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They Taught America How to Watch Football

THE COACH AS GENERAL. THE PLAYERS AS GLADIATORS. ED SABOL AND HIS SON, STEVE, HAVE SPENT THE PAST HALF CENTURY AT NFL FILMS, INVENTING THE TROPES OF MODERN FOOTBALL. COLOR, SLOW MOTION, UBIQUITOUS CAMERAS AND MICROPHONES, THE OMNISCIENT NARRATOR INVOKING THE LANGUAGE OF WAR—THE SABOLS PIONEERED ALL OF THIS AND, IN SO DOING, HELPED MAKE FOOTBALL THE NATIONAL GAME.

By [Rich Cohen](#)

Update: Steve Sabol passed away on September 18, 2012.

In the summer of 1968, Steve Sabol went on the road. He was driving a beat-up old car with the windows open. From Pennsylvania to Ohio to Indiana, the towns drifted by, the neon vacancy signs outside the motels, the taverns, the fields where the high-school football teams played. Steve was 26, strong as a horse, his hair too long for the Podunk provinces. He had a reel-to-reel projector in the backseat, the kind every randy best man used to drag to stag parties in the 1950s. Each night, he set up in another wood-paneled room where, after the Kiwanians or Rotarians or Boy Scouts had finished their business, he showed his movie. He was stumping like a politician, building an audience for a film he'd made guerrilla-style, with nothing but a few thousand dollars and a vision. He wanted to show football as it might have been shown by the old Hollywood directors: the game as directed by John Ford.

They Call It Pro Football was produced by NFL Films, a small company Steve's father, Ed, had founded as Blair Productions in 1962. After Steve had first shown it in New York several months earlier, NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle shook his hand and said, "That's not a highlight film, it's a real movie." But none of the TV networks were interested, so Steve had to find his viewers, one screening at a time, amassing an audience that would eventually be among the most prized in the marketplace. But even in the beginning, when there was just this determined kid and a weird movie that could not find a distributor, all the elements were there: speed, color, narrative. The first line of *They Call It Pro Football* sets the tone: "It starts with a whistle and ends with a gun." A primer on the game itself, with passages dedicated to "the linemen," "the quarterbacks," and so on, the movie is a collection of dramatic images, explained, glorified, set to music. It came to define the aesthetic of modern, hyper--

vivid sports coverage, taking viewers inside the huddle, letting them hear the collisions and understand the coaches' tactics. It turned every game into Waterloo and every player into an epic hero. It taught America how to watch football.

The bloody fingers of the lineman, the clouds of breath on the cold, clear day, the chewed-up turf, Gale Sayers pulling away from the last defender like a driver who had discovered a seventh gear (Sayers in the film: "Sixteen inches of daylight, that's all I need"), the uncertain wobble of a mid-flight football—and always the heroic voice-over: "Special men in a special game. A uniquely American game with a history as rich and as rugged as the country in which it was born." It was all there, crystallized, perfected. If Steve showed it to kids on a Friday, they'd be in their yards early the next morning, the narrator's voice running through their heads as the receiver ran the hook-and-ladder: "His range carries him into heavy traffic, or through the shifting dangers of a broken field ... Men on the run, measuring their survival by the twist of a shoulder."

That voice, the NFL Films voice—Steve calls it "the voice of God"—would become more than a sports narrator: for those of us who grew up in the 1970s and '80s, it remains the voice in our heads, lending drama to even the most mundane decisions ("Cohen knew the tortilla chips were old, possibly stale, but hunger is a beast that first devours the mind of a man"). For many years, that voice belonged to John Facenda, a Philadelphia broadcaster, though others have filled the role as well. In 1969, for instance, Burt Lancaster narrated *Big Game America*—he took the gig in return for a football signed by Johnny Unitas—because, as I said, Steve wanted to show the game as it would've been shown by Hollywood.

They Call It Pro Football finally made it to television in 1969. It was shown early in the morning, late at night. Junk time. Garbage hour. Just ask Fidel Castro: all revolutions begin in the sticks.

VIDEO: From a fairy tale about Joe Namath to an intimate look at Tim Tebow, highlights from five decades of NFL Films

NFL Films is located in Mount Laurel, New Jersey, a suburb of Philadelphia. The sprawling complex and the parking lot, with its gleaming rows of Mercedes and Saabs, speak of the success of *They Call It*

Pro Football and the hundreds of movies and millions of miles of footage that have followed. The company has produced some 10,000 features since 1964, and supplies hundreds of hours of content a year to HBO, ESPN, ABC, Fox, CBS, and Showtime, including the highlights played during halftime and the features for the Sunday pregame shows. NFL Films generates 25 percent of all content for the NFL Network, including award-winning shows such as *Hard Knocks* and *America's Game*. In 2004, the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences gave Steve and his father, Ed, its Lifetime Achievement Emmy—one of 107 Emmys the company has won over the years. In 2011, Ed was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame, a signature recognition for a man who neither played nor coached.

But all of this actually understates the company's achievement. Slow motion, color, extreme close-up, ubiquitous microphones and cameras, omniscient voice-over: the Sabols pioneered the style of modern sports coverage. There are no secrets in the Sabols' NFL. Everything is revealed. As much as George Halas and Sid Luckman, or Tom Landry and Roger Staubach, it was Ed and Steve who created the modern game, a contest more in tune with the speed and violence of modern America than any other sport. Baseball? Please! Nine angels dancing on the head of a pin. Football is blood and guts, the ticking clock, sudden death, the sack, the blitz, the bomb—symbols of a nation locked in endless war. Almost every detail of the game has come to the attention of its fans through the sensibilities of the Sabols. Asked to describe his goals, Steve paraphrased Matisse: "The importance of an artist is bringing new signs into a language."

"This is the last Hollywood studio," one producer told me. "It never gets old. Peyton Manning is injured? Here comes Tebow, Gronkowski."

The headquarters of NFL Films is 200,000 square feet of photo labs, orchestra pits, recording studios, and endless stretches of gray hallway lined with photos of great players, the gladiatorial forebears who have been gathered and incorporated into the narrative. One shows a group of men playing on a field next to a house that's on fire. Because only the game matters. "This is the last Hollywood studio," a young producer named Ken Rodgers told me. "We have the best subject and the best stars. It never gets old. Peyton Manning is injured? Here comes Tebow, Gronkowski. It's a never-ending drama."

Rodgers was at his desk, watching footage from a recent game and writing the narration that would accompany the banner plays. "If there's a hard run where a guy bounces off a couple tacklers, we won't say 'Marshawn Lynch ran for 42 yards on a touchdown to tie the game at 17,'" he told me. "That doesn't mean anything, if you watched the game. We'll write something like 'The power in his legs was matched only by the fearlessness in his heart.'"

When I asked Rodgers to explain what he was trying to capture, he told me about his first time watching the game from the sideline, during the 2001 season. "It was a Jets game," he said. "Curtis Martin takes a handoff and runs to the sideline. A defender comes up, and they collide right in front of me. I thought they were both dead. Two people that big, that fast, hitting each other full speed—I thought I'd witnessed a murder. Then they jump up and run back, and I saw it 30 more times in the next hour, and I realized that what you see from the stands is nothing. That's what we want to show people: what it's really like."

The focal point of NFL Films, the destination of every hallway and every movie, is the vault. Ed Sabol sold his company to the league in 1964 and became the official historian of the NFL, charged with

collecting old footage as well as filming every game. The fruit of that labor is here, 50,000 cans arranged sequentially in a room chilled to 55 degrees Fahrenheit. In this film, you see the Pottsville Maroons, a memory of the ancient, industrial-city NFL, play for a title in 1925. In that one, you see a 1934 battle between the Giants and the College All-Stars, the first game recorded in color. The collection even includes the oldest football game on film: Princeton versus Rutgers, 1894. Skinny, upright men in sepia tone run into each other at the sound of an unheard signal. *It starts with a whistle and ends with a gun.* Like the Constitution under glass, it's a holy relic: the original football movie, father of thousands, shot by Thomas Edison himself.

I talked with Steve Sabol in his office, a room of souvenirs and windows: bobbleheads, photographs, parking lot, office buildings, sky. He raised a hand, waving goodbye to a compact, gray-haired guy who grinned and thanked Steve for all the good he's done. This was Dick Vermeil, retired now, but for many years a dominating coach, first of the Philadelphia Eagles, then of the St. Louis Rams. Steve helped Vermeil make his name when he was young, helped transform him from a tiny figure in the distance into an icon. It happened one Sunday in 1977, when Steve's cameras caught Vermeil helping a young quarterback, Ron Jaworski, through the kind of rough patch that, if handled wrongly, can mean trouble.

"It was one of those days where things weren't going well in Philadelphia, and the fans were on my ass, booing," Jaworski told me. "Dick pulls me out—we were wired—and says, 'You never have to worry about me jerking you from a game. I don't care what the fans say. You're my quarterback.' It was a personal moment on the sidelines, and NFL Films got it. They still show it when they talk about young quarterbacks. It meant everything." It was just the sort of moment that characterized NFL Films: taking viewers not just inside the game, but inside the psyches of the men on the field.

Steve is 6 foot nothing and was wearing tennis shoes, a purple sweater, and chinos. He is a buoyant man, but his hair is thin, his hands shaky. He's 69, but that's the least of it. The fact is, Steve Sabol is ill. It happened like this: Steve was in Kansas City, where he was about to receive the Lamar Hunt Award, listening to the speaker before him, thinking through his own routine of anecdotes and morals. He began feeling light-headed, foggy, and a blackness appeared at the edge of his vision. Then he was through the looking glass, in another place, another stage of his life: at a hospital across town, with a guy in a lab coat shining a light in his eyes, asking *Can you tell me your name? Do you know who you are?* "And that was the scariest moment of all, the one time I experienced terror," Steve told me, "because, no, I did not know my name, and no, I did not know who I was."

Steve had suffered a seizure at his table, passed out, and been carried away unconscious. The doctors put him in a room and waited for his memory to return. Two days later, it did, but not his ability to speak. (This happened more than a year ago, and Steve still suffers from slight aphasia: his thoughts are clear, but when he tries to speak what's on his mind, he often cannot find the words, or the words come out wrong.) He was flown home to Philadelphia, where the doctors discovered an inoperable brain tumor. He's been undergoing weekly blasts of radiation, which have shrunk the tumor but left Steve tired and frustrated. His entire life has been about communicating the ineffable—the perfect music, the perfect picture, the exact word for the moment—and now even the smallest turn of phrase requires tremendous concentration.

Steve was reluctant to have his story told. He had turned down the reporters who contacted him when

news of his illness went public, fearing they would write the kind of living obituary he hates. “The last thing I want is to be portrayed as a ghost haunting this place while I’m still alive,” he told me. But he did want to talk about NFL Films, how it had changed not just football but American movies and culture. He wanted to talk about his father, too, “a salesman pure and simple, who made us seem big even when we were small. He was the only one who could talk the old coaches into letting us on the sidelines and into the locker rooms, letting us mic them up for sound,” Steve explained. “They would say ‘Absolutely not.’ Then he would sit them down and say ‘We’re going to make you bigger than John Wayne!’ ”

Though Steve worked with his father all his life, important parts of Ed Sabol’s story remained mysterious. “I have no idea what really happened during World War II, even though it was clearly crucial,” Steve explained.

Ed Sabol had returned from Europe in possession of experiences that changed his approach to everything, and caused him to think in ways important to the development of NFL Films. “I’ve asked about it again and again,” Steve told me, “but the most he’ll say is that it was the worst time of his life, and that he was so scared, he did not take a shit for nine days.”

The Father

I met Ed Sabol at his spread in Scottsdale, Arizona, where he lives with Audrey, his wife of 71 years. Ed is 95 years old now, and in a wheelchair, but he had a glass of whiskey in his hand. He described a scene to me: 1944, Ed in fatigues, sitting on his helmet amid a sea of soldiers east of Paris. Behind him, in a panorama, are tents and war machines, infantry preparing for the drive into Germany. He’s listening with rapt attention to a white-haired general sporting a whip and antique pistols. It’s George S. Patton, motivating the men for battle, turning them, phrase by phrase, from lawyers and farmers into killers. *Courage is fear holding out a minute longer. No bastard ever won a war by dying for his country. He won it by making the other poor dumb bastard die for his country.* “I saw Patton give one of his famous speeches,” Ed told me. “It was in a field in the middle of nowhere, and we were terrified, but he was magnificent, a real showman. He knew how important the theatrical things are at the brutal moments. As long as he was talking, we were not afraid.”

“I saw Patton give one of his famous speeches,” Ed said. “He was a tough son of a bitch, and I admired him.” Patton would become a model for how NFL coaches are portrayed.

I seized on this image—Ed on his helmet, listening to Patton—because it’s a key to the culture of sport depicted in NFL Films. The idea of football as the game of field commanders was evident from the first Sabol production. Patton outside Paris was the prototype for Paul Brown with his fedora, for Vince Lombardi with his sayings that echoed those of the general (*Winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing*), for Bill Parcells with his years at West Point. Each of these iconic coaches was the general in another guise, on another field of battle. Patton “told us we were going to kill those cocksuckers, go into their houses, take their broads, blow them all to hell,” Ed told me. “He was a tough son of a bitch, and I admired him.”

Ed Sabol was born in Atlantic City in 1916 and grew up outside Philadelphia, where his dad ran a clothing store on the fringes of the Jewish rag trade. From age 5, he spent every summer at Blue Mountain Camp, in the Poconos, where he became a top-notch swimmer. After high school, he went

for a few college-prep years at Blair Academy, a boarding school in Blairstown, New Jersey. This is where Ed had his first great success, the one that gave him the confidence that's carried him through life. "In 1935, when I was 18, I set a world high-school swimming record for the 100-yard freestyle," he told me. "I went back in 1936 and broke it again." Precise details from the era are tough to pin down, but according to Ed and others, he took that record from Johnny Weissmuller, who, in addition to winning five Olympic gold medals, went on to play Tarzan in Hollywood. Before turning 20, Ed Sabol had whipped the King of the Jungle.

He wound up at Ohio State, where he gradually gave up swimming for the dream of becoming a movie star. "I went out for the dramatic club, got in some plays, loved it," he told me. In late 1937, he dropped out of school and moved to New York. "I started making the rounds, going up and down Broadway," he said. "One day, I got lucky. There was a show opening called *Where Do We Go From Here?* It was about college. I go to the office, and who is there but Oscar Hammerstein." Ed got the part. The show opened two weeks later, and closed two weeks after that. Ed's parents were living in Florida by then, and he reluctantly moved down to help his father run the store he owned. "That was the end of my film career," Ed said. "I thought it was the end of my life, too."

It was in Miami that Ed courted Audrey Siegel, whom he'd known years before when she'd spent summers at the girls' camp across the lake from Blue Mountain. Married in 1941, they moved to Philly, where Ed took a job with Audrey's father, a coat manufacturer. Their son, Steve, was born in October 1942, 10 months after the United States entered World War II. Ed was drafted and landed on Utah Beach, in France, as one of the grunts in the gunwales of the big attack craft that went *boom, boom* as the clouds closed the sky. "Not D-Day," he told me: "D-Day plus 10, thank God." Toward the end of the war, he found himself in Paris, which he helped liberate: "Eighteen abreast down the Champs-Élysées, flowers, broads, everything. I thought I was in heaven, but then we went east. I got as far as the Hürtgen Forest. I got shell-shocked, I guess. They sent me to rest in the back lines. General Patton didn't like [guys like me]. He said, 'You stay up and shoot until you get killed.'" Ed took a slug of whiskey, then told me, "Jesus, I hated the Army."

When Ed came home, in 1945, he went meekly back to the workplace of his father-in-law. This was the era of the Man in the Gray Flannel Suit, who embraced the mundane not because he was boring, but because he had killed a man with his bare hands. Ed worked in the coat business for a dozen years, until his father-in-law decided to retire and sell his factory, splitting the proceeds between his children. For Ed, it was the first freedom he had tasted since he'd given up on stardom.

He was 40 years old, handsome, optimistic, rich. He had three things he wanted to do: learn to fly a plane (he mastered a Cessna), travel the world (he hopscotched Asia), and make movies. Ed had always been interested in film. He'd been given a camera for his wedding, a 16-millimeter Bell + Howell, and he documented everything: his daughter, Blair, taking her first bubble bath, Steve's first bike ride, snowball fights, trips to town—all captured and set to music. It had been a great hobby, but now he wanted to make it something more. He started a company, Blair Productions, named after his daughter, who was named after the school where he had whipped Tarzan as a swimmer. He went to the Bahamas, where he combined his two great passions, piloting a Cessna above the islands while, with his free hand, shooting the beaches and hotels, roads, dunes, and pools. Ed cut the footage into a visual hymn to the Caribbean, then sold it to the Bahamian Tourist Bureau: his first credit.

When Ed got home, he noticed a Howard Johnson's hotel going up near his house. He set up his camera in front of the construction site, which was nothing but girders and holes in the ground, shot a few frames, then came back each morning for the same shot until the building was complete. When the frames were run together, he had a beautiful time-lapse film of a building rising from nothing. Ed sold it to Howard Johnson's: his second credit.

Ed had become increasingly interested in football as a subject, particularly Steve's games at the Haverford School, outside Philadelphia—the color, the violence, the story lines that seemed to emerge naturally from the game. Ed started on the sideline but, always in search of the God's-eye view, eventually built a rickety wooden tower beside the field. The school tolerated him for the same reason NFL owners would years later: the film was invaluable, allowing the coach to study team strengths and weaknesses that could be recognized only from above. Ed began editing the footage into high-school epics, with slow motion and music. Some of these sepia beauties survive. In one, you see young Steve carrying the ball behind his blockers, finding a hole, then wandering through as if in a dream, as if rolling downhill, as if following a kind of logic.

“Our game lends itself to the majestic,” the Hall of Fame quarterback Joe Theismann told me. “Ed Sabol figured all that out early.”

The footage, the movies, the reaction of Steve and his teammates—all of it gave Ed ideas. Simply put, he looked at the films then being made about pro football and thought, *I can do better*. Each year, the film rights to the NFL Championship Game were sold at auction to the sort of companies that made black-and-white industrial shorts with titles like *Zinc: It Makes the Body Strong*. Many of the football films were made by TelRa Productions, which compiled highlight reels, the field seen through a single, static camera high in the stands. The music was marching bands, the B-roll was pennant-waving crowds, the narration was Eisenhower-era corn, such as: “Milt Plum pegged a peach of a pass to become the apple of coach George Wilson's eye.”

Ed wanted to shoot in color, roll many cameras, record everything in slow motion, set the action to dramatic music. TelRa wrote news; Ed wanted to create myths. “Our game lends itself to the majestic,” Joe Theismann, the All-Pro quarterback, told me. “The way you can slow it down, isolate the spin on the ball, the different emotions you can show—Ed Sabol figured all that out early.”

In 1962, Blair Productions entered a bid for the rights to film the NFL Championship Game. Having learned that the previous year's rights had gone for \$2,500, Ed offered \$3,000. When he finally heard from Pete Rozelle, the commissioner told him that he'd made the top offer, but that didn't mean he'd get the rights. Rozelle had never heard of Blair Productions, and when he looked through its scant credits, he saw titles such as *The Sabols at the Seashore*, *All About Ice Cream*, and *Bahamas Bound*. The company's only sports films featured Steve Sabol's prep-school team. Rozelle asked Ed to explain why he was more than a hobbyist with money to burn. Ed went in and pitched, which was his thing, his gift. He came away with not just the rights but an ally who would prove crucial in the coming years.

Ed went to work, hiring cameramen and soundmen. The game, Packers versus Giants, was played at Yankee Stadium on December 30, 1962. (Ed filmed an establishing shot of New York City from his Cessna.) It was 15 degrees at kickoff. The cameras jammed, the film cracked. Ed built a fire in the dugout to thaw his equipment. He told his men to get as much as they could, to film everything, then he threw the reels in a sack, figuring he would save what he could in the edit room. The movie was

shown a few weeks later to football people and press at the midtown restaurant Toots Shor's, a legendary haunt of Hemingway and Mantle and Gleason and Sinatra.

The room was dark and quiet, save for the clink of glasses and the pop of champagne corks. And there it was: the tundra of Yankee Stadium, the players on the field, Bart Starr and Y. A. Tittle, the kickoff, the ball high in the bitter air, the move and countermove. Whereas previous football films had depicted the game in the way of college contests—bobby soxers and pennant-wavers—Ed Sabol had made a war movie. “The Packers’ iconic Lombardi, pacing the sidelines in his camel-hair coat, took on the aspect of a general leading his troops into war,” Michael MacCambridge writes in his 2004 book, *America’s Game*. “And the action that had unfolded too quickly to be fully absorbed live revealed itself to be a carefully orchestrated series of troop movements, captured in close-up and slow motion by Sabol’s cameras.”

The crowd at Toots Shor’s, restless at first, turned quiet, respectful. Even Sabol’s title—*Pro Football’s Longest Day*—suggested war, echoing the name of the Hollywood D-Day blockbuster *The Longest Day*, a title that itself drew from Kipling’s great war poem “Gunga Din”: “’E would dot an’ carry one / till the longest day was done.” Ed had borrowed the title of a movie that told the story of his own landing at Normandy. Starting with this first film, he seemed to run his worst experiences through the prism of football, turning Patton into Lombardi, torment into entertainment, slowing everything down until it made sense.

Seen today, that first movie seems primitive, with one foot still in the world of TelRa Productions. But the elements that would gradually come to characterize NFL Films were there. When the lights came up at Toots Shor’s, Rozelle clapped Ed on the back and said, “That’s the best damn football movie I’ve ever seen.”

Sabol secured rights to the next two Championship Games, but the price kept climbing: \$10,000, \$17,000. He was a victim of his own success. In the previous era, the title-game film had been a vanity project, made for the archives and for team owners. By reinventing the film for a general audience, Ed showed there was money to be made, raising the price for the rights in a way that threatened to drive him out of a market he had invented.

After the 1964 game, Ed went to Rozelle with a proposition. To hell with all this bidding: the league should buy Blair Productions and rename it NFL Films. It was time for the league to have its own media wing, to control its own image and sell its own product. Despite the misgivings of some of the old owners, Rozelle agreed, and the league bought Ed’s company for less than \$1 million. Ed, who continued to run the company, was put on the league payroll at \$30,000 a year. In addition to the Championship Game, he would now film every game on the schedule. In 1965, he sold the syndication rights for the first weekly football show, *NFL Game of the Week*. The following year, a Packers highlight movie opened with a full minute of film shot in the trenches during World War I.

The Son

Another Sabol, another image: Steve, sitting on his football helmet in 1962, in the middle of a stadium in the Rockies, as his coach paces the sideline. Steve is a starting fullback at Colorado College, in Colorado Springs, which is not as great as it sounds—Division III, “a nothing thing,” Steve told me. But still, he is a player in the only game that matters.

I seized on this image of Steve, the son who will bring the Sabol project to fruition, in part because it shows the difference between generations: one that came of age during the Great Depression, that dreamed of Broadway but gave it all up for family obligation, that sat on helmets as Patton barked; the other that came of age in the '60s, that sat on helmets as college coaches used the language of war. Woven together, these generations—father and son, scarcity and surplus—created the aesthetic of modern football.

The football team at Colorado was a tough nut to crack: even Division III coaches want to win. To improve his odds of getting on the field, when asked to write a few biographical facts for the program, Steve changed his birthplace from Villanova to Coaltown Township—because Villanova means a trophy-filled room where a kid stays up late doing extra credit, but Coaltown means Johnny Unitas and Joe Namath and working harder than anyone else because it's better than getting black lung in the mines. "Everybody knows that western Pennsylvania is where the studs come from," Steve explained. He added a nickname to complete the picture: "Sudden Death." When this didn't work, he doubled down, keeping the nickname but choosing an even more colorful birthplace: Possum Trot, Mississippi. He began sending press releases to the newspapers, extolling his own virtues. In some, he referred to himself as "the Prince of Pigskin Pageantry now at the Pinnacle of his Power." He had hats made, postcards, buttons. He wrote a column for the school paper, titled Here's a Lot From Possum Trot. His self-publicizing was successful enough that, remarkably, he was covered in the November 22, 1965, issue of *Sports Illustrated*: "[The Fearless Tot From Possum Trot.](#)"

All the while, Steve was working like a dog, running, lifting, getting bigger. He was up to 210 pounds by his junior year. When the coach finally took notice, he was ready. He started in short-yardage situations, grunting, grimacing, bucking the line. Steve downplays his college career, but it defined him—not the games themselves, but the lessons he took from his own self-invention. That people are always hungry for a more interesting story. That if you put the pictures on the screen, the audience will fill them out with their own fantasies. Steve was an art major, and his mother, Audrey, an art dealer. When Steve wasn't on the football field, he was studying images.

When Steve went to work full-time at NFL Films in 1964, he arrived with a sense of mission. Ed had sketched the outline; Steve would jam it full of color, character, incident. The game had always been seen from a distance: the backsides of the linemen in three-point stance, the pile of bodies. Steve wanted to open the game like a sandwich, peer inside, show people things they'd never been able to see. He would take them onto the field, into the locker rooms—even into the huddle, the most sacred place in pro sports.

Steve began experimenting in the mid-1960s, pioneering techniques that still define sports coverage, documentary film, even reality TV. He was the first to mic a coach, the first to use pop music in sports films, the first to diagram a play onscreen. He put cameras everywhere. He kept filming the QB after he had thrown the ball and was tackled, showing fans what it's like when the wall of pain arrives.

Steve hired former NFL players to work the cameras, because they could better anticipate where the play was going. "I remember watching the camerawork, saying to myself, *How do those guys do that?*" said Hank McElwee, a cameraman and the director of photography at NFL Films. "They were getting angles you had never seen. On TV, you'd always see the shot from the main camera, which sits high above the stadium—never any handhelds. And here was this little company doing slow motion, doing

sound. They were on the field. I remember saying ‘Boy, that really makes you feel like you’re part of the game.’ ”

There’s a degree of Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle in all this: by observing the game, the Sabols changed it. Their movies taught a generation of kids who became players how to behave onscreen. It made them self-conscious. “I remember the first player who looked into the lens and said ‘Hi, Mom.’ I thought it was the end of everything,” Steve told me. “ ‘We can’t capture it anymore. The players are thinking about us as much as we’re thinking about them.’ But I was wrong. In the end, the performance became another part of the game.” If you want to understand football, don’t look at Jim Brown or John Elway or Tom Brady, Steve explained. Look at Homer Jones, a receiver for the Giants in the 1960s. Players used to hand the ball to the referee after scoring, or toss it to the fans. Jones, wanting to distinguish himself, whipped it into the turf instead. The first spike. You can go from there to Billy “White Shoes” Johnson’s end-zone dance, Ickey Woods’s shuffle, Terrell Owens’s Sharpie, Rob Gronkowski’s antics. In the modern game, the camera is the 12th man, another participant in the unfolding drama.

As Steve’s ambition grew, Ed slowly stepped away, turning the operation over to his son little by little and year by year, until, before anyone quite registered the fact, it was Steve in the huddle and Ed in the skybox, where the shrimp plates drift by in schools. Steve began to experiment with techniques pioneered by New Wave French auteurs: quick cut, montage. He wanted to make real films. In a 1965 sequence, he showed the Chicago Bears QB Rudy Bukich throwing a ball in Wrigley Field, then cut to the L.A. Coliseum, where Mike Ditka made a beautiful catch. George Halas, the iconic Bears coach, called NFL Films in a rage. He wanted to know how it was possible to catch a ball in L.A. that was thrown in Chicago. *What does Bukich have, a fucking intercontinental arm?* In such situations, Ed would get on the phone and work his magic, speak of legacy, mythology, film techniques. “This is going to record and preserve your life’s work,” he explained. “It’s something your grandkids will appreciate.” When that failed, he’d go to his fallback line: “You’ll be bigger than John Wayne!” It took a dozen years, but Halas finally caught up with NFL Films, praising the Sabols as “keepers of the flame.”

Steve and his colleagues had a handful of models, Hollywood films they believed they could emulate: *The Magnificent Seven* for the music, the Gregory Peck movie *Duel in the Sun* for close-ups of fingers and hands during the climactic battle in the mountains. The French director Claude Lelouch’s *A Man and a Woman* convinced Steve that even the most familiar events could be worked into drama. He began commissioning original scores for his films; many were written by the composer Sam Spence, then recorded by full orchestras in Europe. With the right music, he explained, “you can make a coin toss seem like Armageddon.”

In 1967, Steve brought in John Facenda, the Philadelphia newscaster who became “the voice of God.” Facenda knew nothing about the game, but he could deliver a line. The scripts were the key, of course, and Steve wrote many of them himself. He was particular about the language, wanting everything jacked up, squeezed for drama. When I asked him to name his literary influences, he said, “Kipling and Poe.” (Kipling again, whose poem had given a title to a war movie that gave its title to his dad’s first championship film.) Where sports narrative had tended toward the descriptive, Steve strove for the literary. His words did not describe the action—they accompanied it, amplified it. “Rage was part of [Mike] Curtis’s anatomy. Like a muscle, he flexed it and built it up”; “There’s glory in the legends of

this hard-muscle life, and there's poetry in each season made of sweat and strife"; "As for the Patriots, Gertrude Stein would have said, 'Instead of going the way they were going, they went back the way they had come.'"

When I told Ken Rodgers I thought it'd be funny if the writers drafted scripts in a literary voice other than Kipling's, he said, "We've done that." He then sent me a copy of a show called "Highlights for Highbrows," which narrates the most notorious game in Giants history—in which the quarterback, Joe Pisarcik, fumbled with seconds left, resulting in an Eagles touchdown that ended the Giants' 1978 playoff run—in the style of J. D. Salinger. "If you really want to know about it," the film opens, "the first thing you probably want to know is why I didn't just fall on the ball and run out the clock and all that John Madden crap."

"I remember the first player who looked into the lens and said 'Hi, Mom,'" Steve said. "I thought it was the end of everything. But I was wrong."

But it all went back to *They Call It Pro Football*, the movie in which Steve created the template: for the highlight reel, the sports film, the backyard fantasy. Everything flowed from that film, a headwater that marks the place where the modern sports flick was born. Others might go back still further, to certain scenes in Michael Curtiz's epic *Jim Thorpe: All American*, or the CBS special "[The Violent World of Sam Huff](#)," but I start with Steve driving his reel-to-reel from Kiwanis Club to rec center to auditorium. If this were a movie about Steve, you would cut straight from him stumping in the hinterlands to him, a little older now, taking over from his father, building the company into a behemoth as he shoots and cuts, screens and sells the string of films that helped turn football into the national game:

Championship Chase (1974), *The Road to the Super Bowl* (1978), *Joe and the Magic Bean* (1977), *Hard Knocks* (2001).

We live in a bourgeois society, where works of art—those that attract a large audience, anyway—teach you how to consume, or else make the process of consumption more pleasurable. Ed and Steve Sabol taught the average fan how to consume football: where to look, what to notice, when to exult. They revealed the game inside the game, the story beneath the story. In doing so, they helped football achieve its paramount position in American culture. Football is among the last entertainments that still draw a mass audience. Everyone is watching, or in the vicinity of someone who is.

No one can say what the future will be for NFL Films. The company is healthy and booming, but Ed is ailing and Steve has cancer, the prognosis of which depends on whom you ask. He may have decades, or his reign may be nearing its end. But the Sabols' legacy is already known: it's the 100 million-plus people who tune in to the Super Bowl. Why did football surpass baseball? Because football is perfect for the TV screen, which is actually shaped like a football field; because football is at once the most intellectual and the most brutal game in the world, in which the coaches think while the players bleed; because we love to see people knocked silly. But also, perhaps even primarily, because football mints the kind of uniquely vivid images that the Sabols could spin, over and over, into a Kipling poem about war.

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