

I Love Football

By Jim Balentine

I love football. I've always loved football, as long as I can remember. My family was a football family, but neither of my parents was ever a professional. They just loved it, like me. We used to play it on long trips, and one of my earliest memories is of wondering how you could learn to coordinate what you did with what everybody else did, right on the spur of the moment, and make it work.

I was the second boy of four, and when my older brother Tony was twelve, he got to pick what position he wanted to play in junior high school, and he got pretty good pretty quick. His best friend Mike was really good, and they would always talk about wanting to be professional football players when they got older.

So it was obvious to me that when I got to be twelve, I would get to pick what position I wanted to play too. I wasn't sure, so I went with one that was different from Tony's, and as soon as I started, I practiced a lot. At first, in junior high, I was second best; my friend Scott was a year older than me and we would sometimes play football, just the two of us, and I loved the way the plays worked one after the other, and the way different positions did different things, and when it all worked right, it was like nothing else I could even imagine. I was scared the first time the whole team played in front of everybody; Mom and Dad were there, Tony, and I felt like everybody was looking right at me. I never got to carry the ball, but I was part of the team, and I just loved it.

School scared me. For the first three or four grades, I would throw up the first day of school. I don't know why. I was just nervous, I guess. But from junior high on, being a member of the football team was what I looked forward to, and I thought I was pretty good at it. Before the ninth grade, my family moved to Japan, and I went to an American school near Tachikawa. Even though the football team was small, they still had one, and I got to be the starter for my position. Did I tell you what position it was? I was a tight end. Not a prominent part, not likely to ever carry the ball or make a touchdown, but always an important position. I thought I was good at it, because I understood it intuitively. I knew what made the plays work, the choreography, the tempo, the pace, the relationship between the positions, and how the opposing teams interacted to make the final score what it was. And I knew how to notate it on the diagrams.

It did seem funny to me that lots of the kids on the team didn't understand that, and they thought that the most important part was making the touchdown, or even sillier, getting more points than the other team. They just didn't understand that teamwork and the grace of every move was really what was important. Some of them even thought that they were supposed to hurt you with their moves, or mess up the play and do something different just so they could make a touchdown.

I thought I was good, but I did notice that there were others who were faster, or bigger, and got to carry the ball more even though they were often the ones who didn't understand the game, and just wanted to make points. And in high school, girls were important too, and I noticed that they didn't care as much about the football players as they did about the big bad band members. I don't know why. I thought the band guys were all jerks, and they all thought they were the greatest gift to

everybody, and were always the popular ones. I didn't understand it, but I got used to it, and when I was a junior, my last year in high school, I decided to join the band too, probably because my best friend, Joe, did both football and band. He was good at both, and good looking, and a great student in everything, and the only thing I thought I was better at was football, because I was first and he was second chair tight end. I wasn't really good enough to be in the first band, so I was in the junior varsity band. I never did get to play a solo, but I kind of felt like it made me better than just being a football player.

Before my senior year in high school we moved again, and I went to a bigger school, in the midwest. I wasn't nearly good enough to be in the band, but I did play football. I was second, because there was this one guy, Darryl, who really was good. Even though I made all-state that year, so did he, and a girl who played the same position, Linda, made all-state, and a few others who played other positions; Allen, and John, and Tracey, were all pretty good football players. So I still thought I was pretty good, and I knew I understood the game. I had always loved the theory of the game, and I loved writing the diagrams, and figuring out new plays. Even as a little kid I liked making up new plays, but I never wrote them down until I was in high school. The football team even did some of the plays I made up.

I still thought that everybody did that; made up plays, and could write them down, and understood the game like I did, but I found out that it wasn't true. Most people who played football just followed the diagrams, and made touchdowns, and liked it when their team would have the highest score at the end.

I still didn't really think about going to school to study football, or getting a degree in it, or being a professional. I didn't take any lessons, and I was good enough to be second tight end, so I still thought I was pretty good.

When I went to college, I was going to be an engineer, and be in Air Force ROTC, and be a military man like my Dad. I still loved football, so I took classes in engineering and math, and played football. But at UT I was playing in the Longhorn Sandlot Football team, and one of the graduate football students was leading the team. He would write diagrams and make up plays and games, and I wanted to be like him. I started writing more plays and getting the football team to try them out. We would use my plays in games, and I thought if they were getting used by the team, I must be pretty good at it. My plays were really different, and the players would run in funny directions and sometimes fall down at strange spots, but somehow there were some touchdowns made, and everybody was very encouraging about how good they thought my plays were. I finally decided I couldn't live without football being my career, and I changed majors to be a football diagram composer.

Here's the thing: in the 1960's, football was in a weird kind of place, or at least in colleges. A lot of people called it "academic football" and even though the spectators hated it, and no one would come watch it, if we wrote any conventional plays, and just made touchdowns, other academic football teams, especially the ones who wrote all these strange plays, would laugh and call it old fashioned... nobody was writing conventional football plays anymore. The weirder the play, the better the academic diagrammers liked it. Very often we didn't even use a ball, and people had to

run in all directions at the same time. The players didn't all like it because it was really hard to do, and you almost never got to carry the ball, if there was one, but the important thing was, it was *new*.

But I felt like I really understood what football was all about... the movements of the body, the new things you could make a team do, and I really knew how to write down these things. I couldn't really do them very well, but I could do them ok, and since I wasn't writing conventional plays, I could get away with anything and make people think I was really good... as long as it was pretty weird. So when I majored in football, I knew enough about the theory and how to write diagrams that I skipped over the beginning courses. I thought I already knew all that.

This graduate student in football that I wanted to be like was cool. He not only knew how to write some really new, weird plays, but he could also do the conventional ones, and was also a good player. He was especially good at a kind of football that wasn't very well accepted in the academy yet, sort of a back yard, home grown football, where you could make up plays as you went along, improvising the play as long as you were in the middle of the field. Lots of black guys played this kind of football, and that's one of the reasons white conventional football players didn't like it. You still made touchdowns, and the plays were kind of conventional, but the way you ran the plays wasn't quite like the diagram, and lots of times they didn't even use diagrams. You could kind of weave in and out of the lines in the diagram, and run with a kind of a lopsided gait that felt good to do. So he got me started doing that, and I started playing professionally, doing that style of football.

After a while, I ended up coming back to school, and got several degrees in football, even a DFA... a Doctor of Football Arts. Since I had been a professional, there were lots of courses that I didn't take, and I thought I already knew it. After all, I was a professional... that meant I was pretty good, right? I had played tight end all this time, but I also started playing other positions, and as long as I could make it through the plays in that position, I figured I was pretty good at those positions too. I was pretty naïve, as it turns out.

Now with a DFA, I could teach football. I understood it; how the moves worked, that the point of the game was to be in control, and make your moves work with the other team members' moves, and how many points were scored wasn't so important, and who won or lost wasn't important. It was all about the feeling of playing the game that was important. Not everybody understood this, and I hoped that I could change the meaning of football for these people.

I slowly found out that *teaching* football wasn't like playing or writing it. It was a different game, with different rules. It was kind of like football, except that just making the plays correctly wasn't enough, and maybe not even important at all. It was much more important that everybody *know*, or at least *think* that you were making the plays, and a whole support network of ways to make people think that was already in place. Places to publish your diagrams, conferences to discuss diagrams in other languages, whole football teams dedicated to playing these weird plays... all of that was designed to make you successful as a teacher, whether anyone came to watch the games or not. As a matter of fact, if people *wanted* to watch your games, it was considered less important to the academy. Nobody told me that, and even though some of the football that I wrote during those years was pretty good, nobody knew it, and I never made any touchdowns or won a game, and I was thrown out of the game for not playing it right.

So I finally said to hell with it, and opened a football store. I thought that there were probably enough people that loved football that I could sell the supporting equipment, and still have time to play football and even write a few plays of my own. After all, I knew I *understood* football better than other people, especially ones who were very successful at it as teachers or players or writers. They still seemed to think that scoring touchdowns and getting more points than the other team was what it was all about. They even seemed to think that it was important to keep the other team from making points, just so they could come out ahead with fewer points. They just had a warped sense of what the game was all about.

But, after just a few years, I found that selling things was hard work, and lots of hours, and was not about football at all. I wanted to be around football, I wanted to play football, I wanted to write football and choreograph games. So I sold my store and went back to teaching. I thought that maybe I could score some touchdowns and win a few games, and I did, enough to get promoted and get back into the game, at least the academic game. I wanted to be successful, I wanted to make a difference in people's lives with my football plays, and I wanted to make the world a better place.

So I'm nearing the end of a very mediocre career in academic football. I scored a few touchdowns, and won a game or two, and I am beginning to figure out that maybe I was wrong about what football is all about. Those who made touchdowns, and played the game conventionally seem to win, and it may not really make any difference how the game is played unless you win. I know that how you play the game is absolutely irrelevant if nobody sees those games. I guess I'll always wonder if I could have won too, if I'd not ever thought I was good at it.

I remember the scene in the movie *Amadeus*, where Salieri is incensed at God for allowing him the luxury of understanding football, of feeling its power and majesty, but not allowing him the ability to create it. Salieri was wrong; God didn't allow him to do either.

I love football. I wish I could have played it better.