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Football and Thanksgiving

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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The History of Thanksgiving and of Football both go back into the Middle Ages, and so it may not be so strange that the two would become intertwined in modern America.

The first American Thanksgiving is generally believed to have been in Plymouth Colony in mid-October of 1621, when William Bradford and the Pilgrims gathered with local Indians to give thanks for survival and the first harvest. The first Thanksgiving proclaimed by a President was November 26, 1789 when he called for a national day of Thanksgiving for the new form of government.

By the end of that century the practice had faded into disuse, but through the first half of the nineteenth century Sara Hale, editor of Godey's Lady's Book kept the idea alive writing editorials and letters to presidents and governors urging their adoption of such a day. Finally during the Civil War Abraham Lincoln took her advice and proclaimed the last Thursday of November, 1863, as Thanksgiving Day. The practice stuck.

Eleven years later in 1874 the first intercollegiate football game was played. Two years later the Intercollegiate Football Association was formed and they instituted a championship game for Thanksgiving Day. Within a decade it was the premier athletic event in the nation.

All but twice in the first two decades of the league Princeton and Yale were the participants, and by the 1890's when the game was played in the Polo Grounds it was drawing 40,000 fans. Players, students and fans wore their school colors while banners flew from carriages, hotels, and the business establishments of the city. It was by then one of the most important social events of the season for New York's social elite.

In 1893 the New York Herald noted the significance of the event, declaring: "Thanksgiving Day is no longer a solemn festival to God for mercies given...It is a holiday granted by the State and the Nation to see a game of football." Indeed it was, and would remain so. By the mid-1890's it was estimated that some 120,000 athletes from colleges, clubs, and high schools took part in 5,000 Thanksgiving Day football games across the nation. The Thanksgiving Day game was established as both a tradition and a money maker.

The National Football League followed the example of the colleges. In 1934 George Richards bought the Portsmouth, Ohio, Spartans, moved them to Detroit, and renamed them the Lions. Richards decided to play the Lions game against the Bears on Thanksgiving Day at the University of Detroit Stadium. With no other professional competition and owning a radio station of his own, Richards was able to put together a 94 station coast-to-coast radio network. This allowed a national radio audience, and 25,000 fans, to witness the 19-16 Bear victory. The Detroit Lions traditional Thanksgiving Day game was born.

When professional football began to attract a national following in the 1950's as the television sport, it was the Lion's Thanksgiving Day game that became a mid-20th century tradition, and until 1963 the Lions always played the Green Bay Packers on Thanksgiving.

I can remember watching terrible Packer teams chasing the legendary Lion quarterback Bobby Lane around Briggs Stadium. I was in awe of Lane the tough Texan who was out of shape, aging, and never wore a face mask. But I loved the Packers and longed for an upset of the Lions.

After Vince Lombardi transformed the Packers into champions, with Starr, Taylor, and Hornung, it was the Lions who pulled the big upsets on Turkey Day in front of growing television audiences. The turkey would not be served until the game was over, as the smell of turkey, gravy, dressing, pumpkin pie and football filled the air. Some games were played in rain, others in snow, and almost always it was cold outside our Minnesota home.

Much has changed since then. The Lions are playing in a dome. They play a variety of teams on Thanksgiving, no longer just the Packers. And because there are now two TV networks covering the NFL, there must be two Thanksgiving Day games, the second one in Dallas, which began in 1966, the merger year. At our house the Turkey is still served at the end of the Lions game, but after the meal we watch the fourth quarter of the game from Dallas over pie and coffee, hoping for a Cowboy loss. And almost always now it is warm outside our Florida home.

As it was in the 1890's so it is in the 1990's, Thanksgiving remains "a holiday granted by the State and the Nation to see a game of football."

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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