

2008

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Recommended Citation

Barbeau, Pierre-Yves. "A French Trying to Understand American Football." (2008). https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/best_student_essays/2

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A French Trying to Understand American Football

By Pierre-Yves Barbeau

Editor's note:

Most students who attend UNM have grown up with American culture, so the perspective of someone to whom American culture is fresh can be both entertaining and enlightening. It affirms the value of a part of our university, a part whose usage of English is at times unique, and whose adventures here are perhaps too brief.

The game was to start in fifteen minutes and everyone got in line to enter the stadium. The line was incredibly long, running all along the fence of the back parking lot. As UNM students, we had to come in by the back entrance and didn't have to pay to come in as long as we had our Lobo card. While waiting to get in, the conversations were animated between Lobos fans and Aggies fans. One group of teenagers started to talk to me. The gang leader—as I imagined him to be—bombarded me with questions.

“Hey, so which football team do you like the most? Do you watch football a lot? Hey, who's your Lobos favorite player?”

“Well, I've just arrived here in the U.S. and it's my first American football match,” I replied, trying to stay as neutral as possible so as to hide my lack of knowledge about popular sports.

“Really? Where are you from? You'll see, American football is awesome! I like it so bad!” he said, with a thrilled look in his eyes.

“I'm from France. I'm staying here for a year.”

“Cool! So you play soccer? What is your favorite soccer team in France?”

At this point, I realized that I was not in the right place. I don't care about soccer, just as I didn't care about football. This guy was enclosed in his own little world of football players and soccer teams. He was so excited to meet me, a French, just because we had won the world cup in 1998 and we played the final match against Italy in 2006. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to share his enthusiasm because I just don't give a shit about all this crap!

“Marseille is my favorite team” I said.

“Cool, I like it too! N'Diaye is such a good player!”

I was impressed! This guy knew even more about what was going on in the Marseille soccer team than I did.

On Saturday, September 8, 2007 at 4:00 p.m., my friend Mathieu called me, saying that there was an international event going on and that I had to be in front of the UNM bookstore in half an hour. He didn't say much, but randomly talked about a football game. I was pretty sure that we would go and have a beer in a bar, and watch a football match. Our other friend Lucas came to pick up Mathieu,

Christiana, Katrina, and me, and drove to the stadium. Only once in front of the stadium did I realize what was going on. I was here to watch an American football game between the University of New Mexico and New Mexico State.

We arrived at 4:30 p.m. for the tailgate party and met some other international friends, Alex from Quebec, Eva from Austria, and Lise from Denmark. It took us at least twenty minutes to find the place where we were supposed to meet the other international students. The parking lot, which I had been to before, did not appear to be the same at all. A crowd of people was there, insane and loud. For all these people who were standing, squeezed against one another, the whole afternoon preceding the game was devoted to eating junk food and drinking beer. The huge parking lots around the stadium were full of big trucks playing loud music, full of people eating and drinking together, getting drunk for the evening's game. After a while, we finally managed to reach the international stand, which was, as Alex knew, recognizable thanks to the New Mexican flag, the Zia—a kind of red round-cross on a yellow background.

Matt, the guy in charge of organizing international events, was cooking steaks that looked more or less like pieces of burnt wood and tasted like predigested baby food. Bread, ketchup, and cheese were lying on a table nearby and we got in line to get our hamburgers.

I talked to Marco while eating the amusing food.

"So you've been all the way to Taos with your bike, that's awesome! How long did it take to get there?" he asked me.

"Well, I left Albuquerque on the late Friday afternoon and arrived in Taos Sunday around 5:00P.M., I'd say that you can do it in two days. It was so great! And I was actually lucky as I managed to take the Greyhound back, it's not allowed normally if you've got a bike. But my ass was hurting so bad that I couldn't get back on the bike! I have to change the seat..."

"Hey, that's cool! You know what, I've been all across Spain with my mountain bike with three friends for three weeks—" he stopped talking.

Fat guys wearing white and red Lobos wolf outfits were going around the parking lot, beers in hand, sharing their enthusiasm about the event—the first match of the season! All around us were these people shouting the animal refrain: "Everyone's a Lobo, woof, woof, woof."

We had to stop talking for a while as the fat guys were being too loud. They were talking to us as if we were standing miles away, but they were in fact standing right in front of us, trying as hard as possible to keep their balance. They were all sweaty, and their hot beer breath bothered our nostrils. We pretended to share their enthusiasm and shouted with them the refrain we had just heard, being as loud as possible ourselves, the only way to get rid of them.

Feeling thirsty, Mathieu, Jamil and I decided to go on a mission: trying to find beers. This little walk allowed us to see another area of the parking lots where big campers were allowed. In some places, you could easily imagine people living there for months. They virtually had their little home on the parking lot—tables, chairs, stereo, TV, parasols, coolers, grill, and all kinds of fancy stuff.

We made our way out to the opposite side of the parking lot. The Seven-Eleven gas station had what we wanted; we bought a six-pack of Fat Tire, a bottle of water, and some orange juice. I actually had to argue with the cashier to be able to buy the beers, as I had only brought my French ID, even though as a foreigner I should have my passport at any time. On the way back, I wanted to drink one of the beers, but got told by Jamil that I was not allowed to drink on the street. People were allowed to drink in a parking lot and get drunk as much as they wanted, but I wasn't allowed to carry a beer in the street if not wrapped in a plastic bag. Strange.

Back in the parking lot, I wasn't allowed to drink beer in a glass bottle: too dangerous! You bet! Things stay far from my understanding in the U.S. I don't know if I'll be able one day to find the clue. Maybe I have too much of a French conception about things.

7:15 p.m. After a good half hour in line, I eventually managed to enter the stadium. I had lost all my friends by then, but found other international students to stay with. On the higher spot of the tiers, I was impressed by the size the stadium, as it is only a university stadium! University sport teams are a really big deal in the U.S., I guess. We don't have that in France.

We found seats quickly but we didn't notice at first that we were on the Aggies' side, although we were to realize it pretty soon! The match had started already, and I spent the first half an hour trying to figure out the mysterious rules of this sport unfolding before my eyes. Players stopped every twenty seconds, ran for another twenty seconds, and stopped again. I was puzzled. In front of us, an Aggies fan, a man of impressive muscles, large shoulders, tanned skin, and long face, was making fun of the Lobos game. He had his long hair tied, which gave him the nickname of Pony Tail. As he was making funny faces to the Lobos fans, insults started to rise:

“Hey, Pony Tail! Go back to your ranch!” or “Pooony Tail! Why don't you cut your hair before we have to use it to drag you on the ground?”

After a little while, the stadium staff, all dressed in their yellow security outfits, came to find him and kicked him out, at the delight of every Lobos fan. In a way, this was a show within the show, and seeing these Lobo fans ready to get in a fight for the smallest excuse made me doubt the real reason they were coming to watch the match. The tension, madness, and excitement I could feel in this mass America reminded me of this guy I met on my way to Taos the weekend preceding the football game.

He was working at the Twin Warriors Golf Club. I ended up there

on my bicycle as the night was falling, seeking water and a place to camp. I rapidly understood that this wouldn't be the place to camp, as the golf road was proudly exposing its no-bicycle sign. It did not discourage me, though, and I cycled in this kingdom of SUVs, sports cars, and huge pick-up trucks. Uncomfortable and feeling out of place, I asked the doorkeeper if I could get some water. He disappeared into the cozy hallway and came back with two water bottles filled with fresh water. We stayed talking for a little while. He asked me where I was heading with my bicycle and my tent on the top of the rack. I told him about my project and mentioned how impressed I was to see such a green and luxurious place in the middle of the desert. We talked about his job then, and I was astonished when I learned that he was working full-time as well as being a full-time student: "Hey, I have to get the money to pay for University, you know."

I could not believe him; I could not picture someone waking up six days a week at 5:00 a.m. and going to bed at 12:00 a.m., running from school to work, and back to school. I explained how we had these laws in France that prevented any student from working more than twenty hours a week, and any full-time employee more than thirty-five.

In front of this hotel, on my bicycle, I was a French on a three-day weekend. Back at the stadium, I was the American that goes and gets drunk at a football game to release the stress of the week.

I was looking for the doorkeeper in the crowd, ready to see his young face decomposed by the alcohol and the tiredness. Why are university fees so expensive when you see the business that is made out of it?

After watching the football game for a good hour, I found that it was a way to show that the university was good, powerful, and rich. It is a big show, the fanfare, the girls shaking their bodies and shouting stupid refrains, everything is entertainment and advertisement. Giant screens advertise such or such product, the announcer talking over an unbearably loud soundtrack. Famous and influential personalities come to wave at the crowd. Hotdogs and other chemical food invade the rows in a smell of rotted frying oil. Welcome to consumer society! More than 40,000 people watching their university team. People need entertainment...

Pierre-Yves Barbeau: Exchange student from France, big fan of popular sports.