onto reservations and population had fallen to -- to its almost all-time low. Pratt and a lot of other policymakers came to the conclusion that something had to happen fast or Indians would literally become extinct. They would, in fact, become the vanishing race. And so Pratt ...*

SALLY JENKINS: *He comes to Washington with an idea.*

JAD: His idea was to start a boarding school specifically for American Indian children that was kind of a radical experiment.

CONRAD CRANE: *Children would be taken, removed for several years at a time. They would be stripped of their, what was called their savage heritage and they would be civilized.*

JAD: IE. they would be white-itized.

BARBARA LANDIS: *It was -- it was forcible assimilation. Pratt had a slogan: Kill the Indian, save the man.*

JAD: That's Barbara Landis.

BARBARA LANDIS: *Carlisle Indian School biographer.*

JAD: We went up to Carlisle to talk with her and her colleague Kara Curtis. And they told us that Pratt basically made that pitch ...

Joe American Horse just got caught, but he's already got American Indian families and a lot of money.

ROBERT: *I want your son. Is that -- how does that work?*

KARA CURTIS: *I want your children because ...*

BARBARA LANDIS: *White people are gonna keep coming and coming. They want to settle in your lands. They want to take your lands. And you need to learn how to deal with these people. So we need to teach your children how to speak English.*

JAD: *We need to teach them how to communicate with the white man, so that when the white man comes and tries to get you to sign away the Black Hills you won't fall for it again.*

BARBARA LANDIS: *And it was a convincing argument.*

JOE AMERICAN HORSE: *Well you know, back in those days you're talking about survival over here.*

JAD: *Would you mind introducing yourself?*

JOE AMERICAN HORSE: *Okay, my name is Joe American Horse. I'm 79 years old, and I'm a grandson of Chief American Horse.*

JAD: *Joe lives near the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota. He's Lakota. And he told us the story about his grandfather who was a famous Lakota chief. In the 1890s, his grandpa led a delegation of American Indians to Washington.*

JOE AMERICAN HORSE: *Well, he went to Washington, DC. And he was down there, but he said there was a lot of people down there.*

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JOE AMERICAN HORSE: *And pretty soon they're gonna come to our area. So he had the idea of trying to send his kids to school so they can intermingle or, you know, intercept, whatever.*

JAD: *Basically, Joe says his grandpa just had this realization.*

JOE AMERICAN HORSE: *We can't -- we can't go back. We got to go forward.*

JAD: *And it seemed to him Carlisle was the way forward.*

JAD: *So where we going now?*

BARBARA LANDIS: *This is our photo archive.*

JAD: *As kids were admitted, here's how it would work. They would come in, and they'd immediately have their picture taken on arrival. Then they'd be given an extreme makeover which would also be photographed.*

BARBARA LANDIS: *Okay, this is Tom Torlino.*

JAD: *Wow. So this is -- this is Tom Torlino as he -- as he comes in.*

BARBARA LANDIS: *Mm-hmm.*

ROBERT: *Barbara showed us a picture of a Navajo kid looking maybe 18 years old.*

JAD: *This is 1882.*

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JAD: *He has long hair.*

BARBARA LANDIS: *Here you can see ...*

ROBERT: *Earrings.*

✕

ROBERT: He's wearing an elaborate necklace. Looks like it might be made of bone.

JAD: And he's wrapped in a blanket.

ROBERT: *And then ...*

JAD: *And then here he is in a suit with clean-cut hair.*

JAD: In the second picture, his hair is very short. Not long.

ROBERT: No blanket.

JAD: He's wearing a three-piece suit.

ROBERT: *Sitting there with a cravat and a spread collar and parted hair.*

JAD: *Wow. It's like in a snapshot you have Tom Indian, Tom white man.*

JOE AMERICAN HORSE: *Like my Aunt Sophie.*

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JOE AMERICAN HORSE: *Aunt Sophie was there in Carlisle for five years, and when she came back she looks like a white woman. You know, she had a real tiny waist and a bonnet and everything. And she can't speak Lakota.*

JAD: *She forgot.*

✕

JOE AMERICAN HORSE: *Uh-huh.*

JAD: But just think about this for a second. Just think about this. We spoke with one guy Professor Eric Anderson who teaches at Haskell, he's also part Pottawatomie. Just imagine the parents, he says, the first time they see their kids.

ERIC ANDERSON: *Parents are seeing their students marched around in essentially the uniforms of what had not very long before, for many of the tribes, been the uniform of the enemy.*

JAD: At the very least ...

ERIC ANDERSON: *I think that would be startling.*

JAD: In any case, according to Sally Jenkins, after the kids were recropped and redressed, Pratt would run them through a bunch of drills.

SALLY JENKINS: *I mean, Carlisle was a little military academy. And the Indian kids were so unhealthy at first. They had been put on an unfamiliar diet. They had been sleeping indoors for the first time in their lives, and a lot of them were getting sick.*

JAD: I mean, we know that in the 39-year history of the school at least 200 kids died of disease or poor health or even homesickness.

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JAD: And Sally thinks that one of those hires ...

SALLY JENKINS: *Probably one of the first dormitory masters.*

XAD: This guy who had formerly taught at an Ivy League school. He showed the Carlisle Indian kids this game that the kids at Harvard were playing. Maybe he thought it would toughen them up, who knows? But suddenly they're playing football. Now keep in mind, this is, you know, at a point, we're talking 1882, where football's barely a thing. Not so many schools had teams.

SALLY JENKINS: *There wasn't such a thing as a head coach back then. They were volunteer coaches who tended to be students or ex-students.*

JAD: But the Carlisle kids self-organized, level the field, start to play. They even start to scrimmage some kids across town. And at one of those games, according to Barbara ...

BARBARA LANDIS: *Stacy Matluck, who is a Pawnee student at Carlisle, later became a Pawnee chief, he broke his leg playing football, and Pratt said, "That's it. No more football."*

JAD: Because in his mind he was trying to civilize these kids, and football was doing the opposite. But a short time later, says David Adams ...

DAVID ADAMS: *Approximately three dozen Carlisle boys came into Pratt's office and they said, "We want to play football."*

JAD: *Do we know what they said exactly?*

DAVID ADAMS: *We don't have -- we don't have the exact words, but Pratt says at one point, he says, "Well, they stood around my desk." I'm quoting here. "Well, they stood around my desk, their black eyes intensely watching me." He says, "The orator gave practically all the arguments in favor of our*

just listening to him when Pratt had been so much stronger, and he quailed and pined for the appeal. So he said, "Okay ..."

DAVID ADAMS: *"You can play if you do these two things. One," he says, "Never slug. People who are looking on will say 'There, that's the Indian of it. Just see them. They are savages and you can't get it out of them.'" Okay. And the other one was, "You have to beat the best teams in America."*

XAD: And at that early point in American football ...

SALLY JENKINS: *Far and away, the most powerful team was Yale.*

JAD: Which brings us to October 24th 1896.

SALLY JENKINS: *It's -- it's a raw fall day in New York.*

JAD: *They played in New York?*

SALLY JENKINS: *Yes, at the old Polo Grounds.*

JAD: Apparently, there was about 4,000 people in the stands, including ...

SALLY JENKINS: *A handful of newspaper men. New York newspaper men.*

ROBERT: *Really?*

SALLY JENKINS: *I mean, it was a big story.*

Sally Jenkins was very, like, newspaper-woman material, right?

[NEWSPAPER CLIP: "On one side were the undergraduates of an old and great university. They represent physically the perfection of modern athletics, and intellectually the culture and refinement of the best modern American life. On the other side, was the aborigine, the real son of the forest and plain. The red skin of history, of story, of war, developed over near as the case may be by education."]

X SALLY JENKINS: And if you read the newspaper stories, they're written as -- they're written in this kind of bloodcurdling shot through with Indian cliches, you know?

ROBERT: Here come the Redskins.

SALLY JENKINS: Here come the Redskins.

DAVID ADAMS: Right, right.

JAD: According to David Adams in one paper ...

DAVID ADAMS: There is a reference to yodeling. The writer said that then the fans were yodeling in that Indian fashion.

SALLY JENKINS: I mean, try to put yourself in the shoes of a New Yorker in the early 1880s. Your contact with an American Indian was in a Wild West Show. It was theater. And here comes a football game, and all of these American Indian kids run onto the field. And there's literally an instance in one of the first games where someone in the audience says "Well, they look just like our boys."

JAD: Because of course, that's what Pratt wanted. Now one thing that was immediately clear to everyone in attendance when they saw the Carlisle players was that they were physically outmatched.

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Sally Jenkins was impression-giving and she was an absolute crack job.

JAD: Or at the very least, the odds are heavily against them. But three minutes into the game, in the midst of a big pile up. A Yaley fumbles the ball. It comes squirting out. Carlisle guy picks it up, and runs the entire length of the field, 63 yards, and scores the touchdown. Now, nobody had scored on Yale in seven games. They were furious. So what they do is they use their bulk to slowly push the pile down the field twice to take the lead. And with three minutes left, Yale is up 12 to 6, Carlisle has the ball. Carlisle running back charges the pile and gets clobbered. Falls

X backwards, And just as he's about to hit the earth, he laterals the ball to a teammate who grabs it, runs around the scrum the entire length of the field and scores!

SALLY JENKINS: Carlisle scores a touchdown that would have tied the game. But it's called back by a referee who was a Yale man.

ROBERT: Why?

SALLY JENKINS: The call was that the referee claimed that a whistle had blown. The play dead.

JAD: Oh.

ROBERT: And what was the crowd's reaction?

DAVID ADAMS: Well, they were -- they were furious.

SALLY JENKINS: Yes.

DAVID ADAMS: There was booing and hooting.

SALLY JENKINS: Everyone knew it was a terrible miscarriage of justice.

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gentleman."

DAVID ADAMS: Pratt did not want this game to end because of their tempers, even though they'd been wronged by that call.

ROBERT: So the Carlisle boys finish the game. And when they walk off the field ...

JAD: They get a standing ovation.

SALLY JENKINS: Carlisle wins incredible respect and renown in the aftermath of the game. In fact, one of the newspaper men ...

JAD: After another Carlisle-Yale game where something similar happened ...

SALLY JENKINS: Wrote something to the effect of "Carlisle could beat 11 Yale men, but they couldn't beat 11 Yale men and a Yale referee."

ROBERT: Whoa!

SALLY JENKINS: Yes. After the Yale game of 1896, Pratt is committed. Pratt believes that it's the greatest thing that can happen to his school. It is an instant way to do what he's been struggling to do for 15 years at the Carlisle school, which is to prove the value of these American Indian kids against their white peers.

JAD: To prove the value or to quote "civilize" them?

SALLY JENKINS: Well, both. To civilize them but also to prove that given education and equal opportunity, they were the equal of their -- of their white peers. I mean, he was for all of his forcible

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just this compromise of the school and what there could be in representing it as what we were putting this show together. I mean on the one hand, there were clearly students who felt that Carlisle was prison. In fact, Barbara Landis, when she took us on a tour of the grounds of the former Carlisle Indian School, she said that kids would even set fire to the buildings.

BARBARA LANDIS: Yeah, some did burn down, which is kind of typical on Indian campuses. A lot of fires and burning buildings.

JAD: Why?

BARBARA LANDIS: It's a form of resistance.

JAD: On the other hand, when we started looking around for original archival recordings of some of the earliest Carlisle players, pretty much the only recording we could find ...

[ARCHIVE TAPE: This tape we would like for it to be as much of your making as possible.]

JAD: Was this oral history with a guy named ...

[ARCHIVE TAPE, interviewer: Your name, your full name is ...]

[ARCHIVE TAPE, Albert Exendine: Albert Andrew Exendine.]

JAD: Albert Exendine. The interview was done in the early '70s when he was 88. He entered the school.

[ARCHIVE TAPE, Albert Exendine: Just before 1899.]

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JAD: Can't really play you too much of this because the audio quality is really bad. But in the interview, Pratt comes up.

[ARCHIVE TAPE, Albert Exendine: R.H. Pratt. P-R-A-T-T.]



JAD: and Exendine talks about him with a great deal of affection and gratitude.

[ARCHIVE TAPE, Albert Exendine: We called him the father of Indian education.]

JAD: We call him the father of Indian education.

[ARCHIVE TAPE, Albert Exendine: Oh, he was a wonderful man.]

SALLY JENKINS: So he's a tough figure, Pratt. He's got a very mixed legacy. I mean, I like to say Pratt was his country.

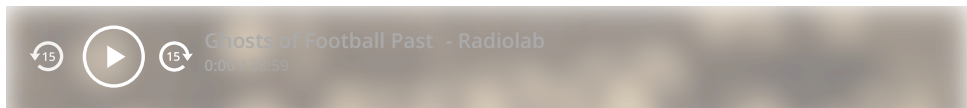
ROBERT: Hmm.

SALLY JENKINS: Whatever you think of him, he was his country.

JAD: So, okay. So 1896, he gets the bug. Like, he sees football's good PR.

SALLY JENKINS: Yes.

JAD: What happens next?



and coach the team. And he winds up with a Cornell grad named Pop Warner. Glenn "Pop" Warner.

JAD: Now Pop Warner was an interesting guy.

ROBERT: Is this Pops right here?



JAD: Just to give you a visual.

JAD and ROBERT: Whoo! Look at him!

JAD: Barbara and Karen showed us pictures. Looks kind of like Mike Ditka if Mike Ditka had Einstein's hair.

SALLY JENKINS: Pop's a little bit of an outlier. He's got these Texas roots. He's a bit of a rogue. Can be kind of vulgar.

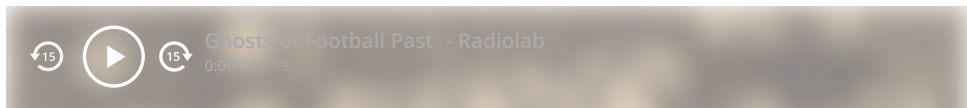
BARBARA LANDIS: He liked to party a little bit.

KARA CURTIS: He liked to gamble.

BARBARA LANDIS: Yes.

JAD: Really!

JAD: And that is exactly what he does in spectacular fashion when he gets to Carlisle.



SALLY JENKINS: But they're underweight and they're small.

JAD: Way small.

X SALLY JENKINS: You know, while they might occasionally force a tie with a Yale if they, you know, half killed themselves physically, they weren't gonna beat the Ivy Leagues on any kind of consistent basis without -- without doing something different. And there was a very fine line between innovation and cheating.

ROBERT: [laughs] I see.

SALLY JENKINS: And Pop Warner starts exploiting that line absolutely as hard as he can. And he comes up with the trick play.

JAD: For example, 1903.

SALLY JENKINS: Pop Warner devises the hidden ball trick.

ROBERT: What is that?

SALLY JENKINS: The hidden ball trick is the quarterback takes the ball, and actually behind this huge pile of men tucks it under another guy's sweater.

ROBERT: Oh!

SALLY JENKINS: While the big pile of men is struggling in the mud in the center of the field not knowing

ROBERT: And how does he keep the ball from falling out of his jersey onto the ground?

SALLY JENKINS: I think they actually sewed the jersey so that the ball would stay in there without falling out.

X ROBERT: So they made a cheating pocket?

SALLY JENKINS: They made a cheating pocket.

ROBERT: Was that legal? Did they got -- did they get a legitimate touchdown?

SALLY JENKINS: Was it legal, you ask? Pop Warner would have said there was nothing in the rule book against it. Another thing he does which actually works brilliantly, is he sews footballs onto the front of their jerseys which were really bulky sweaters at the time. He sews leather football-shaped patches onto the front of their jerseys in order to try to disguise who's got the ball.

ROBERT: Really?

SALLY JENKINS: Against Harvard. And the Harvard coach goes insane.

ROBERT: Well, I would, too! I mean, semi-pregnant player?

JAD: That's amazing!

ROBERT: But Harvard did not take this lying down. Harvard retaliates by painting the footballs the same color as their jerseys. It's maroon everywhere. So when they held the ball against their chest, the ball basically, well, you can't see it.

JAD: At least initially, British football ran on the honor system. But with American football, the refs were there practically from the beginning. And she says it was largely a response to the brutality of the game, but also to the kind of rule-bending that you saw from Pop Warner and the Carlisle Indians.

X *SALLY JENKINS: Every time Pop Warner came up with an innovation, the next year there was a rule against it. So immediately the Ivy League would get together and pass a rule and say, "Okay no more of that." And that's how the rule book really burgeons in American football. And it's thanks to Pop Warner's slights of hand.*

JAD: And Pop Warner's greatest sleight of hand, and maybe the Carlisle Indians most soaring moment -- and I mean that literally, happened at a moment when the game almost disappeared. That's coming up.

[ANSWERING MACHINE: Start of message.]

[DAVID ADAMS: Yes, this is David Adams.]

[CONRAD CRANE: This is Conrad Crane. And I got an email message asking me to read credit text.]

[DAVID ADAMS: Radiolab is supported in part by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.]

[CONRAD CRANE: Enhancing public understanding of science and technology in the modern world.]

[DAVID ADAMS: More information about Sloan at ...]

[CONRAD CRANE: www.sloan.org.]

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[ANSWERING MACHINE: End of message.]

JAD: Hey, I'm Jad Abumrad.

X *ROBERT: I'm Robert Krulwich.*

JAD: This is Radiolab. And getting back to our story on the Carlisle Indian School and the birth of the modern game of football. One of the most important moments in this story happens at a time when football it was right on the edge of disappearing. Talking about 1905.

ROBERT: Okay.

JAD: This was the most violent year in football to this point. 19 people died on the football field.

ROBERT: 19?

JAD: One-nine.

ROBERT: One death is a lot. But 19? That's crazy.

JAD: Yeah. Because what would happen is that Carlisle would try and do these things to sort of open up the game. The Ivys would consistently respond by making the game more about brute force, more about violence. And so you had all these deaths. And suddenly all the major programs were spooked. You know, Columbia pulls their -- their football team. Harvard even thinks about doing that.

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ROBERT: And then there was his kid

CONRAD CRANE: His — his son was playing and getting beat up pretty badly as well.

X

IAD: Broke his nose, slit his eyebrow

ROBERT: In one game he got knocked out cold. So after the violence of '05, the President calls the presidents of all these colleges and so on to Washington. And according to David Adams, he basically tells them

DAVID ADAMS: *That the rules had to be rewritten. It had to become a little bit more safe at least, or it would be banned.*

JAD: And out of that we see a couple of rule changes. First, the schools decide in order to loosen up the pile so to speak, they're gonna tinker with the down yardage ratio.

CONRAD CRANE: Instead of going from three downs to gain five yards, it becomes three downs to gain 10 yards. The

ROBERT: Three downs to get ten yards or four downs to get ten yards?

IAD: Four would come a couple years later.

ROBERT: Oh

ROBERT: So where do we go -- what's the next -- ?

JAD: So if I could -- if I could place you in a moment, unless there's a moment before this you'd like to hit. I believe November 23rd, 1907.

XALLY JENKINS: Yes.

ROBERT: Oh, yeah.

SALLY JENKINS: Dig moment

AD: Okay. Can you set the scene?

SALLY JENKINS: Well, the scene from the standpoint of broader American history, things have gone airborne.

ROBERT: You mean Wilbur and Orville Wright?

SALLY JENKINS: I'm talking about not just them, but I'm talking about hot air balloons. There are aeronautical experiments happening really all over the world. In France everyone is experimenting with flying machines. Things are going up in the air.

JAD: But not so fast with football, because when the rule committee had made that rule about forward passing they had also hedged a little bit saying if you throw a forward pass and your receiver doesn't catch it you are penalized 15 yards, which back in the day was a monster amount. So nobody throw the ball. It was too risky.

ROBERT: But, story goes as soon as that rule got passed, Don Warner goes back to his garage

...and I don't expect him to understand what we're doing and in those days all these things were new. We have today with the nice, whatever, the oblate spheroid or whatever they call it with nice points and things. These are rugby balls.

JAD: Sort of imagine a deflated basketball.

X *CONRAD CRANE: They're thicker in the middle. They're not as well-shaped. They're really tough to get our hand on to throw right.*

JAD: And in 1906, there's a tiny bit of tape in Albert Exendine's oral history where he talks about this. In 1906, he says Pop called all the players together. He tells them ...

[ARCHIVE TAPE, Albert Exendine: I think, boys, you will have to learn to spiral the ball.]

JAD: He says, "I think you're gonna have to learn to spiral the ball."

[ARCHIVE TAPE, Albert Exendine: "... to spiral the ball."]

JAD: Because if you throw the ball on the spiral it gets 10 times less air drag than if you throw it end-over-end.

ROBERT: Plus it's easier to catch.

JAD: Yeah.

SALLY JENKINS: They start experimenting with it a little bit in 1906, but they come out in 1907 as a throwing offense.

ROBERT: The best. I don't think it's even arguable.

JAD: Well, Carlisle's good at this point, though.

X *ROBERT: Yeah. But Chicago's like Stagg Field, whoa!*

JAD: And there are 27,000 people in the stands.

SALLY JENKINS: Well, what happened was the Chicago players had decided to try to defeat Carlisle's innovative forward passing by just knocking the crap out of their receivers every time they came off the line of scrimmage.

JAD: And so Carlisle's greatest receiver, Albert Exendine, our guy, had been stymied the entire game, because the minute the ball was snapped the Chicago players would ...

SALLY JENKINS: Hit him and try to throw him down or knock him out of bounds. So Pop Warner said to Exendine, here's what we're gonna do. Next time they hit you out of bounds, sneak around the bench and get back on the field.

JAD: By some accounts, this was Exendine's idea. But whoever thought of it, on the next play Albert Exendine as expected ends up out of bounds, but he keeps running.

SALLY JENKINS: He runs around the back of the bench.

JAD: Runs around the spectators, maybe around the band.

SALLY JENKINS: And comes back on the field.

SALLY JENKINS: Hauser, the quarterback of Carlisle ...

JAD: Lets loose a vicious spiral.

JAD: Can I have you read something?

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SALLY JENKINS: Sure.


JAD: Hold on.

JAD: This is Sally's description of that moment from her book The Real All Americans.

SALLY JENKINS: For a moment, it was a frozen scene in a staged drama. The ball hung in the air, a tantalizing possibility. Could Exendine reach it? Would he catch it or drop it? Defenders wheeled and stared down field. Spectators watching from the stands found that the breath had died in their collective throats. The spiraling ball seemed to defy physics. What made it stay up? When would it come down? In that long moment, 27,000 spectators mashed together on benches and crammed on platforms may have felt their loyalty to the home team evaporate in the grip of a powerful new emotion. They may have noticed something they never had before: that a ball traveling through space traces a profoundly elegant path. They may have realized something else. That it was beautiful. The ball struck its human target. Exendine caught the pass all alone and trotted over the Chicago goal line. The stadium exploded in sound and motion. It was the game breaker. The rest was just anti-climax. The final score was 18 to 4 for Carlisle. But the very next year, the Ivy League passes a rule that you can't leave the field and then come back on to it.

JAD: Oh, that's where that rule came from.

SALLY JENKINS: Yes. That's where that rule comes from.

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JAD: That's exactly why football is still beautiful at times.

SALLY JENKINS: That's -- that's when -- Carlisle in 1907 is when American football becomes the sport that you watch today.

✕

JAD: Oh, wow. This is -- is this the field?

BARBARA LANDIS: This is the field.

JAD: This is the field! Can we get out?

BARBARA LANDIS: Yeah.


JAD: After we'd spent an entire day looking at pictures of, you know, Albert Exendine and Pratt and Pop Warner and Delos Lone Wolf and Tom Torlino and all these Carlisle players, Barbara and Kara took us to the field where they practiced.

JAD: Right. So this is the Carlisle Indian School football field covered in snow. It's like, 10 degrees out here. Really, really bright sun coming off the snow. And it's just empty.

JAD: And we just kind of walked around and tried to imagine all the stuff we'd just seen in photos.

ROBERT: It was a little bit like walking among ghosts.

JAD: Yeah. That's the sound of the flag blowing in the background. I remember standing on that

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larger and wider and stronger, but more of a common problem of coming together, that's not a Pratt coming together where one side gets erased, but it is a coming together.

ERIC ANDERSON: Yeah. I mean, there is a middle ground. Clearly, it's more than a game. The stakes are higher than that. You know, will we as Indian people be accepted on our own terms and also in our ability to meet you halfway. Will we be accepted through this as the vehicle? It's clearly more than a game.

X

JAD: A lot of people to thank for this episode. We had original music made for us for that episode from Morgan O'Kane. You can hear him right here playing the banjo. That's MorganOKaneMusic.com. Check him out. Also, we had original music from Austin musician Shaky Graves. And the Albert Exendine tape that we played is from the research division of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

ROBERT: Thanks also to the Cumberland County Historical Society and the US Army Heritage and Education Center, where you can go and see tons of photos from both archives, or you can come to us.

JAD: On our website, Radiolab.org, we have a ton of old archival football picks, a ton of those before-and-after pictures from the ...

ROBERT: Amazing.

JAD: Really amazing. And we also have a link to Sally Jenkins's book, which is highly recommended. The Real All Americans. That's on our site Radiolab.org.

ROBERT: Thanks also to Reggie Kathy and to Scott Graham. To Noah Robbins to Michael Chernus to Matt Della Pina, Cole Wimpy, to J.R. McCarthy to Nick Capodice.

JAD: Colin and Michelle Campbell.

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JAD: And special thanks, very special thanks to our amazing volunteer, Steve Squard, who came out and weathered the Brooklyn cold to scream and holler and bring this story to life. And speaking of that, very special thanks to Brenna Farrell who found the story and produced it with us. And production support from Damiano Marchetti.

ROBERT: Well, that's a lot of people to have thanked. But we will have -- we will have more to listen to and more people to thank in the second half of our program.

X

JAD: Yeah, we're gonna take a distinctly modern view on football coming up.

JAD: Are we rolling Jamie?

JAMIE: We are rolling. Chuck, can you say -- how's your water?

CHUCK KLOSTERMAN: My water is refreshing. It's delicious.

JAD: We like to go a little bit heavy on the minerals here in public radio.

JAD: Hey, I'm Jad Abumrad.

ROBERT: I'm Robert Krulwich.

JAD: This is Radiolab. And today ...

ROBERT: Still talking about football.

JAD: Yes, sir.

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look at where it's going. Which seems to be the big conversation these days. And as we were thinking about that, we ended up talking with one of our favorite sports writers, Chuck Klosterman.

CHUCK KLOSTERMAN: *I'm a writer and a journalist in Brooklyn.*

XTOBERT: You may know him from his Ethicist column in the New York Times. He also writes about sports for Grantland. And he recently wrote an essay about football and its inherent contradictions. And it recalled for us this sort of Carlisle versus Ivy freeflow versus traditional sort of thing, but in a newer sort of modern way.

CHUCK KLOSTERMAN: *Mm-hmm.*

JAD: *Hey, can I ask you -- so your -- I want you to explain this statement. This is the thing I found most interesting about your essay. You say basically that by portraying itself as a super-conservative, traditional, manly sport, but essentially operating as the opposite, like this really liberal, wide-open anything goes kind of sport, football became the most successful enterprise in American sports history. You have this sense that it's pretending to be one thing but actually another. What do you mean?*

CHUCK KLOSTERMAN: *Well, okay. It's a unique thing in the sense that if you look at a sport like soccer or baseball, there is a real sense from the people who sort of, you know, the institution of the sport to keep the sport the same. That they want the sport to sort of almost transcend time. It would be the same game now as it always is. Soccer particularly, they hate any kind of attempt to change the rules in this. Football works in the exact opposite way. Football is constantly evolving and constantly adopting new ideas and new technologies, and is very willing to alter the game in order to make it a more free-flowing or more progressive game. I mean, football will add things like coaches can talk to the quarterback through a radio in their helmet. You know, the idea of instant replay was added very early on compared to other sports. The game itself from an offensive perspective is constantly being reinvented.*

JAD: Chuck says if you look at all the new formations that keep getting added and all the trick plays that are tried out every year, it is quite clear that football as a game ...

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and so popular that it allows you to sort of think about the game in a very liberal, progressive way.

JAD: In a Carlisle way.

CHUCK KLOSTERMAN: *But spiritually, like your heart of it can still be this kind of old, comfortable conservative mindset.*

JAD: Those old Ivy fundamentals of power and might and tradition.

CHUCK KLOSTERMAN: *I'm just kind of of the belief that that's really what most people want. Most people want to think of themselves as progressive but feel conservative.*

JAD: And Chuck's whole argument is that it is football's unique ability to be both at the same time: reactionary and simultaneously wildly inventive, so that you can think about it one way and feel about it another, that is what makes football ...

CHUCK KLOSTERMAN: *The most popular part of our sporting culture, which it is right now by a factor of three.*

JAD: What he means is that the NFL's three times as popular as the next most popular sport in America. And the question we got to, just because it's a question you can't really avoid right now is, is it gonna stay that way?

CHUCK KLOSTERMAN: *Well, it's just -- we're in such a weird era for the sport. Like, this is, certainly in my lifetime, the strangest era. Like, some weird things are happening. One is that ...*

[SPORTS CLIP: Injuries after injuries.]

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[SPORTS CLIP: Concussions in football.]

[SPORTS CLIP: If you're a coach, how do you handle all this discussion about neurologists and head injuries going forward?]

X: **HUCK KLOSTERMAN:** The idea that so many former NFL players are essentially, you know, decrepit and

[SPORTS CLIP: My former center, a lot of head problems.]

CHUCK KLOSTERMAN: We study their brains after they die, and they have the brains of people who should have been 180 old and had Alzheimer's or whatever, you know? There was just a kid from Ohio State who shot himself in a dumpster.

[NEWS CLIP: Before he vanished he sent a text to his mother saying, "I am sorry if I'm an embarrassment.]

CHUCK KLOSTERMAN: And basically texted his mom and said it was like, "I think it's concussions that are making me do this.

[NEWS CLIP: These concussions have my head all effed up.]

CHUCK KLOSTERMAN: And at the same time ...

[NEWS CLIP: It is an American pastime ...]

CHUCK KLOSTERMAN: There seems to be no limit to the popularity of the sport.

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CHUCK KLOSTERMAN: I think it's very plausible that the Super Bowl this year will be the most watched sporting event of all time.

JAD: In America, that is.

X: **HUCK KLOSTERMAN:** And this is a ...

ROBERT: Don't you feel a small cold wind in the air? Like, strange ...

JAD: I feel like -- I feel like the chimes of death are tolling or something.

CHUCK KLOSTERMAN: Absolutely. Well, this -- and there's really never been a serious discussion about should we as a culture be playing football since ...

JAD: Since Roosevelt. 1905.

CHUCK KLOSTERMAN: Yes. And yet no one seems to be stopping themselves from watching these games. So it's almost like there are these two silos.

JAD: Two separate streams in our collective unconscious.

CHUCK KLOSTERMAN: That exist simultaneously and are both, like, shooting skyward.

JAD: Okay, so we got to be honest. Like, when Chuck was talking about the -- his whole idea of silos shooting skyward, cool idea, but we weren't really sure what that meant exactly.

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JAD: That is until our producer Soren Wheeler met this woman.

MONET BARTELL: I'm Monet Bartell.

SOREN: You could add something, like, if you want.

X

MONET BARTELL: I'm Monet Bartell. I'm a Libra. I enjoy long walks on the beach. I'm just joking.

SOREN: So Monet is a partner at a media production company. She lives with her husband and their four kids outside of Atlanta, Georgia. But I actually went to talk to her about her son Parker, because Monet says the very moment he was born ...

SOREN: So what are you thinking when -- when Parker's born?

MONET BARTELL: As soon as the doctor saw his third thumb, I was like, "Yes! We're going to the NFL, baby! Yes!" And then Parker's 10 pounds and one ounce. He's the biggest thing. He walked out the womb.

SOREN: I'm still going with third thumb.

MONET BARTELL: The third thumb! That's the best part.

SOREN: I hadn't heard that one before.

MONET BARTELL: So Parker comes out, and he's the biggest thing I've ever seen. You know, I've prepared for months and I've found the perfect outfit to take him home from the hospital, and -- and this joker's too big for it. So right then I'm like, "Oh my God. Yes!"

MONET BARTELL: He's a boy!

SOREN: And he's gonna play in the NFL.

MONET BARTELL: And he's gonna play in the NFL. A lot of families pass down quilts. They pass down family businesses. Our family tradition was football. It was football. My dad played football.

X

[SPORTS CLIP: The Lions' leading rusher was Mel Farr.]

SOREN: Her dad is Mel Farr. He was a running back for the Detroit Lions, and actually Rookie of the Year in 1967.

MONET BARTELL: His brother played football.

SOREN: Miller Farr.

SOREN: Your uncle.

MONET BARTELL: My uncle.

SOREN: Her brothers Mel Farr Junior and Michael Farr both played football.

MONET BARTELL: My cousin Jerry LeVias who, they ...

SOREN: And when we say played, these guys, everybody played in the NFL.

MONET BARTELL: Jerry Ball. I can't even -- if I -- I said I was gonna actually write them all down, but it's something like 33.

SOREN: Really!

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MONET BARTELL: Family members have played in the NFL.

SOREN: Oh, my God!

MONET BARTELL: Coming from a sports family, we had to play a sport. So I can remember getting up in the mornings before school, six, seven o'clock in the morning and having agility drills. We lived on the house with ...


SOREN: Like, just at home in your backyard?

MONET BARTELL: At home. Yeah, in the backyard. We lived on a hill. And I didn't have it as bad as my brothers because I played tennis. I started playing tennis at three. But, like, in the wintertime, my dad would strap my brothers to the sled and my dad would sit in the sled and they would have to run up the hill with my dad in the sled.

SOREN: Oh, my God!

MONET BARTELL: Tire drills, everything.

SOREN: Do you have a sense of, like, why?

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and Sam Barry and even Combs who are all in the family. Name-dropping, James Brown, and Sam Barney sang background on Marvin Gaye's What's Going On?

SOREN: No!

MONET BARTELL: Yes, they did. My dad has a gold record.

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SOREN: Oh, man. That's crazy!

MONET BARTELL: And when he stopped playing football...

[COMMERCIAL CLIP: The continuing adventures of Mel Farr Superstar!]

MONET BARTELL: He opened up his first car dealership.

SOREN: And then another and another. And for a time, the Mel Farr Auto Group was actually the largest African American-owned business in the country.

MONET BARTELL: I mean, that's what football did for him. Football gave my dad a life.

SOREN: So Parker ...

MONET BARTELL: If they had a Toddler League, he'd have been in it.

SOREN: So you start looking for leagues?

MONET BARTELL: Absolutely. We moved to Georgia when Parker was two, and I found one that started

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...right? Parker had to have more going into going up there and being, just personal with me and my check. Four years old. Full-on contact football at four.

SOREN: With helmets, pads.

MONET BARTELL: Helmets, pads, spring training.

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SOREN: Wow.

MONET BARTELL: Parker had spring training, okay? He's going through the tires. He's four, okay? We don't even have team colors yet, but I'm there in what I feel like our team colors should be. I'm there in Honolulu blue and silver, because that's Detroit Lions colors. So this is just at the -- at spring training. Then we get to the actual team practice. They immediately -- they named him *The Tank*. He was just plowing through people. They're like, "Tank! Tank!"

SOREN: Like the coaches and the parents?

MONET BARTELL: The coaches. At first practice, I'm not thinking about the other parents and their little normal-size children and the fact that by, you know, after the first day of practice three kids quit because Parker had just plowed them over. I'm like, "Yes, my son is a beast!"

SOREN: And then the season starts.

MONET BARTELL: Football in where we live is huge. At four years old, they were tailgating.

SOREN: [laughs]

MONET BARTELL: No, I'm serious. The coaches had matching outfits. They had headgear. I'm like, "Are you kidding me? You guys are talking on microphones?" And I'm like, "Wow, this is -- this is freaking



MONET BARTELL: It's that serious.

SOREN: Are you starting to think this is ridiculous at any point? Or it's just they were ...

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MONET BARTELL: I'm like, this -- no, I'm like, this is ridiculous.

SOREN: Monet says she knew that, but when Parker's team would take the field ...

MONET BARTELL: "Ha ha, hoo hoo, go fight win!"

SOREN: It didn't matter.

MONET BARTELL: You know, the proudest moment as a parent, my son gets a personal foul.

SOREN: [laughs]

MONET BARTELL: I know. It's terrible. I'm -- my son just tackles this guy, and the coach, you know, he would always tell them, "Make them eat dirt!" So after he tackled him, my son took his hand and was like, "Eat dirt!" And I'm like, "Ah, ha ha!" I had to keep myself down.

SOREN: Because the kid who's eat -- mom who ate dirt is ...

MONET BARTELL: Right? I'm like, Oh, I'm sorry!" So at that -- that's what -- that evening is when I realize oh my gosh, if my son was just attacked by a 65-pound four-year-old, I'd probably be a bit upset. So this is a progression. This is -- okay, they got the matching outfits. Okay, they eat dirt. And then you go home and you reflect on the day. And I start to -- you know, I'm like, "Oh, my gosh. What about this



MONET BARTELL: Yes.

SOREN: Okay.

X MONET BARTELL: My son has a trophy that's -- it's probably three feet tall.

SOREN: The crazy part is that as all this is happening, as Parker's taking the field with his four- and five-year-old teammates ...

MONET BARTELL: A family member had really, really started showing signs.

SOREN: Signs of, like ...

MONET BARTELL: Of CTE.

SOREN: Chronic traumatic encephalopathy.

SOREN: Which is the -- what comes from, like, concussion.

MONET BARTELL: Concussion after concussion.

SOREN: Symptoms include memory loss, sometimes bouts of anger. In this case ...

MONET BARTELL: It was depression. It was suicidal thoughts. It was everything.

MONET BARTELL: It was everybody else seeing it. It was getting phone calls. Like, "Hey, I need you to come get him because he's having dangerous thoughts."

SOREN: Yeah.

X MONET BARTELL: And at that very time knowing that, I went and signed my son up for football.

SOREN: What's going on there?

MONET BARTELL: Because that's what we do. It's almost like a split personality. Registering him for football was just as natural as getting up every morning and brushing my teeth. Then you have the other half as a mother, daughter, niece of NFL athletes who sees what happens on the flipside.

SOREN: And while Parker was playing, the part of her that did see what happens on the flipside, that -- that part would campaign to raise awareness of CTE with other parents.

MONET BARTELL: I was on a mission. I met with people, I was doing health fairs, helping create this pamphlet that would go out.

SOREN: Meanwhile ...

MONET BARTELL: Since Parker was playing, my dad now is affected.

SOREN: Really? Your dad too?

MONET BARTELL: My dad is now showing signs.

MONET BARTELL: My dad just talked to me, and he's like, "You know, I'm seeing how much you love football, and the thought pattern. You know, running backs what do you do, man? You lead with the head. That was, you know -- but I can't stop myself from wanting my son to play football. It's just the -- I can't -- I can't even explain it. If he wanted to play I would be out there. He would be at practice, you know? Even -- who tosses the ball around with him in the yard, hoping that he'll fall in love with football? Me."

SOREN: And as for Parker?

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MONET BARTELL: When I asked Parker how did he like the season, his favorite things were the trophy and the pizza party at the end. He had no desire. "You want to play again next season?" "No." This past year or last year, "Hey Parker. Do you want to play this year?" "No. I want to play soccer."

SOREN: Would you bring up -- like, when would a next possible season be?

MONET BARTELL: Well, registration is in June.

SOREN: And this would be what kind of -- he's eight?

MONET BARTELL: Yeah. I don't want him to -- if he decides to play the game, cool. If not, begrudgingly, but that's okay, too. I don't want to force him to play, especially this early. So I -- I stand firm on both sides of the debate.

SOREN: [laughs] You can't do that.

MONET BARTELL: [laughs] I know. That's what makes it ridiculous. I stand firm that children should not play football. I also stand firm that children should play football. That it's a great sport.

SOREN: And her current solution to this quandary ...

SOREN: Come say hi to Mr. Wheeler. And the kicker's name, just so you know.

MONET BARTELL: I'm like what -- what the what? There's no black kickers, there's no black punters.

SOREN: Even the kicker gets hit every so often, though.

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MONET BARTELL: Every so often, but there is a stiff penalty for that. It's 15 yards.

SOREN: And at about this point in the conversation, Parker came home from school.

MONET BARTELL: Come say hi to Mr. Wheeler.

PARKER BARTELL: Hi, Mr. Wheeler.

SOREN: Hey there, Parker. How are you doing?

PARKER BARTELL: Good.

SOREN: I'm not exactly sure how an eight-year-old should look, but he's a pretty big kid.

MONET BARTELL: Come sit with me. Oof!

PARKER BARTELL: [laughs]

MONET BARTELL: I need to sit on your lap.

MONET BARTELL: Why?

SOREN: You don't know why?

X PARKER BARTELL: Oh, about football?

SOREN: Yeah.

PARKER BARTELL: I've played -- I played for about six weeks, I think. Is that right?

MONET BARTELL: Something like that.

SOREN: Because you just weren't really that into it?

PARKER BARTELL: No, I just still -- the only reason I don't want to play it anymore is because I made someone swallow dirt and, like, that stuff is kind of messing up my history and I don't want to get anyone else hurt.

SOREN: Messing up your history?

PARKER BARTELL: Yeah. It's just missing up history in my life.

SOREN: Oh. I mean, you could -- well, I don't know what that means. What does that mean?

PARKER BARTELL: It's like messing up -- it's making me have bad memories. I want to have good

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it?

PARKER BARTELL: I feel bad about it every time I think back.

SOREN: Really?

X PARKER BARTELL: Yes. I thought I heard somebody crying or something. I thought I heard tears, or I saw them.

SOREN: So you didn't like doing that.

PARKER BARTELL: Yeah.

SOREN: Do you like watching football?

PARKER BARTELL: No, I'm not that into football like the rest of my family.

SOREN: Why not?

PARKER BARTELL: I usually think about just having fun and not winning.

SOREN: Where'd you get that? Is that from your mom?

PARKER BARTELL: No, I just know that. Winning's just for people trying to be better than everyone and bullying.

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people. When you win, all you're gonna do is, like, take a trophy and say you're better than them. It's not fair to the others.

SOREN: *Do you like other sports? Or you don't really care about that either.*

PARKER BARTELL: *I really want to do synchronized swimming.*

MONET BARTELL: *[laughs]*

SOREN: *Really? Is that true?*

MONET BARTELL: *Where did you come from? Is that true?*

PARKER BARTELL: *Mm-hmm.*

SOREN: *Why?*

PARKER BARTELL: *Mostly because when I saw something about it, it looked kind of cool. Like, people are doing a lot of cool swimming tricks. So I kind of thought it was something for me.*

SOREN: *Are you -- are you playing me?*

PARKER BARTELL: *It's true! I want to do synchronized swimming.*

MONET BARTELL: *When did that happen?*

MONET BARTELL:

SOREN: *No, you like it?*

PARKER BARTELL: *Yeah, it sounds kind of good.*

MONET BARTELL: *He likes to swim. So he said swimming. But I guess we don't have to worry about ...*

SOREN: *Well, that would be a team sport.*

PARKER BARTELL: *Yeah.*

PARKER BARTELL: *Wow, this is kind of exhausting.*

SOREN: *Yeah. It's all right, we can stop, we can stop.*

JAD: Thanks to Monet and Parker Bartell for letting -- letting Soren invade their home and exhaust them on short notice. And by the way, when Monet went back and counted all the relatives that had been in the NFL, it wasn't 33 it was 13. But that's still -- that's a lot. In any case, here's a logical question that we felt like we should ask at least somewhere in this show. Given Tank's experience, you know, where football was practically his birthright, but he is opting out. Are there a lot of Tanks out there? Like, is football the sport tanking nationally? Generally? We asked Molly Webster to find out.

MOLLY WEBSTER: It's funny. One of -- one of my friends, we call him Tank, but that's because he can drink a lot. And my dad can't remember his name. He just goes, "How's Tank? How's that Tank fellow?" "Still drinking a lot." In any case, I started making some calls to high school coaches.

RYAN WALLASON: *Yup.*

MOLLY: *Oh, sweet.*

MOLLY: And to kind of get a handle on the bigger picture, I called this guy.

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RYAN WALLASON: *Ryan Marsalis Wallason. And I am a freelance sports reporter. I don't know. Would you want to name the places where I ...*

MOLLY: *No. We'll keep it short.*

RYAN WALLASON: *Okay, so then yeah. Just a name and freelance sportswriter.*

MOLLY: Okay. So in 2013, he was an intern at the Wall Street Journal's sports desk.

RYAN WALLASON: *In my first week, an article was published on ESPN that suggested based on solely Pop Warner's youth football numbers ...*

JAD: Hey!

MOLLY: By the way, Pop Warner is no longer the person Pop Warner, but he is a youth football league.

RYAN WALLASON: *Based on solely Pop Warner's youth football numbers, youth football was declining pretty significantly.*

MOLLY: When people saw these numbers they were like, "Oh, my God!"

JAD: Why, exactly? Five percent doesn't sound too bad.

MOLLY: Well I mean, if you assume that the five percent drop doesn't change, that's what it drops by every year, then in 15 years you're in the neighborhood of, like, 50 percent less kids playing ball.

JAD: Wow!

RYAN WALLASON: *Well, if this is true, it spells the end of football.*

MOLLY: The idea is you -- if you don't have the kids getting trained in, like, Pop Warner, then they're not going to middle school football. They're not going to high school football and they're not going to college football. So they're not going to the NFL.

RYAN WALLASON: *Right.*

MOLLY: Needless to say, everyone was like, "Oh, my God. Is this actually true? Or is there more to these numbers than meets the eye?" So Ryan starts digging into them.

RYAN WALLASON: *See if I couldn't find a context to put them in.*

MOLLY: And he doesn't look just at Pop Warner numbers, he looks at all the youth football leagues.

RYAN WALLASON: *And what I began to realize was that the drop wasn't as drastic, but that there was indeed a drop.*

RYAN WALLASON: Right.

JAD: Okay.

MOLLY: Your relief will be short-lived, because -- because there's a bigger story. When Ryan **X**ooked at participation across all youth sports, not just football ...

RYAN WALLASON: I came back with noted drops in all of the biggest youth sports.

JAD: It's not just that football's -- everything's decreasing?

RYAN WALLASON: So nothing was rising except for lacrosse and for hockey.

JAD: Huh. Wow.

RYAN WALLASON: So we had our headline. Kids Aren't Playing Sports. You know, football gets all of the attention, football gets all of the controversy. You don't really hear about basketball or soccer or baseball. So you don't have any reason to think that those sports aren't still as healthy as they've always been. But then when you go and look, you see a drop that is comparable to the drop in the sport that's got everybody's hair on fire. And you just wonder why this has been going on so silently.

JAD: Is this an extension of the whole concussion thing?

MOLLY: Yes. Concussions were definitely part of the conversation. But so were, you know, budget issues, and kids specializing in sports and getting burnt out. Basically, everyone had their reasons and every school has their reasons, but the guys I talked to ...

J.T. CURTIS: And you know

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J.T. CURTIS: You know, the bottom line is today, if a kid doesn't like the score he just hits restart. He just starts the game over.

J.J. WOODWARD: Because they can get on a video game, they can play. They start losing, they hit reset.

X.T. CURTIS: Hit the button and play another game.

GEORGE SALAS: They just get a button start over.

MOLLY: That's J.T. Curtis, J.J. Woodward and George Salas. They're in Louisiana, California and Kansas. And I heard this refrain not just from them, but I heard this in Ohio, I heard this in Michigan. And by this point I was like, Jesus!

J.T. CURTIS: You know, that's the problem.


MOLLY: It's funny, because it's as if all the coaches all across the nation are reading the same book or going to the same bar or something, because literally everyone I've talked to has brought this up. Is it just that everyone's said it to each other so much that ...

J.J. WOODWARD: No. I can tell you that's not it at all.

MOLLY: Okay.

J.J. WOODWARD: It's because we all deal with the problem.

MOLLY: So all these coaches I talked to were like, "You can't go hit reset. You can't hit reset. You can't hit reset." Like, these kids are used to, like -- I sound so old. They're basically saying that what they find is they feel like there's some -- some commitment issue now

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MOLLY: Yeah. So the interesting thing was is the coaches I talked to at the power house schools were like, "Well, we're not actually having trouble getting kids because we win." But the other schools in their conference, they know that coaches and athletic directors, and then I talked to some schools that had forfeiting teams, that ended up forfeiting games. They said like, "You just don't get the kids that will work their asses off and ride the bench."

ROBERT: Well, everybody wants to win. It just somehow sounds like they expect to win or it isn't worth the effort?

MOLLY: Or it's just that there are so many options, like, why would you choose the losing option?

GEORGE SALAS: I tell you what, when I used to go home after school, I'd turn the TV on and there's three channels. That's all I had. And they usually were showing soap operas. And so there was really no reason, I had no reason to stay home. Now you go home, there's 150 stations. You can find something you want to watch or you get out a game.

JAD: All right. So whether it you think it's video games, or parenting, or fear of concussions, or whatever reason you want to choose, it seems to be the larger thing that happens in these conversations about sports like football, is it doesn't actually seem to be about football. It's like some kind of negotiation between the generations. Because, like, back in the 1870s, the Harvard kids they were using football as a way to say back to the previous generation like, "Look how tough we are. Look how manly we are." Maybe this generation is turning away from sports like football also to say something back to the previous generation. Something about the world they want to live in.

CHUCK KLOSTERMAN: Sports do suggest things about society and about reality that we are slowly trying to move, remove from existence.

JAD: Mm-hmm.

CHUCK KLOSTERMAN: The idea that somehow physicality matters more than the mind, and that

just physicality, even masculinity, or any kind, it's something that we don't have to celebrate these days. So it could be, if you believe writer Chuck Klosterman, it could be that some kids are choosing away from sports like football because to play football, it means that on some level you have to support or at least entertain ideas that you don't like, you know? Or at least you don't want to admit that you like. Except he admits it.

CHUCK KLOSTERMAN: You think there's something unconscious about me that is drawn to the problems in the game that are based around what it really is, which is a ...

JAD: Two dudes slamming into each other.

CHUCK KLOSTERMAN: Yes. Because you know, I mean, okay, this is -- like, I'm doing -- I guess I'm doing pop psychology on myself, but ...

JAD: Which you are fully entitled to do because it's fascinating.

CHUCK KLOSTERMAN: But I sometimes wonder if -- if somehow part of me misses that from my life. That -- you know, that my life is built around sitting at a computer and avoiding conflict and basically thinking about things and going on the radio and talking about what they might mean, you know? And sort of like, what are they metaphors for? What is this culture? What is it telling us, you know? And that -- that perhaps football allows me to sort of, even though I'm not playing it, I'm just watching it, but somehow by watching it, it allows me to tap into something that is no longer part of my life because my mind has trained me not to want it. My mind knows not to look for conflict. Now I -- do I suspect that I was socialized to believe that that would be a positive, exciting thing? Absolutely.

CHUCK KLOSTERMAN: I mean, I -- you know, I talked about sports with my father more than we talked about every other thing we ever talked about. I had a great relationship with my dad. He passed away. I loved him. We had a great relationship. But we definitely spent more time discussing sports than I would say every other thing that we discussed. Even though he would always say, like, the most important thing -- he'd like -- I'd come home from whatever, you know, and he would be like, "So how was school today?" And I would tell him how school was briefly and he would be like, "Well, you know, academics are the most important thing." And then we would talk about football practice for an hour. Like, you know? It's like, that would be -- so I realized that my relationship to football goes back to, you know, my -- I have two older brothers, man. We spent so much time throwing the football around. And -- and my brother, one of them -- both my brothers were very good football players and like one

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[Answering Machine: End of message.]

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something else. That it was beautiful. The ball struck its human target. Exendine caught the pass all alone and trotted over to Chicago goal line.

SCOTT GRAHAM: *The stadium exploded in sound and motion. On the Chicago sideline, coaches and players screamed with outrage. On the field, the referee signaled the score. But in the stands, the spectators marveled. The crowd held its breath in amazement for a time, then stifled its local pride and turned loose its enthusiasm and cheered for the Indians, the Chicago Daily Tribune reported.*

X

SCOTT GRAHAM: *It was the game breaker. The rest was just anti-climax. The final score was 18 to 4 for Carlisle. The long pass had arrived in Chicago, although by a circuitous and out-of-bounds route. The Indians, declared The Tribune, had given such an exhibition of its possibilities as will not soon be forgotten in that vast throng.*

JAD: That was Mr. Scott Graham, voice of Inside The NFL. Thank you, Scott. You are the awesomest voice ever. And that was original music by Dylan Keefe. Bye!

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