AN ANALYSIS OF NATIONAL FOOTBALL LEAGUE FANDOM AND ITS PROMOTION
OF CONSERVATIVE CULTURAL IDEALS ABOUT RACE, RELIGION, AND GENDER

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ABSTRACT

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In this thesis I address three specific questions that relate to the current state of NFL fandom. To what extent do religion, race, and gender influence various aspects of NFL fandom? How do these issues reflect the dominant culture and major demographics of NFL fans (white and male)? Finally, what implications do my findings have for sports culture, fandom, and popular culture as a whole? To answer these questions, I provide three different case studies of NFL fan activities such as fantasy football, issues of gender, and religious and social ideals which show how NFL fandom reflects a very conservative view of race, gender, and religion that in particular mirrors and supports the conservative backlash that has occurred since President Barack Obama took office in January 2009.

For this thesis I examined NFL fan behavior and fan rhetoric on websites and blogs devoted to NFL fandom. In Chapter One, I focus on fantasy football, a popular activity among NFL fans. I examine the practices of fantasy football participants and how NFL players, particularly non-white players, are commodified by fans that play fantasy football. In Chapter Two, I analyze how women are portrayed by and situated within NFL fandom. I demonstrate that even while the NFL as an organization is trying to cater to female fans (through merchandising and branding), NFL fandom as a whole remains very much a male-dominated community that promotes traditional gender roles and behavior. In the third chapter, I explore how the Tebowmania phenomenon reflects conservative views of religion and race among NFL fans.
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INTRODUCTION

Growing up there was never any question about whether one loved football. Everyone loves football. In my family, football and the love for one’s favorite team is something that is in your blood like a biological trait passed down from generation to generation. The evidence of this belief was all around me. Sundays were spent watching football with family and friends and, during commercials, playing football with my father on our living room floor with a cloth football that I had since birth. Football was an activity that everyone could get excited about—young, old, male, female, everyone was eager to watch and cheer on our beloved Green Bay Packers. I suppose that my family fits the stereotype of National Football League (NFL)\(^1\) fans and more specifically Packer fans. On Sunday, we dug out our Packer jerseys and dressed from head-to-toe in green and gold, wearing our cheeseheads\(^2\) as if they were crowns. We grilled beer brats on the grill (even if it was January) and hung our Packer flag proudly outside our house. Sometimes my family traveled to see the games in person whether the game was in Green Bay or in some other part of the country. While I was never lucky enough to go to a Packer game when I was a child, I remember the pride and emotion that I felt when I visited Lambeau Field for the first time or when I attended my first Packer game with my father. These memories may seem insignificant and my feelings irrational to someone who does not identify as a sports fan, but for many fans these types of memories and shared experiences are important major life experiences. Watching football games together, tailgating, and dressing in one’s team colors transforms football to be more than just a game for those who love it. Being a football fan (and even more specifically a fan of certain football team, such as my own experience with being a Packer fan)

\(^1\) National Football League will be abbreviated as NFL from this point forward.
\(^2\) Cheeseheads are foam hats are shaped like a block of cheese and are often worn by Packer fans.
can become an important part of one’s identity and become an integral part of one’s life. One’s identity as a football fan is not just influenced by team loyalty, but also by a person’s other identities (e.g. gender and racial identities). Fan identities not only tie into the cultural texts that people become fans of, but they are also negotiated through fans’ other identities.

It is important that I address my own positionality if I am to interpret and analyze NFL fandom. As with many scholars who study fandom, I identify as a football fan and in particular an NFL fan. I participate in various fan activities beyond those I have already mentioned, such as playing in a fantasy football league and participating in online and offline discussions of football. My personal experience as an NFL fan can provide important insights and knowledge that someone who does not identify as an NFL fan could easily miss. As Henry Jenkins (6) noted in his groundbreaking work *Textual Poachers*, “Writing as a fan about fan culture poses certain risks for the academic critic, yet it also facilitates certain understanding and forms of access impossible through other positionings.” Simply stated, my position as a participant in NFL fandom, and also a scholar of popular culture, gives me tools for further examination of these issues. While I possess firsthand knowledge and experience of the subject, I am not so entrenched within the dominant group of the subculture as to make it impossible for me to do a thorough and objective examination of NFL fandom and the attitudes and rhetoric associated with it.

Sports fans, like other types of fans, have received significant attention from academics in the past twenty years. However, much of this attention has focused on the model of sports fans as consumers for marketing purposes, such as the classification of types of sports fans (DeSarbo and Madrigal 199-201; Hunt et al 439), analysis of sport fans’ purchasing behaviors (Zhang and Won 124-125), examination of reasons for watching sports (Wann et al 6; James and
Ridinger 260), and surveys of fan loyalty (Depken 275). While these are all important aspects of studying sports fandom, they are not the focus of this thesis. One of the reasons cited by Schimmel et al for the emphasis within sports fandom studies on trends in consumption is that popular culture scholars tend to be more concerned with media fans (e.g. television, film, music) than sports fans, due to the fact some scholars feel that sports makes up its own cultural form outside of popular culture (584). This has created a gulf between those scholars who study sports fans from a quantitative perspective (social sciences and business) and those who study sports fans from a qualitative perspective (cultural studies), a gulf that has been infrequently bridged by scholars from either perspective. (Schimmel et al 582-583).

Studying fandom has not always been a popular pursuit even among scholars of popular culture. It was not until the late 1980’s and early 1990’s that works such as *Textual Poachers* by Henry Jenkins shifted the focus from just studying texts in popular culture to studying those who enjoy the texts and examining how they incorporate them into their everyday lives and personal identities. Jenkins mainly focuses on fans of media texts (e.g. television and film), but he provides valuable insight on how fandoms are shaped and function within popular culture. Jenkins (279) argues that “fan culture, like traditional folk culture, constructs a group identity, articulates the community ideals, and defines its relationship to the outside world.” While some associate fandom with being outside of dominant culture and subverting dominant cultural ideals, sports fandom can be seen as an exception to this (Fiske 30). Part of the reason for this exception is the hegemonically-reinforced masculine nature of sports, as most sports fans are male and sports as a whole have been seen as a man’s game (Stanfill 3.2). For the purposes of my analysis, I will use the term fan as defined by Hunt, Bristol, and Bradshaw. Hunt et al (440) define a fan as “an enthusiastic consumer [which] means that he or she is motivated to engage in
behavior related to sports. The sports consumptive object can be a sport in general, or a specific league, or team.” Using this definition, I assume that engaging in online activities such as reading and writing about sports, playing fantasy football, and conversing with other fans about the NFL are fan behaviors. Sports provide an excellent lens through which to examine cultural ideals and perspectives due to how they saturate our everyday lives. Whether it is watching sports on television or actively participating in sports, even those who do not identify as sports fans cannot avoid discussions of “big games” or remarkable plays during individual games. Sports and the casual discussion of sports are ever-present in our daily lives, and so the study of these discussions is a study of an important aspect of everyday life. Sports fandom has received significant attention in scholarship, especially since the 1990’s, but much of the scholarship has focused on specific sports and their fans (Gantz et al. 64).

Much research has been devoted to looking at what distinguishes a sports fan from a spectator. It is beyond the focus of this work to examine whether fans are truly fans. While research on NFL fandom is widespread, there have not been many studies employing a qualitative approach to the study of NFL fandom. Most scholarship related specifically to NFL fandom has mainly focused on the financial and consumption aspects of fandom rather than the fan behavior (see Lee; Fountain and Finley; Clark, Apostolopoulou, and Gladden; and Drayer et al.). Some scholars have written more about the interactions between NFL fans and culture. Examples include how the NFL has served as an outlet for fans during times of crisis (Martin and Breitenfeldt 34), constructions of player mythology (Berg and Harthcock 137), and how NFL fans are using new media to engage in various activities such as watching the NFL Draft, playing fantasy football, and interacting with other fans (Oates 31; End 162).
In this thesis I address three specific questions that relate to the current state of NFL fandom. To what extent do religion, race, and gender influence various aspects of NFL fandom? How do these issues reflect the dominant culture and major demographics of NFL fans (white and male)? Finally, what implications do my findings have for sports culture, fandom, and popular culture as a whole? To answer these questions, I provide three different case studies of NFL fan activities which show that NFL fandom reflects a very conservative view of race, gender, and religion that in particular mirrors and supports the conservative backlash that has occurred since President Barack Obama took office in January 2009.

My thesis examines NFL fan behavior and fan rhetoric on websites and blogs devoted to NFL fandom. The majority of my primary source materials have been collected from various sports websites and blogs. The internet is not only the easiest way to examine NFL fandom, but also the best way to study it. Advances in technology have changed the ways that sports fans interact with their favorite sports. No longer are their opinions relegated to letters to the editor or call-in talk shows, but various types of new media have allowed for different types of expression and have provided fans with easier and more efficient ways to gather news and information as well as talk with other fans. Sports fans make up an estimated nineteen percent of all internet users (Sachoff). While the internet has not removed the importance and effect of face-to-face interactions, the internet is increasingly becoming a place where fans from all over the country (and even the world) can connect with each other and gather information almost instantaneously. Throughout my thesis, quotations from fans and other primary sources appear in their original forms and have not been corrected for spelling or grammar. In order to study fan behavior, it is important to go to the sites where fan action occurs.
In Chapter One, I focus on fantasy football, a popular activity among NFL fans. I examine the practices of fantasy football participants and how NFL players, particularly non-white players, are commodified by fans who play fantasy football. Fantasy football participants commonly employ racialized rhetoric in describing both NFL players and their own practices as fantasy football participants, rhetoric to which I draw parallels with the rhetoric of slave-owners. Ultimately I argue that these practices reflect fan perceptions about race, in particular an ideology that aligns well with what bell hooks called a “white supremacist” ideology (hooks 1).

In Chapter Two, I analyze how women are portrayed by and situated within NFL fandom. I demonstrate that even while the NFL as an organization is trying to cater to female fans (through merchandising and branding), NFL fandom as a whole remains very much a male-dominated community that promotes traditional gender roles and behavior. This community holds very traditional and conservative views about where and how women should participate, if at all. I also argue that the rhetoric among NFL fans surrounding women who interact with the NFL (female sports journalists and female fans alike) reflects these views. Overall, I demonstrate in this chapter that the NFL and its fans view women participants in fan culture as inauthentic at best and genuine outsiders at worst.

In the third chapter, I explore how the Tebowmania phenomenon reflects conservative views of religion and race among NFL fans. I argue that Tim Tebow has become more than just a quarterback for NFL fans, but he has become a cultural hero due to his position as a white, Christian male who is outspoken and unapologetic about his very conservative religious and social beliefs, in sharp contrast with a league that is becoming increasingly non-white and even seeing large increases of female fans (as my first two chapters demonstrate). Tebow represents an ideal that is aligned with the current conservative backlash that has arisen since President
Barack Obama took office in January 2009. Tebow’s popularity and rising hero status reflects the desire for these unsatisfied cultural factions to see their views represented on the national stage. This desire also coincides with a wish by conservative football fandom to reinforce the game’s status as a pastime of white, middle-class Christian men.
CHAPTER ONE: NFL FANS, FANTASY FOOTBALL, AND RACE

Baseball may be thought of as America’s pastime, but football has cemented itself as America’s present. For the past twenty-five years, professional football has remained the most popular sport among Americans, with increasing popularity, whereas sports such as baseball and basketball are either declining or stagnant in popularity (Sports Business Daily). With thirty-two teams located across the United States, it is easy for people to find an NFL team to support and connect to. For many fans of the NFL, it is simply not enough to watch their favorite team every Sunday. Fans continually search for ways to become closer to their favorite team, and other fans with whom to share their passion. Fans may attend games, make pilgrimages to their team’s stadium or to the Pro Football Hall of Fame, purchase various types of material culture related to the team they follow, paint their bodies and faces and loudly cheer for their team, tailgate, celebrate holidays and other special events while watching a football game with friends and family, and engage in numerous other ways to wear their team allegiance on their sleeves. While these types of expression are enough for some fans, many fans seek out other ways of expression and involvement with their interest. One way for fans to feel more involved with their favorite team and the NFL as a whole is by playing fantasy football. By playing fantasy football fans can maintain their allegiance to their favorite team while avidly cheering for and following players from teams besides their own.

Despite the growing popularity of fantasy football, there have been only a few studies on this fan activity and even fewer that analyze the activity for its greater cultural significance. This chapter attempts to bridge this gap in the literature through examining the deeper cultural meanings that underlie and are perpetuated by fantasy football as an aspect of the greater NFL fandom. For many fans, fantasy football is about socializing with other fans and increasing one’s
general knowledge of the sport. Fantasy football also allows its participants to take part in American football's fixation on treating athletes as commodities. Through its reliance on team-based performance metrics to determine individual player point total (and thus use value to the fantasy team owner), fantasy football obscures the group-based nature of game outcomes, instead giving the majority of credit or blame for group actions to single players on a play-by-play basis. Furthermore, I argue fantasy football serves as a kind of slave-owner simulator, allowing team owners to trade and utilize players as statistical packages whose health and well-being are only brought into the equation if an injury will prevent their scoring of points in a given week, or if their general physical condition is so exceptional as to warrant particular attention as a fantasy selection. (The language employed by fantasy football participants and the sports media at large in discussing African-American football players in particular becomes especially racially-charged, as I will demonstrate.) From here, I continue my examination of players as commodities in a racial context—something particularly relevant given that a majority of players in the NFL are African-American or identify as black (Lapchick, Kamke, & McMechan) and also given the fact that one of the major motivations and pleasures for fantasy football owners is the idea that they enjoy having “ownership” of their team and having control of their players (Spinda and Haridakis 194).

The main purpose of this chapter is to explore the relationship between the commodification of players and their race, and to examine how this relationship shapes the game of fantasy football and NFL fandom in general. I will analyze articles from websites such as NFL.com, ESPN.com, BleacherReport.com, FoxSports.com, and Yahoo!Sports, as well as participant comments from these articles, comments on various blogs and message boards, and rhetoric in fantasy football leagues that are publically available to view on the Internet. I am
choosing to use the Internet for my information on fantasy football as the game is primarily played online and most of the information used by those who play fantasy football is accessed and collected online. Though the exact demographics of my particular sample are not certain, I will be utilizing existing research on the socioeconomic status and the racial make-up of the “average” fantasy football player to reinforce my arguments as to the racialized ownership displayed by fantasy football participants. In essence, I argue that the commodification of NFL players via fantasy football further problematizes ways fans think and talk about race in the context of sports. I believe that this context also has implications for shaping the ways fans think about race in terms of their lives outside of fantasy football.

Fantasy football has evolved dramatically since its creation in 1962. The idea for fantasy football is credited to former partial owner of the Oakland Raiders, Bill Winkenbach. Winkenbach, along with Oakland Tribune writer Scotty Stirling and Oakland Raiders public relations representative Bill Tunnell, came up with a system that tracked the statistics of individual players and awarded points to the owners\(^1\) of the players\(^2\) based on their game performance (Dickey). While originally played on paper and using football statistics published in the newspaper, today’s game of fantasy football is played online in such places as NFL.com, ESPN.com, YahooSports.com, FoxSports.com, and other related websites with software that updates an owner’s points in real time as well as providing a wealth of information on how to manage and groom one’s team for fantasy football success. This online, interactive, role-playing-like\(^3\) game where individuals can take on the role of an NFL owner and coach allows them to

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1. In the context of fantasy football, the term “owner” is the term used for those who play the game. Therefore, I will use this term to refer to people who play fantasy football.
2. The term “players” will be used to refer to the actual football players on one’s fantasy team.
3. I describe fantasy football as similar to a role-playing game due to the fact that people who play fantasy football take on the role of an owner and coach. While people who play fantasy football
draft players and create their own team, add, trade, and drop players from the roster, set a starting
lineup for each week of regular season game play, and trade players with other owners. There are
various formats leagues can use such as head-to-head, rotisserie, total points, and salary cap
leagues. Each of these formats has different rules for calculating points and for drafting, adding,
and dropping players as well as for team composition, yet the overall commodification of players
remains undisturbed. Owners usually play for the first fourteen weeks of the regular season with
the last two weeks reserved for a league’s playoffs, ensuring that fantasy football participants are
given the entire season’s stock of players and games to analyze and trade on.

Fantasy sports are played by an estimated twenty-seven to thirty-two million people, and
that number is growing: about eighty-five percent of them play fantasy football (Ankeny;
Fantasy Football Trade Association), with some estimates putting the number at almost ninety-
three percent (Hiestand). Economically, Americans spend over 800 million dollars on fantasy
football related products and services per year (Crupi). While the NFL itself consists of about
sixty-seven percent black players (Lapchick, Kamke, & McMechan), the overwhelming majority
of those who play fantasy sports are white men who have at least a Bachelor’s degree, make at
least $50,000-$94,000, own their own home, and report high amounts of disposable income
(Davis and Duncan 247; Hill 2; Rainie). Though there have been limited studies on fantasy
football and those who play it, initial studies of participants and knowledge of the primary
audience for professional sports have led scholars and industry experts to conclude that the
white, financially comfortable male is the primary demographic of those who play fantasy sports,
particularly fantasy football (Spinda and Haridakis 189; Fantasy Sports Trade Association;
Petrecca). Since this echoes the racial make-up of the power structures of the NFL (as I address
do not usually develop a character and a narrative around their team, fantasy football has been
commonly referred to in popular culture as “Dungeons and Dragons for jocks”.)
later), the demographic profile of fantasy football owners is far more than a simple point of statistical interest.

Fantasy sports are essentially practices in commodification of people. When Karl Marx defined the concept of commodity in his first chapter of *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, I do not think he originally intended for the term to be applied to people. Marx defines commodity as “in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another” (41). Marx specifically says that a commodity is outside us; however, this does not preclude people from commodifying individuals as other individuals are by definition outside of us. Through the act of objectification, we allow ourselves to make people into objects, distinguishing them from ourselves and setting the “object” apart from us. For this analysis, I use Marx’s concept of commodification, applying it to the commoditization of football players in fantasy football. For fantasy football to exist, the commoditization of the player is a critical part of the game. But how does this commoditization affect how owners refer to and think of their fantasy teams? How does commoditization factor into owners’ motivation for playing and the pleasure they receive from fantasy football?

One of the exciting and unpredictable factors about fantasy football is that an owner’s performance is determined by *real* game play of *real* NFL players that he or she virtually owns and controls. Just like a commodity in the Marxist sense of the word, players as portrayed in the fantasy football environment are not just material objects, but they are useful to the owners, as it is the players’ performances that determine an owner’s fantasy football performance (Marx 42). The players’ commoditized status is not just implicit, but is made explicit as they are openly and frequently referred to as such. In an article entitled “Fantasy Football Week 14 Start ‘Em, Sit ‘Em?: Phillip Rivers, Roy Helu and More,” the writer described New York Jets quarterback
Mark Sanchez, “Sanchez is an unpredictable commodity, making him a player you don’t want to depend on” (Stashin). Even in a more general sense, players are referred to as commodities, such as in a Bleacher Report article from October 2011, “Quarterbacks may be all the rage in fantasy football this season, but having a superstar running back on your team is still a rare and valuable commodity” (Vassalo). There are even articles that will help an owner compare players in terms of their commodified status. This rhetoric is not just limited to articles on Bleacher Report, but also on sites such as ESPN, Yahoo!Sports, and even NFL.com. For owners, and sports writers whose sole job is advising fantasy football owners, a fantasy football team is simply a group of commodities as opposed to actual players. While the argument could be made that these examples are little more than phrasing, I feel there is much more at work here.

The commodification of players also follows the same path as commodities in the Marxist sense as players also have use values and exchange values. The use value associated with players is similar to Marx’s description of use value. A player’s use value is found in the statistics that determine the points an owner receives for their players’ performances (e.g. passing yardage, rushing yardage, or number of sacks). These statistics provide a definite quantitative measure of players’ value that only becomes real through its use (i.e. through the points assessed for the performances), and that makes up the wealth of the owner as these points are how an owner’s success is evaluated (Marx 42-43). In fantasy football, the exchange value of players makes itself most evident when players are traded between owners. As Marx describes it, the exchange value is present when two commodities (in this case, the players) are exchanged (Marx 45). To give you an example from my own personal experience, another owner in my

For example: “Fantasy Football IDP Rankings for Week 13” by Jim McCormick on ESPN.com, “Tip Drill: Identifying Overrated Draft Commodities (Sorry, Vick)” by Scott Pianowski on YahooSports!, or “Sanchez an Undervalued Commodity in Jets’ Success” by Vic Carucci on NFL.com
league wanted to trade me for the quarterback on my fantasy team, Aaron Rodgers, who is considered to be one of the best quarterbacks in the NFL this season and has averaged about 28.9 points per game this season\(^5\). The person proposing the trade wanted to give me running back Marshawn Lynch, who is averaging about 14.9 points per game this season and tight end Jimmy Graham, who is averaging about 13.5 points per game. While this trade seems equal, the points and exchange value are not quite equal (although one could argue it was much harder to get a good running back and a tight end this past season than it was a good quarterback). The reason why this does not work is because Aaron Rodgers’s exchange value is worth more than both of these players combined due to his consistency and the fact that he is coming off of a Super Bowl win where he was selected as the game’s and the league’s most valuable player. It is not only Aaron Rodgers’s use value, as Lynch’s and Graham’s combined use value is almost the same in the Marxist definition, but it is also the social value—Rodger’s reputation, his consistency, and his scoring potential—that makes this a good illustration of how use and exchange values are determined and expressed in terms of fantasy football (Marx 48).

The use and exchange values become more apparent in looking at salary cap leagues where owners must “purchase”\(^6\) players when they draft, add, or trade. As part of ESPN’s fantasy football draft kit, they publish the top 300 NFL players in terms of their fantasy production and provide monetary values for each player (ESPN Fantasy Staff). In these types of leagues it is much easier to make the argument that fantasy football leagues use players as commodities, but the players in salary leagues become real life commodities for fantasy football

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\(^5\) A typical quarterback in the ESPN fantasy football system is averaging between fifteen to twenty points per game this season.

\(^6\) Sometimes there is real (this is where fantasy football overlaps with gambling) or virtual currency (people must use virtual money to buy and sell players to add to their rosters) involved; however, I have never played in a league that has utilized this system.
owners to use virtually or in real life depending on the type of league. The scale of these fantasy football economics demands such statistical examination by fantasy football owners.

This argument is supported further when analyzing websites such as FantasySP.com’s trade analyzer, which will not only take a player’s use value into consideration but will also account for what an owner identifies as a player’s exchange value by showing news and opinions on a player’s estimated value (e.g. health status, comparison to other players, and predictions on future performance). Exchange values can also be determined by how many owners in a database of leagues own a player. ESPN’s fantasy sports leagues have a system that is very similar to the stock market in that it shows how many people own a player, but it will also show add/drop rates. These numbers are also used by various fantasy football writers to give advice on which players are valuable and which are not. In one of many articles that dispense weekly advice on how to best utilize the waiver wire\(^7\), Bleacher Report featured columnist Craig Faig offers three picks whose respective values are increased by the fact they are only owned by a small percentage in fantasy football leagues. Supply and demand thus dictate player-as-commodity examinations as well. Though I believe that Marx did not intend for the concept of commodity to be extended to include people, fantasy football creates a system that turns real NFL players into commodities that are to be traded, added, brought, sold, and cut at will. Like the commodities that Marx refers to, these players have use and exchange values that are not only determined by their usefulness, but also determined from social factors that are constantly changing based on various factors such as player reputation, the percentage of ownership, and their comparison to other players.

\(^7\) The waiver wire is where players who are not on rosters are listed. Depending on the league rules owners can select a certain number of players from this list each week. When owners drop players, they are added to the waiver wire.
While the idea that NFL players are commoditized through the play of fantasy football may not be revealing of trends in a vacuum, it becomes a revelation when we examine why people are motivated to play fantasy football or the pleasure they receive from playing fantasy football. A number of studies have explored owners’ motivations for playing. Spinda and Haridakis explored owners’ motivations for playing fantasy sports and found that one of the most significant motivators is the pleasure that people get from being able to control their teams, much like an NFL owner or coach would control their team, including the power to trade, add, and drop players at the owner’s sole discretion (194). The pleasure that owners get from the control and virtual ownership of NFL players was also studied by Michael Serazio. Serazio argues that the virtual ownership of NFL players allows owners to live vicariously and project the success or failures of their fantasy teams onto themselves (232). While these behaviors seem harmless, Thomas Oates argues that this “vicarious management” is a process of commodifying athletes which frames how fans then connect and identify with athletes—as simply property to be exploited for their successes (32). The pleasure owners derive from playing fantasy football is directly tied to the commodification of the player. It is through this commodification that we are able to control, manipulate and, as Oates stated, live vicariously through the successes and failures of NFL players that are virtually owned by the fans. By considering players as statistical packages whose numerical value correlates directly to the fantasy football team owners’ feelings of success or failure, those owners dehumanize players and view them as cogs in a machine, a machine whose aggregate output should be the owners’ feeling of self-satisfaction at owning well.

The commodification of the player also has racial implications. To fully understand this, it is important to note the history and current state of race relations in the
NFL. There has yet to be an NFL team with a majority ownership stake held by an
African-American (Lapchick, Kamke, & McMechan). Out of the thirty-two NFL teams,
there are currently only five black head coaches, and this number has been fairly
consistent over the past few years with no major gains or setbacks (Lapchick, Kamke, &
McMechan). Less than twenty-five percent of upper-level administrative positions and
coaching positions are held by people of color (Lapchick, Kamke, & McMechan). The
fact that the majority of the players are black but the majority of the ownership and power
is held by whites has been an issue that has received significant attention from both
scholars and NFL players. This inequality came to a head during the summer of 2012
when the NFL was locked in a labor dispute with its constituent players. Minnesota
Vikings running back Adrian Peterson commented on the issue of the NFL owners
refusing to reveal financial information to players:

...If they have nothing to hide, just give us the information. Why not? Obviously,
there’s a lot to hide — these guys are professionals, and they’re maximizing what
they do. But they know that if all this information comes out, the information the
players want, it’ll be right out there for everyone to see. It’s a rip-off — not just
for the players, but for the people who work at the concession stands and at the
stadiums. It’s modern-day slavery, you know? People kind of laugh at that, but
there are people working at regular jobs who get treated the same way, too. With
all the money . . . the owners are trying to get a different percentage, and bring in
more money. (Caplan)

This comment drew a number of criticisms, mostly rooted in the fact that many thought Peterson
was implying that the NFL is an equivalent to the abuses and maltreatment of slaves brought to
the United States during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, Rashard Mendenhall, a running back for the Pittsburg Steelers, came to the defense of Peterson and clarified some of his comments via Twitter, saying:

@AdrianPeterson is correct in his analogy of this game. It is a lot deeper than most people understand. If you look back and dissect [sic] what I said, I didn't say that the NFL was slavery, I said that they parallel each other. Look up the word parallel. This means that they’re not the same thing, but they run the same course. These paths will never cross, but they mirror each other. @AdrianPeterson

Anyone with knowledge of the slave trade and the NFL could say that these two parallel each other. (as quoted in Davis)

Mendenhall makes an important clarification here in that the issues are similar, but not the same. What Peterson and Mendenhall are taking issue with is something that William Rhoden addresses in his book *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*. In his book, Rhoden argues that the success of many sports has been built on the backs of black athletes, yet black athletes still have little to show for it in terms of ownership and power over their own labor. Like Mendenhall and Peterson, he argues that for the black athlete professional sports are a figurative type of slavery that puts black athletes:

“…at the pleasure of the white men who signed the checks and the white media who told the stories. And rather than this unfair system provoke any sort of sympathy, it was endorsed by the average fan, who was typically already nursing resentment at the quick wealth these athletes attained and sometimes flaunted” (244-245).
How can one be a “million dollar slave”? If athletes make a fortune playing sports, should they not just be grateful that they have been able to improve their lot in life? While this may seem rational to those of us who make less than that in jobs we perceive to be more difficult, Rhoden argues otherwise. To make his point, Rhoden uses the example of New York Knicks forward Larry Johnson and the controversy that surrounded him during the 1999 National Basketball Association (NBA) Finals. Larry Johnson refused to talk to the press despite being assessed fines from the league for not doing required press interviews. When Johnson finally agreed to hold a press conference, he talked about how he and his teammates were “rebellious slaves” (Rhoden 238). This caused a firestorm and media backlash for him because people objected to the claim that the NBA was like slavery. Again, it came down to the issue of how can someone complain when making millions of dollars each year? Rhoden argues that Johnson’s complaints were about more than money:

In a nation that with largely uncompensated slave ancestors set off a maelstrom of angry criticism…Most of the criticism was aimed at Johnson’s lack of gratitude. Here he was, a young, wealthy, black male who went from poverty in Dallas equates wealth with happiness, Johnson’s equation of well-compensated athletes to making $11 million a season playing professional basketball, talking about slavery…Johnson explained money had little to do with his analogy of being like a slave on a plantation, but that he was really referring to relationships—namely between the owners and the players (238-239).

Regardless of whether or not one agrees that the NFL is directly parallel to or simply a figurative comparison to slavery, it is hard not to notice the glaring inequalities of power and ownership.

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8 Johnson’s situation was similar to the situation that occurred in March 2011 with Minnesota Vikings’ running back Adrian Peterson.
within the NFL, historically and in the present. While the money offered to athletes of each sport can soar to significant sums, the overarching narrative remains the same: white men put a premium on the physical labor of black men. But how does this narrative fit in terms of fantasy football and NFL fandom? Are there similarities we can draw between the actual circumstances of the NFL and how fantasy football leagues and ownership are structured? I would argue that the parallel is very clear between the historical and current state of affairs in the NFL and fantasy football. Fantasy football is just a way for fans to role play what they know. In this description from Danny Sheridan’s Fantasy Football, a book for beginners that was written right before fantasy sports took off with the growth of the Internet, fantasy football is a way for us (the fans) to live the fantasy of being the NFL owner:

One of the by-products of this very conservative approach is that ownership of an NFL franchise has always been reserved for members of a very exclusive club. However, that philosophy is changing today, right before the NFL’s eyes. In fact, many NFL fans have already experienced the thrill of owning and managing their own franchises. How have they done that? These fans have participated in their own fantasy football leagues. And you can, too. (Sheridan viii)

I am not sure what the author meant by a “very exclusive club,” but from previously cited research it is clear that to be a part of this club, being white definitely helps. It is difficult to say whether or not this racial connection is lost on those who play fantasy football, but whether it is consciously recognized or not does not negate its very evident existence. As Oates argues:

Vicarious management invites audiences to identify with the institutional regimes of the NFL (and the authorities who conduct them) rather than with the athletes. It is a mode of fandom primarily located in new media entertainments, though it
spans several media platforms. In contrast to the heroes of the past enshrined in
statuary outside many NFL stadiums, athletes framed by this mode of fandom are
positioned as property, often valuable, but ultimately disposable. (32)

Viewing players as commodities—as simply properties to be added, cut, and traded—changes
the way we think and talk about those players in terms of their humanity— especially players of
color. As one fantasy football owner stated on their tumblr, “Funny how my fantasy football
draft just felt like a lot like slave auction. But at least my best player is named Arian”\(^9\) (Eric).

While this statement is problematic for a number of reasons (not the least of which is what
could be construed as neo-Nazi sentiment, which is itself ironic given that the player to whom
he refers, Arian Foster, is an African-American), it still acknowledges this commodification of
the player in conjunction with race relations within the NFL and how these are simulated by
fantasy football. Other blatant cases can be found in how players and even the leagues
themselves are referred to by some who play such as leagues, called “Forced Slave Camps,”\(^10\)
or through team names such as “Peterson is a Slave.”\(^11\) While these may be poking fun at
players such as Mendenhall and Peterson who articulate the similarities between the NFL and
slavery, it seems to reinforce these very arguments, regardless of intent.

This racialized language goes beyond team and league names, but is even used to
describe the players. While it could be argued that regardless of race players are often referred to
in terms that objectify their physical attributes and dehumanize them by referring to them as
machines or animals, this type of language is more often than not used to describe players of

\(^9\) Arian Foster’s first name is pronounced like the word “Aryan”.
\(^10\) http://nickelback.rtsports.com/fantasy-football-league/4037
\(^11\) http://football.fantasysports.yahoo.com/f1/242159/6
color. In the book Why Fantasy Football Matters (And Our Lives Do Not), Barmack and Handelman describe black and white players in the following terms:

Some guys are drawn to players-of-the moment. Driven by an alchemy of fantasy magazines, Internet experts, and fellow league members, they grab a hot [all emphasis original] “stud” running back (Shaun Alexander), a hot second running back ready to explode in a new system (Duce Staley), a brand name wide receiver (Chad Johnson)\(^{12}\), a hot wide receiver coming off a breakout year (Santana Moss), and a brand name “winning” quarterback (Tom Brady)…Going with a trendy receiver who’s never had more than 1,000 yards is far more important to him than taking someone like Marvin Harrison, a proven—albeit boring—workhorse. (57)

Out of the mentioned players, the only one not referred to in terms of being a “stud,” “hot,” and “workhorse” is the only white player named in the passage, Tom Brady. Instead of being described in such terms of raw physicality, Tom Brady is a winner, while everyone else is othered in one way or another. Far from being an innocent linguistic decision with no racial charge to it, this is not an isolated case. When talking with other owners about which players to start, one owner, honolulu2786, asks this on the FootballsFuture.com’s NFL forums: “Need to pick 3 horses from my stable of studs…help…need some advice on what RB’s to start this week…” The owner goes on to mention some of the “horses” in his “stables” all of which are—unsurprisingly—black. Interestingly enough, this same sort of language was used to describe slaves up for sale. A former slave named James Martin recounted in an interview a typical scene from a slave auction:

\(^{12}\) Also known as Chad Ochocinco.
They calls the men ‘‘bucks’’ and the women ‘‘wenches’’. . . At these slave auctions, the overseer yells, ‘‘Say, you bucks and wenches, get in your hole. Come out here.’’ Then, he makes ‘em hop, he makes ‘em trot, he makes ‘em jump. ‘‘How much,’’ he yells, ‘‘for this buck? A thousand? Eleven hundred? Twelve hundred dollars?’’ Then the bidders makes offers accordin’ to size and build. (as cited in Burton 21)

The language used here is very similar to the language used by fantasy football owners to describe black NFL players. While the term “buck” is not used specifically by fantasy football owners or those who write about fantasy football, the same characterization and emphasis on the physical is there. While it could be debated whether this is the intent or it is inadvertent, I do think that interesting parallels can be drawn between the two situations and the language used in each. Furthermore, regardless of any conscious evocation of slave-owning rhetoric on the parts of these fantasy football owners, their intent is the same as the slave owners of old: commodification of human beings for personal gain.

The emphasis on the physical is common in the discussion of athletes, but the physical attributes of black players are given special attention, especially in comparison to white athletes. Even when comparing two players at the same position, descriptions of the black players typically give much more attention to their physical attributes rather than their skill. In an article on Bleacher Report that is comparing Jason Witten, a tight end for the Dallas Cowboys, and Vernon Davis, a tight end for the San Francisco 49ers, the analysis pays much more attention to the size and build of Davis, the black player: “At 6’3”, 250 pounds, with incredible speed, Davis is a matchup nightmare capable of putting up elite wide receiver numbers” (Smith). In contrast, Smith describes Witten as “one of the most productive tight ends in the league for quite some time, and has proven to be Tony Romo’s favorite target”. The emphasis on black athletes’
physical prowess even comes up when discussing white players. When Dan Patrick, a popular
sports talk show host, asked Peyton Hillis (currently a running back for the Kansas City Chiefs)
why he did not become the main running back when he played for the Denver Broncos, Hillis
told Patrick that he was not given the starting position because he was white. Specifically, Hillis
implied that reverse racism was at work due to a perception that black players (such as
Knowshon Moreno, who was chosen as the starting running back over Hillis when he played in
Denver) are much more physically capable than white players (Bailey). It is not like Peyton
Hillis is a small guy or physically incapable of playing the position—in fact he is statistically a
very strong running back. It is just that fantasy owners and those who write about fantasy
football choose to emphasize size and build when it comes to black players while speaking of
white players in terms of general productivity. In fact, players like Hillis use this same argument
to prove that they are victims of reverse racism because they are thought of as less physically
capable of playing their respective positions. This focus on the physicality of black athletes is
nothing new. It is based on the concept that if black bodies could survive the rough and strenuous
journey from Africa to America and the beatings and difficult life of slavery, they must have
more physical strength and ability than white bodies (Hoberman 187). Even as early as the 19th
century, this perceived difference was seized upon by white audiences and used to explain black
athletes’ successes (Hoberman 189). The fetishizing of the black body in sports has its roots in a
racist ideology based on this pseudo-evolutionary perspective stating that a (recent) history of
slavery has prepared the current generations of African-Americans for superior athleticism when
compared to their white counterparts.

The control over black bodies and black performance does not just materialize in the
descriptions of players, but in the acts on the football field. While this does not have direct
fantasy football applications, it does reflect attitudes and preferences of the NFL ownership and authorities in the NFL. Its indirect application to fantasy football is that if fantasy football is a way for fans to role play as NFL commissioners, team owners, and coaches, and if these attitudes are held by the owners and this power is exercised in a very public and highly publicized manner, this also reinforces racialized thinking of black bodies/performance as opposed to white bodies/performance. For two simple and contemporary case studies, I draw attention to two players with “dirty” reputations but with two very different responses from the NFL in terms of their bodies and performance. Ndamukong Suh, a black defensive tackle for the Detroit Lions, has received his fair share of attention from the NFL management and the media for being a “dirty player.” The most blatant evidence for this claim leveled against him was the stomping incident that took place during the 2011 Thanksgiving game where the Lions hosted the Green Bay Packers. After one of the plays, Suh struck the head of a Packer player and stomped on the player’s arm. For this, Suh received a two game suspension. While I am not arguing that this was an unfair punishment in light of what Suh did (as it was extremely obvious that Suh did commit the fouls), when we compare him to similar white players, such as Minnesota Vikings defensive end Jared Allen, who is also known as a “dirty” player (Musto; Wiederer), with a similarly distasteful foul, we see that Suh and Allen received very different treatment. During the Vikings’ November 27, 2011 game against the Atlanta Falcons, Allen was caught on tape purposely punching an opponent in the groin after a play. After the game, Allen had this to say:

Ray [Edwards, whom he punched] is obviously a former teammate and friend of mine. I told him before the snap that he’s known for blowing up the long snapper on the field goal. So I told him, “You run me over here, I am going to punch you square in your wiener, dude.” (Issac)
It is important to note that Allen did not receive a fine, suspension, or even scolding from the NFL management. As Issac wisely notes, “Let me tell ya, if that’s Ndamukong Suh, the headline would read, ‘Suh castrates offensive lineman, leaves him unable to bear children.’” Why would two defensive players with similar reputations and fouls garner two completely different reactions from the NFL management? While it would be irresponsible to accuse the NFL of active racism based on history and evidence, it could be one part of the explanation, especially when looking at how the black athletic body is characterized both historically and in the present. For white owners (both virtual and real) the black body (and thus black labor) is something to be controlled, owned, and policed.

Fantasy football offers fans a new level of interaction and involvement. Whereas previously fans could scarcely imagine entering the exclusive club of NFL team ownership, fantasy football has allowed people to experience a transformation that Williams (as cited in Serazio 232) describes as going from “couch potatoes into coach potatoes.” However there is more to this transition than just increased fan involvement and engagement. Considering how racially-charged the interactions between management and players can get, with black players calling the system slavery and the white ownership/officiating bodies leveling much higher penalties on black players than white players, it becomes very problematic to see fantasy football participants reenacting and reinforcing this white-ownership, black-subordinate structure every week. Even if this connection is consciously lost on the owners, it is not lost among the players. While some NFL players seem to be ambivalent about fantasy football, others seem to have caught on to these underlying themes of fantasy football. One player in particular, Arian Foster (who plays for the Houston Texans) addressed his fantasy owners after coming back from an injury he sustained during training camp, saying via Twitter, “4 those sincerely concerned, I’m
Foster understands that some of his “fans” are only concerned with his body and the labor it can produce—he is aware that his only purpose for fantasy football (and in terms of the NFL itself) is to be a commodity—to be bought, used, and thrown or traded away. As with commodities in the Marxist sense, this labor NFL players produce has associated use and exchange values. The use value is found in the points players produce through their game performances, but the exchange value is subject to social values and (fake or real) monetary values that are present when owners draft, add off waivers or free agency, drop, or trade players with other owners. This commodification not only impacts the way fans view the players, but it also has racial implications regardless of whether they are conscious or not. As Hill states, “Fantasy sport is not a raceless leisure activity and clearly has emerged as a site where rationality and technology have been exalted as the line between real and virtual are blurred” (93). We can see how commodification and race come together in fantasy football when we not only take into account the historical and current state of NFL ownership and the racial composition of NFL players, but how the simulation of the NFL ownership and the racist rhetoric and characteristics (i.e., buying players for money based on their physical traits, especially if they are of color) can lead to some disturbing parallels between the game and slavery of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the United States and in other parts of the colonized world. Fantasy football is not just a simulation of NFL ownership, but an exercise in flexing the muscle power of white males through the performance of black athletes.

I want to be clear that I am not trying to equate the fantasy football owners or NFL fans with members of the Klu Klux Klan, but I am trying to draw attention to the tensions of a
dominantly white male subculture and game and how the issue of race is addressed and treated by those who play it. Whether people are consciously racist and view these black NFL players as objects—as commodities to be bought, used, and thrown away—there are some unconscious processes at work that lend themselves to this analysis, such as the joy of control and authority over players (Davis and Duncan 260) and portrayals of black players through the activity of fantasy football and the discourse surrounding it. Although bell hooks is not specifically discussing fantasy football, I think she sums up the argument best when she says:

When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of the dominant races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other. (23)

Before any major conclusions can be drawn, this subject deserves a more ethnographic analysis exploring racial issues within the game of fantasy football. Although discussing race can sometimes be difficult for people, especially if their views are not considered politically correct, I do not think this is an issue that can be fully understood by only using textual analysis. While textual analysis is helpful, I know from my own personal experience as well as conversations with other fantasy football players, and from other scholarship\(^{13}\) that has yielded similar analyses to mine, that these are not the only reasons for playing fantasy football, nor do all fans discuss or view players on their teams in the same way. It is important to keep in mind that there are multiple meanings and motivations that answer the questions of why people play fantasy football and what they take away from playing it. I believe that the commodification of the player as well

\(^{13}\) See Duncan and Davis (2006); Serazio (2006); and Spinda and Haridakis (2006).
as how it relates to the racialized depictions of the black athlete and slavery are a piece of the puzzle and definitely have implications that can be carried over into real life, with how we value others and our perceptions of race outside of fantasy football. While the value of my analysis is not diminished, for future work it would be important to use this analysis, and other analyses like it, with caution until more research can be done to explore more of the mental processes of fantasy football owners.
CHAPTER TWO: GENDER AND NFL FANS

In the football spectacle, the role of woman in our society is clearly defined against the masculine criteria. The important action is male-dominated: women can share only from a distance in a man’s world. They can shout and squeal from afar, but their roles are accessory to the male event.

– Eugene Bianchi, “Pigskin and Piety”

While there are still many people who doubt that women can be serious fans of the NFL, women have received increasing attention from the league and in popular culture due to the dramatically increasing numbers of women fans and the purchasing power they hold. Women now make up about forty percent of the NFL’s fan base and some even estimate the number of female fans to be as high as forty-four percent (Stevenson 1). The increasing number of women fans is receiving attention not only because the NFL and football in general is primarily a male-dominated activity, but because of the purchasing power they possess. Tracey Bleczinski, the vice president of NFL consumer products, views women as the “CFOs of households” because women are thought to have increasing power over household purchases (Stevenson 2).\(^1\) The NFL wants to seize on this opportunity to increase merchandise sales. The NFL has reached out to woman fans by creating campaigns featuring apparel “fit for them” and even dedicated a branch of NFL.com that provides female fans with “a weekly NFL Homegating blog full of party tips and recipes” (NFL Communications Staff). Has this increased attention from the league equated to more respect and recognition of women as fans? In this chapter, I argue that despite the increased attention and catering to female fans by the NFL, women still are not seen as “real”

\(^1\) It is often said that women control up to eighty percent of household purchases; this number is disputed among researchers (Bialik). While this high number is disputed, it is known that women are either a household’s primary purchaser or share this responsibility with another household member (as cited in “Buying Power”).
fans and in NFL fandom women in general are viewed as a threat to the sport. Though these opinions and attitudes are not always explicit, they can be found in various spaces and places (sometimes fan-produced and sometimes produced for fan consumption) on the internet where fans go for information and/or to gather with other fans.

To support this argument, I draw on various texts from sports websites such as ESPN.com and BleacherReport.com, which are some of the most popular websites for sports information and specifically NFL information and news. I also examine comments and opinions expressed by fans themselves on these websites as well as in other forums for fans. Using these texts and commentary by fans, I examine three issues related to the promotion and acceptance of traditional gender roles and stereotypes within the NFL fandom: player safety, female sports journalists, and attitude towards female NFL fans.

Before examining gender and the role it plays in NFL fandom, it is important to understand how sports are culturally situated. Historically, sports have been a male-dominated activity for both participation and attendance as spectators. This is true especially for American culture where sports seem to provide boys with the tools to become a “man”. As Mariah Nelson (2) states:

Sports are a male initiation rite, as fundamental and natural as shaving and deep voices—a prerequisite, somehow, to becoming an American man…all of us, female and male, learned to associate sports prowess and sports privilege with masculinity.

Sports became a breeding ground for masculine ideals and privilege because women were thought to be incapable of participating in and enjoying sports activities. Throughout the
nineteenth century, Victorian ideals dictated that women should be delicate, devote all their energy into maintaining their families, and avoid strenuous labor and exercise (Gerber 10). Sports and maintaining the Victorian ideal of femininity were at odds with each other, so women avoided or were prohibited from participating in sports activities. While playing sports was seen as an unacceptable activity for women, attending sports events was marginally more acceptable for women. During the later parts of the nineteenth century, women were allowed to attend sporting events, but they were still segregated as they were only allowed to observe such sports as ice skating and horse racing from the women’s sections (Gerber 26). During the twentieth century, various social and political changes (e.g. World Wars, growth of education, and women’s suffrage) allowed for women to participate in sports, and most notably the Olympic Games (Gerber 17). The twentieth century also saw the growth of women’s professional sports leagues such as the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) and the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) among other leagues over the course of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century.

Football is among the few sports where women still are mostly absent as participants and women spectators (fans) are not seen as equal to male spectators in terms of knowledge and dedication. Even when women are in positions of authority, such as sports reporters or executives, their knowledge of the sport is questioned, reinforcing the image of a woman’s proper place when it comes to football. For many within NFL fandom, women should stick to wearing cute pink NFL jerseys and making sandwiches for Super Bowl parties. In no way should they attempt to play, talk about football, or even contribute their viewpoints on how the game is played.
Player safety has been a growing concern in the NFL over the past few years. With researchers focusing their attention on the long-term health impacts of the years and years of trauma players’ bodies endure, the NFL has taken several steps such as requiring additional padding and encouraging the use of helmets that help prevent concussions, as well as implementing rules for dealing with players who present symptoms of concussions in games and penalizing players for hits that put other players at risk, e.g. helmet-to-helmet hits (Corbett; “Head Injuries”). This issue has received significant attention in the wake of the suicide of Junior Seau, the former NFL linebacker who is known to have sustained multiple concussions over his twenty-year career. While it is still unknown if Seau suffered from brain damage\(^2\), many have suspected that brain damage may have been a factor. Seau’s suicide has not been the only recent event to draw attention to the issue of player safety. A couple of months before Seau’s death, it was revealed that the New Orleans Saints ran a bounty program\(^3\) in which they awarded bonuses to players who “performed well” by injuring opponents. In response to this, NFL commissioner Roger Goodell suspended numerous Saints players and coaches, including the Saints’ head coach Sean Payton and Saints linebacker Jonathan Vilma, for an entire season. Both the Saints bounty scandal and Seau’s death have made player safety an issue that the NFL and fans cannot ignore.

\(^2\) More specifically, Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) is a degenerative brain disease that results from repetitive brain trauma (e.g. multiple concussions) and can cause memory loss, depression, confusion, impaired judgment, and increased aggression (Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy). CTE has been found as a contributing cause of death for several former NFL players (Keating). CTE can only be diagnosed post-mortem.
Though Seau’s death and the Saints bounty scandal are not the first incidents to draw attention to player safety, they have both contributed to the increase in discussions of player safety among NFL fans. No fan wants to see a favorite player get hurt, but fans (and even the players themselves) are generally split on the NFL’s attempts to protect players. The question is: how does the league balance player safety with keeping the game physical and aggressive? As Clifton Brown, a writer with SportingNews, points out, “The violence of football is part of what makes it popular. Change the game dramatically, and many fans might be turned off.” If violence is what drives the game’s popularity, how can the NFL balance player safety with keeping the sport popular? One strategy that has received significant attention is appealing to women. One of the ads that ran during this past year’s Super Bowl was an advertisement about player safety efforts sponsored by the NFL. According to Mark Waller, the NFL’s chief marketing officer:

> It is your biggest stage [the Super Bowl], you’ve got a massive audience, a massive casual audience, and this topic [player safety] is probably one of most important topics for casual fans, particularly mothers. (as quoted in Battista)

Women not only are seen as a key demographic for the NFL, but also are the producers of the NFL’s main commodity—the players. The logic behind this appeal is that women are more sensitive to violence than men and if the NFL does nothing to prevent player injuries they will not only stop watching, but will also keep their sons from playing football. This fear was expressed by Peter Alfano, a featured columnist for Bleacher Report:

> Fans will complain that the sport is going soft and that players know what they’re getting into when they put on the pads for the first time. And that's true for young men who are old enough to make their own choices, regardless of what mom or
dad says. However, every sport tries to woo the next generation of participants and fans when the kids are young. What are the ramifications, then, if moms don't let their babies grow up to play football anymore?

Interestingly enough, the title of Alfano’s article was *Will Moms Eventually Kill the NFL?* The implication is that moms will be the sole destroyers of America’s most popular game.

This idea is not lost on the many fans who complain about all the new rules and regulations that are in place to protect player safety. One fan, who goes by the screen name “dontouchmyjunk,” commented on an NBC Sports article praising the NFL’s recent efforts to increase NFL player safety:

I will add that over the last two decades the American male has been under assault from women’s groups (led by the likes of Gloria Alred) that have led to the increasing feminization of the American male throughout our culture. Football is one of the last remaining bastions where men can be men. But no. They want to take that away from us, too? A sad day in America. A sad day.

While this is one fan’s opinion on the issue, many other fans discussing the same article supported his point. In another discussion on the Baltimore Sun’s website about violence in the NFL and player safety, “Eastside Terp” agrees with dontouchmyjunk: “the NFL isn't going anywhere .....too violent? they have been feminizing it for years and women are jumping on board in droves.” In both fan comments, the fans create an “us” versus “them” dichotomy, with them being women. Many fans believe that if the NFL continues to focus too much on safety, people will simply stop watching due to the lack of big hits. It is clear that fans are uneasy with the transition the NFL has made to protect its players due to the number of scandals and
tragedies that have occurred recently. Unfortunately much of this uneasiness and anger has been directed at females, especially when the NFL is clearly using safety to increase the number of female fans.

The idea of player safety does not appear to be a gendered issue on the surface, but the idea that moms and women in general are responsible for ruining football is an opinion that is widely accepted among fans. The gendered landscape of this issue becomes increasingly more complicated when considering that recently Tom Brady’s father said that if he had known the risks he might have not let Tom Brady play football (Rosenthal). While fans were upset that the league is trying to reduce the numbers of “big hits”, there was no discussion of football dads ruining the NFL or even that the NFL was being feminized by “women’s groups”. Even when former NFL quarterback Kurt Warner said during an interview with sportscaster Dan Patrick that he would prefer his children did not play football due to safety issues, there was no discussion of Warner trying to ruin the NFL (McKelvie). While the players (who are all male) and many male fans may agree with the increasing safety measures the NFL has put in place, there is a view among a large portion of the fandom that these measures are “feminizing” and weakening the level of play and aggressiveness that many fans grew up watching and enjoying. The creation of the “us”/male and “them”/female binary is troubling and seems to affirm the view that sports are an arena for promoting traditional views of gender roles. By virtue of the “us versus them” binary that is created, women are placed in the category outside the “real” fans and thus more likely to be viewed negatively as threats to the in-group of male fans (Perdue, et al. 476).

If the perception is that women who are interested in football and assert their perspectives on it are trying to “feminize” the NFL by supporting and being concerned about player safety, then looking at the perceptions of and attitudes towards female sports journalists is a relevant and
important issue to examine. If indeed females were actively trying to change the NFL and how football is depicted, female sports journalists would be key in providing the information and spin needed to effectively change the way the sport is viewed and interpreted by fans. Female sports journalists have received much attention from academics regarding issues of job satisfaction and the amount of discrimination in the workplace (see Miller and Miller; Smucker et.al). In a 2006 study, Hardin and Shain examined issues surrounding how female sports journalists negotiate their identities as women and sports journalists. Using a focus group of over twenty female sports journalists, they found that almost all of the women in their focus group expressed frustration at continually having to prove themselves as competent and knowledgeable to not only co-workers and bosses, but the fans they write for (Hardin and Shain 329). As one female sports reporter explained:

I think in some ways that [men] know what they’re doing as opposed to women really having to prove themselves. I think they still have to work a lot harder than a guy does--both inside and out. Both in your work and with your colleagues.

Your peers and the people you are covering. (Hardin and Shain 329)

Women who work in sports journalism are often accused of being interested in sports only so they can meet, look at, and seduce athletes, although this has also been balanced with ideas that female sports journalists are “mannish” or lesbians due to sports’ masculine culture (Hardin and Shain 326). Regardless, these stereotypes of female sports journalists can result in limited opportunities for promotion and assignments.

Despite the fact that most of the research on female sports journalists analyzes women covering sports in general, NFL fan opinions of female sports journalists also
support these findings. One fan, guidojo, who created a thread about “women on the NFL Network”, had this to say:

Sorry guys but even the most beautiful of em all, I just don’t want my daily dose of NFL fed to me by the various pop tarts you guys seem to think we want on this channel. I know your answer, ”these so called pop tarts know more about football than you’ll ever know”. If it is your answer that’s just bull (you know what) The eye candy factor I’m sure is pumping up the ratings and that’s all that matters but I for one want to see some ugly women delivering the news to me. Then I’ll believe the crap about how knowledgable they are. I have an idea, If we have to have them, ... put em in bikini’s to deliver that secondary breakdown of the Eagles game last week. That’s a ratings grabber I’ll be a part of. Better yet the Genie Bra channel is hiring, and I my first nominee is Michelle Bisner⁴ or Lindsey Soto, Enough with the chicks, Gimme, Mooch, or Marshall or Sapp⁵... believable dudes who’ve played the game... not things who’ve played the dudes... (Guidojoe)

This comment supports previous research (see Hardin and Shain) on assumptions that female sports journalists are not as knowledgeable as male fans, especially men who have played football. It promotes the idea that the only acceptable way for women to talk about sports is if they are sexualized and objectified for the male viewer. Interestingly enough, no other fan in the thread dismissed these comments for being sexist or argued that gender has nothing to do with the amount of sports knowledge one has.

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⁴ Bisner and Soto are two of only seven women currently employed by the NFL Network as hosts or reporters. The NFL Network currently employs fifty-one hosts and reporters.
⁵ This is referring to NFL Network analysts Steve Mariucci (also known by his nickname “Mooch”), Marshall Faulk, and Warren Sapp. All played in the NFL with the exception of Mariucci who was an NFL head coach.
Female reporters have been—at least on paper—granted the same level of access\(^6\) to conduct post-game locker room interviews\(^7\) as male reporters since 1985, when the NFL adopted an open locker room policy to allow women to conduct locker room interviews (Gloster). However, women are still being harassed and barred from NFL locker rooms. These barriers to conducting locker room interviews put women sports journalists at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts because the locker room interviews are viewed as an important part of covering sports (Cramer 163). One female sports journalist emphasized the importance of the locker room interview: “It’s a must for the job because it offers the immediacy of the event” (Cramer 163). However, discrimination, limitation, and harassment in the locker room are commonplace for many women sports journalists with very little condemnation from the NFL. As William Rhoden, a sports columnist with the New York Times, explained:

> Some N.F.L. executives rationalize that the exclusion or limitation of women inside a locker room is a way to avoid possible conflicts: romantic liaisons or players making advances that could result in jealous wives and girlfriends. Of course, this assumes a lack of professionalism — especially on the part of the female employees. In the aftermath of the Inés Sainz\(^8\) episode there was a lot of blame-the-victim that attempted to justify the players’ behavior.

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\(^6\) It should be noted that male sports journalists have equal access to women’s locker rooms to interview female athletes.

\(^7\) A practice that is very common for American sports leagues and featured in various sports media and even official team websites.

\(^8\) Inés Sainz is a Mexican journalist who works for CNN en Español and the Mexican sports channel Azteca Desportes. Sainz was waiting to conduct a locker room interview with New York Jets quarterback Mark Sanchez and was subjected to catcalls and other rude comments. After this episode, much of the media attention was focused on the fact that Sainz was a former model and some thought she dressed too provocatively to be a female sports journalist. It was this type of
Players as well as fans feel that women should not have the same access as male journalists due to their gender. Mostly this is due to the assumption that women sports journalists will be unprofessional. Clinton Portis, former Washington Redskins running back and current free agent, said in an interview that women should not be allowed in locker rooms because:

You put a woman and you give her a choice of 53 athletes, somebody got to be appealing to her. You know, somebody got to spark her interest, or she's gonna want somebody. I don't know what kind of woman won't, if you get to go and look at 53 men's packages. (as quoted in Armstrong)

Portis later apologized for his comments, but the attitude and perception remains among NFL fans as well as the players that the NFL is not a place for women. Instead of female sports journalists being valued and judged on the basis of their work, women continue to battle misconceptions and stereotypes that women are less knowledgeable and only romantically interested in the athletes they cover. While it is not out of the realm of possibility that this may happen, it is important to point out that many female sports journalists would prefer to conduct interviews outside of the locker room and avoid conducting interviews with players who are nude (Cramer 163-164). There are no objections (or at least not on the same scale) to male journalists in women’s locker rooms or continuous questioning of their knowledge of sports. These ideas that reflect traditional gender roles are applied to female sports journalists throughout the NFL, from the players to the fans.

coverage that led to people blaming her for the harassment she experienced in the Jets’ locker room.
Female sports journalists are not the only ones who have to combat stereotypes and misconceptions about their knowledge and love for the game; female NFL fans are also subjected to such stereotyping and suspicion. Whether it is the objectification of their bodies or devaluing of their knowledge, female fans struggle with discrimination by male fans. Female fans often find themselves being recognized for their bodies instead of their passion and knowledge of the game. Many of the sports news websites on the internet have taken to creating slideshows of the “best” female fans. Bleacher Report, one of the most popular sports news websites on the internet, is one of the main producers of these types of images, with slideshows such as “The Top 40 Hottest NFL Fans” that rates teams based on photos of the attractiveness of their female fans or “Sexiest NFL Fan Bases: Playoff Edition” which ranked teams in the playoffs in 2011 based on the “hotness” of their female fans. Many of the photos and the commentary provided by the authors position women as only being good for their bodies. For example, the author of the “Sexiest NFL Fan Bases” commented on one photo of a Jets fan, “I think Rex Ryan⁹ should change his fetish from feet to ass. There is more fine tail running around the city of New York than a dog show in Georgia” (Delatte slide 12). The author of the same slideshow uses this medium not only to praise the attractiveness of female bodies but to also put down what he determines as fan bases with “ugly” fans. Delatte comments that both the Seattle Seahawks and the Green Bay Packers have no sexy fans, which justifies their position at the bottom of his rankings. He even features a photo of a woman with her breast painted and exclaims:

This is it! This is all the Seahawks could bring to the table? Do not get me wrong, body paint is hot, almost always, but this is the only thing I could possibly find to

⁹ Rex Ryan is currently the head coach of the New York Jets. There was a report that he had a foot fetish based on a video of him with his wife.
represent the Seahawks sexy fan base. I am not sure if the women are hiding are
or they just do not exist.

The objectification of female fans such as in these images and commentary featured on Bleacher
Report provides the audience (presumably male, but with the growth of female fans and even
female sports journalists this is changing) with ways to look at and evaluate female fans. It
positions the female fan as passive and a “bearer of meaning” (Mulvey 7).

Laura Mulvey’s groundbreaking work “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” which
analyzes the images and depictions of women in cinema, has been used by scholars to examine
women’s images in television, advertising, and various other media. Applying her analysis to
Bleacher Report’s photo slideshows of female fans, we see many of the same meanings and
themes at work. As Mulvey (7) stated in her analysis:

Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other bound by
a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through
linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to
her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.

The identity of the photographer is unknown for many of the photos used in these slideshows10,
but the people who choose and comment on them are men. These photos and the commentary
that accompanies them allow the male fan to live out his fantasies through these images (e.g.
many of the photos allude to women taking off their tops or exposing their bodies in other ways).
It is implied that a female fan’s only value is found in being looked at by the male fans. I argue
that this objectification of female fans takes away from their status as “real” fans. Similar to

10 Some of the photos look as though they were taken by the women themselves as some of them
are photos of them checking themselves out in the mirror and some feature the women in the
audience of an actual game. Regardless of the photographer though, I still argue that these photos
are used by men to objectify female fans.
female sports journalists, despite their football experience and/or knowledge of the game, female fans are demeaned by other male fans and even at times are asked to “stay in the kitchen.”

In addition to being valued for their bodies, female fans often encounter male fans who question their knowledge and even their status as fans. Women can never just be football fans; they are usually situated as the ignorant girlfriend, wife, sister, daughter, etc. of a male fan despite their actual knowledge of or dedication to the game (Anderson 85). These attitudes and beliefs are not uncommon within the NFL fandom despite the increasing numbers of female fans. One notable instance of male fans attacking female fans on a sports website was triggered by an article (written by a woman) about the Buffalo Bills. At the beginning of the 2011-2012 season, the Buffalo Bills had one of the best starts to the season that they have had in years. The point of the article was to caution Bills fans, as the Bills were going to play the New England Patriots and were picked to lose. When the Bills ended up beating the Patriots, male fans began lashing out against the female columnist who wrote the article. The comments reflect not only the sexism female sports journalists experience, but also that female fans face the same type of criticism. Comments included statements such as:

- I wish I could lick those smug tears off your face. Go Bills! So how does it feel to be both a woman and so wrong about football? I guess those two go hand in hand.

- **WOMEN DONT KNOW FOOTBALL**

- Well great prediction! Maybe your article will help get women like you removed from sports media. You are incompetent and really offered no unique points that haven’t already been beaten to death in the past ten years in your tirade against the bills. Glad they could prove a hack borderline blogger like you wrong. Maybe you should stay in the kitchen next time.
• Why do you care if Bills fans care about their team? Is it really ruining your day because you are some worthless female who does not know anything about sports.

(as quoted in Gish)

Many women fans have posted about the lack of respect they receive on the basis of these stereotypes. One female fan wrote in a blog post for Persephone Magazine:

Suffice to say I know my sports and don’t like it when people undermine my intelligence by saying I don’t. I think that it is funny when people say that women can’t be fans, just because they are girls, that they are just jumping on the bandwagon. Um no, I will be a die-hard fan of these teams till I die. I won’t change and you can’t make me. I will wear the pink jersey if I want to, and you can’t stop me. I will cheer louder, have the best tailgate and you can’t stop me.

(Amélie)

Interestingly enough, many of the (presumably) women who commented on Amélie’s post also echoed this frustration. For example, user CijiTheGeek expressed her own experiences as a female fan:

I hate it when folks regard female fans of damn near anything male-dominated like a unicorn (*cough*Comic-Con*cough*). My dad and I couldn’t bond over much, but we could bond over football. But what the skepticism of female fans boils down to is that men don’t think we’re smart enough to understand the game. Whenever I’m at the bar watching my team play, I get grilled with trivia by the men there. Like, if I don’t know “who was the backup center for the Tennessee Titans in 1972” I can’t really like football. (And that’s a trick question: the Titans
didn’t come to Tennessee until ’90, and back in ’72 they were called the Oilers.)

So freakin’ frustrating…

Much of the NFL fandom is based on memorizing facts and statistics of the game. The question of who knows the most about football, such as who can remember who scored the last touchdown in Super Bowl II, acts as a basis for exerting power and control. As with most fandoms, knowledge acts as a sort of cultural capital to be exchanged and used to promote one’s status within the fan community (Fiske 33). In the NFL fandom, if you do not know what a touchdown is or even if you do not know a particular athlete’s name, team, position, and number, you may lose status within the group or even be considered “less real”.

Other women also complain of being stereotyped as ignorant and less dedicated. In an article about the depictions of “football moms” for the website DivineCaroline, Kate Carter writes of her own experience of watching a Wal-Mart commercial which positions football moms as the people who “who wash their [kids’] uniforms, drive them to practice, keep the fridge stocked full of food” (as quoted in Carter). Carter takes issue with this limited definition of a football mom and everything it leaves out:

In my dreams, a Football Mom can make wilier calls than Steve Spurrier; cite recruiting statistics as easily as others cite Britney Spears’ crotch shot statistics; and would much rather watch a good football game than Oprah. Further, a Football Mom is not dependent upon her children’s interest in playing the sport. Rather, she leads the family in its weekly ritual of watching big men clash on the gridiron.
In her “dreams”, Carter paints the picture of a more active female fan than what is depicted in the media and by male fans. The female fan as the knowledgeable family leader who sits down and watches the game with the same enjoyment as everyone else is absent from the media and some male fans’ minds, but I argue it is much closer to reality than the ignorant “hottie” whose only value at a football game (or in the living room) is playing the role of eye candy for the male fans.

Despite the way female fans and sports journalists are depicted and denigrated by other NFL fans, women have finally begun receiving attention from the NFL itself, which has begun to recognize that football is not only a man’s game, but everyone’s game. With almost half of the NFL fandom now consisting of women, the issue of gender is at the forefront. Gender in the NFL is a very complicated subject to examine because of the many forms it takes within the fandom. Sports are traditionally viewed as a male activity and men are quick to defend their domination of sports as it is a means within our culture by which many men define themselves. While this chapter does not attempt to address all of the gender-related issues present within the NFL fandom, it analyzes three different examples of how women are stereotyped in the NFL fandom. Even though the issue of player safety, the discussion of female sports journalists, and the vocal male segment of the NFL fandom’s views of female fans can be considered to be wildly different topics from one another, the view of how females engage with football and the NFL as a whole is a unifying theme that can be seen throughout the examinations of each issue. In each case, female participation is limited by traditional gender stereotypes as well as by the sexual objectification on the part of some male fans who attempt to establish a false dichotomy: one that distinguishes between the “real” fans and the women.
CHAPTER THREE: TEBOWMANIA: INTERSECTIONS OF RELIGION AND CONSERVATIVE IDEOLOGY IN NFL FANDOM

One does not have to be an avid NFL fan to know of Tim Tebow. His extraordinary athletic abilities during narratively-tense moments in the 2011-2012 NFL season, his public persona as a person of impeccable moral character, and his outspoken religious and social beliefs have made Tebow someone adored by millions of NFL fans and non-NFL fans alike. Of course, the love for Tebow is not unanimous, but he still manages to be one of the most popular stars of the NFL and among active United States sports figures (“Poll: Tim Tebow”). Many have questioned why Tebow is so popular despite the fact that he is not considered an elite quarterback\(^1\) in the NFL. Several possible explanations for Tebow’s quick rise to popularity have been suggested, such as Tebow’s race and religious beliefs, in order to explain how the NFL’s “most overrated player”\(^2\) could achieve this level of fan popularity and even be described by some fans as a hero. But how do these factors account for Tebow’s growing popularity among NFL fans? Do Tebow’s personal beliefs and cultural representations make him a cultural hero for NFL fans? The answer to these questions can be found by examining what Tebow represents culturally and how the ideas he represents align with the current cultural and political climate in the United States. I argue that through Tebow’s outspoken religious beliefs and his race, Tebow represents a culturally conservative perspective that is celebrated by fans and further reflects the conservative nature of NFL fandom.

\(^1\) The “elite” quarterback status is highly debated among fans and pundits, but the current quarterbacks that are described as being elite are: Aaron Rodgers, Drew Brees, Eli Manning, and Tom Brady. Peyton Manning (although he did not play last season due to injury) and Ben Roethlisberger also are sometimes described as elite quarterbacks. See Santorsa or Billick.

\(^2\) Tebow was voted by fellow NFL players as the most overrated player in the NFL in 2011. See “Midseason Player Poll”.
If Tebow constitutes a culture hero, especially for NFL fans, how does he fit the definition of one? What is the difference between famous sports figures and heroes in their positions and representations in culture? To answer the first question, there are many different definitions and interpretations of the concept of a hero. Part of the difficulty of defining what is heroic and identifying who are heroes is that these concepts are influenced by cultural and historical factors (Gash and Conway 350). Regardless of what attributes make a person heroic or the particular identity of the hero being discussed, one concept that remains universal is that heroes represent cultural ideas and serve as cultural role models of desirable behaviors and traits (Gash and Conway 351). The definition of hero I will use is a hybrid of two scholars’ definitions that I feel encapsulates the concept of hero that is used most commonly in popular culture. While some may argue that our culture uses the word “hero” too casually for it to have any significant meaning, I argue that our perceptions of heroes have changed over time to reflect contemporary popular cultural values. Psychologist Phillip Zimbardo (25) defines a hero as:

... someone who possesses and displays certain heroic attributes such as integrity, compassion, and moral courage, heightened by an understanding of the power of situational forces, an enhanced social awareness, and an abiding commitment to social action.

Similarly, Orrin E. Klapp (57) writes:

Heroes may be defined as personages, real or imaginary, who are admired because they stand out from others by supposed unusual merits or attainments…they are recognized as such and occupy an honored status, to which
behavior such as home, commemoration, celebration and veneration is appropriate.

Using these definitions together provides a broad yet clear framework for conceptualizing heroes. Heroes, real or fictional, are respected and recognized for their moral behaviors and attitudes as well as their achievements that distinguish them from the rest of society. But how does a famous sports figure fall into this definition of hero? Many scholars have tried to distinguish between these two categories (see North et al; Drucker; and Shuart), arguing (or at least attempting to argue) that sports figures and heroes are mutually exclusive. While this argument may have some value for scholars, it nevertheless skirts the issue that the term “hero” is still in the public’s lexicon when it comes to discussing sports figures and explains part of our culture’s casual usage of the term.

To further understand how Tebow fits these definitions of a hero, it is important to understand his background. Tim Tebow was born to Christian missionaries in the Philippines on August 14, 1987 (“Tim Tebow”). While pregnant with Tebow, his mother was told that she was “not pregnant, but that he [Tebow] was a mass of fetal tissue” and that she needed to have an abortion in order to save her life (“God Story”). However, she continued the pregnancy and refused medical treatment because she “trusted God’s plan for her and her baby” (“God Story”). The Tebow family moved back to the United States in the early 1990’s (“Tebow Family”). Home schooled by his mother, Tebow had a very strong Christian upbringing. Despite being homeschooled, Tebow was able to play football with the local high school team. Tebow earned national attention and received an athletic scholarship to play for the University of Florida in 2006. Tebow played as a backup quarterback for a year and took over the starting position in his sophomore year. Tebow became the first sophomore to win the Heisman Trophy, while also
setting numerous records. In 2008 he helped his team win the Bowl Championship Series (BCS) National Championship. In 2010, Tebow entered the NFL Draft and was selected in the first round (twenty-fifth overall) by the Denver Broncos. Tebow was initially the backup quarterback, but after poor performance by the starting quarterback during the 2011 season and fan pressure to change the lineup, Tebow became the starting quarterback. At the time that Tebow took over the position, the Broncos had one win and four losses. Tebow led them to eight wins and eight loses during the regular season, as well as an appearance in the franchise’s first playoff game since 2005. In the spring of 2012, he was traded to the New York Jets; it remains to be seen whether or not he will be the starting quarterback for the 2012-2013 NFL season. Tim Tebow is known as much for his off-the-field actions as his on-the-field achievements.

Tebow and his siblings spend summers on mission trips in the Philippines as well as other missionary work. In 2010, he founded the Tim Tebow Foundation, which “utilizes the public platform that God has blessed Tim Tebow with to inspire and make a difference in people’s lives throughout the world” (“Tim Tebow Foundation”). He also is very outspoken about his Christian beliefs. In 2010—at a time when he was not the starting quarterback—Tebow starred with his mother in a pro-life Super Bowl commercial sponsored by Focus on the Family. While he is very reluctant to discuss his private life during interviews and other publicity events, Tebow is very forthcoming with details about his spirituality and religious beliefs.

Similar to Tebow’s hesitation to discuss his private life, many are uncomfortable with examining how Tebow’s race factors into his popularity. However, it is important to consider the question: If Tim Tebow was African American, would he have the same hero status in American popular culture as he does now? I argue that Tebow’s whiteness plays a significant role in Tebow’s popularity with fans. White fans make up about eighty-three percent of the NFL
fandom (“Get to Know”) while sixty-seven percent of NFL players are black (Lapchick, Kamke, & McMechan). Even though white fans will gladly cheer on black players, there still exists a racial divide between the NFL’s white fans and the NFL’s black players. Sports writer Palash Ghosh discusses the racial divide between players and fans:

As for 2012, I still see signs that white fans will embrace a white star more than a black player – but if there are no white players good enough to cheer for, they will (almost by default) cheer on the blacks who happen to play for their favorite team. But there is definitely something "missing" from this relationship between white fan and black athlete. Indeed, I have heard many white fans complain that there are “too many” minorities playing the sports that they love watching. Even while they celebrate the accomplishments of Ryan Howard, Ray Lewis and Kevin Durant, etc., I get the feeling that if these players were white they would be even more beloved by the white fan base.

White fans feel more comfortable cheering for the players that they feel represent themselves. But how much does race factor into player success and popularity, especially in positions that have been historically white. Kordell Stewart, an analyst for ESPN and a former NFL quarterback, believes that race is a significant factor in the opportunities Tebow has been given to be successful in the NFL despite questions and concerns regarding his ability to be a starting quarterback. Stewart argued that:

In the end, it’s gotten better, it’s an excuse in my mind because there’s too much talent out there from college to in the NFL where these African-American quarterbacks deserve the same opportunity as a Tim Tebow to make the mistakes
so that they can learn and unleash and show how much of a gamer they are.

(quoted in Owens)

As a former quarterback who also fell victim to this type of racial discrimination himself, Stewart’s comments reflect a history of discrimination against African American quarterbacks with play styles similar to Tebow’s. One falsehood that has plagued black quarterbacks is that they lack the intelligence to read defenses and memorize the playbook, which makes them suitable only for other positions that require less skill (e.g. wide receiver or running back) (Ross).

While there are only a few African American quarterbacks active in the NFL today, they are either heavily criticized or given less attention than white quarterbacks they outperform. One example of this from the 2011-2012 season involved Cam Newton, quarterback for the Carolina Panthers and reigning NFL and Offensive Rookie of the Year. Newton and other black quarterbacks such as Michael Vick and Vince Young are often compared to Tebow due to their similar quarterback styles. Many sports analysts and fans say Newton had a breakout year. Newton not only broke the record for most passing yards by a rookie quarterback, but also broke the records for most passing yards for a quarterback in the first two games and most passing yards in a game by a rookie quarterback. He was the first rookie to throw for over 400 yards in one game, became the first player in NFL history to have five rushing and passing touchdowns in the first five games; and most notably made the most rushing touchdowns by a quarterback in a single season (Lechner). While Newton did receive some media attention for his achievements, many of these were overlooked due to “Tebowmania” Jermichael Finley, a tight end who plays

3 They are all know as “running” quarterbacks due to their rushing skills and ability to move out of the pocket.
4 Tebowmania is the term used widely in United States popular culture for the cultural (media and fan alike) response to Tim Tebow becoming the starting quarterback for the Denver Broncos in
for the Green Bay Packers, pointed out the how the coverage of Tebow has eclipsed coverage of Newton:

I sit at home, start watching TV and all I’m seeing is Tebow. That’s kind of disturbing. We have a guy here [Newton] that’s breaking records every week and you have a guy in Tebow that’s saying ‘God’ every word and he gets coverage. Of course I love my faith and God but come on man. (quoted in Dunn)

Not only has Tebow received more coverage than Newton, but there is also the question of whether black quarterbacks such as Newton could succeed in the NFL with Tebow’s performances and statistics. 5

History suggests that if Newton had not had such a great rookie year, he would probably have found himself cut and either resigned to play backup quarterback on another team or left unsigned as many African American quarterbacks have been in the past few years. Former quarterbacks such as JaMarcus Russell, Troy Smith, Donovan McNabb, and others before them have all been demoted or cut and unsigned (forcing them out of the NFL) while their white counterparts who have performed less well or equally well have been given numerous opportunities to make up for their performances and stay in the starting quarterback position

2011. While this term came into wide usage during the 2011-2012 NFL season, it could be argued that Tebowmania started when Tebow played for the University of Florida where he also received heavy media attention both locally and nationally. Tebowmania is responsible for many internet memes as well as the “Tebowing” craze, which I will explain later, as it relates to Tebow’s religious beliefs and practices.

5 While Tebow led the Broncos to victory with fourth quarter heroics, he finished the season with a 46.5 percent completion rate, which was the lowest by a qualifying quarterback since 2000, and struggled in his last five starts of the 2011-2012 season with turnovers and fumbles (“Tebow’s Season”).
Terrell Suggs, a linebacker for the Baltimore Ravens took issue with this during an interview with Jim Rome:

The guy [Tebow] was 6 for 22 [completions] in a must-win game; and, you know, we're still talking about the Tim Tebow phenomenon. I'm like: Donovan McNabb had a similar game like that in week four and got the hatchet. Cam Newton, if he had a game like that; everyone would be trying to move him to receiver. (“Terrell Suggs”)

As Mike Fransden, a writer for the popular sports site, *Bleacher Report*, explained, “If Tim Tebow were black, it’s unlikely that Tebow would get a chance to play quarterback in the NFL…Tebow would most likely be converted to another position such as running back or tight end.” Regardless of Tebow’s abilities, being a starting NFL quarterback gives one a platform of leadership, power, and influence. Whether or not one is an “elite” quarterback or the worst quarterback in the league, all eyes are on the quarterback (black or white), judging his every move on and off the field. However, historically and currently the NFL has shown that this level of privilege and power is only trusted to and reserved for white quarterbacks. While this privilege is not unique to Tebow, Tebow’s whiteness does assist him in being seen as a cultural savior and hero instead of just another mediocre quarterback.

Perhaps the most widely publicized characteristic of Tebow is his religion and his very public displays of his faith. Before Tebow came to the NFL, he played for the University of Florida Gators. It was as a Gator that Tebow began writing references to Bible verses in his eye paint, which he did through his entire college career. In fact, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in 2010 (the year that Tebow made his rookie debut in the NFL) created the
“Tebow Rule”\footnote{This was not the official name, but this is what the media named the rule and the name has stuck since it was created in response to the attention created by Tebow writing on his eye paint. The NFL already had banned the use of messages, symbols, and numbers in player’s eye black.} which banned players from writing any words, symbols, and numbers in their eye black (Kaufmann). Tebow and his mother also starred in a pro-life commercial sponsored by the evangelical Christian group Focus on the Family that aired during the 2010 Super Bowl (although Tebow was not even playing in the NFL at the time). Although the thirty second ad did not specifically mention being pro-life, it advised viewers to go to the Focus on the Family website where they could see and hear the rest of the Tebows’ story. The Tebows’ story, or as it was titled on the Focus on the Family website, “God Story,” was extremely pro-life in its message as it specifically warned viewers against having an abortion and evoked Tebow as an example of what a woman could give up by having one. The ad was highly controversial\footnote{Part of the controversy arose from the fact that CBS refused to air ads from left-leaning groups such as PETA and MoveOn.org.} and widely discussed in the media, and while Tebow has not specifically commented on the ad after appearing in it, he has not been shy about his opinion that people should be outspoken about their religious beliefs. Tebow recently made an appearance at a Texas megachurch where he told the congregation, “It's OK to be outspoken about your faith” (quoted in Cuff). For Tebow, this means one should be outspoken on and off the field. One of the “crazes” that peaked during Tebowmania this past season was “Tebowing”. Tebowing (as a noun) was the name given to the pose Tebow did while praying on the field before, during, and after games. This inspired an internet meme, Tebowing (the verb), where people (seriously or mockingly) posed like Tebow in various places. While this was mostly a joke, Tebow was very open and supportive of the Tebowing phenomenon. He viewed the attention it gained as part of his evangelical mission to spread the gospel:
It's not my job to see people's reasons behind it, but I know [of a kid] with cancer that tweeted me, 'Tebowing while I'm chemoing' -- how cool is that? That's worth it right now. If that gives him any encouragement or puts a smile on his face, or gives him encouragement to pray, that's completely awesome. It [praying] is serious, for me. At least it's being talked about, and that's a cool thing. If I can help be an example of that, then I look at that as a blessing. (quoted in Jones)

At Tebow’s first press conference as a New York Jet, Tebow got almost as many questions about his religious beliefs as he did about football. It is clear Tebow not only wants to be a good football player, but also serve as a religious example. Tebow said, “If people are still somehow talking about prayer or talking about my faith, then I think that’s pretty cool.” (New York Jets Media Relations Department). While these quotes from Tebow may not seem too extreme, he views his role as an evangelical Christian to be his first and foremost (a phrase often used by Tebow) priority and duty.

Tebow has also made numerous statements off the field. He has made very explicit his religious views and how he believes the country should function. At a recent church appearance, when he was asked what needed to change culturally in America, Tebow responded, “First and foremost is what this country was based on: one nation under God. The more that we can get back to that” (Cuff). Getting back to “what this country was based on,” Tebow seems to live by the principles of the evangelical Christian lifestyle. Tebow professes to be a virgin who is saving himself for marriage, a non-drinker, a non-smoker, someone who has never done drugs and does not curse (Robertson; Manahan). Clearly Tebow is not afraid to mix his personal beliefs with his professional career. In fact, Tebow embraces the elevated platform to do God’s work.
Tebow’s public displays and outspokenness about his faith and his beliefs have not received much backlash from sports writers and fans. Many fervently defend Tebow—even if they are not Christians—because many believe Tebow is a model for the type of person that we all should be. Would the public be so quick to defend Tebow if he was Muslim? Jewish? Or practicing any other religion? How would we respond to Tebow loudly and proudly praising Allah on national television? History has shown that the American public does not take too kindly to athletes trying to promote any other religion besides Christianity. Even before the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, athletes who practiced Islam were treated differently than their Christian counterparts. While there are athletes in the NFL and other sports who practice Islam, most practice quietly in that they do not do it in front of the cameras as Tebow does. Chris Jackson, former National Basketball Association (NBA) player who later converted to Islam and changed his name to Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, refused to perform the Pledge of Allegiance due to his religious beliefs. His public display of his faith caused a media firestorm and he eventually quit the NBA (Cederstrom). Unlike Tebow, who has been widely defended for practicing his religion openly on and off the field, Abdul-Rauf suffered further discrimination. People called for him to be deported (even though he was born in Mississippi) and months after the September 11th attacks his house was burnt down (Cederstrom). In our culture, one is accepted and embraced for practicing their religion unless it is something other than Christianity.

How does each of these factors work to make Tebow a cultural hero? It is really the combination of these factors and the current cultural and political climate that create a perfect storm to transform Tebow from star athlete to cultural hero. Looking at the numerous articles that have been written about Tebow, it is clear that regardless of whether the authors believe in
his athletic abilities they believe that Tebow is an accurate representation of our cultural values and how we envision America should be. Ever since Tebow’s high school days, people have called him a hero (English; FitzRoy). Why? There are numerous reasons that have been given by fans and writers, but essentially they have bestowed this title on Tebow because he is someone who represents the cultural ideal of the dominant group in our society: male, white, heterosexual, and Christian. This powerful, white man who trusts the Lord with all his heart and is not afraid to challenge the “cultural left” by speaking out on sensitive social issues such as abortion from a platform and privilege afforded to a starting quarterback in the NFL is the perfect spokesperson for promoting a white, heterosexual, Christian male agenda. In a November 2011 article in the Washington Times, entitled “Tim Tebow, An Emerging American Folk Hero Answering a Cultural Need,” Tebow is presented as “ferociously hardworking,” unselfish, and unconventional. Essentially, Tebow is presented as the personification of the American ideal. The article further describes Tebow as “the embodiment of everything that the cultural left hates…Tebow nevertheless personifies the patriarchy---straight, white, big, strong, clean cut, square-jawed, preternaturally confident, radiating exceptionalism and utterly convinced that God is on his side” (Stevens). So why is Tebow a hero? The connection between what Tebow represents (i.e. white, male, Christian privilege) and the current Christian Right political movement is hard to ignore. Sports writers and non-sports writers alike have crowned him “hero of the culture war” and hailed him as the American sports hero that America was (apparently) searching for (Mango). One article goes so far as to argue that Tebow is the “authentic hero” America was searching for because President Obama turned out to be a president who “feigned heroic strength and ability and, with nary an achievement to speak of, accepted admiration for untested noble qualities and non-existent accomplishment,” (DeAngelis).
Tebow’s heroic qualities do not simply end with being a quarterback. There is little debate that Tebow is just a fame seeking celebrity or a spoiled, overpaid athlete, but the public considers him a person with integrity, compassion, moral courage, enhanced social awareness, and commitment to social action who occupies a special status in our culture. Tim Tebow may not be a perfect quarterback, but Tebow is perfect for representing and modeling what many on the political right such as the Tea Party Movement would call “traditional” American values, so much so that many of the 2012 Republican Presidential candidates sought his endorsement. Former GOP hopeful Rick Santorum addressed the question of whether or not Tim Tebow should be considered a hero. Santorum’s answer was unsurprisingly yes, “Our heroes that we celebrate almost without thinking…are not heroes that are necessarily promoting [our] values, and we have one who does, they’re controversial, right? They’re the ones who get held up to scorn and ridicule because they stand up for their Biblical virtues or truth, as we saw with Tim Tebow” (Gehrke). Santorum and the other Republican candidates were not afraid of invoking Tebow’s name because they realized the importance of an outspoken male role model who represents the traditional cultural ideals that they wish to restore to our country. He actively embraces this position as part of his evangelical beliefs (Branch and Pilon). Whether we like it or not, Tebow is the great white hope of the political right, the Christian white male who will restore and vindicate our cultural values and, as many Republicans say, “Take our country back.”

While changes, challenges, and reaffirmations of cultural values are clear to see in areas such as politics and the mass media, are they as clear in professional sports? While some may claim that sports are purely about leisure and unaffected by other parts of our culture, Tim Tebow and the hysteria of Tebowmania reveal otherwise. It might be plausible that Tebow is simply just interesting to watch and cheer for. While this may be true, why is he interesting to
watch? Why do we feel the need to root for him? What draws us to his story? Why do we consider him a hero? There are many other quarterbacks (and even players in other positions) in the NFL who are and were considered better athletes and equally as Christian and moral as Tebow. Obviously, his fans and sports analysts seem to think that there is something special about Tebow, something that connects them to him and causes them to rally and put him on a cultural pedestal above all other NFL players (or any other professional sports figure, for that matter). Who better to represent traditional American cultural values than a God-fearing white quarterback with good looks, who is saving himself for one true love, does not indulge in sinful activities like drinking, smoking, and cursing, spends his spare time doing charity and mission work, and makes millions of dollars each year? In this case, Tim Tebow is indeed the American hero we have been looking for.

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8 According to a 2005 Christian Science Monitor article, 33 percent or more of NFL players are openly devout Christians. See McCauley.
CONCLUSION

NFL fandom projects and supports a very conservative worldview. In each chapter of this thesis, I provided a case study which examined NFL fan rhetoric, discourse, and practices online. These behaviors included not only interactions between fans, but also with various sports-related businesses that cater to fans (e.g. sports journalism and television). I examined how race is negotiated by those who play fantasy football, how gender stereotypes are applied to female fans, and the role race and religion have played in Tim Tebow’s popularity. These three different case studies of NFL fan activities show how NFL fandom reflects a very conservative view of race, gender, and religion. This conservative view in particular reflects the conservative backlash that has occurred since President Barack Obama took office in January 2009. The results of these conservative perspectives are not just limited to football fandom, but have implications for social interactions and expectations of gender, race, and religion in culture—implications I identified and addressed in each chapter.

My thesis began with an examination of fantasy football, a popular activity for millions of NFL fans. Fantasy football is a popular activity for NFL fans because it allows them to go beyond just cheering for their favorite team, but allows them to virtually own their favorite NFL players. The explicit purpose of fantasy football is to allow fans into the “very exclusive” club of NFL ownership (Sheridan viii). Fantasy football puts the fan in the position and mindset of an NFL owner/coach to control a team of NFL players from various NFL teams. It is known from previous studies of fans who play fantasy football that the main enjoyment that comes from playing fantasy football is the feeling of ownership and control over NFL players. This enjoyment frames the relationship between fan (the fantasy football owner) and NFL players. This relationship between owner and player becomes more complex when we analyze how
players are discussed by fans (the owners) and sports journalists (who serve as a main source of information and influence for fans). Not only are players treated as simple commodities, but the ways they are commodified varies based on a player’s race. Over the past fifty years, the NFL has evolved from being a league with an unofficial but clear “whites only” policy (Mastro and Hogrogian 1) to a league where the majority of players are African-American (Lapchick 3). The significance of the change in NFL player demographics is an issue that does not go unnoticed by fans. Many fans have commented on how the NFL has become what one poster on the popular news discussion site Topix called the “Negro Football League” (SickOfIt). Regardless of how one feels about the increase of African-American NFL players, the fact is that fans notice the difference and acknowledge its presence. Yet while this issue is acknowledged by fans, fans continue to use racially motivated language when discussing African-American NFL players. In much of the media produced for fans and even some fan-produced media, African-American players continue to be praised for their bodies, and fans (consciously or non-consciously) employ the same language that was used to describe African-American slaves. Many are quick to point out that language such as “workhorses” or “studs” may be unique to certain positions (e.g. running back) that African-Americans have dominated. However, I show that this language changes depending on the race of the player. If the players are white, they are described with terms such as “productive” and “winner”, while African-Americans are described with very physical and primitive terminology. As I demonstrated in this chapter, fantasy football has become a breeding ground for very (conscious or unconscious) racist ideas. Even though the NFL has been praised for being racially progressive (Lapchick 1), many fans seem hesitant to celebrate the NFL’s racial changes. This first chapter demonstrated that fantasy football reflects
this hesitation through the commodification of NFL players and furthermore through racialized terminology used to emphasize the physical bodies which fans seek to control.

Chapter Two focused on the issue of gender within NFL fandom, specifically looking at how female fans and female sports journalists are viewed by other (male) fans. Football, and specifically the NFL, has always been thought of as a man’s game, and to some extent this is still true, as women have yet to break through to play, coach, or referee in the NFL. However, women are watching the NFL in increasing numbers, so much so that the NFL has begun specifically marketing to women through special merchandise and special events. Although women are being welcomed by the NFL as potential consumers of NFL merchandise, women often find resistance to their increased presence within NFL fandom. While player safety is not an explicitly female-driven initiative, I demonstrated in this chapter that there is a perception among male fans that women have been the driving force behind recent increases in rules and regulations geared towards player safety. For a sport that is well-known and enjoyed for its hard hits and aggressiveness, many fans (and even NFL players) have expressed displeasure at the NFL’s shift in policy. Though at first glance this issue may seem gender-neutral, discussion among the fans has increasingly shifted its focus towards blaming women for “feminizing” the NFL. Fans and sports writers have even gone as far to suggest that women will eventually be responsible for the downfall of the NFL, though the issue of player safety has been championed by both men and women.

1 Most notably Breast Cancer Awareness, where NFL players wear pink equipment during the month of October.
2 It is true that wives of former players have lobbied for increased player safety in the NFL, but they have also been joined by former players themselves.
Women have become increasingly involved in the NFL fandom both as sports journalists covering the NFL and as fans. An increasingly vocal subset of male fans claim that women have no business being involved with their “man’s game.” As I observed in Chapter Two, female sports journalists frequently find themselves not only discriminated against by their co-workers, but also criticized by the fans they write for. Female journalists who cover the NFL feel marginalized because men continuously call their knowledge and perspective into question, asking how a woman write about a game she has never played? Even when women have opportunities to cover the NFL, they often are stereotyped and perceived to be unprofessional and incapable of handling locker room interviews. Female sports journalists are confronted daily with questions about these perceived limitations, while also receiving very gendered pushback from fans who believe that women should leave NFL journalism to the people these fans feel are the most knowledgeable: men. Female fans find similar resistance to their participation in the NFL fan community. Female fans find their knowledge and status as “real fans” continuously challenged by male fans. When women are accepted and valued as fans, they are often valued for their bodies and sex appeal. I examined a number of popular sports websites that display photo features of the “hottest” female fans. Similar to other representations of women in popular culture, female fans are objectified to appeal to the sexual fantasies of male fans. This representation of female fans promotes the idea that women fans are to be seen and valued for their looks, not for what they know about football. There is no doubt about the increased presence of women in NFL fandom. However, there is significant doubt among male NFL fans about the ways and extent to which women should participate in NFL fandom. Like fantasy football, online discourse in NFL fandom reflects and promotes a very conservative social view. Women are expected to have limited participation—if any—in an activity that is perceived as
masculine. The dichotomy between “us” and “them” that such male fans wish to maintain is, in their words, meant to ensure the integrity of the NFL. This view of the integrity of the NFL reflects these male fans’ desire to preserve the integrity of their own patriarchal superiority—superiority called into question by increasing attempts at equality in fan participation by women.

My third and final chapter explored the cultural meanings behind Tim Tebow and the cultural phenomenon of Tebowmania, a topic of considerable discussion during the 2011-2012 NFL season. Many have questioned Tebow’s abilities to be a successful NFL quarterback, but that has not stopped Tebow from becoming a favorite among NFL fans. Tebow, who played with the Denver Broncos during the 2011-2012 season, transitioned from being a backup quarterback to starting quarterback partially due to increasing pressure from fans[^3] to start him instead of the struggling Kyle Orton, given the team’s poor start at one win and four losses (“Tim Tebow Replaces”). Despite the fact that Tebow did lead the Broncos to their first playoff game since 2005, Tebow received significantly more attention for his status as a white Christian male. I argue that Tebow’s race and religious beliefs (and by extension, his political beliefs) are more responsible for Tebow’s popularity among fans than simply his athleticism. Tebow’s race and vocal expression of his religious-political beliefs have given fans—particularly the traditionally white, male, Christian audience of the NFL—a representative who embodies conservative ideals in a time of notable politically conservative backlash. Tim Tebow provides this audience with a hero. I argue that both race and religion are significant factors in why Tebowmania became the phenomenon that it was, and that each facet of Tebow’s identity plays a large part in his appeal.

[^3]: Although Broncos head coach John Fox denied they made the change due to fan pressure, many suspect that fan pressure influenced the final decision. Fans not only took to the internet to voice their displeasure with former Broncos quarterback Kyle Orton, but they also would chant “Tebow!” at games.
to some fans. Tebow embodies everything that is traditional to these fans. He provides a counter
to the increasing racial gap in terms of acceptance between whites and African-Americans in the
NFL. Tebow also provides fans with an NFL star that reinforces traditional patriarchy (a
patriarchy which some fans feel is being threatened, as I established in Chapter Two. His
traditional religious beliefs and traditional conservative views have made him into a hero of the
culture war.

It is not a revelation that sports fandoms are mostly conservative, with a history of sports
being breeding grounds for traditional masculinity and racism. However, there are many
factors—such as increased female inclusion in sports (e.g. the effects of the passage of Title IX)
and the end of segregation in sports leagues, including the NFL—that could be considered as
examples that sports and sports fandom are becoming more progressive. I would be remiss in
completely discounting the progress that has been made regarding gender and race issues in NFL
fandom, yet there is still an overwhelmingly conservative ideology in the worldview to which
large segments of NFL fandom adhere. Playing fantasy football is not a racist activity in and of
itself, but the rhetoric and the attitudes surrounding how NFL players are discussed, as well as
the commodification of NFL players by those who play fantasy football, reinforce stereotypical
views of race and use terms that reflect practices of slavery. Gender also remains a significant
and divisive force in NFL fandom despite (or, as I suspect, in reaction to) the increasing number
of female fans. It may look as though women are generally accepted in the world of the NFL, yet
women are viewed by some male fans as enemies and unqualified to discuss football (whether in
journalism or in the stereotypical male fan’s living room). Tebowmania and the narrative
surrounding the rising popularity of Tim Tebow serve to promote the traditional, conservative
perspective found in sports and sports fandom.
The current political environment—which has seen major political gains by the conservative, and more specifically the type of conservativism associated with the Tea Party Movement. Tea Party Movement—has influenced and reinforced the conservative nature of NFL fandom. The connection between sports and politics is strong. Sports have been used in the past to reinforce and promote certain political perspectives in American politics (Katz 61). The connection between sports and politics is not always obvious, but politicians have often used sports metaphors or have used their athletic experiences in attempts to connect with voters. Katz argues that sports metaphors and imagery have long been used by American politicians to “produce and reproduce dominant constructions of masculinity (femininity), and establish and reinforce norms for both candidates and voters” (75). I suggest that Tebowmania and Tebow’s rise to cultural hero status have been heavily influenced by the gains made by conservative political groups and politicians since President Obama took office in January 2009. Many of the 2012 Republican Presidential candidates have sought Tim Tebow’s endorsement and in addition made direct comparisons between Tebow and Obama, with the assumption that Tebow is the greater and more accomplished of the two. These politicians understand the power of the connection between sports, sports fans, and politics.

Despite the NFL’s popularity, NFL fans have received significantly less attention from scholars than fans of other sports. Further research would benefit from closer examinations of female fans, issues of sexuality and specifically homophobia, and race among NFL fans. The research on NFL fans that does exist relies on textual analysis. Textual analysis is an important tool for examining various aspects of popular culture; however ethnography could also be used to examine fans’ perspectives and behavior as they could reveal different interpretations than ones yielded from textual analysis. Nonetheless, some general conclusions about NFL fandom and its
role in American culture and politics can be drawn from my analysis.

Football, and more specifically professional football, has taken over as the most popular sport in the United States—more popular than professional baseball, basketball, and even auto racing. From September to early February millions of Americans spend their Sundays watching—from their couches or the stands—their favorite football teams. With large segments of the American population taking part in the fandom of the NFL, studying this expansive fandom allows scholars to look at a major and important part of American popular culture. If by examining popular culture we learn about ourselves and how we interact with the world around us, studying fans of the NFL has a huge potential to reveal much about how we construct our identities and our cultural ideals. Textual analysis is an important tool for examining various aspects of popular culture; however, ethnography could also be used to examine fans’ perspectives and interpretations as they could reveal different interpretations than ones yielded from textual analysis.

Through my analysis, I have identified how attitudes and beliefs about gender, race, and religion held by fans of the NFL reflect and connect with current political movements and beliefs. NFL fandom reflects a conservative ideology that marginalizes both large segments of the fandom of the NFL (women) and a significant number of people about whom that fandom is based African-American football players.

The continued popularity of the NFL, and the ongoing growth of NFL fandom, reflects the continuing popularity of this ideology. The assumptions inherent in such an ideology go largely unquestioned, and as such perpetuate themselves across our culture. In this thesis, I sought to identify this ideology within NFL fandom. Its perpetuation is fundamentally about fear. Male portions of NFL fandom fear that their patriarchal supremacy will be questioned by any
female participation in their leisure activities. White NFL fans fear that the increased presence of ethnic minorities in the play of the game reduces the opportunities of “guys like them” to succeed in the game they love so much (with their reaction being to reduce their status to commodities). Conservative Christian NFL fans fear that without personalities like Tim Tebow to stand as a paragon of their personal virtues and beliefs, the game will lose integrity—that popular culture, and culture as a whole, will lose integrity. If popular culture reflects society as a whole, NFL fandom reflects fears about society as a whole. If the NFL changes in ways these fans do not like, or in ways that do not privilege these fans religiously, politically, racially, or along gender lines, this suggests they may lose the privilege that they have grown accustomed to benefitting from in their daily lives. Conservative ideologies are ultimately reactionary and fear anything that may upset the status quo, and NFL fandom is no different. Change means difference. Change means upheaval of the existing order. And if the existing order has suited a group or series of groups for so long, any threat to that order is, understandably, met with fear.
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