

## Seventeen Reasons Why Football Is Better Than High School



By Herb Childress

*As an ethnographer, Mr. Childress was able to watch more than a hundred high school students in a variety of circumstances. Here's what he learned.*

Illustration © 1998 by Jem Sullivan

**WE DEFINE SCHOOL as a place of learning.** But as I visited classes in the high school in which I was an observer for a year, what I saw mostly -- and what the students told me about most frequently -- was not learning at all but *boredom*. I saw students talking in class, not listening to lectures, having conversations instead of working on their study guides, putting their heads on their desks, and tuning out. Teachers talked about what a struggle it was to get students to turn in their homework at all, much less on time. Students picked up enough information to pass the test, did their work well enough to get the grade, and then totally forgot whatever it can be said that they had learned.

We adults could see this as yet another moral problem. We could call young people lazy and tell one another that they won't put any effort into their work. We could press for more testing to tell us that -- sure enough -- test scores are declining. We could seek more penalties when students don't do well in class -- more ways to coerce them into doing their work. We could talk about going "back to basics," which is to say making school an even less appealing and more restrictive place than it is now.

But as an ethnographer, I had the advantage of hanging around with more than a hundred of this school's students outside the classroom, and I got to watch them in a variety of circumstances. For example, in February I spent one Thursday through Saturday with Bill, a junior who had good grades during his first two years of high school but lost interest in school during his third year. I watched him not bother to study at all for a French test and fail it. I watched him skip a class and play a computer game instead of writing his article for the school newspaper. I watched him get busted in a couple of classes for tardies and talking. But that same guy on that same weekend spent two hours running full out in a soccer practice and spent more hours than I can count playing hacky sack. (He taught me how to play acceptably well, no small achievement in itself.) He cooked a wonderful dinner at home one night and worked five fast-paced hours at his restaurant kitchen job the next night. He spent most of his home time playing games invented by his little brother and sister, who loved him. He spent two hours surfing on Friday and three more hours preparing for another surfing trip on Sunday.

When I was with him in school, he was an archetypal slacker, but when I was with him outside school, he was a person with a lot of interests -- things that he was dedicated to and good at doing. And that pattern carried over to many of the students that I followed. I watched other young people operate computers and wash horses. I saw them playing video games that had dozens of rules and literally hundreds of decisions to be made every minute, and I watched them play card games that I couldn't begin to understand. I watched

them drive four-wheel-drive trucks at insane speeds on dirt roads and watched them working on those trucks as well. I watched them acting, opening their hearts in front of hundreds of people. I watched them wrestling and playing the piano. I was privileged to see them doing the things that they loved to do. The things that they put themselves into without reserve. The things that they were damn good at. The students I knew were a skilled bunch of people. So why didn't those skills and capabilities and that enthusiasm show up more often in the classroom?

In the school that I observed, I saw striking -- and strikingly consistent -- differences between the perfunctory classroom sessions and lively extracurricular activities. The same students who were emotionally absent from their classes came alive after school. We say, "If only she'd spend as much time doing her algebra as she does on cheerleading . . ." with the implication that students blow off algebra because they're immature. We don't usually think to turn the question around and ask what it is about the activities they love that is worthy of their best effort. We don't usually ask what it is about school that tends to make it unworthy of that kind of devotion. But if we're interested in looking at places of joy, places where students lose track of how hard they're working because they're so involved in what they're doing, places where teenagers voluntarily learn a difficult skill, places that might hold some important lessons for schools, football is a good choice.

Let me give you 17 reasons why football is better for learning than high school. I use football as my specific example not because I love football; I use it because I hate football. It's been said that football combines the two worst elements of American society: violence and committee meetings. You can substitute "music" or "theater" or "soccer" for "football," and everything I say will stay the same; so when I say that football is better than school, what I really mean is that even football is better than school.

1. *In football, teenagers are considered important contributors rather than passive recipients.* This attitude is extraordinarily rare in teenage life, but it is central to both learning and self-esteem. A football team is framed around the abilities and preferences of the players; if there's nobody who can throw the ball but three big fast running backs and a strong offensive line, the team isn't going to have an offense that dwells much on passing. But the geometry class -- and every student in the geometry class -- has to keep pace with the same state-ordained curriculum as every other school, regardless of the skills and interests and abilities of the students. Football players know that they, and nobody else, will get the job done. Students know that they are considered empty minds, to be filled at a pace and with materials to be determined by others.

2. *In football, teenagers are encouraged to excel.* By this, I don't mean that players are asked to perform to someone else's standards (which may already be limited); rather, they are pushed to go beyond anything they've ever been asked to do before, to improve constantly. There is no such thing as "good enough." We congratulate players on their accomplishments, but we don't give them much time to be complacent -- we ask them to do even more. In the classroom, we give them a test on polynomials, and the best result they can get is to score high enough never to have to deal with polynomials again.

3. *In football, teenagers are honored.* Football players get extraordinary amounts of approval: award banquets, letter jackets, banners around the campus, school festivals, team photos, whole sections of the yearbook, newspaper coverage, trophies, regional and even state recognition for being the best. The whole community comes out to see them. We put them on floats and have parades. That doesn't happen for members of the consumer math class.

4. *In football, a player can let the team down.* Personal effort is linked to more than personal achievement: it means the difference between making the team better or making it weaker, making a player's teammates and coaches grateful for his presence or irritated with his apathy. A single player can make his peers better than they would have been without him. That's a huge incentive that we take away from the classroom with our constant emphasis on individual outcomes.

5. *In football, repetition is honorable.* In the curriculum, we continually move forward, with not much opportunity to do things a second time and get better. Students have to do new things every time they get to class. In football, students do the same drills over and over all season long -- and, in fact, get better at them. The skills get easier, and players start to use those skills to do things that are more complex.

6. *In football, the unexpected happens all the time.* Every player will line up across from the same opposing player dozens of times during a game, but he knows that, each time, his opponent could do something different, and he'll have to react to it right in the moment. There's no opportunity to coast, to tune out, to sit back and watch others work. Every player is required to be involved and absorbed in his work, and a talented player who holds back is typically held in lower regard than his less talented but more engaged teammates. Contrast that with a normal class period, scripted by a teacher with the idea that a successful class is the one that goes as planned, with the fewest disruptions, and it's clear why apathy can be a problem in the classroom.

7. *In football, practices generally run a lot longer than 50 minutes.* And when they end, there's a reason to stop: the players work until they get it right or until they're too tired to move anymore. There's no specific reason that a school class should run for 50 minutes instead of 35 or 85, and there's no reason why classes should run the same length of time every day. The classroom schedule responds to pressures that come from outside the classroom -- state laws, other classes, even bus schedules. The football practice schedule is more internal -- the coach and team quit when they're done.

8. *In football, the homework is of a different type from what's done at practice.* Students do worksheets in the classroom and then very often are assigned to do the same kind of worksheet at home. Football requires a lot of homework that comes in the form of running and weight training, things not done at practice. Players work at home to find and build their strengths and then bring those strengths to practice to work together with their teammates on specific skills. The work done at home and the work done in common are two different jobs, and each is incomplete without the other.

9. *In football, emotions and human contact are expected parts of the work.* When players do well, they get to be happy. When they do poorly, they get to be angry. Players are supposed to talk with one another while things are going on. But we have no tools to make use of happiness or frustration in most classrooms, and we generally prohibit communication except for the most restricted exchanges. When we bring 30 students together and ask them not to communicate, not to use one another as resources or exhort one another to go further, then we make it clear to them that their being together is simply cost-effective.

10. *In football, players get to choose their own roles.* Not only do they choose their sport, but they also choose their favorite position within that sport. In the classroom, we don't allow people to follow their hearts very often. We give them a list of classes they have to take, and then we give them assignments within those classes that they have to do, and we don't offer many alternatives. We've set the whole school thing up as a set of requirements. But sports are a set of opportunities, a set of pleasures from which anyone gets to choose. Each one of those pleasures carries with it a set of requirements and responsibilities and difficult learning assignments, but youngsters still do them voluntarily, following their own self-defined mission of seeking their place in the world.

11. *In football, the better players teach the less-skilled players.* Sometimes this teaching is on purpose, but mostly it is by example. Every player is constantly surrounded by other players who can do things well and who love doing what they do. The really good players are allowed to show off -- in fact, it's demanded that they show off, that they work to their highest capacity. The people who aren't as good observe that. They don't simply see skills they can learn; they become inspired. They get to see another person -- not just the teacher but a peer -- who knows what he's doing and who loves to do it. In the classroom, the best students aren't often given a chance publicly to go beyond what everyone else is doing. They're smothered, held

back, kept to the same pace as their classmates.

---

## **We give the appearance of not caring so that we won't be hurt when the students don't care either.**

---

12. *In football, there is a lot of individual instruction and encouragement from adults.* A coach who has only the nine defensive linemen to deal with for an hour is going to get a pretty good sense of who these youngsters are, what drives them, what they can and can't do. And those players are going to see the coach in a less formal and more human frame; they get to ask questions when questions arise without feeling as though they're on stage in front of 30 other bored students.

Let's admit a basic truth: bigger classes make personal contact more difficult. The school I was in had an average class size of 27 students. That was considered pretty good, since the statewide average was 31. But as I looked around the halls at the team photos in their glass trophy cases, the highest player-to-coach ratio I saw was 13 to one; sometimes it was better than 10 to one. There was one photo of the varsity football team with Coach Phillips and his three assistants surrounded by 35 players; erase the three assistants from the picture, and you could have had a photo of any one of his history classes.

On the first day of freshman basketball practice, 23 hopefuls tried out, and by the end of the first week, there were still 17. On the next Monday morning the coach said to me, "I sure hope some more of these kids quit. You can't do anything with 17 kids." True enough -- so why do we expect him to do something five periods a day with 25, 30, or 34?

13. *In football, the adults who participate are genuinely interested.* The adults involved in football are more than willing to tell you that they love to play, that they love to coach. And they don't say it in words so much as in their actions, in the way that they hold themselves and dive in to correct problems and give praise. But the teachers I watched (and the teachers I had from grade school to grad school) were, for the most part, embarrassed to death to say that they loved whatever it was that they did. It takes a lot of guts to stand up in front of 25 students who didn't volunteer to be there and say, "You know, dissecting this pig is going to be the most fun I'm going to have all day." We're candidates for the Geek-of-the-Month Club if we let people know that we really love poetry, or trigonometry, or theater, or invertebrate biology. And so we often hide behind a curriculum plan, a textbook, and a set of handouts, and we say, "You and I have to do this together because it's what the book says we have to do." We give the appearance of not caring so that we won't be hurt when the students don't care either.

But it was only in those few classrooms where the teachers said, both in word and in action, that they absolutely loved what they were doing that the students were engaged, that they learned. I talked with a lot of students -- and their teachers and their parents -- about what they loved to do, whether it was photography or surfing or hunting or reading -- things that are real skills. And when I asked how they got involved in those activities, both the young people and the adults always answered that it was someone who got them interested, and not anything intrinsic in the event itself. They followed someone they respected into an activity that that person loved, and they discovered it from there.

14. *In football, volunteers from the community are sought after.* No sports program in a high school could ever operate without assistant coaches, trainers, and other local people who aren't paid to help out. These people give hours and hours to the school in exchange for a handshake, a vinyl jacket, and a free dinner at the end of the season. Volunteers are a natural part of human activity. There are almost never volunteers in the classroom -- no adults who seem to believe that math or chemistry is so interesting that they would help

out with it for free on a regular basis. There's no sense that anyone other than "the expert" can contribute to a discussion of ideas.

15. *In football, ability isn't age-linked.* Freshmen who excel can play varsity. In a ninth-grade English classroom, an extraordinary student can't go beyond what the other ninth-grade students are doing, even if he or she could profit from what's being assigned to the seniors. When a student tries out for football, he gets a careful looking over by several coaches, and if he's really good, they're going to move him up fast. In the classroom, if that same student is really good -- if he's inspired -- one person sees it and gives him an A. Big deal -- it's the same A that someone else gets for just completing the requirements without inspiration.

The pace of advancement in football isn't linked to equal advancement in another, irrelevant area. If a boy is an adequate JV basketball player but an extraordinary football player, the football coach isn't going to say that the boy has to stay with the JV football team so that he's consistent with his grade level. No way! The coach is going to tell that player, "Come on up here; we need you." Have you ever heard an English teacher recruit a young student by saying, "We need you in this classroom"? Have you ever heard a science teacher say, "Your presence is crucial to how this course operates -- we're not at our full potential without you"?

16. *Football is more than the sum of its parts.* Players practice specific moves over and over in isolation, but they know that their job at the end is going to mean putting all those moves together. In school, we keep the parts separate. We don't show our students how a creative writer might use a knowledge of science; we don't show them how a historian might want to know about the building trades; we don't show them how a mechanic can take joy in knowing about American history. We don't let our students see the way that all these different interests might come together into a worthwhile and fascinating life. We pretend they're all separate.

17. *In football, a public performance is expected.* The incentive to perform in front of family and friends was a great motivating force for the athletes I knew. The potential for a poor performance was another motivator -- nobody wants to be embarrassed in public. These students were contributing an important civic service to their small community, with over a thousand home fans at every game, and they took that responsibility seriously. But schoolwork is almost always performed and evaluated in private. Successes and failures are unseen and have no bearing on the happiness of others.

No single one of these 17 patterns taken individually constitutes a magic potion for a good learning environment. But when we look at these patterns taken together, we can see that football has a lot to recommend it as a social configuration for learning. I'm not going to argue that we should give up on school and focus on football. What I am saying is that we have a model for learning difficult skills -- a model that appears in sports, in theater, in student clubs, in music, in hobbies -- and it's a model that works, that transmits both skills and joy from adult to teenager and from one teenager to another.

We need a varsity education.

---

*HERB CHILDRESS holds a doctorate in Environment-Behavior Studies from the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. His ethnography of a Northern California high school, "Landscapes of Betrayal, Landscapes of Joy," is available from University Microforms International, Ann Arbor, Mich. He can be reached via e-mail at [miaktxca@aol.com](mailto:miaktxca@aol.com).*

Last updated 31 March 1998

URL: <http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kchi9804.htm>

Copyright 1998 Phi Delta Kappa International