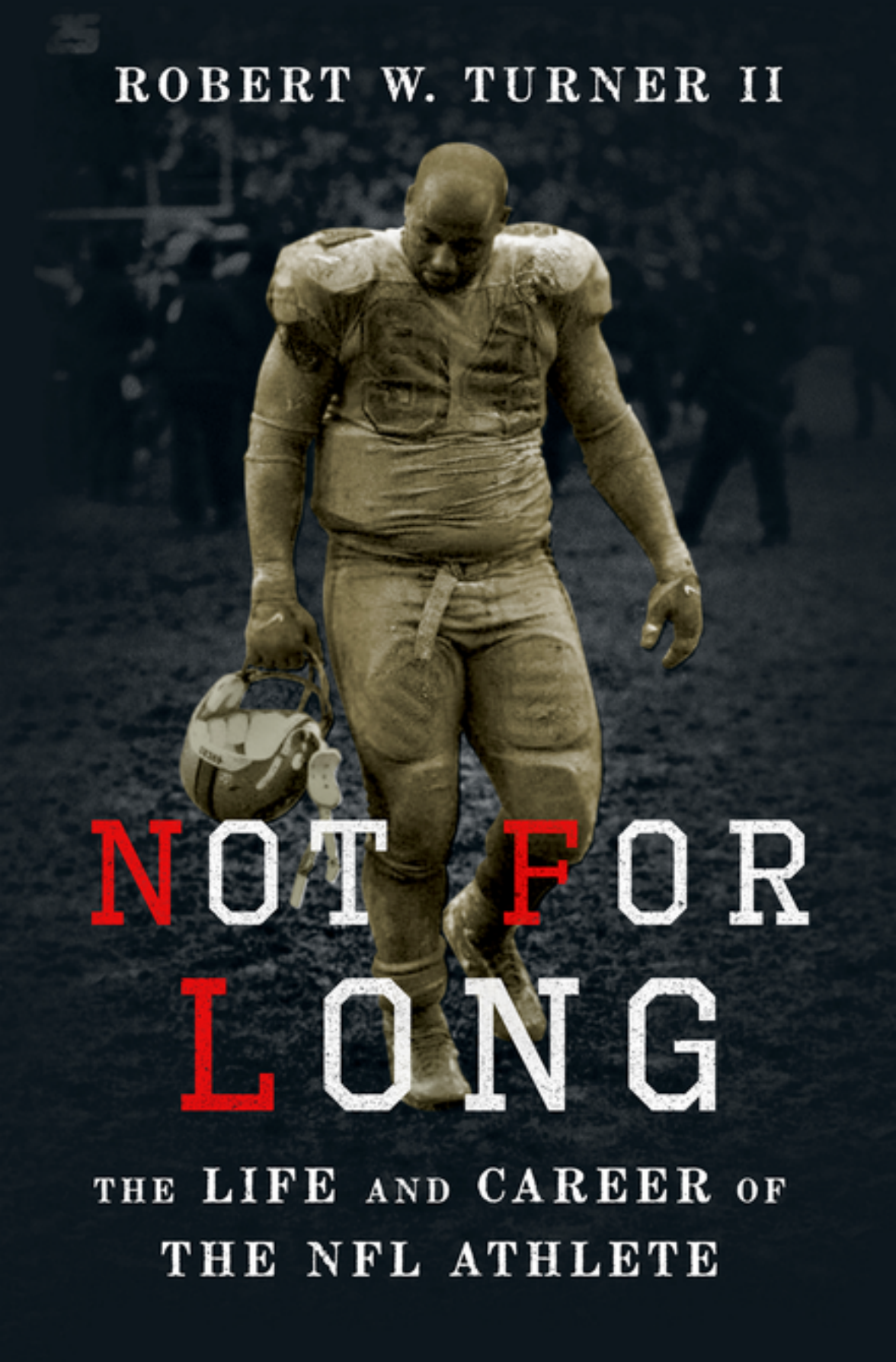
ROBERT W. TURNER II



NOT FOR LONG

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FOR ROBERT AND DOLORES

Words cannot express the love I feel for you.

God bless you, always.

I owe a debt of gratitude to:

Coach Tom Higgins Sr., Piscataway High School

Coach Challace Joe McMillan, James Madison University

Coach Joe Carico, James Madison University

Dr. Richard Southall

Intellectual giants:

Dr. Stanley Aronowitz

Dr. Carol Stack

Dr. Keith E. Whitfield

Dr. James S. Jackson

Dr. Tamera Coyne-Beasley

Former teammates

and

To all the athletes who participated in this study

Peace, Love, and much Respect

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE: NFL MEANS *NOT FOR LONG*

INJURY, INDISCRETION, OR ILLNESS—any one of these can instantly end a lifetime of work for the professional American football player. Fail to be in the right place at the right time or demonstrate a propensity to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and you're out. Get distracted by social, familial, or personal obligations and you're out. A single misstep can leave you benched, block your hopes of a better contract or free agency, or take you out of the league all together. Your time on the field isn't the most brutal part of a life lived for and in the National Football League (NFL); it's the constant, gnawing uncertainty of what comes next. Every player knows that "NFL" really stands for "Not For Long."

To be a typical NFL athlete is to know that no matter how tired or horrible you feel, you must play better than everyone else in your position. If you can't deliver what the coach, the general manager, and the owner want, you're utterly replaceable. Thousands of eager athletes are waiting to suit up in your place—including some who would happily betray you to advance their own fleeting careers. Because each athlete is highly skilled and cultivated but always disposable, the pressure resting on those shoulder pads is immense and the surveillance is extreme. Every cab ride, workout, and social interaction is observed and recorded, and any bad behavior can be swiftly and harshly punished. By day, you will spend 12 to 16 hours absorbed in football-related activities: training, practice, game films, team meetings, position-specific training, and playbook memorization, but "blowing off some steam" is verboten. Day by day, your body will be pounded, crushed, bruised, and strained; your pain will likely be long term and debilitating; and you will face life-threatening, even deadly injuries over and over and over. Then you'll get up and do it again because it's what you've worked for—what your family,

friends, mentors, and coaches have worked for—your whole life, and yet your grasp on this career, this persona of "pro football player," is so tenuous.

NFL athletes exert all of this effort and make great sacrifices along a career path that often starts in childhood but pays off, on average, for only 3.1 years, if at all.[1] By the time players reach the age of 27 or 28, their careers, even the most incredibly accomplished professional football players, are often finished. Then what?

To be an NFL athlete is to know all of this and to want to play anyway because being a professional football player means that you are the toughest, strongest, and fastest. You are the most agile, aggressive, and sleekest *badd azz* out there.

I know, because this is my story.

This text draws from my personal narrative as well as interviews and shared experiences with over 140 high school, college, current, and former NFL athletes. Now a sociologist, I'm well positioned to offer an insider's view of the complex, tournament-style competition required to get into the league, the institution that requires this development process and policies that shape football player's career, and the after-effects of the game, lingering long and looming large in the often truncated lives of participant-athletes after the NFL.

My own tenure in the Big Show was relatively brief. When the general manager of the San Francisco 49ers called me into his office, it was an abrupt dismissal. He said, as if it was a normal, everyday conversation for him, "We will give you a one-way airplane ticket anywhere. So where do you want to go?"

A lifetime of dreams, of preparations, routines, discipline, and work came crashing down around me, and I had no answer for his question. Where did I want to go? I didn't know. What was I going to do? I didn't know. How could I carry on? I didn't know. How would I make money? I didn't know. How would I face my friends and family as a failure? I couldn't.

From age 10 until my late 20s, my life revolved around football. I spent five years of my adult life chasing and living my dream of playing professionally: first in the United States Football League (USFL), then in the Canadian Football League (CFL), and finally, with a brief stint in the National Football League (NFL). Four seasons of jumping across leagues and living in different

cities had already taken their toll by the time I got that hardest hit. I called my agent and told him I was done.

After the NFL, I experienced a crisis in my very soul. I felt depressed, hopeless, and upended. I avoided my friends and family. I drifted around towns and cycled through jobs, searching for something that would give me the excitement and meaning I found playing football. Nothing worked.

People lose jobs or change careers frequently. It happens all the time. So why were men like me—the toughest, fastest, most aggressive, masculine athletes—so fragile when faced with the quotidian tasks of life outside the league? As I found my path, training in sociology and studying the contours of a professional athlete's training and labor, the commodification of human bodies in a violent spectacle, and the institutions that cultivate and corral ideal players (but leave them almost wholly unprepared for their exit), I began to think of my "reentry" to civilian life as a peculiar and makeshift project. What social conditions make some football players more vulnerable than others when facing an unceremonious dismissal? What does it take to survive and succeed in life after football? And if these skills and coping mechanisms are taught earlier in the lives of football players—right alongside routes and plays—can that intervention help them to lead happy and productive lives when their playing time is up? Not only did I need to answer these questions for myself but I felt I owed it to those who came before and who would come after me to learn what happens and what *should* happen when your not-for-long career comes to a screeching halt.

PREFACE: THE ATHLETES' JOURNEY THROUGH THE NATIONAL FOOTBALL LEAGUE

IN HIS SEMINAL BOOK, *The Power Elite*, sociologist C. Wright Mills presents the concept of the military-industrial complex, a profit-driven alliance of business and governmental interests that connects seemingly independent profit-seeking parties around the business of war.[1] The term was quickly adopted as a paradigm for the dominant elements of a capitalist power structure, whether applied to the construction of big white weddings or the mounting specter of mass incarceration. Since the merger between the American Football League (AFL) and the National Football League (NFL) in 1970, the NFL has evolved from a loose confederation of teams in pursuit of the thrill of victory to an entity so popular, vast, and profitable that it is known as the crown jewel of the American "sports-industrial complex." The wheel of the football enterprise spins constantly these days. When a player steps onto the wheel, he embraces a system that benefits from the eventual obsolescence of his body. For this modern-day gladiator, the rules are simple—if you win, you continue; if you lose, you're finished. In fact, sorting individuals into groups of winners and losers using the outcome of sport tournaments so significantly threatens and controls the livelihood and ambition of players that the governing system of football essentially functions as a *totalizing institution*. Based on sociologist Erving Goffman's description of places such as prisons and the military as *total institutions* because they contain and entirely control such a wide array of human activities, my use of "totalizing" reflects a change to the individual himself.[2] Obviously, unlike prisoners and enlisted soldiers, a football player may exit his situation at will. However, the mental conditioning and indoctrinating processes of those athletes aggressively set on a career in professional football are incompatible with quitting.

In this book, I explore how the sports-industrial complex in its operation as a totalizing institution contributes to athletes' socialization and to Black male marginalization by presenting data collected from ongoing, situated, micro-level interactions with current and former players. I identify a number of structural and racial inequalities that an elite group of mostly White wealthy men use to exert almost total control over the bodies and social fortunes of professional football players—approximately 70% of whom are Black.[3]

Ultimately, the immense profit and control accrued by a few powerful individuals, combined with the willingness of players to suppress their desires and identities in order to share in the bounty, create such momentum that, as the wheel spins, it regularly jettisons players, sending them spinning off into the ether. Some fall early, some fall late; very few manage to hang on to the game long enough to achieve transformative success through football.

Social prestige and economic gain are just two of the many promises used to lure individuals into pinning their hopes and dreams on a career in the NFL. An athlete might want to play football because of a desire to receive recognition and establish a legacy in the folklore of our nation. After all, the American public loves a good success story. One of the most popular of these is *The Blind Side*, Michael Lewis's 2007 biography of Michael Oher, who was born into abject poverty in 1986 and through grit, gumption, and the help of a caring White family, was drafted in the first round of the 2009 NFL draft by the Baltimore Ravens.[4] Oher's up-by-the-bootstraps, rags-to-riches story became an Oscar-nominated film, and audiences wept and cheered every step along his path toward glory.[5] Similarly, Oliver Stone's 1999 movie *Any Given Sunday* demonstrates the aphrodisiac allure of fame and elite social status.[6] Add 24-hour sports programming into the cultural mix, and readers will understand how easily the celebrity a professional athlete enjoys can influence the career dreams of so many young people.

The seductive success myth of NFL athletes created by the dream-weavers at the NFL and perpetuated by the media leads most Americans to believe that all football players are paid gargantuan salaries just to *play* a game that they love. The NFL's press releases announcing multiyear deals with athletes for tens of millions of dollars, repeated media portrayals of sports professionals "making it rain" money at strip clubs, and reports of NFL athletes spending money on luxury automobiles, mansions, jewelry, fancy clothes,

and other consumables lend credence to the perception that an NFL athlete has vast wealth. For the majority of players, the opposite is true.[7]

Rarely does one hear about how the game can and does leave bodies broken, identities in flux, and athletes vulnerable to exploitation. I address this deficit by sharing stories and insights from current and former players, especially around what I call "involuntary role exit"—or the social condition caused by a sudden or forced departure from a highly coveted social role. By sharing these insights, this work adds to the sociological understanding of the role exit process by shifting the focus to the involuntary exit from a desirable social position.

Do football players contribute to their own vulnerabilities? Michel Foucault contends, "The body is the surface on which the social is inscribed."[8] Likewise, Loïc Wacquant reminds us that a sociological investigation of the body is well suited to uncover the varied ways in which "specific social worlds, invest, shape, and deploy human bodies to the concrete incorporating practices whereby their social structures are effectively embodied by the agents who partake in them."[9] How does one investigate "the social inscription" of a person who obfuscates discovery by unwittingly adhering to the unwritten precepts of masculinity and the verbal veil of pride in order to advance in the sport tournament?

I had to gain the trust of the participants in order to see the social vulnerabilities behind athletes' prideful masculine façades and glimpse this "inscription" process on individual athletes. I re-immersed myself in the world of football. I worked out with the athletes, coached them from the sidelines, and accompanied them in their daily activities, all while understanding the importance of the investigator's own—that is, my own—organism, senses, and embodied intellect. To conduct a thorough, ethnographic, sociological investigation, I employed "various participation-like methods, of the structures of the life-world, meaning the forms, structures or features that people take as objectively existing in the world as they shape their conduct upon the presumption of their prior independent existence."[10] Years after ending my own football career, I jumped back in so that I might learn from the athletes as they worked their way into, through, and eventually out of the league. I learned that football players have a tremendous amount to teach us—about athletics no doubt, but perhaps even more so about our world and ourselves.

My scholarly mentor and personal friend Dr. Stanley Aronowitz reminded me often as I undertook this study that the key to understanding how and why athletes struggle in adjusting to life after football could be found in their personal life histories. Just as one cannot truly understand a game without first examining how the rules impact strategy, one cannot interpret the struggles and challenges of exiting football—at least for those athletes who view sports as a means for upward mobility or social status—without scrutinizing the personal histories, the social and symbolic relations of athletes' lives, and the structural and hidden cultural engine of American sports. As one of the central characters in this manuscript, OD, a former wide receiver for the New York Giants, offers a window into how athletes' lives are forever changed the moment a coach, a parent, an uncle, an older sibling, or a mentor identifies them as a *special talent*. As much as OD's story validated my choice to blend two sociological approaches (the life history and what is called a symbolic interactionist perspective), his testimony also served as a reminder of the myriad minefields athletes encounter as they transition through pivotal stages in their careers.

Michael Messner, in *White Men Misbehaving: Feminism, Afrocentrism, and the Promise of a Critical Standpoint*, and Michael Kimmel, in his 2005 book of essays *The Gender of Desire*, have documented how the rewards of masculinity inspire boys and young men to make tremendous sacrifices in the name of sports.[11] I investigate these rewards and follow their keen focus on the consequences of masculinity—including men's self-censorship and loss of voice in the larger social conversation and their common unwillingness to report vulnerability or hardship.[12] Perhaps, I thought, football players' voices are muted because they are thought to be strong and capable, but not too bright. Or, perhaps instead of speaking out, players are encouraged to focus solely on entertaining the masses rather than worrying about the risks they take on by playing the game. Former NFL player Darnell Dinkins said as much during the 2010–2011 NFL owner's lockout, proclaiming that players are seen as commodities, not people.[13] I argue that the ever-increasing supply of new recruits makes it possible for owners to see players not only as commodities to be bought, sold, and traded, but also as *expendable* entities, easily replaced when broken. The impact of that attitude on the psyches of current and former players is palpable. It gives rise to a great deal of bitterness and conflicted masculinity.

Wacquant asserts that before initiating a study, the essential first step is for the sociologist to immerse himself in and acclimate himself to the organizational field of his subject; through intensive training, the researcher might then come to comprehend the cerebral, artistic, principled habits, and day-to-day behaviors of his subjects.[14] Given my experience playing football, from the Pop Warner Leagues, through high school, college, and into the professional leagues, I had already inhabited the world of football. I shared a common vocabulary and understood the attitudes and vulnerabilities that develop from players' on- and off-field experiences (Figure P.1). This common ground helped me gain access to the more intimate aspects of my subjects' lives and stories, while my sociological skills allowed to me convert my understanding of the game's personal and social impact into an understanding of its meaningful essence. My insider status dramatically helped my entry into the field and allowed me to adequately dissect and communicate its processes without destroying its distinguishable characteristics, as I knew them. It also meant this study was a personal one.

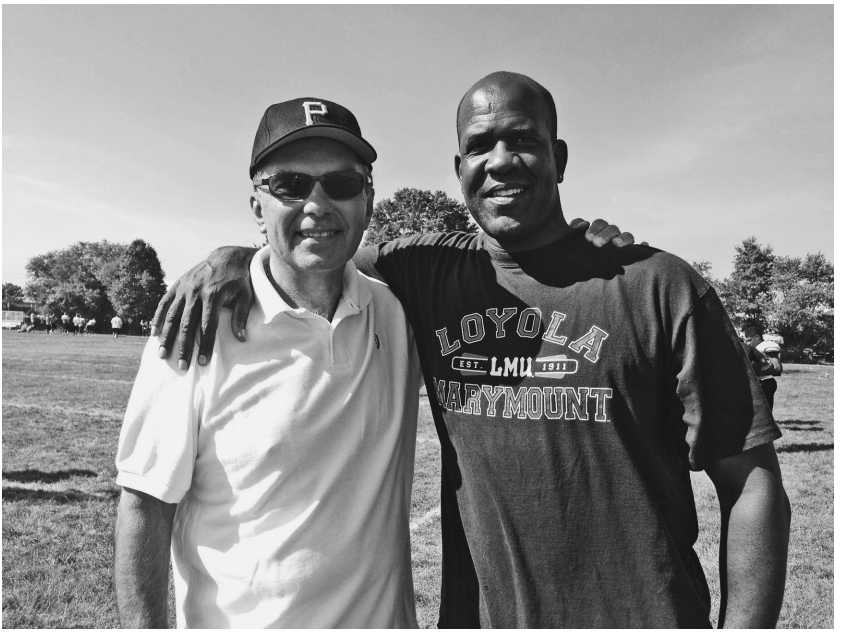

FIGURE P.1: ROBERT "PACKY" TURNER AND FORMER PISCATAWAY HIGH SCHOOL ASSISTANT FOOTBALL COACH JOHN MAMMON.

When I traveled to preseason training camp for the Calgary Stampeders of the Canadian Football League (CFL) in Calgary, Alberta—the team for which I had played for two seasons many years earlier—I experienced both a shock and an odd reassurance kindled by excessive familiarity. I intended to merely reacclimate to my old surroundings and collect some preliminary data, particularly about how the world of professional football had changed since my career had ended 15 years earlier, and I was met with surprising warmth and support from my former high school football coach's son, Tom Higgins Jr., now head coach of the Stampeders and, hereafter, simply Coach Higgins. He greeted me as though no time had passed at all. He granted me unrestricted access to the team's training facilities, locker room, team management, and coaching staff, requiring only that in order to avoid an appearance of bias or endorsement of my project, I schedule interviews with athletes who volunteered to participate in my study through the team's marketing director. Then, Coach Higgins invited me to a private team barbeque cookout at a local amusement park so that I might meet the athletes and their families.

Within a week, something wonderful began to happen. As I shared my experiences, the athletes began to open up with their own stories. This initial set of semi-formal interviews proved so promising that I extended my trip. I remained in Calgary for six weeks conducting additional interviews and immersing myself in the daily lives of the athletes as a participant observer. Athletes began inviting me to their homes for dinner. They let me join in with them to play video games, attend private gatherings, bar hop, and hang out in VIP rooms at night clubs. I had encouraged my informants to choose the location of the interview, either for the sake of convenience or their privacy, and they invited me into their lives.

Overall, I conducted 35 initial and follow-up interviews in Calgary. I recorded audio and took handwritten notes, checking field notes against recordings so that I could ensure consistency and add nuance to mere words. Coding my notes and audio transcripts helped me find recurring themes and develop follow-up questions. One of my most prominent early findings was that I needed to learn more about athletes' personal life histories; that led to accumulating some 300 hours of documentation in Calgary, along with face-to-face interactions and field observations in California, Texas, New York, New Jersey, Florida, Connecticut, North Carolina, Wisconsin, and Maryland.

I had soon gathered some additional 50 hours of recorded phone calls (all recordings were made with the explicit consent of the interview subject, whether by phone or in person), dozens of unrecorded phone conversations (documented through field notes), nearly 1,000 hours of interviews, over 200 email exchanges, and countless hours of observations.

I conducted the majority of these interviews and observations with athletes, family members, coaches, sports agents, personal trainers, combine training facility owners, and other individuals involved in the world of amateur and professional football from January 2006 through the spring of 2015. I lived with athletes and their families, traveled with former NFL athletes to watch their sons play college football, and attended Super Bowl games. Each of these experiences developed my sensitivity to the subtle nuances of athletes' search for respect. Each encouraged me to reflect upon and analyze my own experiences, even as my sociological training forced skepticism and curiosity. I continued to log and review my written notes regularly—as I had in Calgary—after each interaction, using emerging findings to guide my next steps.

Throughout the study, I drew upon my sociological training and years of football experience to situate the subjects' words and actions within their cultural context. Observations of athletes' everyday lives allowed me to develop more reliable inferences than if I had depended solely on questionnaires. That is, the process of fieldwork allowed me to look beyond the narratives and perceptions presented by the athletes and to search for other factors influencing their behavior.[15] I researched details of each athlete's NFL background, gathered information for compiling his life history, and culled the data to find any apparent inconsistencies.

An important academic goal of my research is to reintroduce sport as a primary location for critical investigation. Since the 1990s, it has been pushed to the fringes of sociology; of the nearly 55 sections within the American Sociological Association, not one concentrates on sport as a subfield. Harry Edwards's assessment is an excellent summation of my own perspective: "American's traditional relegation of sports to the 'toy department' of human affairs neglects both its significance as an institution and the seriousness of its impact upon social relations and development."[16] As scholars and lay readers alike consider the empirical evidence presented in this book, I hope they will agree that sport can serve as a microcosm of the larger society.

By approaching sport as a site for social interaction, I believe anyone can explore racial and gender inequality, the roles and functions of institutions and organizations in individual lives, health and injury, aging, and people's experiences of work and labor. Through the prism of sport—alone and together—these topics can help any interested person gain a deeper understanding of our country and our world.

Professional football players are members of an elite club. Membership promises an increase in social capital, maybe even a status upgrade. I learned that the bonds between players and the lengths to which we athletes will go to impress, support, and make sacrifices for one another are two football themes that are both understudied and misunderstood.[17] For me, former NFL athletes Big Al and OD embodied the spirit of football brotherhood.

Over our 20-plus-year relationship, Big Al shared countless stories about the challenges of adjusting to life after the NFL. Reuniting with my old friend reminded me of the special bond I share with those few men who have dedicated their lives and bodies to a sport that is both unforgiving and nurturing, rigid yet artful, violent yet rewarding. Watching Big Al come face-to-face with the highs and lows that define the experience of life after an early exit from football helped me realize that few are equipped to successfully navigate the many obstacles that litter the road ahead of them. Though in the throes of financial uncertainty and personal upheaval, Big Al earned my undying love and admiration for generously sharing his kindness, ideas, and assistance with me and, in many ways, with the readers of this book.

OD, too, figured prominently in the creation of this book. OD's willingness to share his vulnerabilities deeply enriched this study, and, in turn, my life. He taught me to cope with and make sense of the challenging and often difficult life courses of athletes.

Finally, UC Berkeley Emeritus Professor Carol Stack, author of the ground-breaking works *All Our Kin* and *Call to Home*, figured prominently in guiding this project.[18] For two years, I sat across Carol's dining room table, breaking bread and discussing strategies for making my research accessible to the social scientific community, the football fan, and the general reader alike. Carol impressed upon me the central mission of ethnography—that those who use ethnography as a tool of discovery must seek to uncover the underlying patterns and processes that show how people live their lives. Through our weekly interactions, Carol challenged me to move beyond

the typical methods of qualitative research, in which quotes and anecdotes are used to put human faces to the numbers of quantitative studies or to represent macro-level discoveries. Countless conversations with Carol resulted in months of reexamining, reviewing, and immersing myself in my dialogues with athletes, coaches, wives, parents, athletic trainers, agents, and others. She pushed me to find patterns that reveal personal and group vulnerability in social life. In the same way that her books underline the importance of reflexivity in conducting research on the rural poor, Carol impressed upon me that I must continuously challenge my own assumptions about sports in America. The shape and tenor of this manuscript were molded time and again through Carol's encouragement, support, and crucial insistence that I dig deeper, that I seek the motivations and reasons behind the stories my subjects shared.

A career in the NFL is, in many ways, a privilege. Still, where we often expect meritocracy, ruled by the best athletes and coaches, race and class permeate the experiences of Black NFL athletes. The perceptions of minority and White participation in sports differ, specifically because of the historical meanings and codes attached to race. In this book, I construct a historical analysis of the Black NFL athlete that maps out the social conditions that make the game irresistible to legions of African American male youth who may view playing in the NFL as one of the few remaining viable paths toward upward economic mobility and social relevance.

Fortunate enough to have a career in football, these athletes may be unprepared to handle the conflicting demands of the social world they enter. By and large, they will be uniquely unprepared for life after the game. Many athletes left the sport before they were ready or willing. Their early retirement caused these individuals tremendous stress and consternation. Playing was their primary or "master status." What came next had, in some ways, never occurred to them. Having already made that rocky exit myself, I scoured my own memory and my data to try to determine an ideal path for those players experiencing involuntary role exit. How could social context be deployed to scaffold a player's journey through and out of the system? What concessions can be made, what instruction can be offered, what training can be given to facilitate success after an early exit from the game? In the end of this book, I offer a discussion focused on what can be done to protect boys and young men against the exploitation, manipulation, and objectification that fuel the

world of football alongside the many joys of a career, no matter how short, at the upper echelons of sport.

Social scientists have long sought to understand the lived experiences of individuals and groups. When I initiated this project as my doctoral dissertation, I wanted to help give a voice to the boys and men who play a challenging, fascinating, frequently dangerous sport. This book, a transformed and enlivened extension of that dissertation, is my attempt to educate sports enthusiasts and the curious bystander, but also, and perhaps more important, to arm parents, mentors, and coaches with knowledge to guide young athletes through the emotional and physical minefield known as American football.

ABBREVIATIONS

Academic Progress Rate (APR)
American Football Conference (AFC)
American Football League (AFL)
Arena Football (AFL)
Canadian Football League (CFL)
Canadian Total Sports Network (TSN)
Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE)
Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA)
Defined Gross Revenues (DGR)
Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN)
Football Bowl Series (FBS)
Gross Domestic Product (GDP)
Group Licensing Authorization (GLA)
James Madison University (JMU)
Louisiana State University (LSU)
Major League Baseball (MLB)
Major League Baseball Players Association (MLBPA)
Mild Traumatic Brain Injury (mTBI)
National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)
National Football Conference (NFC)
National Football League (NFL)
National Hockey League (NHL)
National Labor Relations Board (NLRB)
NFL Management Council (NFLMC)
NFL Players Association (NFLPA)
Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR)

Optional Training Activities (OTAs)
Organized Team Practice Activities (OTAs)
Personal Conduct Policy (PCP)
Predominantly White Institution (PWI)
Southeastern Conference (SEC)
Sports Broadcasting Act (SBA)
Sports-Industrial Complex (SIC)
United States Football League (USFL)
US Football League (USFL)

NOT FOR LONG

1

BROKE AND BROKEN

I WAS CHATTING with my buddy Steve K at a cocktail lounge in New York City's East Village—the kind of place young Wall Street types gather to enjoy overpriced martinis after a long day of trading—when I felt a tap on my shoulder. Suddenly I was engulfed in a bear hug that nearly lifted me off my barstool. "Robert Turner! Where you been, man?"

It was Big Al, a former tight end who played eight seasons in the National Football League (NFL). Fifteen years earlier, Big Al had encouraged the San Francisco 49ers to sign me to a free agent contract. He had served as my personal mentor and trainer for off-season workouts. Now, having released his bear hug around my back, Big Al explained that these days, to make ends meet, he was working as a bouncer at night and selling vitamins for a multi-level marketing company during the day. Four nights a week he would clock in at the bar around 10:00 PM to check IDs, bus beer bottles, and ensure young Wall Street hustlers remained orderly as they imbibed overpriced craft beers; at 4:00 AM, he would dash from the lower eastside of Manhattan to Penn Station and catch a train back to New Jersey. Since he was on duty when we ran into each other, we agreed to have lunch later in the week.

Though he was born in Drew, Mississippi, Big Al grew up just across the river from Ferguson, Missouri, in the hardscrabble world of East St. Louis, Illinois,[1] where the per capita income in 2013 was $11,618.[2] Big Al is no stranger to hard times. He is the kind of guy who looks for positive solutions to problems instead of dwelling on the negative. It seems like he's always busy organizing for this or that good cause, gathering other former athletes to help draw a crowd for charity and hopefully earn a little pocket change in the process.

Big Al was the Kansas City Chiefs' team representative for the NFL Players Association (NFLPA) during the season leading up to the 1982 strike. His was the deciding vote as to whether the team would enter the field on

that Sunday afternoon in mid-September. In the weeks leading up to that game, Big Al received threats from across the league: if he decided to support the strike various league officials promised it would be the end of his NFL career.[3] Ultimately, he elected to support the strike because he believed all players needed severance pay, insurance, a pension, and a wage scale.[4] He was released by the Chiefs at the end of the season and then signed by the Philadelphia Eagles, where he played 10 games in 1983. He started the 1984 season (his last) for the San Diego Chargers, and then moved over to Bill Walsh's San Francisco 49ers. They won the Super Bowl that year, and then it was over. Just like that.

In 2009, *Sports Illustrated*[5] reported that within two years of retirement, 78% of all NFL athletes are bankrupt or in financial distress as a result of joblessness or divorce; a working paper released by the National Bureau of Economic Research reports that nearly 16% of NFL players drafted between 1996 and 2003 declared bankruptcy within 12 years of retirement.[6] Often while presenting these and other findings from my research at conferences and on university campuses, people ask two questions: How can sports professionals who earn so much money during their careers "go broke?" Why isn't the NFL doing more to help these former athletes? These questions raise important concerns that are addressed throughout this book.

Watching Big Al come face-to-face with the highs and lows that define life after football helped me realize that the road traveled by current and former athletes isn't optional or, for anyone other than the athlete himself, unexpected. But it is one for which players, released from the game that has occupied their bodies and minds since grade school or early adolescence, are often wholly unprepared. No wonder it seemed so many were faltering and failing along that same, well-traveled road.

At lunch after that fateful reunion, Big Al filled me in on the years since we'd last met. There had been personal challenges: his wife struggled with health issues that prevented her from working, his youngest daughter dropped out of college and moved back home to raise her baby, and each of his four other children was having trouble making ends meet. As the proud African American patriarch, Big Al wouldn't say that he was struggling financially and would never let on that life after the NFL had not turned out as expected. After all, it goes against the grain of the NFL's hyper-masculine culture and seemingly against the nature of many NFL athletes to show stress, ask for help, or