

## ***Journal of Issues in* Intercollegiate Athletics**

### **Tribal: College Football and the Secret Heart of America**

By Diane Roberts. Published 2016 by Harper Collins Publishers, New York, NY. (233 pages).

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Diane Roberts, a second generation Florida State football season ticket holder and English Professor at Florida State University, examines her love affair with college football alongside its numerous paradoxes. The inside cover perfectly captures her dilemma, “one overeducated Florida State fan confronts the religiously perverted, racially suspect, and sexually fraught nature of the sport she hates to love: college football.”

In her unique writing style Roberts laments her love of football, “I can’t quit college football. It’s like a bad boyfriend: you hate that he’s so right-wing, his table manners embarrass you, he’s barely read a book, and you don’t want your mother to meet him, but damn, he’s so fine and makes you feel so good (when he isn’t making you feel so bad), you just can’t help yourself” (p. 8).

*Tribal* seeks to address the macro issues surrounding college football, however instead of casting stones outward, Roberts turns the microscope inward on the community of Tallahassee and her employer, Florida State University. While many of the topics addressed are familiar controversies which received their five minutes of national outrage, she methodically reexamines them both personally and within her football obsessed community. Her honest, irreverent and comedic writing style makes *Tribal* a must read for anyone associated with higher education and those interested in the incongruences between academics and athletics. The book is divided into five themed sections that are named after the flow of a football game.

*The First Quarter* is five chapters that address tribalism, and too often hatred, which both unifies and divides college football fan bases. Jameis Winston’s rape allegations are addressed throughout the book, specifically how his alleged indiscretion was perceived among Seminole supporters. His most organized defenders were the FSU fraternities and sororities; Roberts shared, “they voted with T-shirts: the Jesus with Jamesis’s face, and a custom made ‘I heart Jameis Consensually’” (p. 158). But she is quick to point out, “We think we know him. We do not know him. Most of us have never even met him. And never will. Five seconds while he autographs your jersey doesn’t count. He could be a fine young man, he could be a rapist” (p. 17).

*The Second Quarter* is five chapters and explores the intriguing relationship between religion, namely Christianity in the South, and college football. Roberts reminds us that, “God is all over college football, you’d think He played for Amos Alonzo Stagg back in the day. In South Bend, Jesus stands tall on a huge mural at one end of Notre Dame stadium... at Georgia, head coach Mark Richt wouldn’t talk to the media until he’d given ‘thanks to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ... while in Florida we accord football coaches the status of canonized intercessor, even while they are still alive: we drive around with genuflecting bumper stickers. Hail, St. Bowden” (pp. 56-57).

Ultimately Roberts believes that college football is a combination of high mass and tent rival, “rich in ceremony and mystery, emotionally incontinent, and unabashedly in touch with the supernatural” (p. 57).

*Halftime* is one chapter in length and centers on the death of Robert Champion, a member of the Florida A&M University Marching 100, during a hazing initiation in 2012. The chapter entitled *Death of a Drum Major* explores the culture of marching bands at HBCU’s institutions, namely Florida A&M where the halftime show draws more interest than the four quarters of football. “At Florida A&M the team could lose but the marching band, never loses. The band is the reason people keep showing up” (p. 57).

Champion’s death brought unwanted national attention on old problems nobody bothered to fix at Florida A&M: almost one-fourth of the band’s four-hundred members were not enrolled as students, money was missing, and a culture of beatings during hazing rituals persisted. The unmanaged culture of the Marching 100 ultimately cost the band director and president their jobs as both resigned under political pressure.

*The Third Quarter* is two chapters entitled *The Gender Bowl* and *The Ladies Auxiliary* and touches on gender inconsistencies, hyper masculinity, coaches’ wives, and the role of women within the culture of football. Roberts writes, “Women’s may have a place in football, but it’s not on the field, not unless we’re talking the Legend (formerly Lingerie) League, in which babes in bikini underwear, push-up bras, and abbreviated should pads run, pass and tackle while the spectators pray for wardrobe malfunctions” (p. 131). She adds that too often the role of women is on the sidelines with pom-poms, as a trainer handing Gatorade, or at the front of the band as feature twirler.

*The Fourth Quarter* is five chapters in length and addresses a buffet of issues. In *Jaboo Wins*, the Jameis Winston rape investigation is reexamined alongside the sexual assault epidemic that has become too common among athletes and fraternities. *The Plantation* touches on amateurism and the many inconsistencies of the NCAA, the multi-billion dollar non-profit organization that seeks the “highest levels of integrity and sportsmanship.” In *Fighting the War All over Again* Roberts provides a historical perspective on racial tension and Southern pride that she infers was transferred to football after losing the Civil War.

Through *The Southern Way of Life* Roberts tells the story of FSU’s first African-American football player, Calvin Patterson, in 1970 and his unfortunate death in 1972, “he didn’t mean to commit suicide, he didn’t want to die, he just wanted to make himself permanently unavailable for football” (p. 193). In the final chapter, *The Fall of the House of Bowden*, Roberts retraces legendary Florida State Football Coach Bobby Bowden’s termination after 34 years ruling the Seminole sideline. She does this with a comparative analysis between Bowden, and all-time winning coaches Joe Paterno of Penn State and Paul ‘the Bear’ Bryant of Alabama.

Least our arrogance convince us otherwise, the issues in higher education of inconsistent missional alignment are too common across the landscape of college football in America,

including the teams we follow each Saturday. Roberts could have easily written this book on any number of programs and communities that have placed football as the God of its university.

I would highly recommend *Tribal* for athletic administrators and coaches working within intercollegiate athletics, it's a timely discussion piece that is appropriate for leaders across all level of intercollegiate athletics. Additionally, within the Sport Management academic discipline, I would recommend Roberts' book for Sociology of Sport, Intercollegiate Athletics, and Athletic Administration & Leadership courses.