Changes in NFL mirror changes in modern workplace, paper says

March 15 2018, by Phil Ciciora

Sports and society have been intertwined since ancient Greece, so it should come as little surprise that NFL football continues to be influenced by workplaces far removed from the playing field, says a new paper from a University of Illinois expert who studies the cultural and labor history of sports.

From the NFL's birth in the 1920s to its golden age of the 1960s up to the fantasy football hysteria of the present day, the sport has reflected the changing dynamics of the modern U.S. workplace, said Daniel A. Gilbert, a professor of labor and employment relations at Illinois and author of the paper.

"New dynamics in American workplaces far removed from the sports industry have helped to drive each of these three distinct periods of change in pro football," he said.

According to the paper, the football-workplace connection was present from the league's inception, as the NFL emerged during the early 20th century from the company-sponsored teams of the era. For example, the Decatur Staleys team, representing the A. E. Staley Manufacturing Company of Decatur, Illinois, was the forerunner of the modern-day Chicago Bears.

"Business leaders of that era would develop teams out of an interest in cultivating a contented workforce as well as company spirit, and also as a way of marketing their products," Gilbert said.

Similar stories were happening in other parts of the Midwest – the Dayton Triangles, which was underwritten by employers in Dayton, Ohio; and what would become the Green Bay Packers, which was sponsored by the Indian-Acme Packing Company, a meatpacking business.

"Those company teams became some of the founding members of the NFL," Gilbert said.

But the primary reason those industrial teams were formed was to soothe labor tensions.

"In the wake of violent labor upheavals in steel towns in Pennsylvania in the late 19th century, sports came to be viewed as a key tool in industrial relations," he said. "Company-sponsored sports programs were part of a whole host of so-called welfare capitalist strategies designed to direct workers' energies away fom labor radicalism.

"So as the steel industry is driving the American economy, football is also there from the beginning, and it remains essential and deeply embedded in the working culture of places like western Pennsylvania today."

If football staged performances of work on the gridiron, it also presented narratives of management on the sidelines during its biggest surge in popularity.

"The period of the 1960s is when the NFL really became the most popular pro sport, and that was due in large part to the league's media strategy. Their legendary in-house production company, NFL Films, packaged and mythologized football as a kind of idealized, rugged workplace," Gilbert said.

NFL Films productions of this era were, at their root, narratives about charismatic management and the division of labor, Gilbert said.

"For instance, framing Packers coach Vince Lombardi in a suit, tie and overcoat as the ultimate corporate manager, while casting players as disciplined members of a highly specialized workforce," he said. "Stories like these made pro football into a spectacle of power relations that resonated in an era that social scientists at the time greeted as a major transformation in American workplace culture – the radical expansion of the corporate, white-collar office."

The third moment the paper studies is the contemporary era of fantasy football, which has its origins in the rampant gambling that has existed in the sport since George Halas' days with the Staleys.

"Weekly betting on football remains a working-class cultural practice and a workplace cultural practice," Gilbert said. "For decades, workers had been filling out weekly parlay cards on the shop floor. This is one of the ways in which football fandom developed, through this close relationship to work and the workplace – and as a social lubricant of the workplace.

"Older forms of workplace betting are important forerunners to today's office pools and fantasy leagues. In the age of the internet, it has become possible to wager on football with our co-workers and friends whether we're sitting in our cubicles or sitting on our couches on Sunday."

Fantasy football also indulges the imagined possibility of one day rising to the ranks of management – "I may just be an office drone, but in this fantasy-football world, I am a world-class talent evaluator and manager of resources," Gilbert said.

It's also increasingly a phenomenon that plays out on social media, with

the imaginary managers directly engaging with players through Twitter.

"Pro football has always been attached to workplaces, and fans have always viewed both the sport and players through the lens of work," Gilbert said. "And those interactions have revealed a very interesting dynamic between fans and athletes about their status as workers: Fans feel that they can freely criticize an athlete's 'work product' – that is, their performance on the field – like a manager, and not as a fellow worker worthy of sympathy after a rough day at the office."

The paper was published in the Journal of Sport and Social Issues.

More information: Daniel A. Gilbert. The Gridiron and the Gray Flannel Suit: NFL Football and the Modern U.S. Workplace, *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* (2018). DOI: 10.1177/0193723518756850

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Changes in NFL mirror changes in modern workplace, paper says (2018, March 15) retrieved 18 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2018-03-nfl-mirror-modern-workplace-paper.html

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