

FROM CLASSROOM TO LOCKER ROOM: Japanese Professor Turns Football Coach

Keiko I. McDonald

Ichiro, also known by his first name in the United States, enjoys a kind of success that most of us can only wonder at. Now that he plays outfield with the Seattle Mariners, one might say that recession-plagued Japan's best-known export is Ichiro. Fresh from his native country, he has captured two of the most prestigious awards given to this country's professional baseball players. The American League voted him its MVP (Most Valuable Player) as well as its Rookie of the Year.

Surely every Japanese boy's dream is to become a baseball player like Ichiro, one whose prowess has won the hearts of millions of fans on both sides of the Pacific. Sad to say, the American boy's dream of baseball fame appears to be losing ground to one whose hero casts a bigger bulkier shadow on the playing field: the all-American football player.

Even as baseball looks for ways to regain its legendary status as "America's pastime," football might just be running away with that distinction. Certainly football's combination of rough-and-tumble physical contact and razzle-dazzle spectacle seems readymade for crowd-pleasing viewing "live" and on screen.

Add to that increasing emphasis on high school football all across America and you have the makings of a major shift in spectator sport preference. Every high school of any size, even in remote small towns, has its football team complete with cheering section, band, and community-wide support. This is especially true throughout the Midwest and South where

small town main streets on Friday nights are apt to stand empty as entire populations flock to the high school stadium for the week's climactic event: its football game.

Though technically still an amateur sport, college football is now a multi-million dollar enterprise. As soon as football season begins in late August, major games are televised nationwide. Even minor games are broadcast on local radio. Since most games are played on Saturday, every Monday various media ranging from AP (Associated Press) to ESPN announce the results of Top 25 polls. Colleges and universities have many reasons to take TV ratings seriously, not least because every game broadcast earns the team's school its slice of the media revenue pie.

The broadcast stakes grow in importance at year's end when networks cover a growing crowd of college bowl events. Their number has grown from a handful in days gone by to nearly thirty now. Best known is the Rose Bowl played every third of January in Pasadena, California. It is a kind of national college championship game. The BCS (Ball Championship Series) standings determine which teams play for the national title. The formula used is complex and controversial. Eight computers are used to weigh and assess results of AP media and coaches' polls, win-loss records and a number of other factors like the strength of each school's schedule.

Win or lose, teams chosen to play a bowl

event have more to gain than mere prestige. Both winners and losers in Pasadena “come out smelling like a rose” as the saying goes. Each gets its share of an award that runs from between eleven to thirteen million dollars!

Similar amounts of money go to teams that play other big-time events like the Fiesta Bowl in Tempe, Arizona and the Sugar Bowl in New Orleans. Even minor contests like the Music City Bowl in Nashville divide awards in the \$ 750,000 range.

The fundamental rule for getting to play a bowl is as simple as: *win and keep winning*. The college football schedule gives a team eleven chances to win. In order to win, you must have good football players with coaching staff to match. It follows that recruiting is as competitive as anything that happens on the field.

College coaches and their assistants scout for prospective players still in their senior year of high school. Scouts do look locally but just as often travel far and wide to meet possible recruits and their parents. The recruits in turn visit the colleges that interest them. Finally, negotiations end when the player signs on with a letter of intent.

On the face of it, the process seems straightforward, but is in fact grueling and competitive and therefore apt to lend itself to bending the rules. Every year has its share of scandals as this or that school is cited for illegal recruiting. Offenders are put on probation, which means being out of the bowl competition running for two seasons.

Bribery is another recurring theme. A highly sought-after player or his family may be offered cash or a car as an inducement to sign with a particular school. Some such players disappoint recruiters by scoring low on their SAT (Standard Aptitude Test). Scores below a certain level render the student ineligible for college admission and football together.

Even so, every fall hundreds of boys in sizes large to huge do make the college or university team of their dreams.

Enter little me, a Japanese woman of the usual size, a professor in a university as football-crazy as any in America. And yes I do admit to being a little bit football-crazy myself. I say a little because The University of Pittsburgh, like the city whose name it bears, is football-crazy on a scale I could not possibly match. This is not to say that I don't try. In fact, that is my theme here: how far I am prepared to go to aid and abet those who love and play this outsize sport.

But first some local football lore. Football fans all across America know my adoptive city's team, the Pittsburgh Steelers. The Steelers and I, sad to say, are not on speaking terms for the simple reason that they are grown men long out of school. We only meet at games where they can scarcely be expected to hear my supportive screams.

In the classroom, things are very different. There I call the plays—always politely of course. And there, among my students, are numbers of players on our university team, The Pitt Panthers.

Our team's glory days were the 1970's and 1980's. They won the national championship in 1975, thanks to the spectacular performance of running back Tony Dorsett, a Pittsburgh native. He brought the renowned Heisman Trophy to our school and after graduation went on to play for the Dallas Cowboys.

Like most teams, the Panthers have had downs as well as ups. The early 1990s were especially grim. Then, after five losing seasons, the Panthers staged a comeback in 1997. They won their first postseason berth. Last year they made it to the so-called Insight.com Bowl. This year our Panther expectations were running very high. More about that later.

First, my story requires me to reveal some

modest sporting statistics of my own. I have been a dedicated runner for more years than I care to admit to. Enough to say that I have run thirty-three marathons and won quite a few awards at 5K and 10K local road races. And since I keep in shape by running in the vicinity many miles a week, I have come to be known as one teacher who does more than run from class to class. In fact, I am locally a bit famous for running, no matter what the weather.

I am also known for teaching Japanese film courses that fill up quickly at enrollment time. These courses are part of an international curriculum sampled by every Pitt undergraduate. In order to graduate, a student must take at least two non-Western culture courses. My own contribution to this curriculum attracts students from a wide range of academic and ethnic backgrounds. Among them are a goodly number of football players

This fall I offered a course on Japanese culture and society as seen in our national cinema. Enrollment was sizeable as always—sixty students. Fully a third were football players, every position from running back to kicker. We met for a three-hour session on Mondays, the team's day off. Players had no excuse for sneaking out. Not that some did not try. I had to say to one: "Let's save the quarterback sneak for the game!"

The class I stood facing divided itself pretty much down the middle. The non-athletes were to my left. Many of them were coeds. They looked pretty lightweight compared to the bulk of players sprawling to my right. And I do mean bulk. Most of these guys were huge, weighing in at 250 pounds or more. All dwarfed the chairs they squeezed into, legs stretching far out in front.

So there we were, large and small, discussing Japanese society and culture, sometimes serious sometimes roaring with laughter at a

comic scene, say, from *Shall We Dance?*

Early in the term this fall I got an exciting e-mail from Mike, an academic advisor working at the Office of Academic Support. He was inviting me to serve as a "guest coach" for the Panthers' second game against the University of Alabama at Birmingham. This was an honor extended to a few instructors and professors each season. I guessed (rightly, it turned out), that the players in my class were responsible for extending this privilege to me. In this case, "coaching" meant sharing a pre-game breakfast with the team, attending some of their meetings, coming to the field with them, and watching the game from the sidelines. Needless to say I accepted instantly.

The game was scheduled for September 15. Then came the terrorist attacks of September 11. All classes were cancelled, as were all festive and sporting events on campus, as our university community went into mourning.

The Pitt-UAB game was rescheduled. It would be played on December 1st, making it the final game of the season. The weather, which had been unusually fair and warm all fall, turned suddenly chilly. When I woke that morning and opened a window, my runner's sense told me to prepare for a cold and windy day. I dressed accordingly, knowing full well that the stadium would be open to every howling blast that blew off the nearby Ohio River.

My husband dropped me off downtown at the first stop on our guest coach itinerary. Christmas shopping was in full swing, so downtown Pittsburgh was one solid traffic jam. Our team had spent the night at the Hilton Hotel where I arrived just in time for the day's first event, a 9 a.m. prayer service. A ground floor conference room served as a chapel. The service was optional for players, but a few were already seated when I walked in. No doubt some of these had been recruited from down

South where prayer meetings are a more active part of local culture than they are out East.

That much I knew, so I wasn't surprised to see a large crowd assembling. I was, however, embarrassed by the way I was dressed. According to the instructions I had received, "khakis and jeans" would be permissible for this event. So there I was in Levis and bulky sweater, feet sung in a colorful pair of Saucony running shoes—surrounded by men in their Sunday best! At least I was the only woman in sight, so no dressy dame was looking down her church-going nose at me!

Nothing to do but make myself small in the shadow of immense Lamar, a wide receiver who had taken two of my courses. His big brother, a graduate from the University of Virginia, is now a professional football player.

The service was led by the Reverend Bill Jackson, pastor of the Presbyterian church attended by Panthers' head coach Walter Harris. The Rev Jackson was also an honored guest coach so his sermon was short and to the point. Like everyone in the room, he knew how nervous the players were, how much was riding on the day's outcome.

The Panthers had opened their 2001 campaign with a 31-0 landslide victory. That win pitched expectations so high that the local media labeled Pitt the team with the most potential in its conference. Almost immediately, those high hopes were shaken by a series of disasters. A wide receiver rated one of the best in the nation, sprained his ankle on a punt return and was sidelined for weeks. The Panthers lost four in a row. By mid-season they seemed to be stuck at 1-5. Coach Harris delivered his ultimatum: "Play harder. Learn better. Or don't show up for practice."

The tough talk appeared to do its work. The team staged a turnaround, beating some mighty tough opponents. Now, after four straight wins,

the Panthers were 5-5 and ready to face the UAB Blazers in a last showdown of the regular season. The Blazers also had an impressive record of 6-4. One more win would guarantee either team a trip to a postseason bowl game. So the glory of a bowl berth (instead of a quiet Christmas) was at stake on this first meeting between the Panthers and the Blazers. No wonder the players around me in the chapel appeared to be sitting on pins and needles.

The Reverend Jackson began with an allusion to the 1981 Oscar-winning film, *Chariots of Fire*. He explained how the runners had trained for the Olympics that year. He offered the players the maxim that inspired that generation of athletes: "Run forward with perseverance."

The service was followed by a breakfast buffet where the five guest coaches were introduced each by a player. One was an English instructor who identified himself as originally from New York and therefore a "fanatic fan" of the New York Jets. Another was a middle-aged woman who worked as an academic advisor in the College of Arts and Sciences. Two others were professors in the Communications Department. One of them, an elderly gray-haired lady, struck me as a very odd choice for an event with such a hulking rowdy side to it.

I was introduced by Penny, an offensive lineman whose family had moved from Samoa to New York. He was now in my second film class. He might as well have introduced me as a dwarf from the Island of Lilliput made famous by *Gulliver's Travels*. I felt about that small, seated at a table with young men so gigantic in their proportions. I expected to watch them wolf down plates piled high with scrambled eggs, sausage pancakes, fried potatoes and other high cholesterol classics of American Sunday breakfast. How wrong I was!

These guys had a game to play—and pre-game nerves to deal with

Next on our agenda was sitting in on an offense team meeting. Head coach Harris took charge of this last minute briefing. He summarized game strategy, stressing what to do and not to do, using his laptop computer to illustrate points with film clips of plays the other team had used.

Next stop: Heinz Field, a short ride across the Ohio. This brand-new facility replaced two outdated stadiums demolished just last year: the Steelers' Three Rivers and our own Pitt Stadium. Now both teams would share a field named for Pittsburgh's famous (and famously generous) family—the same whose is synonymous for ketchup and pickles.

The Pitt-UAB game was scheduled to begin at one thirty, but we were privileged to arrive two hours early. After a tour of the new facility we waited at the gate for the team to arrive on a bus at noon. We were joined by their families, friends and classmates crowding both sides of the walkway. A local high school band struck up a lively din as the bus arrived and everyone cheered the players getting off. Most were dressed in suits and ties, like they would be for going to church. I have been told that a strict dress code applies to players on this special bus. No jeans or tennis shoes are allowed.

After a short break, guest coaches were escorted into the players' locker room. Three of us were women, but no fuss was made about that—a recent and momentous change in the world of sport. Certainly this was my first-ever visit to a men's locker room. And I must say it was a princely introduction—or would that be princessly? I mean this locker room was the last word in deluxe, thanks to a gift from a Pitt alumnus. Each spacious locker had its high stool complete with Panther logo. I was told that our students enjoyed accom-

modations much nicer than those used by the Steelers next door.

The players were still suiting up when Coach Harris called for a pep talk break. He said, in essence: "*Win or lose, we're all in this together!*" All present knelt down and held hands for a moment of silent prayer. That done, the offensive coordinator shouted out: "Let's get out there and—"

Sorry but I can't bring myself to write down what he said. Enough to say that it was very un-like a prayer, though I have to say it roused the team to a mighty cheer!

Since this would be the final game of their college career, seniors ran first out onto the field. Their parents had also been invited to partake of this ritual. So were guest coaches. So there we went running out to meet the roar of the crowd, followed round the field by the rest of the team.

Quickly as we ran I surveyed the stadium. It seats 65,000. Steelers games will pack it full. Thousands of fans are still waitlisted for regular season tickets. The Panthers are doing well to draw a crowd this large, especially on a wind-chilled December day. It stands to reason that the home team's side of the stadium should be filled with screaming fans while out-of-towners barely make a showing on the other side.

The visiting team won the toss, but the Blazers failed to make good on their opening drive. The ball went nowhere. Then it was the Panthers' turn. They marched 66 yards down the field in several plays.

In football, the twenty yards nearest the opponent's goal line is called "the red zone." When the Panthers moved the ball into that zone, a gigantic monitor near the field goal flashed red in the shape of a huge ketchup bottle turned upside down, flooding the screen with the bright red sauce of Heinz family name and fame. As if that were not enough, the

words “Red Zone” flashed hot and bright for all to see.

That drive resulted in a 6-yard touchdown pass from the quarterback to wide receiver Bryant, one of my students. The Panthers had the early lead of 7-0.

Even so, the UAB’s defense is rated as one of the best in the nation, so our players had their work cut out for them. Three UAB players are considered sure-fire prospects for the NFL (National Football League). As it turned out, our receiving core simply outranked them. By the end of the second quarter, the Panthers had a commanding 21-0 lead, though at a high cost. Bryant sprained his ankle catching the ball under attack by a couple of defensive players. He crippled off the field but returned for the second half—on crutches!

The Blazers got some chances for touchdowns in the second half but botched them all. The Panthers defense and fans joined forces, forcing a turnover. When the opponent team advanced the ball near the red zone, the TV prompter flashed the message: “Make some noise!” The crowd responded full force. Their roaring made it hard for the UAB quarterback to call the shot. A call for time out lowered the noise somewhat. But then the UAB quarterback fumbled, giving our guys a chance to recover the ball. Our defense played with such intensity they held UAB to two field goals no touchdown.

The three-hour game ended with a 24-6 victory of Panthers over Alabama-Birmingham. (In a football game, the actual playing time is just one hour with a short break between the first and second halves. Football, however, is as famous for delays as baseball is for lulls).

This must-win game earned our team the all-important invitation to the Tangerine Bowl in Orlando, Florida. Players and coaches were beside themselves. Several of my student athletes squished me in a victory hug. Luckily,

they didn’t break any bones. Bryant hugged me too, in spite of his crutches.

The crowd, like sportscasters like to say, “went wild.” Some threw oranges into the stadium. A few had done this in the final seconds of the game, causing the announcer to scold them for “unsportsman-like conduct.”

Grandstand bad behavior is much in the news today, thanks to an incident that tarnished the reputation of the Cleveland Browns. Fans of that professional team, outraged by an umpire’s decision, rained beer bottles and coke cans down on officials and the visiting team. Umpires and players scuttled off the field in a general rout that suspended the game in its very last moments. As a result, some stadiums have limited beverage possession and sales to drinks in plastic cups.

The Pitt-UAB game’s finale also included a very common ritual: several players splashed a bucket of Gatorade on Coach Harris and the team’s defensive coordinator—yes, even in freezing winter weather. Not to worry. Neither happy man minded in the least. Coach Harris grabbed a microphone and screamed to the screaming fans: “Pack up your cars, folks, we’re going to Disney World!”

It was time for us to leave the field. I ran with some of my students back into the tunnel. One of them approached me and asked this question in a diplomatic way: “Let’s say my performance on the field today rates an A. That means I ought to get an A in your course, right?” I could not help smiling, even as I said the must-say thing: “Your performance in the classroom so far has earned you A minus. Let’s see how well you can do on your final exam.”

The rest of the day was rather anti-climatic. We filed back into the Panthers’ locker room to witness the official representative offer a formal invitation to the Tangerine Bowl. The coach accepted to uproarious applause and

howls of joy.

Two days later my Japanese cinema class met for the last time. All my student players showed up, their faces still beaming with joy. I handed out copies of the take-home final exam. So there I was, this pint-size Japanese lady professor challenging these young giants to overcome yet another obstacle. Failure to maintain a minimum C average for the term overall would render a student ineligible to play in that all-important bowl game.

After the class I handed each player a copy of this note:

“Thank you for inviting me to be a guest coach on your game of December 1. I enjoyed watching you win and interacting with you on the sidelines. Your perseverance and hard work paid off! I sincerely hope that you will do as well in the final exam as you did on the field yesterday. No pain, no gain! Good luck with the Tangerine Bowl”

I also gave Penny a huge can of mixed nuts

to share with teammates in my class.

A few days I received this e-mail message: “Thanks for the *peanuts!* Please come back again to be a guest coach. You’re a good luck charm for us!”

Imagine how happy I am to report that the Panthers won the Tangerine Bowl later in December down in sunny Florida. A local sportswriter had this to say about that victory:

“Pitt came. Pitt saw Pitt kicked the door down on North Carolina State. The Panthers posted a 34-19 victory over the Wolfpack in a game that showcased all-every-thing wideout Antonio Bryant, the dominating Pitt defense and big plays at big moments.”

End

(Dr. Keiko McDonald is a professor of Japanese cinema and literature at the University of Pittsburgh.)

原稿募集について

CHART NETWORKは、各方面で英語教育にたずさわる方々の、英語教育に関する実践や研究などの発表を大きな柱として編集されます。そこで、広く原稿を募集いたします。

1. 原稿は未発表のものに限ります。英語および英語教育に関するオリジナルのものであれば、内容は問いません。

2. 執筆要領

① 1ページは左右23字、天地43行の2段とし、2～4ページにおさめてください(句読点は1字とする)。英文の場合は1ページ550 wordsを目安としてください。

② 特に強調したい箇所(太字にしたい箇所)には、赤色で下線を引いてください。

③ 冒頭には必ずタイトルをお付けください。このタイトルは、10行×2段とってください。

④ ワードプロで原稿を作成された方は、ご使用の機種を明記のうえ、なるべくフロッピーディスクも原稿と一緒に送り下さい(フロッピーディスクはお返しいたします)。

3. ① 掲載量には限りがございますので、編集部で原稿を選択させていただくことをご了承ください。また、内容の趣旨が変更されない範囲で、原稿の一部を修正させていただく場合があります。

② 掲載させていただきました分につきましては、弊社規定の原稿料をお支払いいたします。

4. 原稿の送り先

〒604-0867 京都市中京区烏丸丸太町西入ル 数研出版株式会社 関西本社編集部 CHART NETWORK 係