

LEVELED Book • X

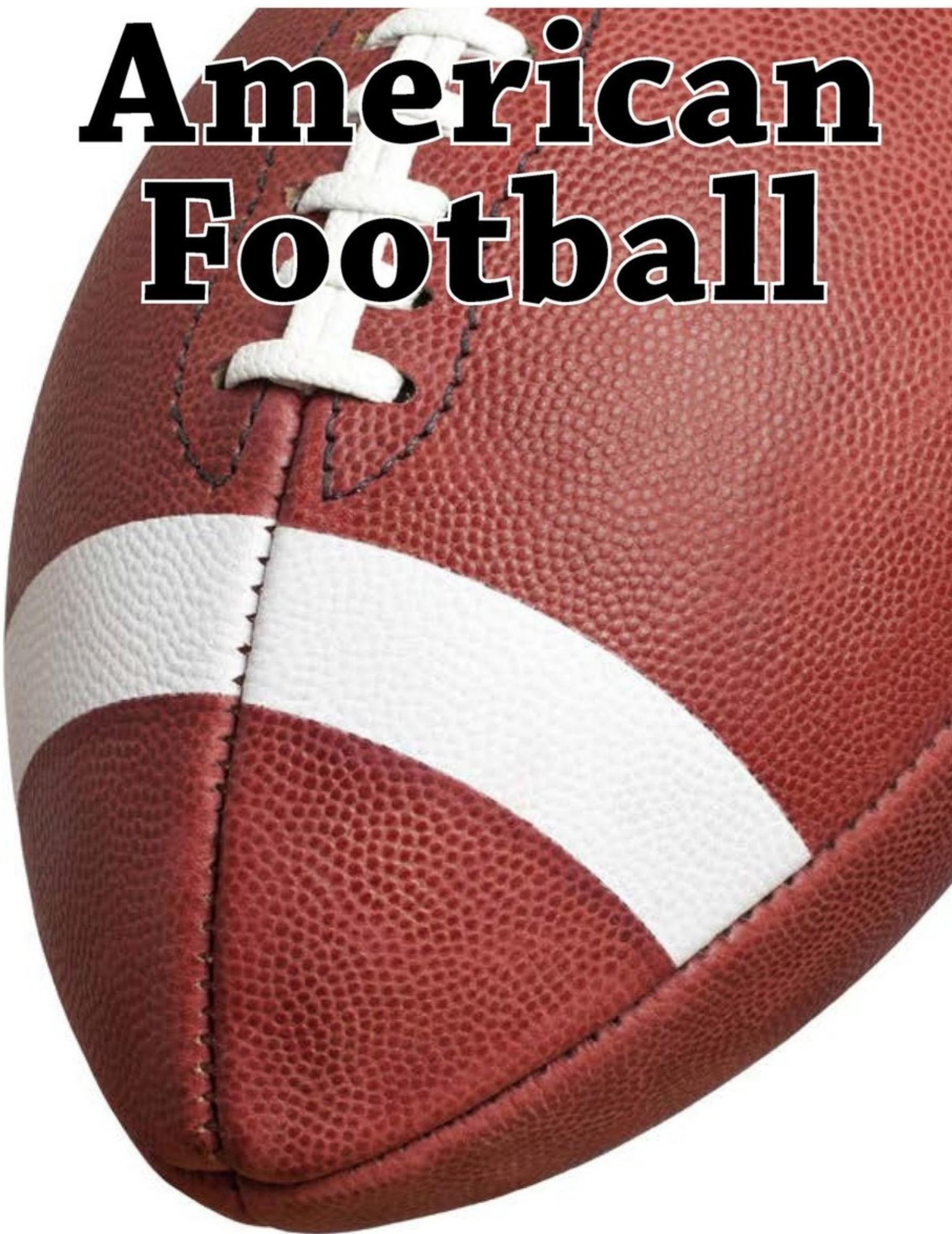
American Football



Written by Kira Freed

www.readinga-z.com

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Focus Question

What makes American football the most popular sport in the United States?

Words to Know

advocated
amateur
dominates
end zone
offensive line
platoon

possession
specialized
spectators
strategies
ultimate
vying

Front cover: A New Orleans Saints player (black and gold) makes a catch as the Philadelphia Eagles (green and white) try to block it in 2009.

Back cover: Tampa Bay and San Francisco compete at Raymond James Stadium in Tampa, Florida.

Page 3: Kansas City Chiefs defense (red) apply pressure to the San Diego Chargers quarterback (blue), who throws the ball to avoid being tackled.

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Spectacular Sports
Level X Leveled Book
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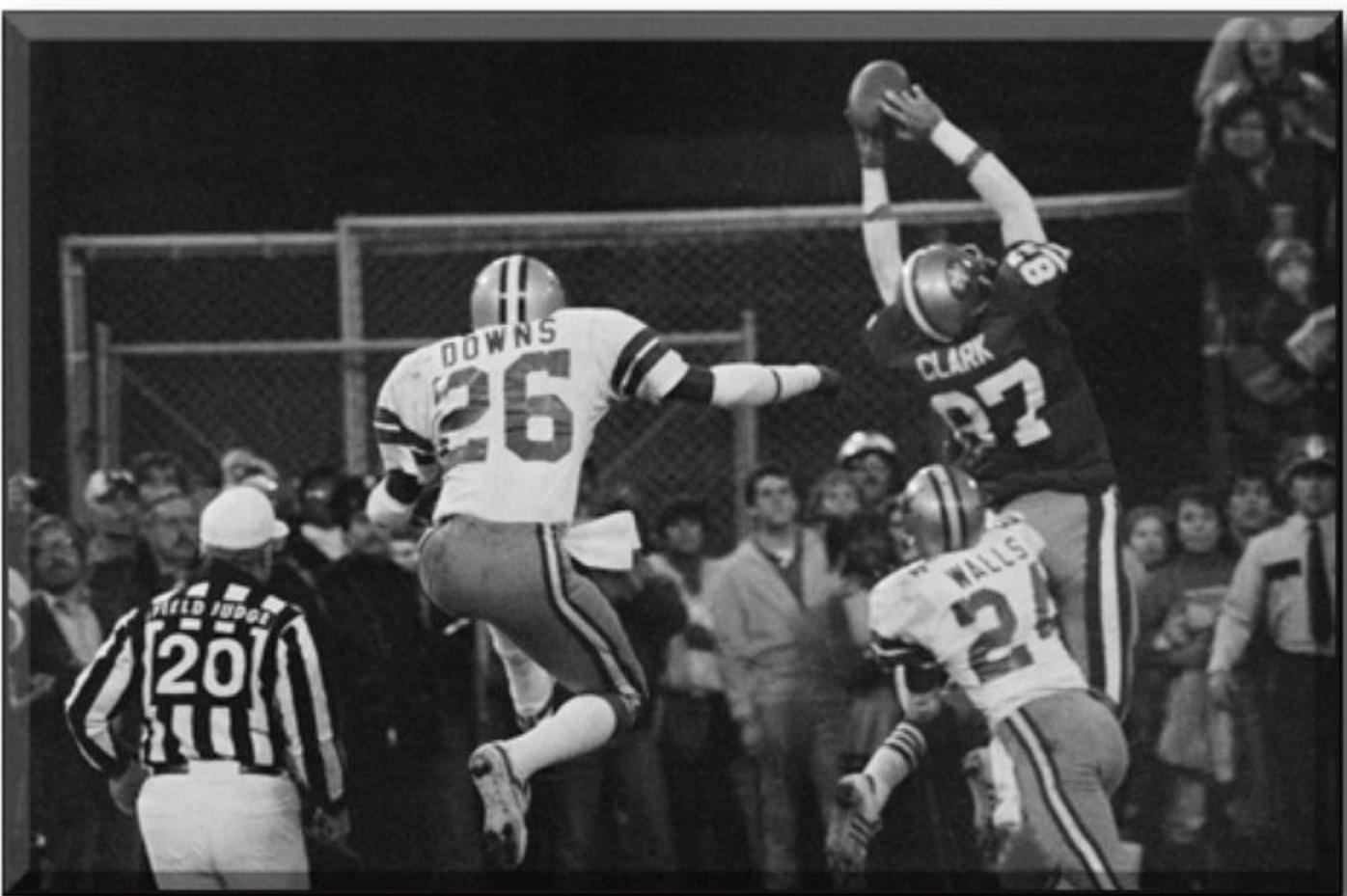
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Dwight Clark makes a superhuman catch for the San Francisco 49ers in one of the all-time great moments in American football history.

The Catch

The date is January 10, 1982. The Dallas Cowboys and the San Francisco 49ers are playing in the National Football Conference (NFC) Championship Game, vying for a spot in the Super Bowl, American football's **ultimate** game. The 49ers are down 27-21 with fifty-eight seconds left.

Quarterback Joe Montana sends the ball high in the air toward the back of the **end zone**. Teammate Dwight Clark leaps well above the defenders and grabs it. Not only do the 49ers win the game, but they go on to win the Super Bowl championship that year, along with three additional championships over the next eight years.

Thrilling last-second moments like this are why thousands of people pack stadiums and millions of fans are glued to their televisions during football season. Football is a spectacular game with fierce competitors and devoted fans.

America's Number One Sport

American football is the most popular sport in the United States, and it's been at the top of the list for about thirty years.

Professional and collegiate football are both extremely popular. The National Football League (NFL) **dominates** the world of pro football, with per-game attendance averaging around seventy thousand. The NFL's playoff season leads up to the Super Bowl, the championship game and one of the biggest sporting events in the world. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) governs college football, which ranks third in popularity in the United States behind NFL football and Major League Baseball.

Women play football mainly at semi-professional and **amateur** levels. The sport's popularity among young people is declining because the game is widely considered too rough for children under fourteen.

The Denver Broncos and the St. Louis Rams play to a sold-out crowd at Mile High Stadium.



Nations of the International Federation of American Football



Football Around the World

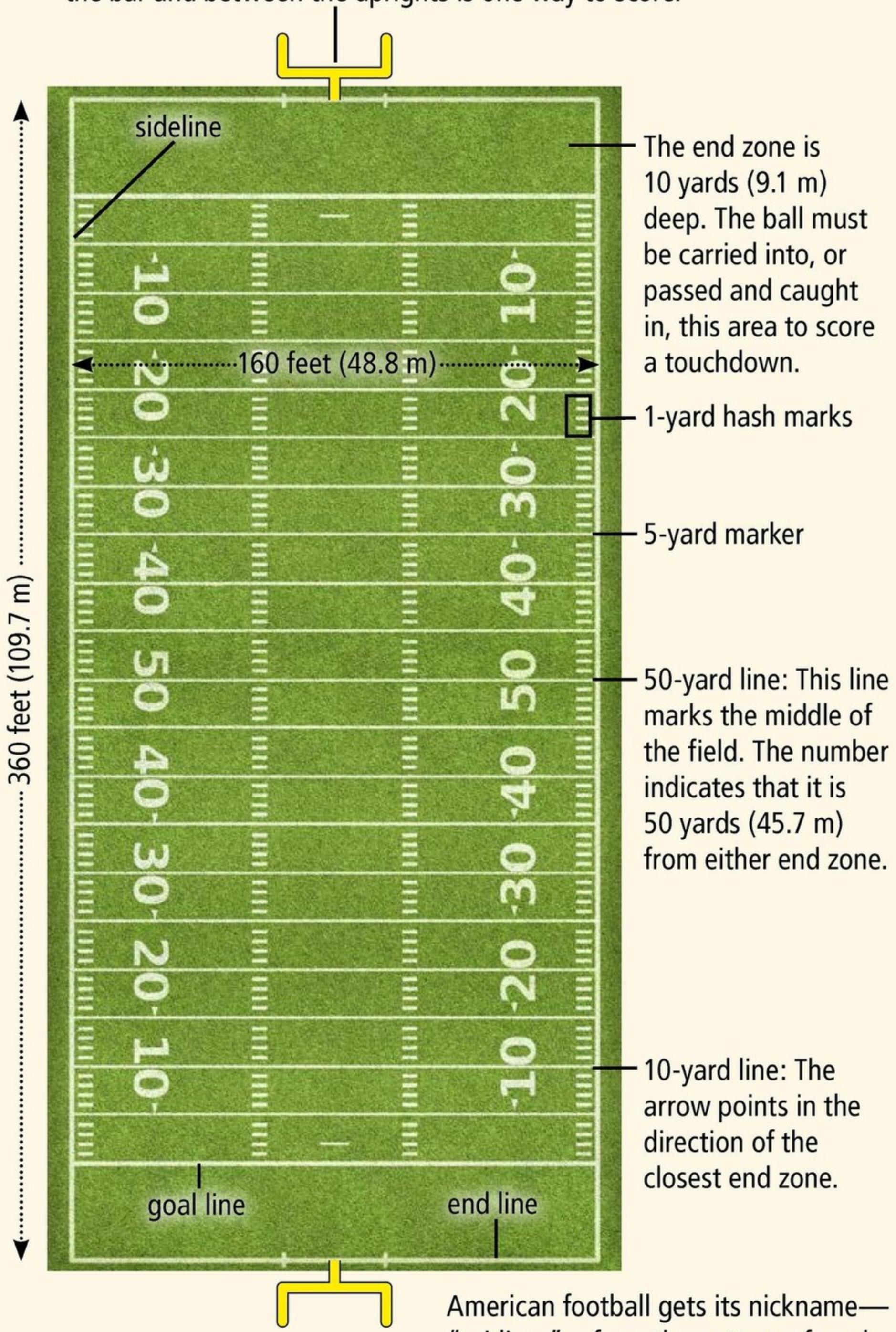
American football is played in many countries around the world. Although it has not yet achieved the global popularity of some other sports, interest in the game is growing. The International Federation of American Football (IFAF) has more than seventy member nations, with representation on six continents.

Canada has had its own version of football since the late 1800s. Canadian football is similar to American football, with differences in field size, number of players, and some rules.

Although most people associate football with outdoor fields, the game can also be played indoors. An indoor version called *arena football* was developed in the 1980s. The rules, which accommodate a smaller playing field, result in a faster-paced game.

American Football Field

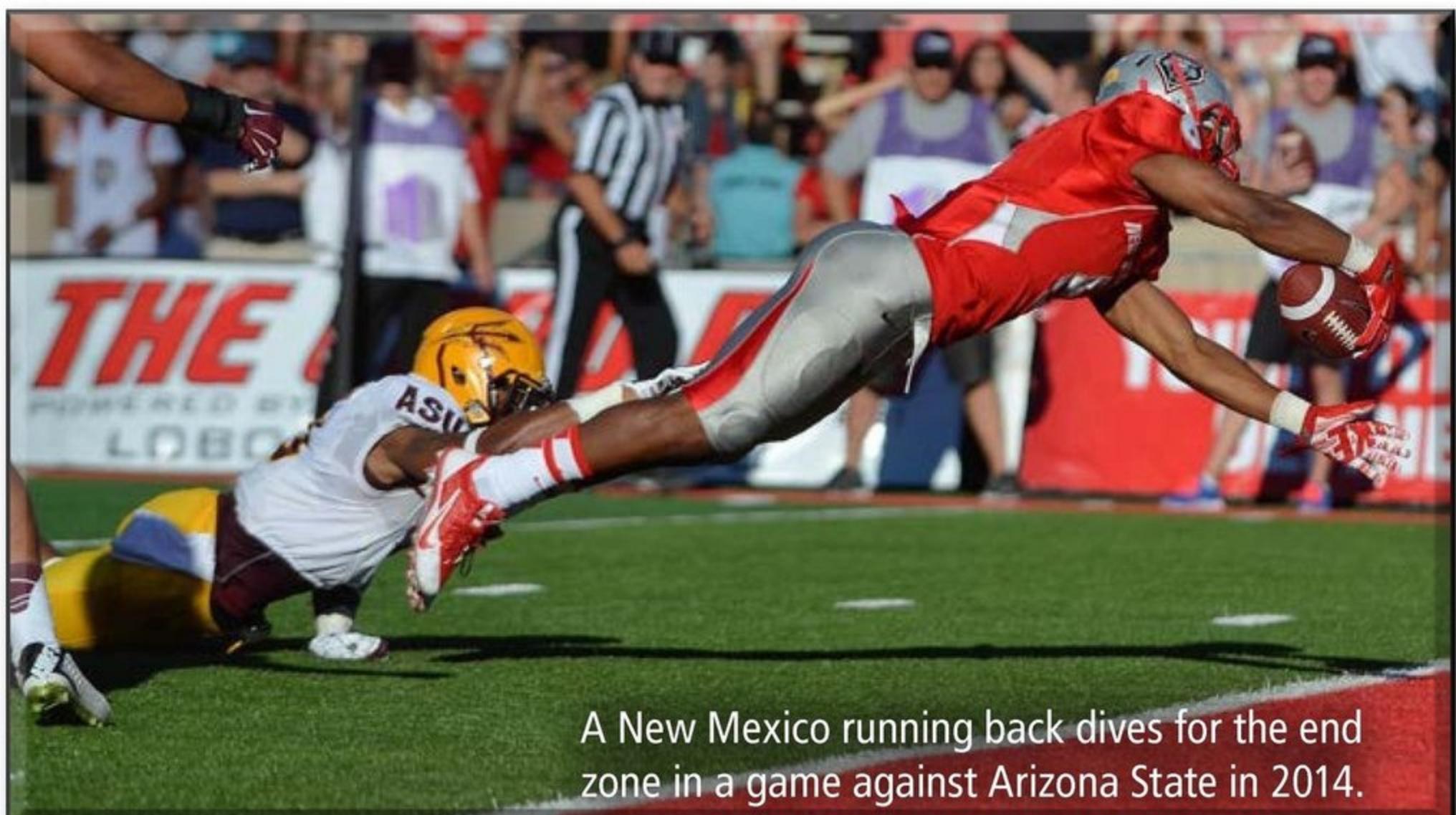
The goalpost is 18.5 feet (5.6 m) across and 10 feet (3 m) tall in college and pro football. Kicking the ball above the bar and between the uprights is one way to score.



Playing the Game

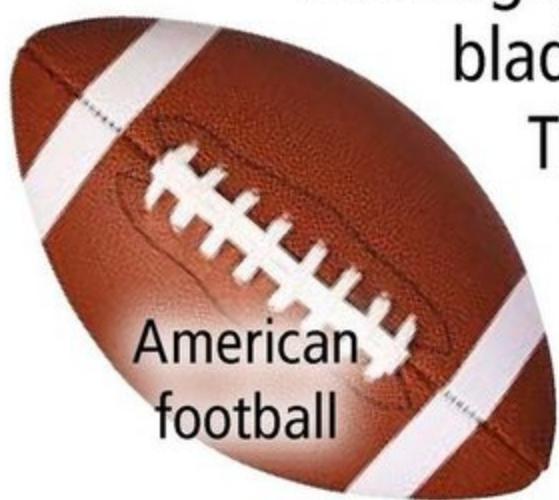
During a football game, two teams attempt to move the ball toward, and eventually into, their opponent's end zone to score touchdowns. Players move the ball in one of two ways: by running with it or by passing (throwing) the ball to a teammate who is closer to the end zone. If the pass is completed—that is, if the teammate catches the ball—that player may then try to advance the ball farther. However, if the pass is intercepted—caught by an opposing player—that team gains **possession** of the ball. Play stops when there is an incomplete pass—if no one catches the ball and it falls to the ground.

Each team has an **offensive line**, or **platoon**, whose job is to try to score, and a defensive platoon that tries to keep the other team from scoring.



A New Mexico running back dives for the end zone in a game against Arizona State in 2014.

Pigskin



Earliest American footballs were probably oval rugby balls made of inflated pig bladders stuffed into pig hide casings.



The balls were difficult to throw. Over time, the bladder was eliminated and the shape streamlined. Today's cowhide footballs are called *pigskins* by some people.

One platoon from each team is on the field at any given time, depending on which team has control of the ball. Each platoon has eleven players.

Teams can score in several ways. A touchdown is worth six points and is most often scored by the offensive team running or passing the ball into the opponent's end zone. However, the defense can also score a touchdown—by recovering a fumble (a ball that an opponent loses control of) or by intercepting the ball and getting it to the opposing end zone. After a touchdown, the scoring team can score one extra point by kicking the ball through the goalposts, or two extra points by running or passing the ball to the end zone.

A third way to score is a field goal (worth three points), which involves kicking the ball between the goalposts. A final way to score is if a ball carrier is tackled in his or her own end zone, which is called a *safety*. In that case, the defensive team is awarded two points.



The game begins with a kickoff to the offensive team. That team moves the ball toward the opponent's end zone in stages, each of which has a minimum of 10 yards (9.1 m). The offensive team has four chances—called *downs*—to either gain those 10 yards or cross the goal line and score. As long as the offensive team gains at least 10 yards within those four downs, it keeps possession of the ball and earns another first down and the opportunity to gain another 10 yards. Each play begins at the line of scrimmage—an imaginary line across the field whose location is based on where the previous play ended plus any penalty yards that have been assessed. Teams have many **specialized** plays, or plans of action, for moving the ball down the field. If the offensive team fails to advance the ball 10 yards within the four downs, it surrenders possession of the ball.

The defensive team uses two main **strategies** to stop the offensive team from scoring. Defensive players try to tackle the ball carrier, and they attempt to force fumbles and interceptions to gain possession of the ball. In order for a player to be tackled, one or both knees must touch the ground, which ends the play. Running out of bounds also ends the play.

In both professional and college football games, actual playing time lasts for sixty minutes,

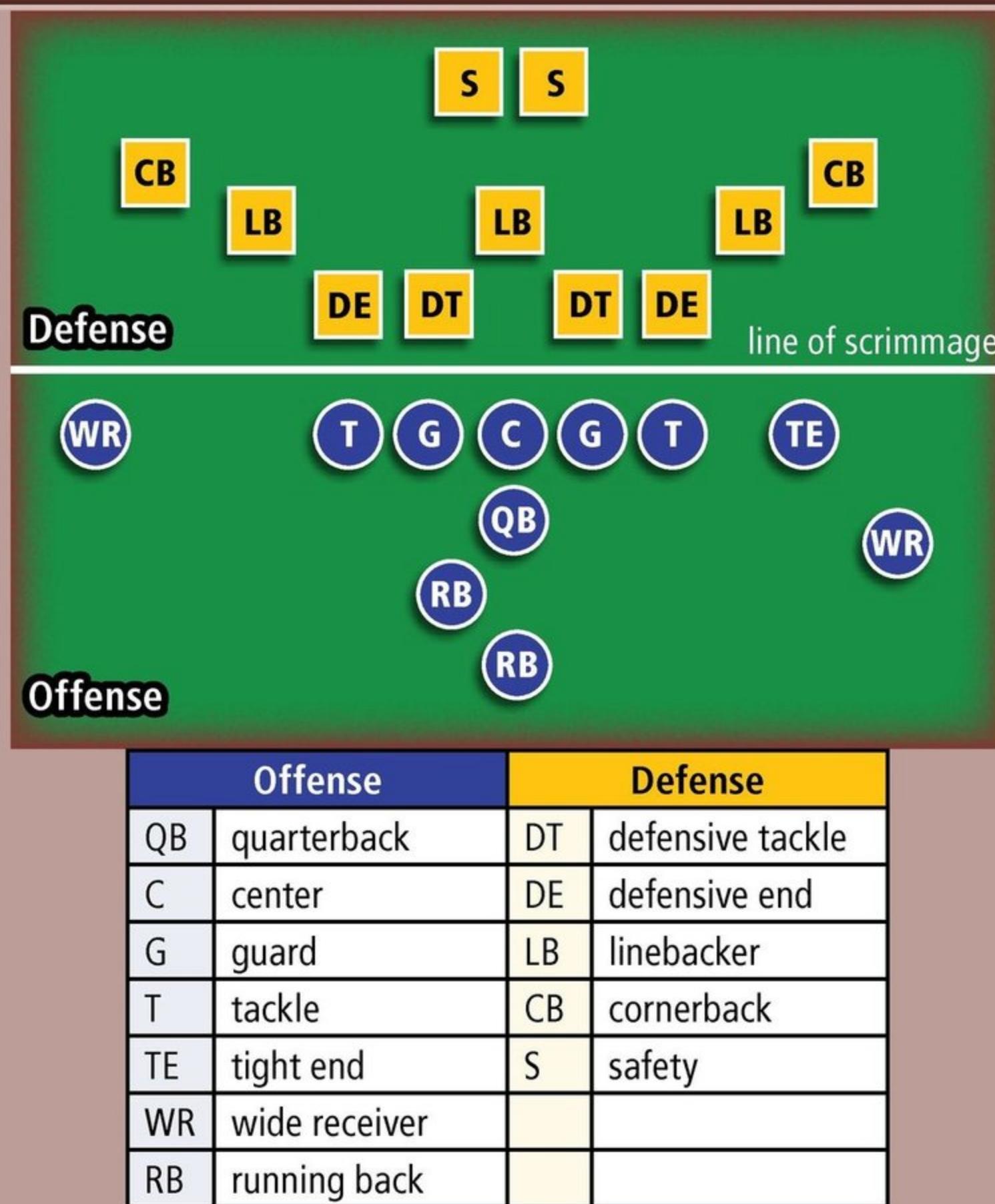
which is broken into two halves and four quarters. (The playing time of high school games is shorter—forty-eight minutes.) If the score is tied at the end of the sixty minutes, a fifteen-minute overtime period is added. An actual football game usually lasts around three hours; the additional time is taken up by stoppages when a player goes out of bounds, a penalty is called, or a pass is incomplete.

Football Gear



Protective pads under players' uniforms help prevent injuries.

Playing Positions



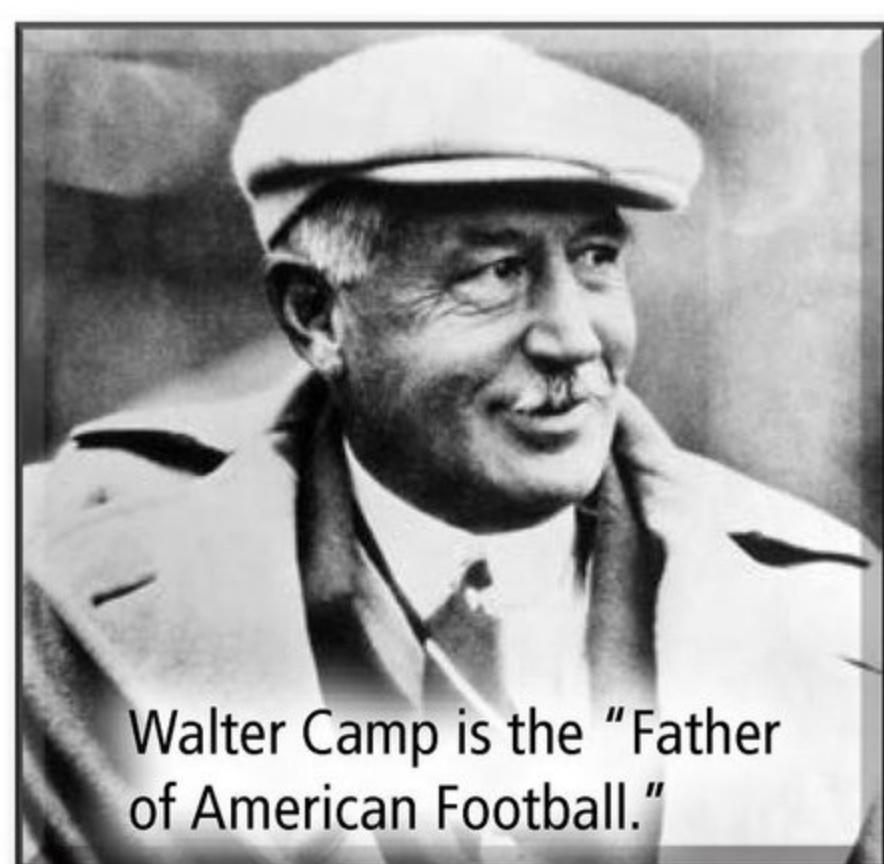
Football players have specialized positions. The quarterback—the leader of the offensive team—calls the play while the team is in a huddle. Then, when the team lines up, the center passes the ball backward between his legs to the quarterback. This maneuver is called *the snap* or *hiking the ball*. The quarterback then either runs with the ball, passes it, or hands it off. The diagram on this page shows offensive and defensive positions. A football game also has a referee and six other officials who make sure the rules of the game are followed.

The Birth of American Football

American football began in the late nineteenth century at several North American universities. The game was related to two English games: soccer (otherwise known as *association football*) and rugby (short for *rugby football*), which is somewhat similar to soccer but played with hands as well as feet. Two New Jersey universities—Princeton (then called the College of New Jersey) and Rutgers—played a soccer-like game that other northeastern universities also started to play. However, Harvard University preferred a game that was more like rugby, and that style spread to Yale University and beyond.

Walter Camp, a Yale student from 1876 to 1881, is considered the “Father of American Football.” He was Yale’s team captain and an important member of the Intercollegiate Football Association. Camp **advocated** rule changes that eventually transformed the game into today’s American football.

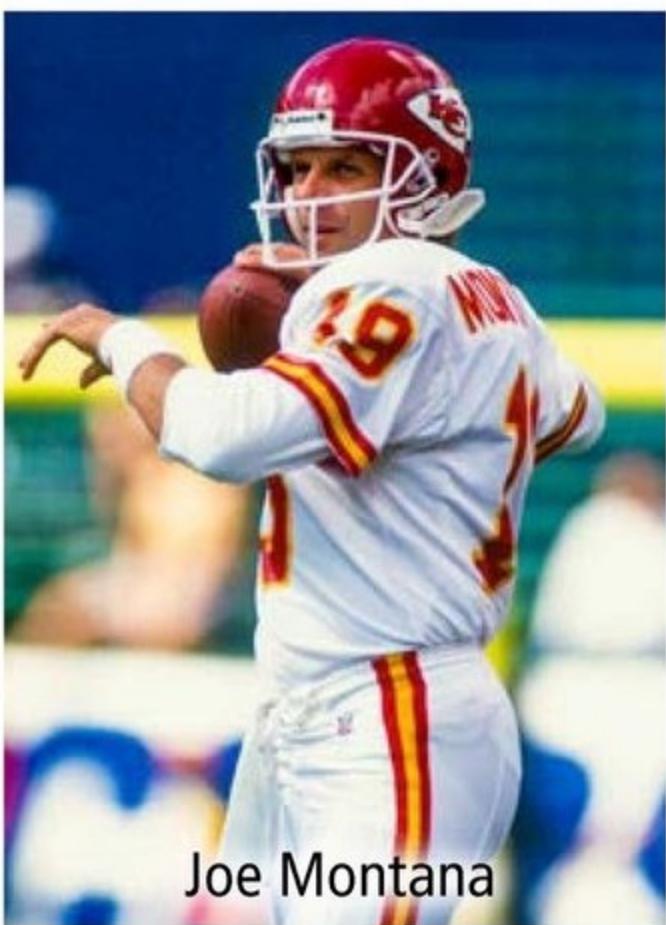
At first, the same players on a team played both offense and defense. The two-platoon system began in the 1940s and later became the standard.



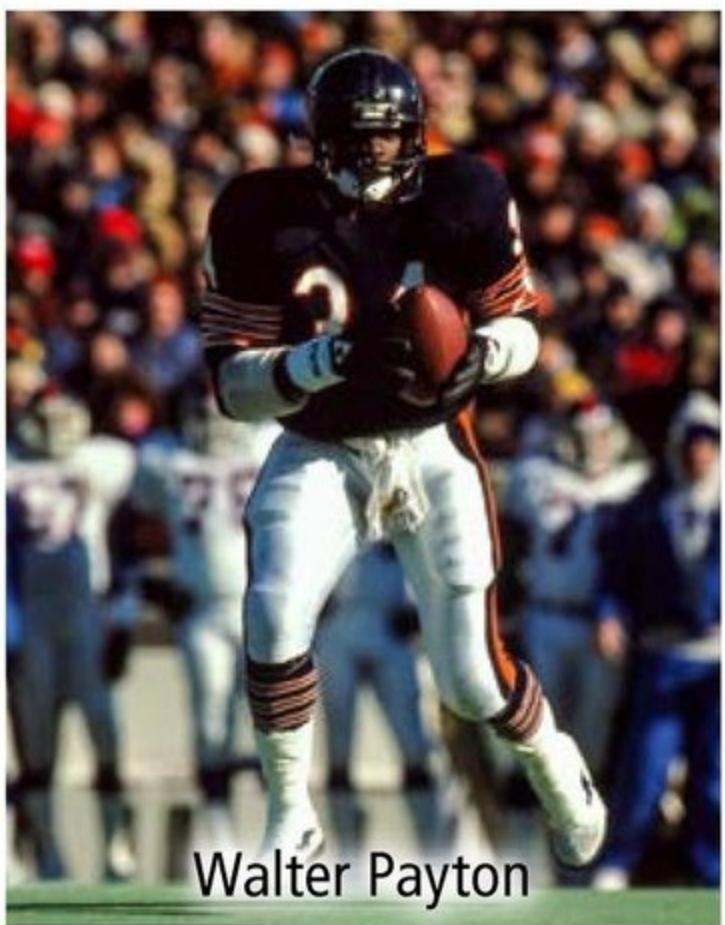
Walter Camp is the “Father of American Football.”



Jerry Rice



Joe Montana



Walter Payton

Football Legends

Jerry Rice, the best wide receiver in football history, played for twenty seasons starting in 1985. He won three Super Bowls playing for the San Francisco 49ers and set close to forty NFL records.

Joe Montana, possibly football's most gifted quarterback ever, began his NFL career in 1979 with the 49ers. When Jerry Rice joined the team in 1985, the pair made the 49ers a dominant force in the NFL for several years. Montana led the 49ers to four Super Bowl wins and retired after the 1994 season with numerous playoff records.

Running back Walter Payton of the Chicago Bears played for thirteen seasons beginning in 1975. Chosen to play in nine Pro Bowl all-star games, Payton helped his team win the 1986 Super Bowl. At one time, he held NFL records for most career touchdowns, rushing yards, and many other categories.

Football Fans

There are many ways for students to play football. Communities or schools often have youth leagues where students compete in tackle football. There are also other forms of the game, such as touch football and flag football, that aren't as physically rough as tackle football.

Many fans of the sport would rather remain **spectators**. Football fans have many ways of showing their love of the game. Some bundle up and endure below-freezing temperatures to watch their team play. Others dress in outrageous clothes or paint their faces in their team's colors. Fans may also wear items that match their team's theme, such as a cowboy hat for the Dallas Cowboys or a yellow beak and feathery red crest for the Arizona Cardinals. Whether you're a fan or a player, this beloved American sport offers great fun and plenty of excitement for everyone.



Football fans show their dedication to their favorite team.

Glossary

advocated (<i>v.</i>)	supported or recommended (p. 13)
amateur (<i>adj.</i>)	not professional; done as a hobby (p. 5)
dominates (<i>v.</i>)	has continuing power or a commanding presence over something or someone (p. 5)
end zone (<i>n.</i>)	the area at the end of an American football field between the goal line and the end line (p. 4)
offensive line (<i>n.</i>)	part of a football team that blocks the defense so the ball carrier can score (p. 8)
platoon (<i>n.</i>)	a group of players on a team who work together for a specific purpose, such as offense or defense in American football (p. 8)
possession (<i>n.</i>)	control or ownership of something (p. 8)
specialized (<i>adj.</i>)	created, designed, and made to perform a certain task (p. 10)
spectators (<i>n.</i>)	people who watch an event without taking part (p. 15)
strategies (<i>n.</i>)	careful plans for solving problems or achieving goals (p. 11)
ultimate (<i>adj.</i>)	the best or greatest; coming or taking place at the end (p. 4)
vying (<i>v.</i>)	competing (p. 4)

American Football

A Reading A-Z Level X Leveled Book

Word Count: 1,545

Connections

Writing

Do you believe American football is too rough for children under age fourteen?

Why or why not? Write a persuasive essay using information from the book to support your answer.

Math

Research the Super Bowl winners from the beginning of the competition to today. Graph the results to determine which team has won the most Super Bowls. What conclusions can you draw about the team on the basis of your graph? Share your conclusions.



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