Learning A–Z	level Q	Multi-level	N/A
Grade	3	Word Count	960
Lexile	950L	Nonfiction • Informational	

Refer to the Focus Question on page 2 of this title to guide discussion and support additional learning connected to the text.

The action-packed sport of **American Football** excites spectators around the globe. Students will be interested to learn about the sport's origin as well as how the game is played. Amazing photos and diagrams support the text. Part of the Spectacular Sports Series, this book is also available for levels H and X.

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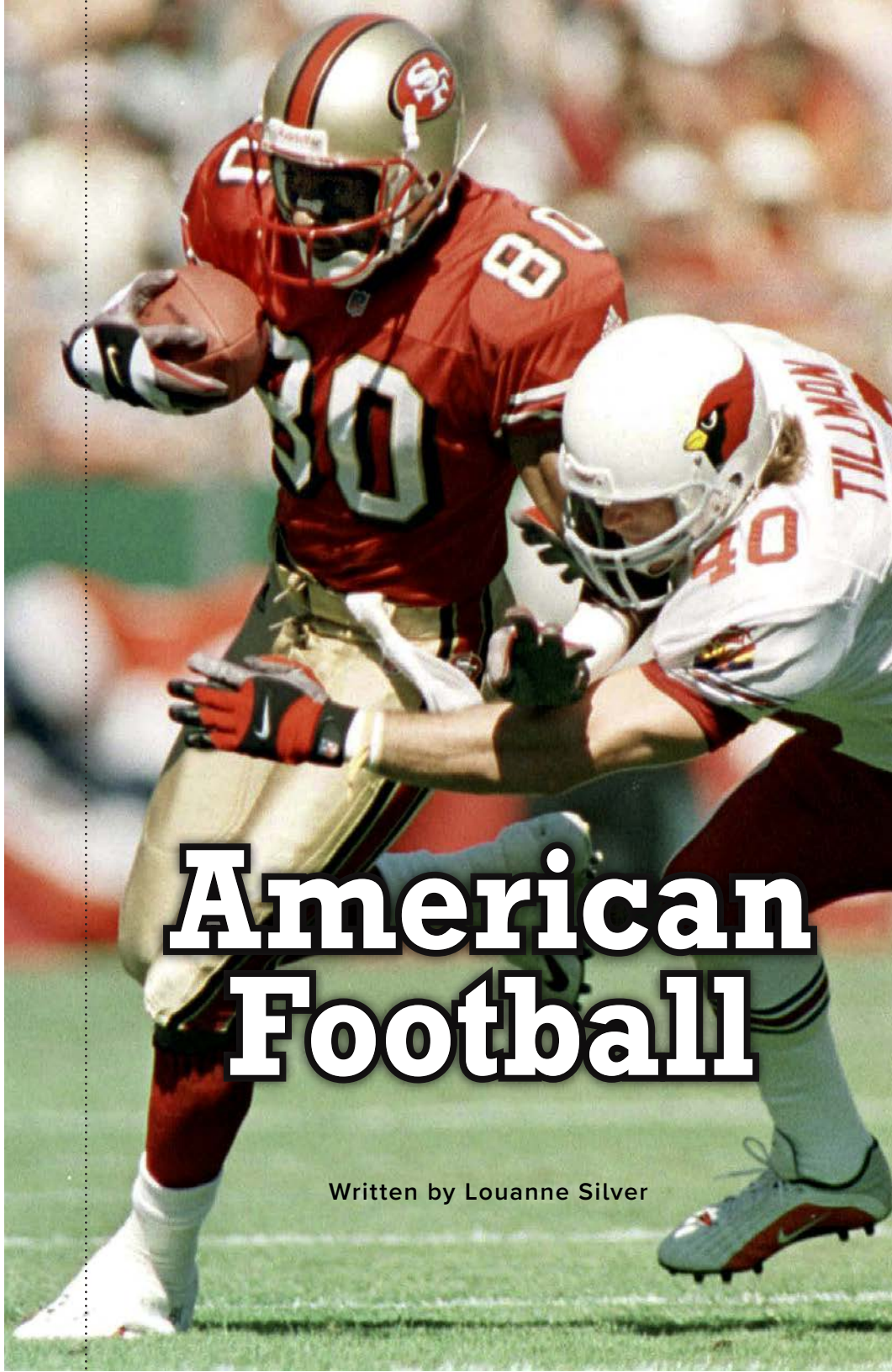

American Football

Written by Louanne Silver

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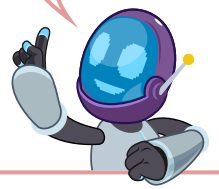
Cover: Arizona Cardinals safety Pat Tillman (right) tackles San Francisco 49ers wide receiver Jerry Rice (left) in San Francisco in 2000.

Page 3: Georgia running back Todd Gurley (right) dives into the end zone for a touchdown as Kentucky cornerback Jaleel Hytchye (left) defends in a game in Athens, Georgia.

Focus Question

What is American football, and how did it become America's favorite sport?



Words to Know

- championship
- defensive
- end zone
- kickoff
- offensive line
- platoons
- quarterback
- spectacular
- wide receiver

Connections

Writing

Do you think American football players should have to wear the football gear shown in the book? Why or why not? Write a persuasive essay using details from the book to support your answer.

Social Studies

Choose a football legend mentioned in the book. Research to learn more about him. Create a trading card for the football player that includes a picture on the front and details about his life and football career on the back.

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"The Tackle" is one of the most dramatic moments in Super Bowl history.

Six Seconds to Go

The date is January 30, 2000. The Tennessee Titans and the St. Louis Rams are playing in the Super Bowl, American football's greatest game. With the Rams ahead 23-16, the Titans are at the Rams' 10-yard line. There are only six seconds left in the game. Titans **quarterback** Steve McNair passes the ball to **wide receiver** Kevin Dyson, whose outstretched arm comes up just 1 yard (0.91 m) short of the **end zone**. The crowd goes wild as the Rams win their first Super Bowl **championship**.

With exciting game endings like this, it isn't hard to see why the **spectacular** sport of American football is something to cheer about.

America's Favorite Sport

American football is the most popular sport in the United States. More fans attend football games and watch football games on TV than any other sport. About seventy thousand fans attend each National Football League (NFL) game. The NFL's championship game—the Super Bowl—is one of the biggest sports events in the world.

The Philadelphia Eagles are entering the field to play against the St. Louis Rams at Lincoln Financial Field in Philadelphia.

Nations of the International Federation of American Football

Football in Other Countries

About seventy countries around the world have American football teams. The sport is not as popular as some other sports, but interest in the game is growing.

Canada has had its own form of football for more than one hundred years. Canadian football is like American football. However, the field size, number of players, and some of the rules are different.

Arena football, an indoor version of American football, has been around since the 1980s. Its fast games take place on a small playing field.

A New Sport Is Born

Walter Camp is the "Father of American Football."

In the late 1860s and early 1870s, students at several North American schools started playing two games from England. Soccer, which is also called *football* in parts of the world, was mainly played with the feet. Rugby (short for *rugby football*) was played with hands as well as feet.

Yale, in Connecticut, was one of the schools that played rugby. Walter Camp, a Yale student from 1876 to 1881, suggested changes to the game's rules. Over time, modern American football was born.

Pigskin

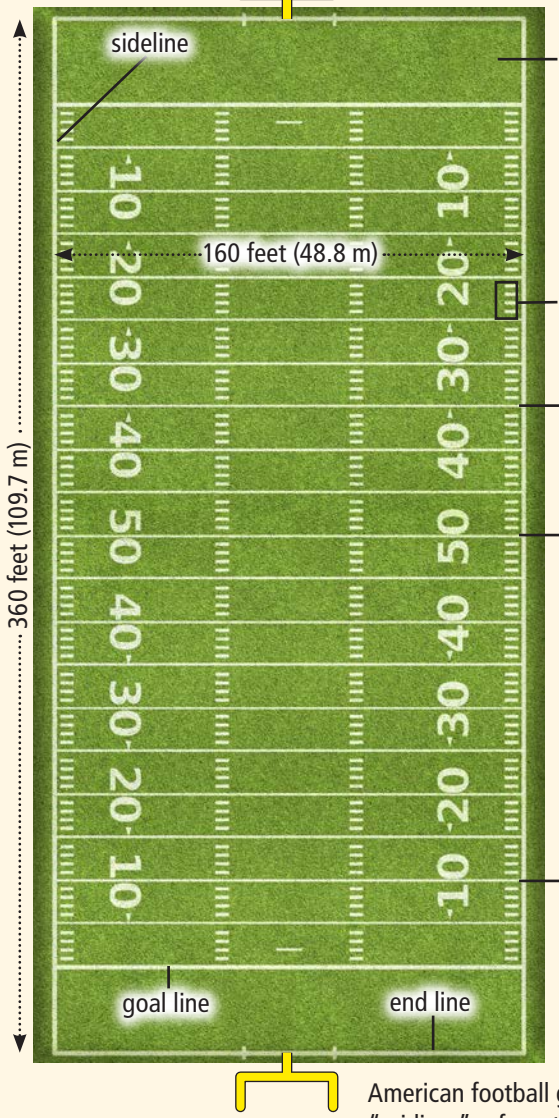
modern rugby ball

Some people believe that early American footballs were probably rugby balls that were made of inflated pig bladders stuffed into pig hide casings. The balls were oval but were difficult to throw. Over time, the bladder was eliminated and more pointed footballs were developed. Today, we use leather footballs made of cowhide that some people refer to as *pigskins*.

modern American football

American Football Field

The goalpost is 18.5 feet (5.6 m) across and 10 feet (3 m) tall in college and pro football. Kicking the ball above the bar and between the uprights is one way to score.



The end zone is 10 yards (9.1 m) wide. The ball must be carried into, or passed and caught in, this area to score a touchdown.

1-yard hash marks

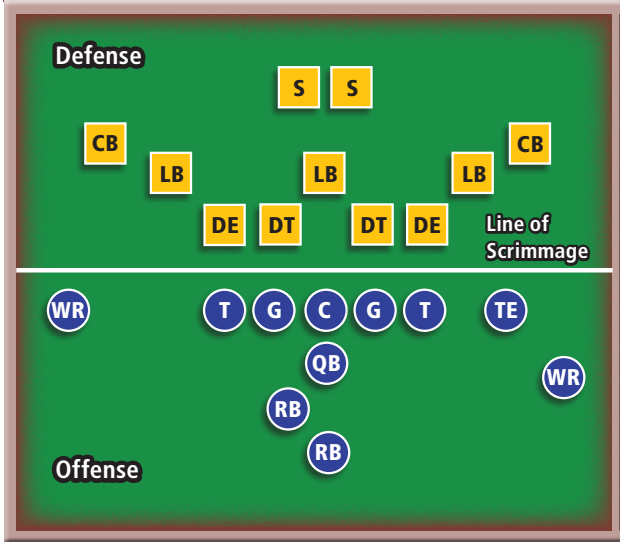
5-yard line

50-yard line: This line marks the middle of the field. The number indicates that it is 50 yards (45.7 m) from either end zone.

10-yard line: The arrow points in the direction of the closest end zone.

American football gets its nickname—"gridiron"—from the pattern of yard lines and hash marks on the field.

Playing Positions



Offense	
QB	quarterback
C	center
G	guard
T	tackle
TE	tight end
WR	wide receiver
RB	running back
Defense	
DT	defensive tackle
DE	defensive end
LB	linebacker
CB	cornerback
S	safety

Playing the Game

During a football game, two teams try to move the ball into the other team's end zone to score points. Each team has two **platoons** of eleven players each. (Teams also have a third platoon for kicking.) The **offensive line**, or platoon, tries to score, and the **defensive** platoon tries to stop the other team from scoring. The two platoons take turns playing. When Team A has control of the ball, its offensive unit plays Team B's defensive platoon. When Team B has control of the ball, its offensive platoon plays Team A's defensive platoon. A quarterback is the leader of each offensive platoon.

A West Virginia University quarterback is ready to pass the ball. He wears a towel to wipe off his hands so he can grip the ball well.

To move the ball toward the end zone, players can run with it or pass (throw) it to a teammate. The ball must be carried to the end zone or caught there. If a teammate catches the ball, the pass is completed. If a player on the other team catches the ball, the pass is intercepted. If no one catches the ball and it falls to the ground, the pass is incomplete.

Teams can score in several ways. Let's say Team A is playing offense. Team A can score six points with a touchdown by running or passing the ball into Team B's end zone. Team A also tries to score extra points right after a touchdown by kicking the ball between the goalposts (one point) or running or passing the ball to get to the end zone (two points). Another way for Team A to score is a field goal (three points). To get a field goal, a player kicks the ball between the goalposts. Team B—the defense—can also try to take the ball from Team A and score points.

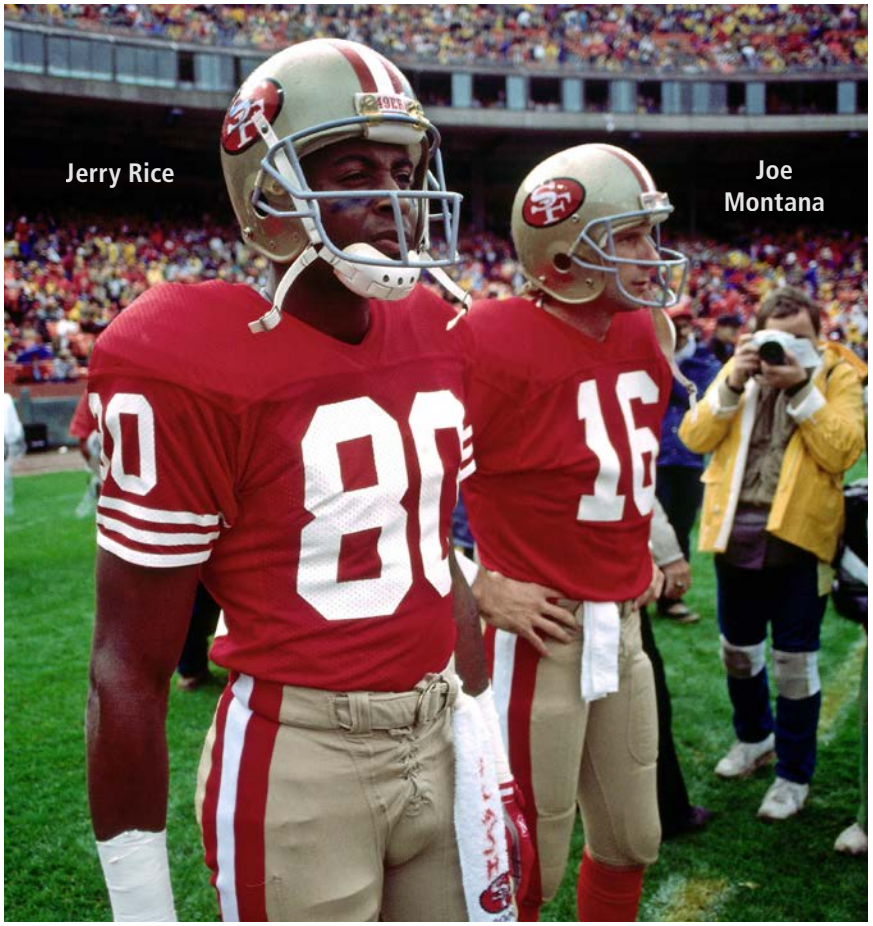
A North Carolina State quarterback (number 12) dives for the end zone in a game against the Georgia Tech Yellow Jackets.

The offense (Northwestern Wildcats, left) is ready to try to move the ball against the defense (Notre Dame Fighting Irish, right).

The game begins with a **kickoff** to the offensive team. That team moves the ball toward the other team's end zone and must gain at least 10 yards (9.1 m). The offensive team has four chances—called *downs*—to either gain those 10 yards or cross the goal line and score. As long as the team gains at least 10 yards within those four downs, it keeps the ball. Then it earns the chance to gain another 10 yards. But let's say the offensive team can't move the ball 10 yards within the four downs. Then the other team gets the ball.

Teams have many special plays, or plans of action, for moving the ball down the field. The quarterback tells his or her teammates which play to use each time the teams line up.

The defensive team has several ways to try to stop the offensive team from scoring. Defensive players try to knock down the ball carrier, which is called *tackling*. They can also get the carrier to drop the ball, or they can catch a ball meant for a player on the other team.



Football Legends

Two of the greatest players in American football history were Jerry Rice and Joe Montana. They played for the San Francisco 49ers in the 1980s. Rice was the best wide receiver in football history. Montana was probably the best quarterback ever. Together they led the 49ers to three Super Bowl wins.

Many Kinds of Football

Tackle football is still very popular among players of all ages. However, some forms of the game are just as fun and not as hard on the body as tackle football. In touch football, players only need to touch the ball carrier to stop him or her. They may or may not follow the main rules of tackle (NFL) football. Flag football is another form of the game. Players stop a ball carrier by grabbing a piece of cloth attached to his or her waist. Whatever form of football fans play or watch, they are sure to have a great time with this amazing sport.

flag football

touch football

Glossary

championship *(n.)* page 4
a contest to decide a winner

defensive *(adj.)* page 9
relating to action intended to keep an opposing team from scoring

end zone *(n.)* page 4
the area at the end of an American football field between the goal line and the end line

kickoff *(n.)* page 12
the kick of a ball that starts play in a sport, such as soccer and American football

offensive line *(n.)* page 9
the part of a football team that blocks the defense so the ball carrier can score

platoons *(n.)* page 9
groups of players on teams who work together for a specific purpose, such as offense or defense in American football

quarterback *(n.)* page 4
the player in a football game who signals plays and throws the ball

spectacular *(adj.)* page 4
wonderful; impressive

wide receiver *(n.)* page 4
the player in a football game whose primary job is to catch the ball from the quarterback and run with it