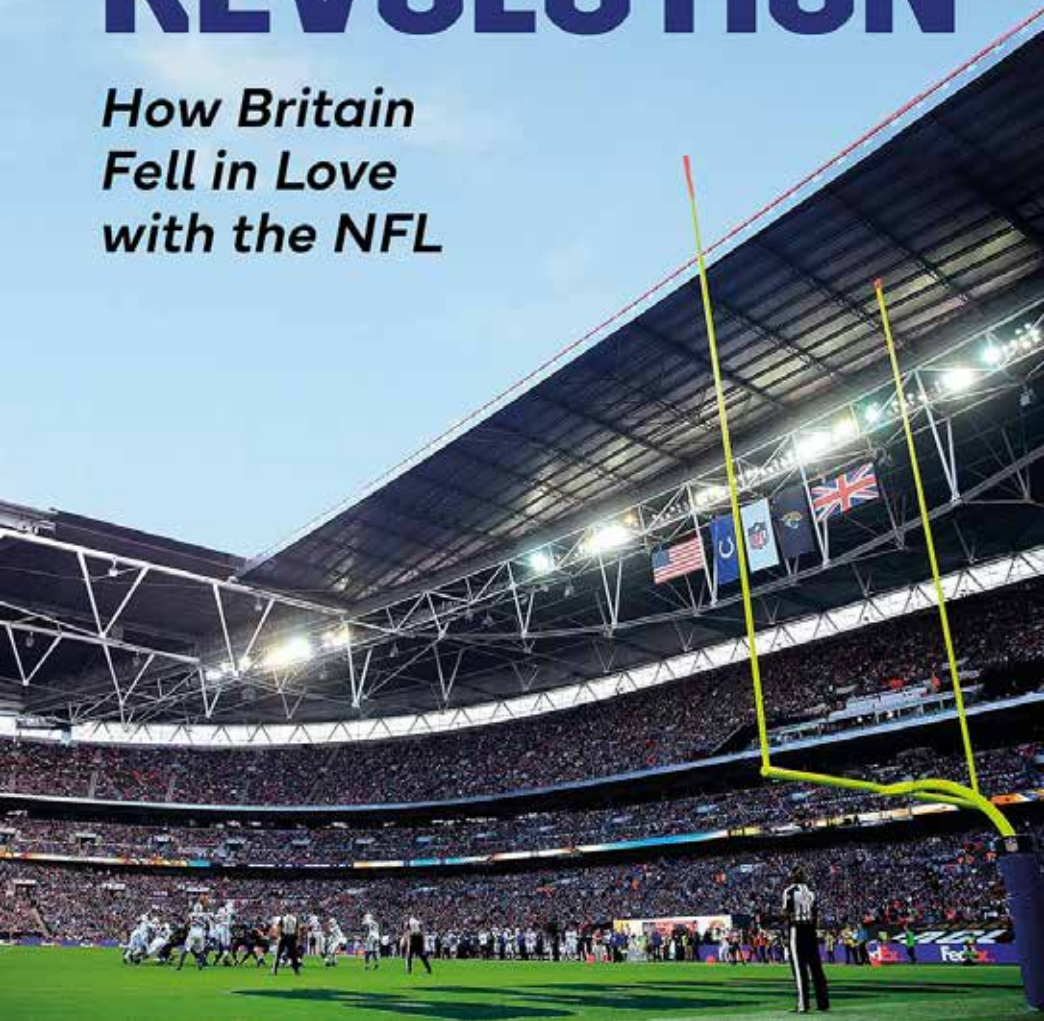


**BEN ISAACS**

**THE  
AMERICAN  
FOOTBALL  
REVOLUTION**

*How Britain  
Fell in Love  
with the NFL*



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## The NFL lands on UK TV screens

THE 1982 NFL season is best known in America for a devastating player strike that meant the regular season had to be shortened from a planned 16 games to just nine. In the UK, however, it is Year Zero. It marked the debut of Channel 4's weekly NFL highlights show, simply titled *American Football*, and for many sports fans such as Nick Roworth, life would never be the same again.

Channel 4 launched on 2 November 1982 as the UK's second commercial network. The plan was for it to be distinctive, innovative, experimental and creative. There was a desire to give the British viewers something different, and five days later the channel did just that when it began broadcasting NFL highlights. There was just one problem. The league was now on strike and no games had been played since 20 September. It didn't matter. With the league being pretty much unknown in the UK, Channel 4 was able to show highlights from earlier in the season without it causing a problem. The NFL resumed on 20 November and by the end of the month, Channel 4 was up to date. If you can use the phrase 'up to date' when the highlights they showed on a Sunday afternoon were all a week old.

Channel 4 wasn't devoting much time to the NFL but to be fair it didn't broadcast for many hours at this point. On weekdays Channel 4 would come on air at 4.45pm; it was an earlier start on the weekends but it would still be after lunchtime. However, the channel still found space in its

schedule to devote 90 minutes of highlights to the New Year's Day 1983 Rose Bowl game between UCLA and Michigan just 24 hours after it had been played. Bizarrely, at that point in time, a college football game had been afforded more time than any single NFL game in British broadcasting history.

The sport was unlike anything else shown in the UK in the early 1980s. For Nick, this was part of the appeal of following the game: to be different and stand out from the pack. He wasn't surrounded by others who loved the game. His family were dedicated Manchester United fans who thought American football was stupid. This only encouraged him to lean into his rebellious streak and fired his love for the game. 'There were always people comparing it to rugby and moaning about the players wearing pads,' says Nick. 'I would tell them the pads meant they could be more athletic without hurting themselves.'

The first Super Bowl – and thus the first live NFL game – to be shown in the UK was on 30 January 1983, broadcast from 10.45pm to 2.30am. Nick, like many other pioneers, stayed up for all of it. 'I was watching all through that first season,' says Nick, 'and watched the entirety of Super Bowl XVII. My main memory of that game is John Riggins just running for what seemed like forever on that one play.' The 43-yard touchdown run in the fourth quarter by the game's MVP was the most iconic moment of the season. It gave the Washington Redskins their first lead of the game against the Miami Dolphins, and they would eventually hold on to win 27-17. The night created a lot of Washington fans across the UK. Nick was not one of them. He had decided to be a Green Bay Packers fan. 'I don't know why I started supporting the Packers,' says Nick, 'but possibly because they wore green. It's certainly not because I like cheese. I don't even eat cheese. The teams that people usually supported back then were the

ones who were big at that time. Those were the ones shown most often on TV and you could buy their T-shirts. The Packers were not one of those!

It wasn't an easy time to be a Packers fan. The team hadn't won a postseason game since Vince Lombardi left in the aftermath of Super Bowl II. They snuck into the temporarily expanded 1982 playoffs in the first year of Channel 4 highlights despite amassing just five wins but were eliminated in the first round. At this point, Bart Starr, MVP of the first two Super Bowls, was still the starting quarterback; a rare link between those crucial games in the sport's history and its breakthrough in the British sporting landscape. Green Bay wouldn't win a playoff game until a Wild Card victory in January 1994 but Nick had stayed loyal through those many barren seasons. This was despite the NFL not making the Packers one of the teams they promoted through merchandise in the UK during the 1980s. 'I had to send off for Packers stuff,' says Nick. 'By the 90s I finally got a Packers hat. My friend, who's also a Green Bay fan, really likes that hat just because it looks so old now.' His goal was to eventually see his beloved team in the flesh. It would be a long wait.

As a Green Bay fan in 1982, Nick quickly picked up on the team's rivalries. He certainly had no love for the Minnesota Vikings but he inadvertently ended up very close to that team. History was made on 6 August 1983 when the Vikings faced the St Louis Cardinals in front of about 33,000 spectators at London's Wembley Stadium. It wasn't organised or promoted by the NFL itself, but instead by British businessman John Marshall with the blessing of the league's forward-thinking commissioner Pete Rozelle. Marshall was ahead of his time and felt that the NFL could go worldwide with games in Tokyo, Milan, Paris and Munich after its London debut.

(Milan and Paris haven't had the NFL experience but Tokyo has hosted plenty of preseason games, including one back in 1976, while Munich celebrated its first regular season game in 2022.) The title sponsor was the short-lived, Missouri-based Global International Airways and the game itself was billed as the Global Cup.

'A few of my colleagues were interested in the NFL,' says Nick. 'I can't remember how we found out about the game at Wembley but we managed to get tickets. One of my colleagues had lived in San Diego, so he supported the Chargers. This was my first visit to Wembley and I couldn't believe the awful state that the stadium was in. We were sitting on terrible wooden benches. I was shocked that this was our national stadium. It really was dismal. We ended up sitting right behind the Vikings' bench. It's the only time in my life I've ever pulled for the Vikings.'

Nowadays NFL games at the new Wembley Stadium, Twickenham Stadium or Tottenham Hotspur Stadium sell out very quickly. This was not the case for the Global Cup. 'It just seemed empty,' says Nick. 'Because of the Vikings players on the sideline, our view was terrible. We told the stewards about it and at the end of the first quarter they let us switch seats. We were allowed to sit in a much better section because there was no one there. This area had proper flip-down seats so we were finally comfortable and could see the game.'

The *New York Times* reported on the game, describing the Vikings' 28-10 win as a 'hit'. They interviewed some fans outside, however, who were not thrilled by what they had seen. According to their report, Dai Cartwright from Cardiff described the stop-start nature of the game as 'a bit disappointing', adding that, 'People here complain about having advertisements at half-time in soccer because it breaks up the atmosphere.' The report also included a quote from

an American who attended. Bruce Kelm told the newspaper's reporter: 'I thought I'd get my revenge for the way my English friends confuse me about cricket.'

'It did seem like there was quite a high proportion of Americans compared to British fans at the game,' says Nick. 'My colleagues and I were interviewed outside the stadium by some US TV channel. They were asking us if we understood the game. We explained: "Yes, we watch it every week!" Although to be honest it did seem like there were a lot of people who cheered loudest for the extra points, which in those days were pretty much automatic because they were so close to the goal posts. Looking back, it's clear the players were not as athletic as they are now, having seen NFL games in person in both eras. You can see why some people in the UK at the time thought the sport was simply big people hitting into each other.'

Despite the growing popularity of the sport in the UK, the NFL didn't play another game in the country until 1986 when the Super Bowl champion, Chicago Bears took on the Dallas Cowboys. By this time the NFL was not relying on British businessmen to put the game on, they were doing it themselves as part of an expanded international marketing plan. However, this three-year hiatus opened the door for another league to try its luck in the UK.

The USFL kicked off in March 1983 as a rival to the NFL. Owners of teams throughout the league's history included Donald Trump (future US president), Stephen Ross (future Miami Dolphins owner) and Edward J DeBartolo Sr (father of Edward J DeBartolo Jr, then owner of the San Francisco 49ers). It initially played its games in the spring, was in many NFL cities and had a TV deal with ABC and ESPN in the US. What it didn't have was a UK TV deal, although British American football magazines did give it



some coverage. Less than a week after the Philadelphia Stars had beaten the Arizona Wranglers for the 1984 USFL championship in Tampa Stadium, the league played a 'postseason exhibition' at Wembley. On 21 July 1984 the Stars faced the Tampa Bay Bandits, a franchise part-owned by Hollywood star Burt Reynolds (who attended Florida State on a football scholarship), in a game broadcast live in the US on ESPN and played in front of about 20,000 spectators. Few people are aware the game even existed but it was an entertaining one and featured future Pro Football Hall of Fame enshrinee Sam Mills.

'I have no memory of how we found out about this game,' says Nick, 'but I do remember thinking: "Who are these two teams?" None of us had ever heard of them. It was a good game, though. The Bandits had a chance to take it to overtime when they were down 24-21, which is how it finished. We all wanted it to go to overtime so we could watch more. Everyone around us was shouting: "Bring on [English rugby's best kicker of the era] Dusty Hare!" Just like after the Global Cup game, we all went on to the pitch at the end. They were happy to allow it. You could just get on the field after the final whistle and talk to the players. It's quite different now of course.' UK fans might not have known about the USFL but they knew it was American football. And that in itself was a draw for a small group of people. Although the USFL eventually crashed and burned thanks to a foolhardy plan to move the schedule to the autumn, there was perhaps an opening in the UK they missed out on.

The 1985 USFL preseason ran from 2-17 February, with some of the games played outside the teams' base cities. There is an argument to be made that playing one of those games in London before the buzz of Super Bowl XIX on 20 January wore off could've placed the league firmly in

the consciousness of a British public hungry for any sort of American football and the merchandise that went along with it. Certainly a missed opportunity.

By watching every week, and reading books by Nicky Horne, the host of Channel 4's coverage, or *Gridiron* magazine, Nick and others like him gradually learned more and more about the sport. 'I loved learning about the strategy and tactics,' says Nick, 'because many people at the time thought it was just about throwing the ball down the field as far as you could. Obviously it's a lot more than that but you had to really make the effort to seek out the information then and learn about it. That's why I still think a defensive game can be just as good as a high-scoring game.'

When the Premier League and its resulting TV coverage arrived, popping the NFL's already shrinking bubble in the UK, Nick was unaffected. Although his family were ardent Manchester United fans on the cusp of seeing their club become English champions for the first time in a generation, he had no interest in other sports. 'For soccer I was a Notts County supporter because that's where I went to university,' says Nick, 'but really it was just so people wouldn't talk to me about soccer. If they ask who you support and you say Notts County it just shuts the conversation down.'

As American football's popularity was dipping, Nick found himself working in the Netherlands, where coverage was nowhere near as good as it was in the UK. When the World League of American Football began in 1991, before a team was based in Amsterdam, Nick couldn't get to games. He ended up attending amateur leagues to get his fix.

Once he was back in the UK he was eager to see the London Monarchs and luckily he had a way to get in for free. 'My father-in-law at the time had a sign company that worked with the league for these games,' says Nick, 'so I

would go along with him and pretend to put signs up. In return I would explain to him what was going on in the game. When I'd finished pretending to work we'd go to find some empty seats. We did this at White Hart Lane and at Stamford Bridge although once again I ended up sitting on some wooden planks because it was before they improved the stadiums.'

Nick has watched every Super Bowl since the NFL made its debut on UK screens, with the exception of Super Bowl XXXVII when he was based in China and the game kicked off at breakfast time. His years in the Netherlands certainly made him appreciate the coverage that UK fans had grown to love. 'One year it was meant to be shown on a particular Dutch channel but was switched at the last minute,' Nick says. 'It ended up being on a channel that was known for being cheap. The broadcast didn't have any ads so it just had a direct feed of the whole thing from the stadium. I don't think the commentators realised because you could hear them talking in the ad breaks, most memorably one of them asking: "Is this fucking mic working?" Oh, it certainly was.'

The hosts of the UK shows have been a lot better in Nick's eyes and he has a particular fondness for Mike Carlson. 'One time, after one of the games in London, I was travelling away from the stadium and I was faced with a packed train,' says Nick. 'Some people said: "Don't worry, we'll get you on," and they dragged me into the carriage. Next thing I knew I was right next to Mike Carlson. Later on in the journey, some guy next to me kept going on about the Packers and how cold it was in Green Bay. All he wanted to do was ask me if I knew how cold it was there. Eventually I said: "Look, when I get my season ticket I'll tell you." Mike enjoyed that and seemed to be the only one who got the joke I was making about the team's waiting list. I think Mike and Nat Coombs

were the best NFL presenters we had in the UK because they explained everything. They talked through the Xs and Os to really get inside the game. The interaction between the two of them was fantastic as well, like it is with Osi Umenyiora and Jason Bell as they seem to be friends. Mike and Nat, Osi and J-Bell – you can tell they like each other. And that they're enjoying what they do.'

For many people the sport has simply been entertainment, but for Nick it was a vital distraction and a positive in his life when times were tough. He went through some dark days and knew he had to make a change in his life. Having the sport alongside him always helped. 'It's one of those things that even when things have been really difficult it's given me something to look forward to, such as attending the games in London,' says Nick. 'And even knowing I can watch the Packers every week on Game Pass has been a help. Sometimes I watch with a mate of mine. I retrained to become a yoga instructor – I wish I had discovered yoga when I was much younger – but he's got me beat because he then trained to be a priest.'

In his decades watching the sport, Nick has been able to see all 32 current franchises in person. However, it felt like he was going to get stuck on 31 and miss out on seeing his favourite team. 'My son lives in Florida and I was going over there to see him get married,' says Nick. 'Even better, that same week the Packers were playing in Tampa Bay against the Bucs.' It seemed like perfect timing. A family celebration, a trip to sunny Florida and the chance to finally watch the Packers play in the flesh – all in one week. 'Then Covid happened,' says Nick, 'and I couldn't leave the country.'

His plans were thwarted by the pandemic but luckily Nick only had to wait another couple of years to cross the 32nd team off his list. The Packers came to London on 9

October 2022, just a few weeks shy of the 40th anniversary of the first Channel 4 highlights show. It would finally give Nick a chance to see his beloved team and Aaron Rodgers, his favourite player of all time. (Yoga, says Nick, is one of the few things he has in common with Rodgers.)

It was no easy feat attending the game. Firstly, tickets were in exceptionally high demand. The combination of Tottenham Hotspur Stadium seating about 25,000 fewer fans than Wembley Stadium and the arrival of two teams in the Packers and New York Giants that are particularly well supported in the UK meant that many people missed out. Secondly, issues across the Transport for London network caused a chunk of fans to get to the stadium later than they had hoped. For many loyal Packers fans, seeing their team make their London debut (the final remaining team to do so) was like a religious experience. Nick's day was disrupted by actual religion, though. 'I missed the Packers' pre-game player introductions,' says Nick, 'because my friend who I went to the game with had to hold a church service earlier that day. The only reason we even made it in time for the national anthems was because we had been to the Vikings vs Saints game there the week before and learned from our travel mistakes. We arrived halfway through the first quarter for that particular game.'

Although Green Bay were upset by the underdog Giants it was still a special day for those fans who eventually got a chance to see their team, something that had been appreciated by fans of the other 31 franchises already. It's a bucket list event ticked off for Nick although he has high hopes of catching the Packers play a road game in Florida in the not-too-distant future. 'Until then,' he says, 'it's the usual routine of watching live every week, even if it means staying up until stupid o'clock so that I don't find out the score.'