

Can football produce righteous warriors?

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I know almost nothing about football.

I have experienced the fully-alive feeling of playing it in the autumn months with guys in college. We would inevitably start a game when I visited the Chicago suburbs. I ran hard and fast with the smell of leaves and smoke lingering in the crisp air. I huddled up, knowing that I didn't really need to listen because I would never be a part of the plan. I was just the last-picked warm body. Five-feet of dead weight. No one would ever pass the ball to me, but I would end up being taught four times each day how to correctly throw the ball by well-meaning Wheaton guys. "You put your fingers on the laces, like this...." (My friends from my college knew better than to try to explain something so ridiculous to me.)

Football was a fun game. A chance for mansplaining. And football was what men in our family watched during holidays while the women worked like servants to cook and clean up after them. It was what college administrations sunk their money into in a high-stakes gamble to excite their alums into giving more money. A generation of students went into debt, while coaches soaked up millions. Colleges spent Sallie Mae loans in order to lure television deals (perhaps not directly, but indirectly, the ecosystem seems apparent). Football became the brand of our colleges, outweighing the worth of classes, professors, writing and research.

When I moved to Lincoln, Nebraska, I had to learn more about college football, because there was no way to communicate at family gatherings or conduct small talk at grocery stores without knowing the minute details of the Huskers. I also learned more unsavory aspects—like how [Lawrence Phillips](#) dragged his girlfriend Kate McEwan, a women's basketball player, down the stairs by her hair. The violence was brutal. Yet, [Tom Osborne](#) merely suspended Phillips and didn't kick him off the team. The stories seemed more intimate because of Lincoln's small-town nature. We often ran into players at the local [Runza](#) and I worked with retired players at the car dealership.

The brutality came back in my mind as I heard about Richie Incognito. My stomach lurched further when I read [Arthur Remillard's piece](#) on warrior culture and muscle men in the NFL.

[Dr. Remillard](#) teaches religious studies. It seems, from Remillard's logic, Incognito was a head-butting warrior. Then, when he became a good-guy on the field, he became a "muscle man" in the locker room and began his racist, homophobic bullying. According to his piece, there is a difference between the muscle man and the warrior. Remillard lifts up football's "warrior culture," compares it to [2 Samuel 2:14](#) (a brutal piece of Scripture which would make a hard-core [George R. R. Martin](#) fan wince), and says we need more of it:

[W]e might conclude that the Incognito affair unveils not the problems of a "warrior culture" but rather an absence of it. When the 2013 football season started, Incognito was a "good guy" and a role model for healthy, rule-bound competition. But behind closed doors, he was a "muscle man" living in a world that celebrated, enabled and encouraged his exploits.

Somehow, Remillard sees the best of football's warrior culture as a man training his body into subjection for the protection of the weak and the advancement of all righteous causes. And, maybe it's because I know so little about football, but I don't see it. How does throwing a ball around a field protect the weak? How does sucking all the money from educational institutions advance worthy causes? How does making a touchdown make a man more righteous?

When I think of our culture, I see one in four women are subject to domestic violence. One and six women are sexually assaulted. I see a society where the game/warrior culture has so blurred that men can remotely kill with something we call a "joystick." And I don't see football remedying the situation in the least.

We bow to the warrior football culture with our bellies full of turkey. That's fine. Really. I'm not trying to make football into a feminist issue.

But how often do we celebrate the peacemakers in our midst? Do we teach children the lessons of our great pacifists? What do we do to educate men and women on the strategies of non-violent resistance?

It may be that Dr. Remillard and I have the same goals at the end of the day. But I just can't agree that the problem with our culture is that we haven't learned enough violence. As we enter into this Advent season, we long for the days when the lion

and the lamb rest together, where we beat our swords into pruning hooks. May we learn to celebrate those who study war no more.