

American Football and the American Dream —From The Blind Side: Evolution of a Game

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Abstract

This article is based on “The Blind Side: Evolution of the Game” by Michael Lewis, which focuses on American football, deeply discusses the close connection between American football and the American Dream. By analyzing the fates of different characters in the book, it reveals the important role of American football in personal growth, social issues, and the context of sports English. American football not only shows the spiritual qualities of teamwork, perseverance, and the courage to compete, but also provides a stage for poor teenagers to change their fates and realize the American Dream. At the same time, sports English vocabulary also reflects the spirit of the American Dream behind American football and becomes a part of its cultural soil.

Keywords

American football, American dream, sports English

1. Introduction

The book *The Blind Side: Evolution of a Game* is written by Michael Lewis, which focuses on American football. And it illustrates the development and evolution of professional American football through telling the story of Michael Oher and others. The extracts in our textbook showcases the dream-pursuing experiences and stories related to basketball and American football mainly of four African-American players. Although it is short listed, from which we can compare American football with basketball to find the development dilemmas of football players, as well as intuitively glimpse the relationship between sports and politics and culture. Moreover, in the US, the important interaction between sport of American football the American Dream(Alexander, 2010).

2. The Intertwining of American Football and the American Dream

2.1 Michael Oher: The Illusion of Meritocracy and the Privilege of Intervention

Michael Oher’s journey from a homeless teenager in Memphis’s crime-ridden Hurt Village to an NFL star is often celebrated as a triumph of individual perseverance. However, his story is deeply intertwined with systemic privilege. Oher’s physical genius —size, speed, and agility—aligned with the NFL’s evolving need for dominant offensive linemen tasked with protecting quarterbacks. Yet his success hinged on external factors: adoption by the affluent white Tuohy family, access to elite education at Briarcrest Christian School,

and mentorship from figures like Big Tony. These privileges provided Oher with resources unavailable to most Black youth in his community. His narrative masks the reality that fewer than 1% of high school football players reach the NFL, and even fewer escape poverty without such intervention. Oher's rise reflects not just talent but luck and racialized benevolence, making his story an exception rather than a blueprint (Anderson, 2013).

2.2 Zachary Bright: The Burden of Premature Responsibility

Zachary Bright's trajectory mirrors Oher's early potential but starkly contrasts in outcome. A defensive tackle with a scholarship offer from the University of Tennessee, Bright's promising career ended abruptly after his girlfriend gave birth. His decision to prioritize family over football underscores the socioeconomic pressures faced by marginalized youth. Unlike Oher, Bright lacked financial or emotional support to balance parenthood and education. His story highlights how systemic neglect—such as inadequate childcare, healthcare, and academic resources—traps young Black men in cycles of poverty, forcing them to abandon dreams for immediate survival. Football, once a ticket to upward mobility, became a casualty of structural inequity.

2.3 Arthur Sallis: The Academic Exploitation of Black Athletes

Arthur Sallis's expulsion from the NCAA for academic disqualification exposes the exploitative relationship between sports and education. As a star running back at Memphis's East High, Sallis's athletic prowess masked his academic struggles, a common issue in underfunded schools that prioritize wins over literacy. The NCAA's profit-driven model thrives on athletes like Sallis, who generate revenue but receive minimal academic support. His inability to secure a scholarship despite record-breaking performance reveals the myth of "student-athlete" parity: Black athletes in revenue-generating sports are often funneled into programs that prioritize athleticism over education, leaving them ill-prepared for life after football (Bowen & Levin, 2003).

2.4 Delvin Lane: The Criminalization of Black Potential

Delvin Lane's transition from a charismatic quarterback to a convicted felon and drug dealer symbolizes the systemic marginalization of Black youth. Despite leadership skills and a scholarship offer to the University of Wyoming, Lane's arrest on felony charges derailed his future. His case reflects the over-policing of Black communities and the punitive nature of the criminal justice system, which disproportionately targets young Black men for minor offenses. Post-incarceration, Lane's involvement in drug trafficking highlights the lack of viable economic opportunities for those with criminal records, even talented athletes. Football, once a source of hope, became a distant memory in a life circumscribed by systemic exclusion (Coates, 2015).

The divergent fates of Oher, Bright, Sallis, and Lane illustrate football's dual role as both a dream-maker and a mirror of societal injustice. While Oher's story perpetuates the myth of meritocracy, his peers' struggles reveal the reality of structural barriers—poverty, racial discrimination, educational neglect, and criminalization—that limit upward mobility. American football, for all its cultural cachet, cannot compensate for systemic failures. To foster genuine personal growth, society must address root causes of inequality, ensuring that talent and effort are met with equitable opportunities, not just for a fortunate few, but for all.

3. The Manifestation of Social Issues in American Football

3.1 Structural Privilege and the Illusion of Meritocracy

The divergent fates of Michael Oher, Zachary Bright, Arthur Sallis, and Delvin Lane highlight the role of systemic privilege in determining athletic success. While Oher's journey from homelessness to NFL stardom is often framed as a triumph of individual grit, Lewis explicitly attributes his rise to external factors: "the change in environment" and "the white world's unusual aid." Oher benefited from adoption by the affluent Tuohy family, access to private education at Briarcrest Christian School, and mentorship from figures like

Big Tony—resources unavailable to his peers. In contrast, Bright’s off-school due to teen parenthood, Sallis’s NCAA expulsion over academic disqualification, and Lane’s incarceration underscore how systemic neglect—such as inadequate childcare, educational resources, and criminal justice bias—traps marginalized youth in cycles of poverty. These disparities reveal football’s limited capacity to transcend structural inequity without intervention(Halberstam, 1999).

3.2 Basketball vs. Football: Racialized Pathways to Mobility

The 1980s saw basketball surpass football in institutional support, particularly in Black communities. Basketball’s “pyramid” talent pipeline—from elementary schools to universities—provided a structured path for upward mobility, symbolized by icons like Michael Jordan. In contrast, football lacked this infrastructure, leaving Black athletes like Oher and his peers reliant on fragmented opportunities. Oher’s brief basketball stint in high school, although hardly maintained, serves as a metaphor for football’s secondary status in Black communities. His eventual shift to football highlights the sport’s potential to transcend racial barriers, but only when paired with extraordinary intervention. The absence of a similar pipeline for football meant that even talented players like Bright, Sallis, and Lane faced insurmountable obstacles(hooks, 1981).

3.3 Class Inequality and the Fragility of the “American Dream”

The narrative starkly contrasts Oher’s impoverished upbringing in Hurt Village with the Tuohys’ affluent lifestyle, exposing America’s deep class divide. Football emerges as a tenuous bridge across this divide: a college scholarship or NFL contract could theoretically lift athletes from poverty, but the odds are stacked against them. For every Oher, thousands of Black youth face systemic barriers—underfunded schools, criminalization, and limited social safety nets—that derail their dreams. The myth of meritocracy persists, but data reveal harsh realities: fewer than 1% of high school football players reach the NFL, and even fewer escape poverty without systemic support. The other three athletes’ struggles underscore the fragility of upward mobility for marginalized communities.

3.4 Racial Discrimination and the Exploitation of Black Athleticism

While Black athletes dominate football’s physically demanding positions (e.g., linemen, running backs), leadership roles like quarterback remain disproportionately white, reflecting broader racial hierarchies. The NCAA’s profit-driven model further entrenches inequality, prioritizing athletic performance over education for Black athletes like Sallis. Even successful players like Oher face long-term health risks from repeated concussions, while team owners and advertisers profit handsomely. The sport’s celebration of Black athleticism masks systemic inequities, perpetuating a cycle where talent is leveraged for profit but denied equitable access to resources and opportunities. This exploitation mirrors Cedric J. Robinson’s theory of racial capitalism, where Black bodies are commodified for economic gain(Katznelson, 2005).

4. American Football and the American Dream in the Context of Sports English

The Blind Side: Evolution of a Game situates American football within a linguistic framework that both embodies and critiques the American Dream. Through sports English terminology, the sport becomes a cultural artifact reflecting national ideals of meritocracy, perseverance, and upward mobility, while simultaneously exposing the contradictions and inequalities embedded in these narratives. This analysis explores how language constructs the myth of the American Dream in football, perpetuates cultural hegemony, and enables critical counter-narratives that challenge systemic exploitation(Katznelson, 2005).

4.1 Metaphorical Language and the Ideology of Meritocracy

Sports English in American football is replete with metaphors that reinforce the American Dream’s emphasis on individualism. Terms like “blind side”—coined in the book to describe the quarterback’s vulnerable rear zone—extend beyond gameplay to symbolize societal marginalization. Michael Oher’s rise from homelessness to NFL stardom is framed as a triumph over his metaphorical “blind side,” a narrative that romanticizes perseverance while obscuring the role of structural privilege. Similarly, the term “underdog”

lionizes athletes who overcome adversity, normalizing the idea that success is solely earned through grit. This linguistic sleight of hand diverts attention from racial and economic barriers, positioning failure as a personal shortcoming rather than a systemic injustice (Lewis, 2006).

The concept of “breakthrough” further perpetuates this myth. Athletes like Oher are celebrated as self-made icons, yet their stories often ignore the role of luck, mentorship, or racialized benevolence. For example, Oher’s adoption by the affluent Tuohy family and access to elite education at Briarcrest Christian School were pivotal to his success—advantages unavailable to most Black youth. Sports English thus constructs a fantasy of meritocracy, erasing the structural inequities that make such “breakthroughs” exceptions rather than norms (Robinson, 2000).

4.2 Cultural Hegemony and the Globalization of Sports English

Sports English serves as a vehicle for exporting American cultural values. Terms like “touchdown,” “super bowl,” and “draft” have transcended their sporting contexts to become global symbols of American capitalism and individualism. This linguistic imperialism normalizes consumerism, framing football as a leisure commodity through phrases like “Sunday Funday” and “tailgating.” Meanwhile, the NFL’s global revenue (\$18 billion in 2023) relies on selling an idealized version of the American Dream, where success is equated with wealth and fame.

The term “American Dream” itself is weaponized through sports English to promote national exceptionalism. For instance, international players like Japanese kicker Haji Wright are celebrated as “foreign successes,” reinforcing the myth that the U.S. offers unparalleled opportunities. Yet this narrative ignores the racialized barriers non-white athletes face in accessing leadership roles. The NFL’s racial demographics—70% Black players but 90% white owners and coaches—expose the sport’s complicity in maintaining racial hierarchies, even as it markets itself as a meritocratic haven.

4.3 Critical Counter-Narratives in Sports English

While dominant discourse idealizes football as a pathway to the American Dream, subversive language challenges this orthodoxy. Terms like “body capital” critique racial capitalism, where Black athletes’ physicality is commodified for profit. The NFL’s \$18 billion revenue contrasts sharply with players’ average career length (3.3 years) and post-retirement health crises, particularly among Black athletes. Similarly, “wage slave” highlights the league’s low minimum salary (\$660,000 in 2023) relative to profits, underscoring the exploitation of Black labor.

Grassroots movements have also popularized terms like “CTE awareness” to expose football’s health risks. The NFL’s decades-long denial of links between head injuries and chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) reflects corporate greed over player welfare. These counter-narratives disrupt the sport’s glamorous image, revealing the human cost of the American Dream myth (Sugrue, 1996).

4.4 Education and Socialization through Sports English

Sports English in schools and media plays a pivotal role in socializing youth into American Dream ideology. Phrases like “no pain, no gain” and “play through the injury” normalize sacrifice, grooming young athletes for capitalist labor markets where personal suffering is equated with productivity. Meanwhile, “teamwork” masks hierarchical power structures, positioning coaches as authoritarian figures and reinforcing obedience—a trait valued in workplace dynamics.

Black athletes, disproportionately concentrated in physically demanding positions like linebacker and running back, are socialized into roles that emphasize physicality over leadership. This mirrors broader societal expectations, where Black men are often confined to labor-intensive roles while leadership positions remain disproportionately white. Sports English thus perpetuates racial stereotypes, limiting opportunities for Black athletes to transcend their designated roles.

The intersection of American football and the American Dream in sports English reveals a complex interplay of ideals and realities. While language constructs narratives of triumph and opportunity, it also

masks systemic inequities—racial exploitation, class stratification, and health risks—that undermine the very ideals it celebrates. To reconcile this contradiction, critical discourse must challenge the linguistic frameworks that naturalize inequality, amplify marginalized voices, and redefine success beyond individual glory. By interrogating the lexicon of sports, we can begin to dismantle the myths that uphold systemic injustice, fostering a more equitable future where the American Dream is accessible to all.

5. Conclusion

The Blind Side's narratives expose football as both a symbol of hope and a microcosm of American inequality. While Oher's story romanticizes the American Dream, his peers' struggles reveal the reality of systemic barriers—racial discrimination, class stratification, and institutional neglect—that limit upward mobility. Addressing these issues requires confronting the structural inequities that reduce sports to a lottery for marginalized youth, rather than a viable path to liberation. Football's cultural significance must be harnessed to advocate for systemic change, ensuring that talent and effort are met with equitable opportunities for all.

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