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The NFL Draft

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
THE NFL DRAFT
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Some of you may remember when the word "draft" referred to a movement of cold air through a warm room from an outside source. Others will remember the Draft as that device controlling compulsory military service. Some will think "Draft lottery" the device designed to make the military draft fair, although the young may think of the NBA Draft Lottery. Others will think "draft" beer.

In the last two decades, the average sports fan knows that the term refers to only one thing, the NFL Player Draft, which is about to descend on Sportsworld after months of NFL and ESPN driven anticipation.

Of all the insignificant events in the world of sport, this is clearly the most overhyped and irrelevant of all. What started as a means of distributing football talent evenly across professional football has turned into a multi-day meat market with associated activities that occupy nearly the entire NFL and Julian calendar.

The Draft began in 1936 after Bert Bell suggested a draft of college players as a way to help insure parity among NFL franchises. The goal was not achieved, as a handful of teams dominated the top of league standings over the next decade. In addition, the Draft was not considered all that important among college players, and many high draft picks did not find football an attractive means of making a living.

In the postwar period the NFL increased in popularity and player salaries increased under the pressure of competition from rival leagues. Then in the late 1960s, with the creation of the American Football League (AFL) and the resulting competition for football talent, the Draft took on greater significance. In the AFL/NFL wars, the Draft was manipulated as the AFL tried to get ahead in the competition for players by holding a secret draft before the NFL held its Draft. At one point, Al Davis signed Fred Biletnikoff to an Oakland Raiders contract *before* drafting him.

The merger of the two leagues ended the competition for players, which increased the significance of the Draft in

player acquisition. Scouting increased, and scouting of African American players increased under the lead of the AFL.

As with most things NFL, it is television that drives the machine forward. The coming of ESPN in the early 80s and the brilliance of Commissioner Pete Rozelle both pushed the expanding popularity of the NFL. At some point, the producers at ESPN, always looking for a way to fill the programming schedule, discovered the NFL Draft. In fact, fans discovered it first, started attending it, and dressed in team gear and costume for it.

If fans were this interested in the NFL Draft, then clearly it needed to be put on television. My guess is that no one anticipated the madness that followed. The Draft became an event, then became *the* event, and shortly the NFL marketers jumped on the bandwagon. The Draft made the NFL a yearlong topic of conversation among fans. Soon, there would be no off-season for the NFL.

At ESPN, the Draft grew in importance and became a central part of their NFL Programming. Analysts began appearing on the network, first one, then two, and then a parade of them. Mel Kiper became a household name, certainly better known among fans than the vice-president of the United States. The Mock Draft was created to predict who would be drafted by which team and in which round. Mock Drafts are now as numerous as gators and cockroaches in Florida. The first Mock Draft now appears the day after the real NFL Draft, as it's never too soon to look to the next season.

Sports Talk radio also played its part, and it soon became apparent to hosts of these shows that football fans never got tired of talking about football. Furthermore, NFL fans were all experts ready to argue with other fan experts and actual experts. These fans all knew they knew more than the coaches and general managers of their favorite teams. Any sports talk radio host knows that his three-hour slot will never go quiet because football never goes away.

Those responsible for drafting players need all the information they can get, and thus the NFL Combine was born. Here, players who hope to be drafted and join the NFL are brought together to display their talents and their bodies. The players are weighed, measured, and tested in multiple ways to create a warehouse of metrics to help the

scouts and directors of player personnel make their draft day decisions. Started in the 1980s, by combining a number of scouting services, it became a permanent fixture in Indianapolis in 1987.

Inevitably, this event too has been turned into television programming. The creation of the NFL Network led to offering live telecasts from the Combine in 2004 and was important in establishing the new Network. ESPN came to the Combine late, not offering significant live coverage until the late teens.

It is a spectacle that has some dark echoes of the past. The meat market, the objectification of the body, attention to such minor details as percentage of body fat, have, at times, led me to wonder if the entire show should be at the waterfront in Charleston.

But of course, it will not be, despite the latest draft day development, namely the competition among cities to host the Draft. Cities now bid on the event, with this year's Draft to be held in the glitz capital of the United State, Las Vegas. Sponsors lineup to buy time on the broadcast of the Draft that now runs seven rounds spread over three days. In a city that was taboo for the NFL only a decade ago, this year's draft will saturate the Vegas landscape. The Circus Circus Hotel and Casino is now joined by a third and much more important Circus.

The beauty of it all is that at least half of those drafted in the first-round will not make a significant contribution to the team that burned their first-round pick on them. Despite this failure rate, over the next year two things will happen: Teams will trade with each other to accumulate early round Draft picks, and fans and the media will wear us out with their endless discussions of the upcoming Draft.

From Mel Kiper, ESPN, and the NFL Network, Oh lord deliver us!

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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