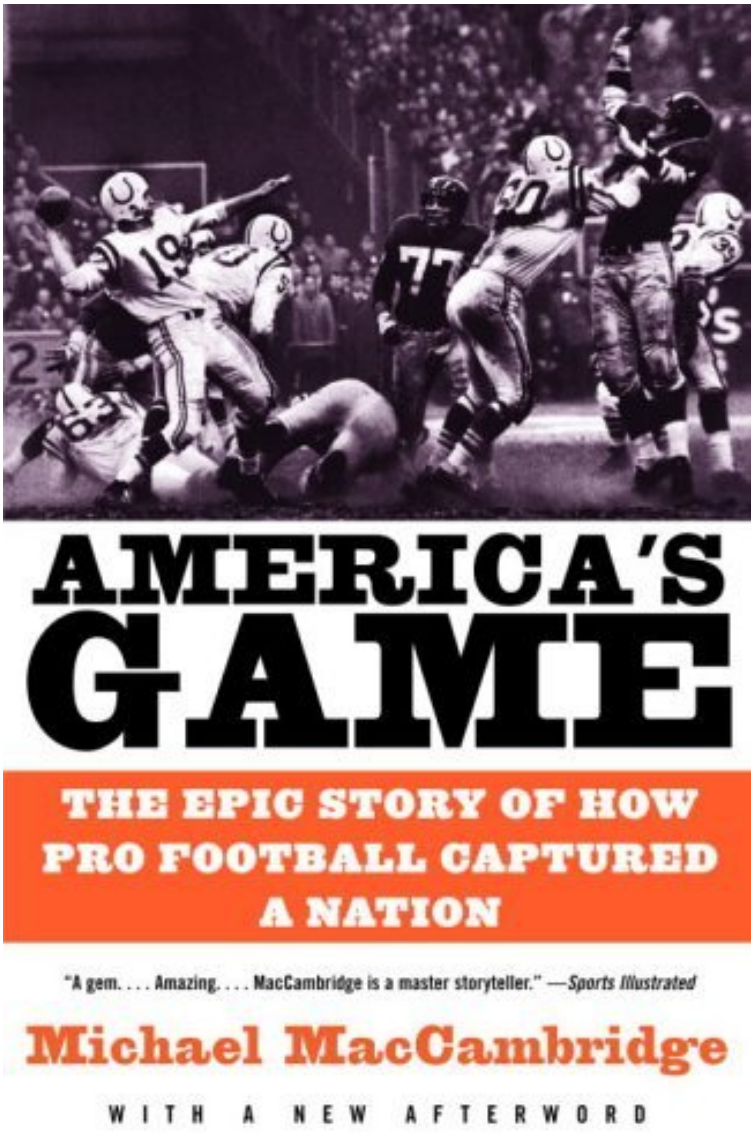
America's Game



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Par Michael MacCambridge : America's Game before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised America's Game:

Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIts difficult to imagine todaywhen the Super Bowl has virtually become a national holiday and the National Football League is the countrys dominant sports entitybut pro football was once a ramshackle afterthought on the margins of the American sports landscape. In the span of a single generation in postwar America, the game charted an extraordinary rise in popularity, becoming a smartly managed, keenly marketed sports entertainment colossus whose action is ideally suited to television and whose sensibilities perfectly fit the modern age.Americas Game traces pro footballs grand transformation, from the World War II years, when the NFL was fighting for its very existence, to the turbulent 1980s and 1990s, when labor disputes and off-field scandals shook the game to its core, and up to the sports present-day

preeminence. A thoroughly entertaining account of the entire universe of professional football, from locker room to boardroom, from playing field to press box, this is an essential book for any fan of Americas favorite sport.ExtraitChapter 1Going WestBundled in a heavy winter coat and sporting a beaverskin hat, Daniel Farrell Reeves dug his hands into his pockets and marched from the gate bordering the stands out onto the field in the cavernous Cleveland Stadium. In a matter of hours, his Cleveland Rams would take the field to play the Washington Redskins for the championship of the National Football League. But as he surveyed the field in the numbing chill of this overcast morning two days before Christmas, Reeves could see nothing on the gridiron but thousands of bales of straw, and a small army of men laboring to move them. This was pro football in 1945.Compact and slender, no more than 5-foot-8 and 140 pounds, Reeves wasa man of reserved nature but wry wit. In four seasons, he had grown accustomed to the perennial financial lossesIrish dividends, as he called themcommon to owning a pro football team. But the 1945 season had been uniquely rewarding and frustrating. Reeves had returned home just two months earlier, after a three-year tour of duty with the Army Air Corps, to what would become a season-long victory celebration. Americas triumph in World War II had been officially consecrated during August two-a-days, and the long lines that greeted the end of gas rationing dissipated by the season-opening win over the Chicago Cardinals. Just one season after the 1944 squad lost six of its last seven games, the Rams had rebounded to become the surprise of the NFL, and win their first Western Conference title. In early December, rookie quarterback Bob Waterfield, soon to be named the leagues Most Valuable Player, was profiled in Life magazine. And though the article spent less time on Waterfield than his wifeHollywood bombshell Jane Russell, star of Howard Hughess sex western The Outlaw, which censors still hadnt allowed to be screened in the U.S.the mere thought that a player for the Cleveland Rams would merit space in Life seemed to Reeves a miracle in itself.After the Washington Redskins beat the New York Giants in the regular season finale, Reevess dream match-up was set. For the title game, the Redskins would make their first trip to Cleveland in eight seasons, bringing along their famed 110-piece marching band to perform a special Christmas-themed halftime show. Interest was high for the match-up between the rookie Waterfield and perennial All-Pro Slingin Sammy Baugh. And so Reeves had bravely decided to move the championship game from the Rams regular stadium, the deteriorating League Park, with its cramped capacity of 30,000, to Cleveland Stadium, which seated 80,000.Six days before the game, the National Weather Service had forecast a major winter storm hitting the Cleveland area in midweek, so the Rams had spent the early part of the week searching for enough bales of straw to cover the tarpaulin, to prevent the field from freezing. It was general manager Charles Chile Walsh who finally located 9,000 bales of straw from around Elyria, and had it delivered to the stadium at a cost of $7,200. In the days leading up to the game, eighteen inches of snow fell on Cleveland, leaving the stadium resembling an arctic snowscape, with drifts piled several feet high in the aisles.On Sunday morning, the Rams lined up 275 workers, many of them off-duty city employees, to remove the bales. While the Rams were responsible for the field, the city of Cleveland was responsible for the stadium and the parking lots, which were left unshoveled. Despite the weather and conditions, the Associated Press projected the game would draw 50,000, and the New York Times wrote that a crowd of better than 40,000 is almost certain with a capacity audience of 77,569 possible in case the forecasters are wrong.But when the lights were turned on at Cleveland Stadium at 6:30 the morning of the game, the temperature was eight degrees below zero. Marching in mucklucks from the Clevelander Hotel a little before eight, Reeves balefully noted the unpassable streets. There was no parking in the two blocks closest to the stadium, since that area was overrun with snow. And taxi service wasnt running to the stadium, another skirmish in the war between the Rams and Arthur McBride, owner of the Zone/Yellow Cab Co. and the new Cleveland entry in the All-America Football Conference, which would begin competition in Cleveland the following fall.By 10:30 that morning most of the 9,000 bales had been cleared off the field. But the trucks that were to transport them away had trouble gaining purchase on the still clogged city streets, leaving the workers no choice but to place the straw against the walls surrounding the playing field. Behind the benches, just in back of the end zones, and stacked more than ten bales high at the walls, the sea of straw was parted so the game could be played.Cleveland Stadium had rarely looked so empty as on this day, when only 32,178 turned out. When former Rams business manager Manny Eisner and his wife walked into the stadium about an hour before kickoff, there were already people filing out, succumbing to the cold. In the stadium ticket office, Lou Isaacson was more prepared than most. Dressed in three pairs of socks, knee-high brogan work shoes, two pairs of pants, two sweaters, and two coats, he sat in the unheated box office for four and a half hours, and sold two tickets.In financial terms, Reeves had already resigned himself to the realization that his share of

the gate wouldnt even pay for the cost of buying, transporting, and removing the bales of straw. But as the kickoff neared, none of that mattered. Up in the press box, Reeves was nervous and amiable, greeting writers and VIPs, accepting congratulations for signing Waterfield to a three-year contract the day before. The stars are making so much money now, I call them Mister and they just call me Reeves, he said. When the game began, the joking ended, and Dan Reeves suffered in silence, as hed done every game day since 1941, when hed bought the team. He paced nervously, far removed from his wife, Mary, the rest of his family, and his closest friends. It was not a time to be jovial or even social. It was time for football.Down on the field, the game sounded different, victim to the noiseless vacuum of severe cold. There was little kibitzing between the teams, and almost none of the concussive, amplified smack that so often accompanied the heavy hitting of professional football. The quality of play was still sharp, but on a day when the temperature was zero degrees at kickoff, the players felt the pain more than heard it, each tackle accompanied by heavy breathing and dull, muffled thuds. The crowd sounded different as well, its applause muted by layers of gloves, the cheers rising curt and thin in the icy air.Even in the 40s, people argued about whether the pressure of football built character or revealed it. But Reeves had long ago learned how capricious the game could be, how random its deciding factors. On this frigid Sunday, he watched Sammy Baughs pass from the Redskins end zone hit the goalpost and fall back into the end zone, for what was then an automatic safety. After Waterfield threw the first of two long touchdown passes for the Rams, his extra point attempt was partially blocked, with the ball careening toward the crossbar, hitting it, and dribbling weakly over. Baughs freak safety and Waterfields wounded conversion had been the difference in the 1514 edge the Rams nursed into the fourth quarter.By that time, the windows of the Cleveland Stadium press box had fogged over, and most of the writers covering the game had abandoned their typewriters and gone outside into the biting cold, cursing as they bundled up to face the brutal wind, but drawn to the finish of the frantic battle below. Reeves himself was outside when he saw the play that decided the game. With the Redskins nearing midfield in the closing minutes, running back Steve Bagarus made an end run to the right, then reversed field and broke free, running in a sweeping arc to the far sideline, with two Rams in hot pursuit. The first slowed him down and the second, Waterfield (who in addition to being the star quarterback was also the teams best defensive back), made a desperate lunge and extended his left arm before hitting the ground. The contact was scantWaterfields hand barely nicked the toe of Bagaruss trailing footbut it was just enough to knock the runner off his feet and save a touchdown. The Rams defense stiffened from there and the Redskins missed a field goal attempt.Moments later, the game was over and the Cleveland Rams were world champions. The hardiest fans stormed the field to tear down the goalposts in celebration, while the rest of the crowd headed for shelter and celebration into Clevelands bars, restaurants, and dance halls. In the locker room, where the players massed for the traditional celebratory championship candid photograph, head coach Adam Walsh hugged his brother, Chile Walsh, and announced, I knew you were champs back there at Bowling Green! I knew it! I knew it!NFL commissioner Elmer Layden greeted Adam Walsh, his old college roommate at Notre Dame, with a hug and a handshake. Then Layden presented Reeves with the leagues Ed Thorp Memorial Trophy, given annually to the NFL champion. Ive been used to losing for so long, said Reeves, with tears in his eyes, that I wasnt counting on anything until it was all over.As Reeves returned with friends and family to his suite at the Clevelander Hotel, his jubilation was tempered by the private realization that his time in Cleveland was near its end. Reeves had lost more money in earlier years, but in the season in which his team had marched to the world championship, it still lost $64,000. And the prospects for box office improvement were dim, since the rival All-America Football Conference would begin play the following season, with a franchise in Cleveland that seemed to be the strongest in the league.Reeves had decided, win or lose, that when the NFL held its annual meeting in January, he would insist on fulfilling his goal, stated for years in private sessions with the owners, to move his franchise to Los Angeles. This time, he was determined: Dan Reeves was heading west, or else Dan Reeves was leaving football.By the end of World War II, the unique personality and character of the National Football League had begun to develop. The NFL owners comprised a particularly hidebound and tightly knit fraternity, loath to accept outsiders, reluctant to change the often circuitous, inefficient manner in which proceedings were conducted. Many could remember the leagues earliest years, when it was perceived to beand for the most part wasa haphazard assemblage of pickup games and hired hands making weekend pay.The Bears legendary coach and owner George Halas had been there from the start, present at the creation of the league, one of sixteen men in Ralph Hays Jordan and Hupmobile showroom in Canton, Ohio, in August 1920. That meeting, called by the leagues first president, Jim Thorpe, laid the foundation for what would be called the American Professional

Football Association, and two years later renamed the National Football League, though it had no franchises west of Chicago or south of Washington, D.C.Its next president, elected in 1921, was the tireless Columbus promoter Joe F. Carr, who presided over the leagues dark ages, in which thirty-five franchises folded in the leagues first ten seasons. At that 1921 meeting, Halas moved the Decatur Staleys to Chicago, where a year later he renamed them the Bears, and the Green Bay Packers and Earl Curly Lambeau entered the league. Four years later, they were joined by New York bookmaker Tim Mara, who bought the New York Giants for $2,500, reasoning that any franchise in New York City ought to be worth that much.In 1932 and 1933, the rest of the inner circle came on board. First there was George Preston Marshall, the bombastic Southern laundry man, who bought the Boston Redskins in 1932, moving them to Washington, D.C., five years later. In 1933, Blue-Shirt Charlie Bidwill, Chicago businessman and diehard Bears fan, bought the crosstown rival Chicago Cardinals, though those closest to him knew the Bears were still his favorite club.Then there was Philadelphias Bert Bell and Pittsburghs Art Rooney, whod met at a horse track in the late 20s, and whose franchises joined the league in 1933, the same year that the Pennsylvania state legislature relaxed its blue laws, allowing sporting events on Sundays. De Benneville Bert Bell, the son of a Pennsylvania attorney general, was a blueblood aristocrat with a common touch, who spent much of the 20s roaring his way through his inheritance. The raconteur Art Rooney, son of a corner tavern owner in Pittsburgh, was a delightfully egalitarian personality in his own right. Rooneys team was called the Pirates throughout the 30s, before changing its name to the Steelers in 1940.For most of the 30s and 40s, these seven menHalas, Lambeau, Mara, Marshall, Bidwill, Bell, and Rooneywere the National Football League. The 30s brought hard-earned growth, with liberalized passing rules, the introduction of a two-division system with an annual championship game (Marshalls idea), and the first college draft (the brainstorm of Bell), all introduced under Carrs watch. Through the decade, the game retained its slangy sense of barnstorming informality. Pittsburgh head coach Johnny Blood once missed a game because he simply forgot it was on the schedule. Most players fit practices during the week around their regular jobs, others came into town on the weekends, and played for less than $100 a game.The tight band of owners fought like brothers, but persevered in the face of several rival start-ups, the indifference of much of the American sporting public, the condemnation of many in college football, and the failures of several of their partners. Those who remained were cautious, inherently suspicious of change, and not eager to test their horizons.In 1936, the Cleveland Rams, who had struggled through a season with the failing rival American Football League, called NFL president Joe Carr to apply for an expansion franchise in the NFL. Carr came to Cleveland, met owner Homer Marshman, and invited him to come to the next meeting to apply for membership.So in December 1936, recalled Marshman, I went to the NFL meeting in Chicago and made my presentation. They told me to sit down and wait. Next, a man from Houston made his presentation. They thanked him and told him to leave. I thought that was very impolite since I was allowed to remain. Next, a man from Los Angeles made a pitch for Los Angeles. They excused him, too. I couldnt understand it, because their presentations were every bit as good as mine. As soon as the two others had left the room, George Preston Marshall jumped up and said, I move we give it to Cleveland. Everybody agreed. It was set up. They had decided on us in advance. They wanted to keep the teams in the east and midwest.From the Hardcover edition.Revue de presseA gem . . . Amazing. . . . MacCambridge is a master storyteller. Sports IllustratedMacCambridge paints a moving account of the games rise in popularity as well as American society at large. For anyone who cares about a good story well told, MacCambridges Americas Game hits all the right notes. Fort Worth Star-TelegramAn expansive and detailed history of the N.F.L.MacCambridge deftly integrates well-chosen accounts of games with profiles of league visionaries and tales of television negotiations and internal meetingsMacCambridge combines prodigious interviewing and research with a savvy use of anecdotes.--New York Times Book A thorough, admirably researched and exceptionally interesting account of footballs rise to its present eminence.--Washington Post Book WorldMacCambridges sweeping history of pro football starts just before WWII, when the National Football League was still largely a regional organization, and ends with Janet Jacksons wardrobe malfunction at Super Bowl XXXVIII. Though there are plenty of vivid descriptions of remarkable games, what sets this chronicle apart from a slew of other recent football books is the depth and breadth of its stories about players, coaches and ownersThis magisterial history is a fitting acknowledgment of the sports legacy.--Publishers WeeklyAmericas Game tells the beguiling story of pro footballfrom Johnny Unitass high-topped shoes to Janet Jacksons exposed breast. It is both rollicking and scholarly, definitive and distinctive. You will never find more concise or pleasurable portraits of some of the names that are already storied, including Vince Lombardi, Pete Rozelle, Jim Brown, and Joe Namath, and some giants of

the game whose luster is harder to recall, including Bert Bell, Kenny Washington, Ed Sabol, and George Allen. It is indispensable to understanding pro football, and a wonderful enhancement to enjoying it.SCOTT SIMON, host, NPRs Weekend Edition SaturdayThe authentic story of how the NFL won Americas heart has never been tolduntil now. Michael MacCambridge weaves a fabulous tale, guiding us through sixty years of professional football. It is a sports story, of course, filled with great games and rich characters. But it is also a big American story. Anyone wondering what makes our vast, violent, adoring, breathless, late-charging, hard-hitting, face-painting, high-fiving, touchdown-celebrating, Super Bowl-partying country tick will find some fascinating answers here.JOE POSNANSKI, columnist, The Kansas City StarMichael MacCambridges prologue begins with the 1958 NFL Championship game, the first pro football game I remember. The league is dramatically different now, and MacCambridge captures every essential aspect of that evolution in this revealing history of what is now Americas most popular sport. -BOB COSTAS, host, HBO's Inside the NFLMichael MacCambridge has written a lively, highly entertaining book on the ascent of the NFL into the center of Americas DNA. If there is a better book on the subject, Im not aware of it.--DAVID HALBERSTAM