

My Football Life in Four Quarters: Rediscovering a Lost Literary Identity

Evan Craig

In this article, Evan Craig discusses the role of football in developing his desire to write in sports media. He breaks down that evolving interest throughout his life and explains how it helped him to reclaim a literary identity that was once lost.

First Quarter: Kicking off My Path into the Writing Field

There's an opening kickoff at the start of every football game. This is where a special teams player kicks a ball off a tee toward the end zone. A player from the opposing team who receives the kick can choose to kneel, automatically placing his team's offense at the thirty-yard line, or run it out. If a player elects to return the kick, a mad dash toward the opposite end zone ensues. The overall goal is to score a touchdown before being tackled by any of the eleven pursuers on defense.

There's nothing quite like the excitement an opening kickoff brings. It signals a fresh start and new beginnings as both teams begin the first quarter in a scoreless tie. Of course, there's still plenty of time for one of them to disappoint, but until then, optimism and the deafening screams of fans packing the stands fill the air.

From the moment I started watching football as a kid, I have wanted to get into sports writing. Something about the game spoke to me, yet I began with a scoreless tie when I first entered my football life.

Football symbolizes Americana much like rock and roll, hot dogs, Tom Hanks, and apple pie. However, many Americans are only exposed to the sport while watching the Super Bowl—that used to be me. I only cared about football when it meant I could slip into a food coma from all the chicken wings I'd consumed. So how did I shift from being a wing-eating fair-weather fan to one who lives and breathes the sport, ready to write about it in a future career? I'd say my fandom started when I was thirteen years old, about to enter seventh grade. I expressed a growing desire to learn about the game, how it was played, and about different teams. I guess it kind of came out of nowhere, but the origin didn't matter. Once the ball was in the air, I was committed to my route.

Now, this isn't a story worthy of its own *ESPN* documentary, but it's still deserving of (some) hype. As I kick off the story of my football life, I'll explain how I navigated through all the challenges in my path and how those obstacles assisted me in rediscovering my writing identity.

Second Quarter: Overcoming an Early Deficit with Research

Entering the second quarter, I found myself down only one possession. I didn't really know much about the game beyond the basics. It should be easy to tie the score back up, as long as my dreadful defense doesn't find a way to blow it . . . *again*.

To get a better understanding of my newfound football life, I decided to look into why it had fascinated me so much. But, for the life of me, I couldn't tell you how or why it happened. It just *did*. I've never pinpointed

Learning New Literacies

When people are trying to learn to do something (a process which can take a lifetime) the process will require them to engage with a huge range of different semiotic resources.

Semiotic resources are the actions, materials, and artifacts we use for communicative purposes, whether produced physiologically—for example, with our vocal apparatus or the muscles we use to make facial expressions and gestures—or technologically—for example, with pen and ink or computer hardware and software—together with the ways in which these resources can be organized. Semiotic resources have a meaning potential based on their past uses, and a set of affordances based on their possible uses, and these will be actualized in concrete social contexts where their use is subject to some form of semiotic regime (van Leeuwen).

what exactly got me into watching football, but I will be forever grateful for the ignition of my dormant internal football switch. I was just thankful the shift was something other than puberty for a change.

Given all the years of football I had missed, there was *a lot* to catch up on. The most dedicated players always devote a large chunk of their time watching film, dissecting their opponent to death, until game time. My process was no different, as I would spend entire afternoons sprawled out on the couch watching football, even if my team wasn't involved.

I was addicted from the moment I watched a football game from beginning to end. I became a football encyclopedia, able to recite every single super pointless statistic that popped into my head. Not only did I learn from obsessively watching games, I also used a range of other **semiotic resources**, like Pro Football Reference, in-depth ESPN profiles, watching old game highlights archived on YouTube, and yes, even that infamously untrustworthy database Wikipedia. So, if anyone is ever in a bind with sports questions during trivia night, now you know who to call. Remember, I'll always do it for free wings!

A thought occurred to me during my extensive researching phase. Given I had enjoyed gaining a comprehensive understanding of football, I felt I could make a career of it somehow. Yet I wanted to find something involving writing on the side. I didn't have a clue as to how I would make either one happen. Perhaps immersing myself in research subliminally led me to combining my passions.

I also wanted to explore the history of professional football and my favorite team, the Green Bay Packers. So, on back-to-back vacations, I

Content and Genre Research

Learning about football through the lens of content research helped me narrow down the types of sources I currently use in my writing. Part of overcoming my personal deficit included researching numerous players and teams in an online database called Pro Football Reference, a site I still use for my SB Nation job (keep following along with this article to see how I landed this position).

But immersing myself through genre research in the spaces where football was central to the culture helped me develop a greater appreciation for my subject. I gained an understanding as to what made those places special and why the stories of those who had played in Green Bay or made it to Canton continue to be told. Once I realized what made these subjects who and what they are, that essentially is what drew me to wanting to tell more of those stories myself.

ventured to Green Bay, Wisconsin, and Canton, Ohio, forever known as the birthplace of the National Football League.

Green Bay is a special place considering most professional teams aren't synonymous with the cities they play in. Visiting there was an important part of the content and genre research I did to gain football literacies. The Packers *are* Green Bay. The Packers' home stadium, Lambeau Field, dominates the skyline and has a seating capacity that can hold most of the community in its 81,000 seats. It was there that I spent my twenty-first birthday, taking in the team's hall of fame and a tour of the facility. I even did a Lambeau Leap, which is how all Packers players celebrate after scoring a touchdown (Figure 1)—on my first try and without *much* assistance, I might add.

Packers fans are known for wearing foam pieces of cheese on their heads during games (Figure 2). Before you ask, I did *not* buy a cheese head while I was there. I've always found them off-putting. Cheese belongs on a half-pound beef patty with a side of chili fries, not on somebody's head.

As for my other pilgrimage, I had previously been to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Unfortunately, I was too young to remember it (Figure 3). In 2004 when I was six years old, my dad took me on a trip to Canton to witness the induction of his favorite player of all-time: Broncos quarterback John Elway. My only recollections from that afternoon consisted of eating a hot dog and falling asleep in the stands on a blistering August day. Seventeen years later, I got to see the bronze bust of the player I once traveled to see immortalized (Figure 4). That time, I happened to stay awake and let me say, it was *no bust*.



Figure 1: My glorious Lambeau Leap.



Figure 2: A cheeshead is the ideal topper to support the Packers. Flip it over and you also have a convenient serving piece for your queso!



Figure 3: Sporting my Blue's Clues attire at the Hall of Fame.



Figure 4: My fully awake return to see John Elway's bust.

I began the second quarter at a deficit, yes. Yet through the help of a time-consuming drive (aided by a handful of questionable penalties), I went into halftime, nearly caught up in my football life. Little did I know that the love I was developing for the game had sparked something inside of me I never could have imagined.

Following some halftime adjustments made for the remainder of the game, I was ready to start the second half of my football life on fire. The profanity-laced speech my coach gave at the break had me ready to run through a brick wall. Hot damn, I was pumped!

Third Quarter: Pressure to Overcome Self-Inflicted Wounds

I entered the third quarter in a double-digit hole. There was still plenty of time left in the game to overcome the deficit, but I had to move quickly. I couldn't afford any mistakes in my comeback attempt, which ramped up the pressure. Unfortunately, life will make tweaks on the fly to counter your adjustments. There is no worse feeling than being blindsided by a would-be tackler racing at you, ready to blast your head off.

That is what makes life such a mean-spirited football player. It doesn't care what odds or deficits you're trying to overcome. Life refuses to play by

the rules, forcing nervous referees to pick up the penalty flags to avoid facing its wrath. Although with the way officiating has evolved, I doubt they would throw the flag to begin with.

Perhaps the only thing worse than being blindsided is allowing a fumble of your own creation.

Writing has long been a passion of mine, and it's what I should've stuck with once I got to college. In my final semester of high school, I took a creative writing course. After years of testing out different classes, I was always led back down the writing path. It seemed like my journeyman search for a future profession was over. I figured I had found my calling. However, at the same time, I made the costly mistake of listening to outside noise, which nearly derailed my football life off the tracks.

Coaches can have a profound impact when making critical decisions about one's own football life, but taking their advice all the time isn't necessarily the wisest career move. The problem is that coaches always think they know best. That's what they're paid the big bucks for, I suppose. Most of the time, they're pulling stuff out of their asses like the rest of us. Where I erred was listening to a coach-like figure during an impressionable period of my life: high school. This individual wildly jacked up on haterade happened to be my English teacher during junior year. I remember a time during one of his daily ramblings when he told my class with zero context, "Why would *anyone* major in creative writing?"

Dick Butkus?

Dick Butkus is a Hall of Fame linebacker who played for the Chicago Bears from 1965 to 1973. Butkus was known as the most ferocious defensive player of his era. His name also sounds funny, but I wouldn't say that to his face.

He was an English teacher, so I figured he knew something I didn't. I should've known he was just a Dick Butkus. It didn't matter, as the damage was already done. Those words were seared into my brain.

The second I left my creative writing class, I buckled down to find something . . . *safe*. In professional football, there is an off-season period known as free agency where players can sign with any team they choose. Locking down a major in

college is similar to free agency in the pros. The only difference is that instead of having teams toss absurd wads of cash in my direction, *I* was the one who had to foot the bill. Gotta love college life, am I right?

As you would expect, free agency is a huge gamble. Every player longs for that perfect fit to advance their career to stardom.



Figure 5: This photo was taken during my TV-10 training shift. If you squint hard enough, you can clearly see I don't know what the hell I'm doing (Moody).

When I got to Illinois State University, I thought journalism was the perfect free agent fit for me. I wanted to go into sports broadcasting and envisioned hosting my own ESPN show or calling an NFL game for CBS or FOX. Those visions of grandeur were nutty and perhaps unattainable, but sometimes isn't that the point of our dreams?

Deep down, I had nagging doubts that I had signed with the wrong team, but I chose to ignore them. I expected they were probably nervous jitters rather than signer's remorse. Those feelings only got worse when I began working at the university's news station, TV-10 (Figure 5).

It only took two weeks for me to realize the class wasn't for me, so I dropped the course. However, I was still a weatherman during Tuesday shows on Facebook live streams for the rest of the semester.

I didn't feel as though I could use my creativity in writing for the station because the only writing I was able to do was for on-air news segments. News segments have a very specific format. Their goal is to get breaking news out in a hurry while concentrating on the five W's (who, what, when, where, why) and how the event happened. This practice is fine for that particular genre of writing, but it also meant that there was zero time to be all artsy-fartsy, which I love to do. Sure, I may be viewed as giving up on my team, but my heart was never in it. I frequently caught myself dreaming about a life that didn't involve journalism. College students flirt with free agency all the time. Some never even find the right team to go to battle for.

I used to be the player who would fully devote my loyalty to one team all my career. It didn't matter whether the organization deteriorated around me. I just had to buckle down and work for my team, ignoring whatever internal strife was boiling within me. Eventually, I had to face that I was butt fumbling my career away on a team I didn't love. There's absolutely *no* coming back from a butt fumble (Figure 6).

Similar to my football awakening, something switched on inside me which clued me into obvious signs I was missing. One being that journalism never felt like the team for me, no matter how much I tried to convince myself otherwise. I was also surrounded by talented individuals who had an undying passion for what they were creating. That just wasn't me.

Once I realized that I would never get to that point and experience true happiness in the profession, I called an audible and decided to test the free agency waters again.

Quarterbacks in the offensive huddle with their teammates can call an audible, which means changing the play call before the ball is snapped. My brief tenure with TV-10 was the perfect time to bomb the ultimate Hail Mary. That was when I decided to change my major to creative writing, much to that dopey English teacher's chagrin.

Hail Mary

A Hail Mary is a long passing play, typically an unsuccessful and desperate attempt to score late in a game. In my professional opinion, it's one of the most awe-inspiring plays in the sport. I wish teams would launch them for fun on every passing down. You only live once, you know.

I needed to find an outlet to fuel my artistic endeavors through writing. So, during the shift from journalism to English, I transformed my old reporting website into a football blog (Figure 7). It's not half bad, and feel free to tell me my head is full of cheese or I'm the G.O.A.T. (Greatest of All Time) at writing in the comments. Either one works for me. Anyway, that was my first sports writing experience. I'm certain only a handful of people (on a good day) read my work on



Figure 6: The Butt Fumble was a notorious play that occurred during a Thanksgiving Day game played between the New York Jets and New England Patriots. Jets quarterback Mark Sanchez ran into his teammate's backside and fumbled the ball where it was then scooped up by a Patriots defender for a touchdown. Scan the QR to see it for yourself. Watching it on repeat is guaranteed to brighten your day ("The Butt Fumble!").

the site, but that didn't matter to me. I was ecstatic, finally doing something I enjoyed for a change, even if I got bored with it after a couple months. I wasn't sure whether English would be the team for me initially. My blog was my only confirmation at the time that I didn't make a huge mistake with my gamble. If my brief time as a blog writer on my site taught me anything, it was that I had the drive to be in sports media. All I needed was a team willing to take a chance on me.



Figure 7: Check out this QR code to view my football blog, *All The Bacon*.

Fourth Quarter: Finding My Way Back Home (& Winning My First Super Bowl)

The story of how I got my first writing job was neither glamorous nor will it ever be adapted into a major motion picture. If it did, I would love for Keanu Reeves to portray me. I understand he looks nothing like me but please let me have this.

As the story goes, I was googling the NFL and scrolling through the top stories that particular morning. I eventually came across one titled, “Want to become an NFL writer?” from an SB Nation blog community for the Los Angeles Rams called Turf Show Times (TST). Owned by Vox Media, SB Nation is a community of 300 blogs for all professional and college sports teams in the US.

Being the die-hard Packers fan I was, it felt almost blasphemous to even consider cheating on my favorite team. I wouldn't call what I was doing *cheating* per se. Experimenting was probably more like it. But, yeah, I realize that's not much better.

The first E-mail I got was from the editor in charge of the site, who thanked me for my interest and told me about the overwhelming response his post had already generated. As part of the application process, I was given a list of questions to determine whether I would be a perfect fit for the site (Figure 8).

I answered the questions as thoroughly as possible, figuring I wouldn't get the job. Don't confuse me for a Debbie Downer who didn't believe in my abilities; I just fully expected TST would go for someone who had previous writing experience, which I didn't exactly have. My crappy little Weebly blog doesn't count (but I will keep shamelessly plugging it . . .).

How many posts per week do you think you could contribute? (It is always better to aim low with your answer than to overshoot the estimate.)

Will you be available to help cover the Rams DURING the games? (Note: 14 of their 17 games are on a SUNDAY)

Will you be available to help cover the Rams IMMEDIATELY AFTER the games?

Will you be available to help create content for the MORNING AFTER game day? (This usually requires writing on a Sunday evening for a Monday morning, or just writing Monday morning)

Strengths - There are many types of NFL writers and content creators, and we're looking for all of them! This may mean that you have a STRONG grasp of Xs and Os (coaches, players, film-obsessed fans), or you love analytics and stats, or you know how to work at a newsdesk and that deadlines are everything. Maybe you already create podcasts, videos, or have a background in social media. Or your strength could be something completely different!

Do you have a preference for what kinds of articles you'd like to create, or a specialized background related to football?

Do you have experience working a newsdesk or covering breaking news?

Do you have a background in creative writing or AP-style English? Have you worked with an editor before?

I may ask if you would write a sample Rams article -- Is that something you are okay with? Anyone who makes it a point to write a Fanpost in immediate response to this question, *thank you*.

Career Goals - I have worked with dozens of writers over the years, including ones who have gone onto key positions at SB Nation, as well as writers at The Athletic, The Ringer, and some who have gone onto work in the NFL. And there have been many others who were great writers and contributors, they simply did not aspire to do anything else outside of our websites, and that's perfectly acceptable too! They've been some of the best people and writers I've been around!

Questions:

What are your career goals? This question just helps me know how best I can serve *you*.

Figure 8: Questions asked for Turf Show Times.

The editor appreciated my swift response, a strong first impression if I do say so myself. He eventually asked me to do a 300-word fictional story on the Rams signing a Pro Bowl linebacker (Figure 9). I was told this wasn't exactly an "audition," but that's how I treated it.

Rams Make Wright Move in Signing Former Seahawks Star

Between 2012-2015, no defense struck more fear into the hearts of the NFL than the Seattle Seahawks' Legion of Boom. They were nasty, physical and who every team tried to emulate. Now, it's the Los Angeles Rams' turn to become that defense as they continue building around the likes of Aaron Donald and Jalen Ramsey. The Rams decided to do this by ransacking their NFC West rivals even further by coming to terms on a two-year deal with linebacker KJ Wright. This move hopes to accelerate the Rams' Super Bowl hopes as they surge forward through yet another strong offseason.

While the news leaves Bobby Wagner as the lone LOB member remaining (poor Hawks...jk), Wright's signing shores up a slightly questionable linebacking corps on a team that had little to worry about on defense last season when they finished number one in the league. Aside from Leonard Floyd being penciled in at OLB following a career year, the remaining competition leaves much to be desired.

Figure 9: My audition article on linebacker KJ Wright.

Quarterbacks with ice in their veins notice how everything slows down as they lead their team on a game-winning drive. That’s how I felt at that moment. I couldn’t afford to chuck the ball into double coverage and risk it being taken away by the opposing team. I would never forgive myself if my only opportunity to that point was intercepted before proving I had what it took. My post had to be a winner, which it was. The editor said I appeared to know what I was doing. Boy, did I have him fooled! He then welcomed me to the show . . . *The Greatest Show on Turf* (or at least on the interwebs).

At the time, I was among the half-dozen new writers. Football players are constantly in the spotlight so they have to develop a thick skin. The same applies to sports writing, as I can’t cry home to Mama every time a fan comments something like, “You are the stupidest person on the planet. May the opposing team bus run you over.” Or, “I really hope you get maimed by your team’s mascot while you sleep.”

Luckily those were not real comments, although creative jabs like that absolutely would have brightened my day. Sometimes I decide to be clever with my word choices, and people dislike them or take them too literally (see Figures 10–13 for QR codes to some of the articles I wrote for TST). For example, in my first year, I had a weekly post that took an inside look at teams within the Rams’ division. This particular week, their rival, the Arizona Cardinals, was blown out by the Detroit Lions. I made a play on the name of Lions quarterback Jared Goff with the headline, “Jared Goffs a triple bogey in Detroit’s win over Cardinals.” My golf terminology was panned by one fan who told me “A bogey in golf is not all that good . . . it is an over par shot.” They really didn’t have to do me *bogey* like that. I think that time I used it right.



Figure 10: In this post, I discuss 49ers fans flocking to Los Angeles for the 2022 NFC Championship.



Figure 11: In this post, I discuss Tom Brady’s retirement in 2023.



Figure 12: In this post, I discuss the 2022 Los Angeles Rams.



Figure 13: In this post, I discuss cornerback Jalen Ramsey.

If we're being really honest, I never would've gone into such a career if I was worried about what people were saying about me. You can't please everyone in the writing business. Not everyone will be singing your praises, even if you consider your latest work a masterpiece. In all honesty, having fans insulting your intelligence is the clearest sign that someone has made it as a sports analyst. As far as I know, that has not happened to me yet.

There was a time when I frequently read the comments, anxious to see what kind of debates I started between fans. I sometimes tend to stir the pot as I enjoy chaos with every fiber of my being. More on that in a moment. Soon after, I quit reading the comments because they usually had nothing to do with the content I wrote about. For example, on one post, there was a comment on the dangers of Critical Race Theory in our educational systems (yes, really), and another wanted to show their loyalty to the LA Dodgers (those bastards!).

Perhaps the final time I quit reading the comment section in its entirety was during the team's Super Bowl run. In 2016, the Rams relocated back to Los Angeles and had difficulty filling up their stadium in a congested sports market. As a result, when the team hosted the NFC Championship, they were going as far as blocking ticket sales to San Francisco 49ers fans living outside of LA due to fears of their opponent dominating the home crowd. The Rams' actions caused me to drop this snarky comment in my post on the subject: "While the Rams rushed to limit ticket sales faster than those in power trying to take away your voting rights, the team failed to realize a key foil in their diabolical plan. Did they not realize that (God forbid) some 49ers fans live in the Los Angeles area?"

For some reason, combining sports and politics strikes a chord with people. Many commenters in denial told me, "No one is stopping any American citizen from going to the polls and voting. Take your stupid political nonsense over to the CNN comment section. This is a Rams

football site, stick to football," and "Nobody is trying to take anyone's voting rights away in this country as those rights are protected by the US constitution (15th, 19th, and 26th amendments). Take that political crap and shove it up Deebo Samuel's you know what." Another fan disagreed, stating, "As someone who works in the political world, and specifically on this issue, I laughed hard at this line. It's extremely accurate, but I love how easily it was worked in." The funniest part was that I was fully expecting it to be deleted. After I finished writing

Deebo Samuel?

Deebo Samuel is a wide receiver for the San Francisco 49ers. Leading up to the NFC Championship, he called out the Rams for blocking tickets to non-Los Angeles residents.

the post, my editor told me he would publish the article himself just to put a link to ticket sales for the game. When the article was published, my jaw dropped to the floor upon seeing the line still intact.

The comments have never gotten in the way of writing what I wanted. Since that “controversial” line, I’ve covered tough topics, including how the NFL has repeatedly failed in its concussion protocol. It’s perfectly fine if people don’t agree with my viewpoints or opinions. If they don’t, whatever. Go Dodgers then.

During my first year at TST, I was paid a stipend of \$100 a month for two articles a week. That amount grew to \$300 in my second year. When I took on sponsored posts the following season, I was bringing home nearly \$1000 in stipends. My first few articles weren’t something I would ever include in my portfolio, but for the first time in what felt like a lifetime, I was proud of the content I was producing.

I was fortunate enough to cover a team with Super Bowl aspirations and one that was also very active. The Rams were constantly seeking ways to upgrade their roster throughout the season. Two such moves included a blockbuster deal where they acquired Broncos All-Pro linebacker Von Miller in a trade and then signed superstar wide receiver Odell Beckham Jr. in free agency. Following these transactions, I was tasked with grading the moves and giving initial player reactions.

Another exciting development occurred as I covered LA: They ended up making it to the Super Bowl! I’m not saying I was their lucky charm or anything. I will say that they got their act together after a few of my midseason articles called them a “pretender” rather than a “contender.” I believe their front office should’ve awarded me a ring just for the added motivation. Or at least they could’ve sent me to Disney World with the rest of the team.

Prior to the Big Game, where the Rams would be facing the Cincinnati Bengals, I had the opportunity to be interviewed by a writer from the opposing blog. I dropped a prediction saying the Rams would hold on and make a key defensive stop in the final minutes. My prediction was spoken into existence by the Rams’ defense, who sacked Cincy’s second-year quarterback Joe Burrow a record-tying *seven times* en route to a 23-20 win in their home stadium. The game actually did come down to LA making a key stop on what would’ve been at least a game-tying drive for the Bengals. Perhaps I’m psychic after all. Forget sports! I should try my newfound abilities on the lottery instead. The Powerball won’t know what hit ’em!

The Packers disappointed me earlier that postseason so celebrating my adopted team felt right. That doesn't mean I'll start calling them Dad, though.

After the game, fellow TST writers in the E-mail chain I was part of, being that we were from different parts of the country, went crazy once the clock hit triple zeroes. In the midst of cheers ranging from "Go Rams" to "World Champs," one notable comment that stuck with me from that night was, "I've never met any of you before, but I love you guys!"

It was at that moment that I realized I had finally found a team I belonged on. I wouldn't consider this writing team anywhere near to the strength of the Avengers, but on that magical night, they came pretty darn close.

Once the final remnants of confetti have dropped from the rafters and the chills have shot up my back after receiving an icy Gatorade bath, I'll be able to finally soak in the victories I have achieved in my football life.

I've come a long way and nothing about it has been easy, but that's what has made me a stronger writer. What's the fun of living a life without being presented with a challenge every once in a while? I've understood that not every decision I've made has led to a touchdown or has left me feeling the high of winning a Super Bowl.

I've learned it's OK to have pregame jitters. Those jitters led to paths I could never have imagined. There's no way I would've known I'd be writing about an NFL team after listening to my high school English teacher. I'm about to move onto the next chapter of my sports writing life. Wherever it may take me, I'll be ready.

Until then, I should probably change out of my Gatorade-drenched jersey before I catch hypothermia.

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Evan Craig graduated with a Bachelor's degree in English from Illinois State University in December 2022. When he's not writing posts about his adopted team, the LA Rams, he's probably being disappointed by the Packers yet again.