‘Big Game’ by Mark Leibovich: Scathing hit on football by a lifelong fan

by Glenn C. Altschuler, For The Inquirer, Posted: October 12, 2018

Big Game
The NFL in Dangerous Times
By Mark Leibovich
Penguin Press. 400 pp. $28

Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler

Football "unites people," NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell often declares. At a time in which social, communal, and family institutions are relatively weak, football gives people around the country "a chance to come together."

Football is, indeed, our national pastime. The NFL is also a financial juggernaut, on track to generate $25 billion in gross revenue by 2027.

Amid "peak football" euphoria, Mark Leibovich suggests, the sport also feels "exhausted and unsettled." It's now clear that concussions cause brain damage. Owners, fans, and politicians disagree about whether players should be encouraged, permitted, or prohibited from protesting injustice by taking a knee during the playing of the national anthem.

In Big Game, Leibovich, the chief national correspondent of the New York Times Magazine and the author of This Town, draws on interviews with owners and players to look at the NFL at a
Leibovich's style is self-referential and sardonic. He acknowledges that, having survived cheating scandals, a murder trial, and lots of arrogant behavior, his loyalty to the New England Patriots is "pretty much unconditional." He risks annoying readers by spending an inordinate amount of time discussing his team, Tom Brady, and "Deflategate."

That said, Leibovich asks the right question — "What to make of this beautiful s- show of a league." He provides answers while inhabiting "true believer" and "cataclysm" camps.

*Big Game* presents scathing portraits of spoiled, self-absorbed septuagenarian and octogenarian NFL owners and their petty rivalries. But fans are self-absorbed to an epic degree as well. The recent relocation of three franchises stimulates Leibovich to indict greedy owners, but also to wonder whether selfishness is so embedded in the fan experience that "one city's heartbeat can so easily be shrunk down into another's Jumbotron experience" — and then remind himself (and us) that "no one buys tickets to watch a morality play."

The book is especially powerful and poignant when Leibovich addresses concussions. He quotes the "billionaire brain fart" comments by owners on health and safety issues. He acknowledges that, along with many fans, he has prayed that concussion protocols don't result in the removal of players on his team at pivotal moments in the game. He takes us to the induction ceremonies at the Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, where once-great players gather, many of them providing palpable evidence of their "CTE-addled brains." At one such gathering, the daughter of linebacker Junior Seau wasn't permitted to discuss her father's head trauma, suicide, or the wrongful-death lawsuit her family filed against the NFL.

*Big Game* is a cliffhanger. In the NFL, as in life, Leibovich concludes, the eternal question — how much longer? — touches everything. "Clock management," he reminds us, "is a lie."

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