*Book Review: “No Game For Boys to Play” by Kathleen Bachynski*
*(972 words)*
*Review by Pardeep Toor*

Football in America is a clash between rhetoric and reality. The reality is that it’s a dangerous game that puts the lives of young people at risk for short- and long-term health consequences. The rhetoric from adults, coaches, and youth football organizers is that its intrinsic social and moral values outweigh health risks. In the book *No Game for Boys to Play: The History of Youth Football and the Origins of a Public Health Crisis*,Kathleen Bachynski traces the pendulum between rhetoric and reality to the origins of tackle football in the 19th century while detailing the growth and obsession with the game in America, despite the physical violence it inflicts on youth and adults.

Football wasn’t always an assumed part of American society. Due to football-related deaths in their respective states, the Georgia House of Representatives voted (91-3) to ban football in 1897 and the New York Board of Education banned high school football in 1905. However, those rulings were quickly overturned. According to Bachynski, resistance to college and youth football was met with a combative response that ensured sport’s growth. The book offers multiple reasons, such as appeal to upper- and lower-classes and military ideals, why football flourished in the United States. But at its core, football expanded by becoming synonymous with American small-town life and masculinity. Bachynski further explains how the New Deal programs after The Great Depression catalyzed growth with the construction of many new stadiums and facilities. The combination of infrastructure and an unwavering belief in the competitive benefits of playing football at a young age allowed the game to grow from Ivy League colleges initially, to all colleges, high school, and then Pop Warner.

Bachnyski argues that the rhetoric of the perceived benefits of tackle football for American youth has evolved over time. At different points in its history, the game has been considered a substitute tool for military training, anti-communist expression, business acumen and leadership, and above all, a symbol of American masculinity. The book eloquently details the connection of each of these characteristics with football and how these factors have overcome the imminent threat of injury on the field. As outlined in the book, although the dangers of football are numerous and, have been highlighted in medical journals and mainstream media publications throughout the 20th century, the game has continued to prosper and grow into the American cultural phenomenon it is today.

A significant portion of the book focuses on the conundrum equipment manufacturers face: presenting football as a risky sport that requires safety equipment, without admitting that the game is unsafe for kids. Bachynski charts the evolution of the football equipment industry that has often sought to profit from the unsafe elements of the game while assuming no risk for the detrimental effect the sport has on youth. The sports equipment manufacturing industry, like the fast-food and tobacco industries before it, often took a “personal responsibility” approach, emphasizing that participants in the sport are aware of its inherent risks. The book also wonderfully overlaps the marketing efforts of equipment manufacturers with the scientific claims of physicians and politicians highlighting the physical dangers of the sport.

Additionally, Bachynski addresses the argument that football is a means for social and economic mobility for minorities, beginning with the Carlisle Indians in the early 20th century and the integration of black athletes in mainstream high school and youth football after the 1950s. Integration was an opportunity for minorities to model equality and perhaps superiority on the football field. However, as Bachnyski claims, the pursuit of short-term equality and long-term social mobility did not translate off the field. Instead, it reinforced negative stereotypes of minorities. For example, Bachynski notes that black athletes were disproportionately relegated to positions that take heavier hits (running back, wide receiver, cornerback and safety), while white players played quarterback due to stereotypes about their intelligence and leadership ability. Such disparities and subsequent public health effects highlight the nuanced physical threats of football based on race and socioeconomic status.

The book ends near present day, with the National Football League (NFL) acknowledging that head injuries are a risk in the sport and working collaboratively with scientists to research improvements in the equipment and game. However, unlike the early 20th century, the existence of football is now assumed, rather than contemplated, underscoring the pivotal place the game occupies in modern American society

This book should be read by anyone associated with youth or professional football or those considering enrolling themselves or their kids in the sport. Although not a parental or player guide, the book’s comprehensive examination of the rhetoric and reality provides important historical context for current conversations about the safety of football for youth and adults. The historical perspective is essential to fully comprehend football’s grasp on the American psyche. Bachnyski’s research is complemented by a narrative arc of football that is written academically and informatively while maintaining the integrity of the sport’s intricate history. The book is accessible to both academics and concerned parents and is a must-read for anyone affiliated with the sport.

Bachynski’s meticulously researched book explores the American psyche and cultural identity related to football. Bachynski consistently balances the staggering dangers the sport poses for youth with the explosive growth of the game from the 19th century to present. Football is an illogical force of popularity that reveals a collective American identity of willing to put children in harm’s way in the name of economics and the perceived social value of competition and contact. Bachynski frames the problem as a public health crisis, yet historical and current responses fall short of treating it as an immediate threat. Bachynski doesn’t lay a path forward for youth and professional football. Instead, she comprehensively reveals the past to guide the reader to their own judgment of what’s best for children in the future.