

The Pitch of Public Opinion: Debating Professional Football's Place in Wartime Britain, 1914-1915

BART LaFASO

Abstract: "The Pitch of Public Opinion" examines the public discussion and debate regarding the cancelation of professional association football in Britain during the First World War. Using the phrase, 'the Football Debates' to refer to the discourse, this paper argues that the concepts of social standing, masculinity, and class especially, shaped opinions on professional football's value in British wartime society. I demonstrate that the criticism of professional football coalesced around two arguments: that British football fans shirked their duty by partaking in sport, and that the playing of professional sport during wartime harmed Britain's reputation among its allies and enemies. In turn, I highlight how football's supporters combatted these critiques, and argued for the necessity of the institution of professional football during the tumults of wartime. "The Pitch of Public Opinion" pinpoints this almost yearlong debate about professional football's wartime fate as the culmination of more than sixty years' worth of tension between the professional and amateur models of sport in Britain. Drawing from a primary source base that includes contemporary newspaper coverage of 'the Football Debates' and recruitment posters aimed at the working-class Britons who partook in football culture, this article elucidates the social and political factors that affected British perception of professional football during a time of national crisis.

In the three decades before the First World War, professional football flourished in Britain, attracting thousands of fans and solidifying its standing as the nation's de facto winter sport. While the 1863 adoption of the Cambridge Rules as the standards for playing football signaled the birth of the modern game, the rise of professionalism in the 1880s accelerated the growth of the game, as well as its footprint on British society. On the eve of the war, the Amateur Football Association, the Football Association's (FA) strongest, most vocal rival, ceded what little momentum it gained and reconciled with its professional counterpart.¹ King George V even took part in Britain's new sporting craze; his

¹ Dave Russell, *Football and the English: A Social History of Association Football in England, 1863-1997* (Preston, England: Carnegie Publishing, 1997), 41.

attendance at the 1914 FA Cup Final seemed to signal royal approval of the professional game's primacy in British sporting culture. Not all Britons tolerated the ascent of professional association football. During the thirty years between the adoption of professionalism and the outbreak of the First World War, many middle-class and aristocratic Britons critiqued professional football's growing place in society. These Britons, who played sports in public schools in order to develop physical strength and moral fortitude, were shocked to see victory and monetary gain become legitimate reasons to play football. They argued that professionalism stripped away the moral benefits of playing sport, and made victory the only valued outcome of playing. Critics railed that the victory-at-all-costs ethos of professional sports was particularly uncivilized, arguing that it encouraged cheating, deception, and other practices that tainted the spirit of the game.²

At the turn of the twentieth century, upper- and middle-class Britons pushed more vigorously for the use of professional sport for societal development. As sports like football became more ubiquitous in society, elite social reformers recognized the utility of sport for creating stronger, healthier, and more patriotic working-class men. While physical education had been a staple of Britain's public schools for almost two centuries, disciples of muscular Christianity, the view that physical education was critical to the cultivation of an upright, moral character, set their sights on spreading the physical and moral benefits of organized sport to working-class institutions.³ These reformers were especially concerned by the poor health of British recruits for the Boer War. The poor health and unfitness of the urban men who volunteered for the war shocked British elites, sparking concerns about Britain's ability to achieve its imperial aims.⁴ In the ensuing decade, private organizations like the Boy Scouts strove to cultivate health, morality, and patriotism among urban, working-class boys.⁵ At the same time, state-run schools began to formally introduce organized sport into their curricula, further strengthening the case for sport's utility to the British state.⁶ This increased use of sporting culture for the cultivation of health

² Tony Mason, *Association Football and English Society, 1863-1915* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1980), 223-224.

³ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁴ Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain, and the Great War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 13.

⁵ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Managing the Body: Beauty, Health and Fitness in Britain, 1880-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 84.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

and patriotism came at the same time as professional football's rise in popularity. The simultaneous growth of the professional model of sport and the moral model of sport during the twentieth century set the stage for the clashes between supporters and detractors of professional football during the Great War, as the war's outbreak demanded sacrifices from the working-class men who had been involved in both institutions.

Football came under critique at the beginning of the First World War because it, like many other forms of leisure, was seen as a form of frivolous cultural excess that jeopardized the British war effort. Unlike other leisure activities, such as theatre and popular music performances, professional football was in a unique position to receive criticism.⁷ Football received vocal criticism because adult men, those expected to serve in the war, overwhelmingly comprised the demographic of those who played and spectated the game. Professional footballers were labeled as unpatriotic shirkers who preferred to use their physical strength to play sport for money instead of serving in the British Army. Fans were maligned for their choice to fill the stands every Saturday instead of volunteering for the war. Compounding these criticisms of professional football as an institution, its players, and the spectators was the underlying class tension present in the sport. British historian Colin Veitch perfectly sums up how class factored into the wartime debate on professional football, writing,

football proved to be the medium through which vocal elements of the middle and upper class launched an embittered literary attack upon the working-class reaction to crystallization of strong feelings over the social changes which had occurred in football in the previous thirty years.⁸

Professional football was without a doubt *the* sport of Britain's working class. While the middle- and upper-classes were the ones who "athleticized" British society by incorporating organized games into boys' school curricula, the working class had made professional games their own by the end of the nineteenth century.⁹ As seen above, the proliferation of professionalism in sport was anathema to middle-class

⁷ Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 72.

⁸ Colin Veitch, "Play Up, Play Up and Win the Game: Football, the Nation, and the First World War, 1914-1915," *Journal of Contemporary History* 20 (1985): 367.

⁹ Varda Burstyn, *The Rites of Men: Manhood, Politics, and the Culture of Sport* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 46.

and aristocratic preference for amateurism, a philosophy of sport that valued the moral aspect of playing the game above all else. The overwhelmingly working-class support for the professional game was derided by much of the public-school class who used moralistic arguments to rail against the emergence of professionalism in sport.

With the outbreak of the First World War, detractors of professional football had an incredibly strong argument for their position. In this paper, I argue that the debate to cancel professional football took on the characteristics of the divisions between Britain's upper classes and its working classes. The divisions were sparked by differing opinions on how Britain needed to respond to the outbreak of the Great War. For upper- and middle-class Britons, sport's role in society was to strengthen and exalt values like bravery, resilience, and male solidarity, and not threaten them. For the working classes, professional football had become an institution around which many structured their leisure time, social lives, and local identities. Coming approximately thirty years after the legalization of professionalism in football, the outbreak of the First World War caused the Football Debates to be more urgent and spirited than ever before.

Even though the urban working class in Britain received the brunt of criticism for their participation in football, they volunteered at a high rate in the opening months of the war. More than 100,000 men volunteered to fight between August 8-22, 1914.¹⁰ Despite their steady enrollment for military service, working-class men remained the target of upper-class Britons, government officials, military leaders, and ordinary citizens who viewed professional football as the chief vice that prevented men from fulfilling their duty to their country. The written record of the Football Debates that is preserved in the pages of Britain's newspapers demonstrates the discord between the expectations placed on the working class by middle- and upper-class Britons and the reality of working-class life.¹¹ Despite the relatively positive response of working-class Britons to the call for war, their group's general affinity for professional football seemed to negate their overwhelming participation in the recruitment effort during the first year of the Great War. Pressure on British men came from national and local governments, employers, other men, wives, and other female family

¹⁰ Burstyn, *The Rites of Men*, 31.

¹¹ I have created and employed the phrase 'Football Debates' to refer to the public, printed discourse on football's place in British society that occurred between 1914-1915. For the purpose of this paper, the phrase specifically refers to materials published in the public domain, namely newspaper articles and recruitment posters.

members.¹² Parliament even debated the necessity of passing legislation to suspend professional football during wartime, a demonstration that these debates had come to a head in the British socio-political realm. As will be examined, professional football's overwhelmingly male and working-class fan base ensured that recruiters and the pro-war upper and middle classes pressured the sport to step aside in the face of war.

It is important to acknowledge that professional football's eventual postponement in 1915 was also influenced by the business considerations of the game. When the decision to cancel the football season was finally made, the steadily waning revenues from the game were often just as influential as the almost constant drum beat of critique leveled at the professional game.¹³ As early as September 1914, revenue from ticket sales had decreased compared to receipts from the previous season, correlating with the noticeable drop in attendance numbers after the outbreak of the war.¹⁴ The variety of arguments made regarding professional football, and the multiple factors that influenced the cancelation of the professional game in 1915, help to provide a more nuanced understanding of the role sport played in society, and how British citizens acted within the various communities that made up their society.

The steady publication of anti-football news, editorials and opinions placed great pressure on the professional football during the first year of the war. Whereas the print media played a large role in the growth of professional football's popularity, Britain's newspapers quickly became the venue where detractors argued against professional football's place during wartime. Both editorials and non-opinion reporting featured critiques of the professional game, though opinion pieces became the most common venue for critiques that lambasted professional football. National newspaper circulation was at an all-time high during the war years, with *The Daily Telegraph* reaching an

¹² For a discussion of the societal pressure placed on men to volunteer for military service, see: Nicoletta Gullace, *The Blood of Our Sons: Men, Women, and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship during the Great War* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), specifically the chapter "Conscription, Conscience, and the Travails of Male Citizenship." For more see: Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, especially the chapter "Malingering."

¹³ Multiple newspaper editorials that I have consulted argue against the claim that football was ruining the recruiting effort by citing attendance figures that suggest a prominent drop in crowd size during the first year of the war. See: "Football in the War," *The Manchester Guardian*, January 13, 1915.

¹⁴ Mason, *Association Football and English Society*, 253.

audience of 300,000 at its peak.¹⁵ Provincial publications such as *The Manchester Guardian* and *The Hull Daily Mail* paid close attention to the fate of football. Newspapers kept their readership up to date on the fate of football. *The Times* and *The Manchester Guardian* published the results of the concurrent FA and Football League meetings, at which the official decision to cancel professional football for the duration of the war was made, on July 20, 1915, one day after the meetings took place.

Even if certain Britons did not engage with the Football Debates by reading editorials in the newspaper, they had access to the arguments against football through other forms of media. Recruitment posters often utilized the same patriotic, moralistic, and masculine arguments that were published in anti-football editorials.¹⁶ Some posters even made mention of the relationship between the battlefield and the playing field, highlighting the middle- and upper-class view of participation in organized sport as a means by which boys learned how to “practice masculinity.”¹⁷ While only a handful of recruitment posters made explicit reference to football and other team sports, almost all of them utilized the theme of masculine patriotism to convince men of their obligation to volunteer. Local recruiting meetings and larger recruiting drives, including some that took place at football grounds, exposed working-class British men to the appeals that espoused the honorable character of war service and their obligation as men to come to the nation’s aid.¹⁸ Whether Britons read them in newspapers, saw them on posters, or heard them at recruiting drives, the language and campaigns that disparaged football and promoted “the Greater Game” were easy to find during the first year of the war.

The first and most broad category of editorials and articles on the football question consisted of opinions that criticized the continued playing of professional football during wartime, and considered it a dereliction of duty by those young men who continued to play the game. These articles most often discussed how the physical prowess of footballers was wasted on the playing field and would be of better use in service to the British Expeditionary Force. The second-most frequent anti-professionalism argument claimed that Britain’s insistence on

¹⁵ Kevin Williams, *Read All About It! A History of the British Newspaper* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 135.

¹⁶ John Patrick Stewart, “Mobilizing manliness, masculinity and nationalism on British recruiting posters, 1914-1915” (MA thesis, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, 2012), 9.

¹⁷ Burstyn, *The Rites of Men*, 66.

¹⁸ Gregory, *The Last Great War*, 75-6.

playing professional football during the war disgraced the sacrifices of their allies, and revealed that Britain was not fully committed to participating in the war effort. This argument against football took on even greater significance after the British press propagandized the “Rape of Belgium,” an atrocity whose press coverage provoked many Britons to sympathize with the plight of “brave little Belgium” at the hands of the Germans. Pro-war voices argued that the invasion of Belgium made the need for unwavering British involvement more urgent, and contended that distractions like professional football could not continue. The third classification of opinions on professional football are those that came to the defense of the game. Some guardians of the game framed their defense through a discussion of class, considering the anti-football voices to be overtly biased against the working class. These authors claimed that the aristocracy and wealthy Britons did not sacrifice their luxurious lifestyles, nor their actual lives, in response to the war, yet expected the working class to divest themselves of leisure in the name of the war effort. Not every voice defended football by attacking the upper classes, though. Authors who did not argue through this framework pointed out how ingrained professional football had become in British society and, thus, how disruptive it would be to abruptly put an end to the sport. Though these defenses of football did not always include a defense of professionalism, they did defend the right of Britons to enjoy leisure, especially during the uncertainty of wartime.

A Matter of Duty

The concepts of duty and service to one’s nation were referenced in almost all of the editorials that addressed the ‘football question’. The importance of rendering service to Britain and ensuring that the nation’s needs were met during wartime was even referenced in some of the editorials that defended the professional game. This sense of duty was without a doubt gendered, as the burden of fighting fell squarely on the shoulders of men. The appeals to masculinity made by critics of professional football comprised a critical aspect of their overall rhetorical strategy. Leveraging of masculinity as part of the pro-volunteering message reflected what historian Joanna Bourke has called “the price for male citizenship.”¹⁹ In her definition of this phrase, Bourke discusses the dissonance between the privileged societal status that men had compared to women and children, arguing that this high status was predicated on the notion that they were required to risk death, disease,

¹⁹ Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, 77.

and mutilation in order to defend their country.²⁰ Indeed, the pressure placed on able-bodied British men to volunteer for military service was immense, as it came from municipal governments, their employers, and even their own families.²¹ These forces were so strong that they seemed to force a realignment of societal divisions. Whereas society had traditionally been divided between the “classes and the masses,” Britain’s entry into the war changed that dichotomy by pitting those in favor of the war against those who did not support British involvement.²² This recalibration of societal divisions had a profound effect on men of military age, as they were expected to be in favor of the war or, at the very least, assent to fight in the war.²³ Specifically, the outbreak of war caused a shift in opinion about the British Army. Previously distrusted as a dishonorable institution for men with no other options in life, the working-class men who began to fill the ranks began to more favorably view the British Army as an institution, as the war provided a tangible and prescient reason to fight.²⁴

The Football Debates show that despite the change in how British society was divided, class remained an important metric through which society ordered itself. One could certainly be a member of the working class and pro-war.²⁵ As historians have shown, the working class’s rate of volunteering for the war effort was substantial, a demonstration of the fact that many members of the working class were at least willing to assent to fighting in the war, no matter their political allegiance.²⁶ The attack on football, though, demonstrates that class division remained relevant during wartime. The perception that adherence to football culture constituted a dereliction of duty drove a fair amount of the anti-

²⁰ Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, 77.

²¹ Gregory, *The Last Great War*, 77.

²² Nicoletta Gullace, *The Blood of Our Sons: Men, Women, and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship during the Great War* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 111.

²³ The minimum age for British Army recruits was nineteen years old. However, in the first years of the war, thousands of boys under the age of nineteen entered the army by lying about their age to recruiters. See Greg James, “How did Britain let 250,000 underage soldiers fight in WWI?” *BBC iWonder*. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/guides/zcvdhyc>.

²⁴ Silbey, “Their Graves Like Beds: the British working class and their enthusiasm for war, 1914-1916” (PhD diss., Duke University, 1999), 269-270.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 267-8. Importantly, Silbey mentions that the sort of patriotism that working-class men often displayed in response to the war tended to be filtered through a local lens. Men felt a duty to protect the people and institutions with which they had a relationship, and not the larger institutions that defined a more national conception of patriotism.

²⁶ Gregory, *The Last Great War*, 74; Silbey, “Their Graves like Beds,” 271.

football discourse, despite evidence that demonstrated the opposite. For the game's critics, professional football's effect on the creation and strengthening of local identities in urban environments clashed with the need for a unified national response to the war. The pro-volunteer, anti-professional football rhetoric demanded that working-class football fans participated in something bigger than themselves, their football team, and their city.

The demand for allegiance to a greater identity is vividly encapsulated in the famous recruitment poster "The Greater Game." This poster, published by *Punch* on October 21, 1914, featured Mr. Punch, the mascot of the satirical magazine, sternly deriding a professional footballer by claiming that, "No doubt you can make money in this field, my friend, but there's only one field to-day where you can get honour."²⁷ This poster, and others like it, served as ever-present reminders that Britain's ruling elite saw football as an impediment that stood in the way of the honor that one could achieve by fighting in the Great War. Referencing football matches played by soldiers at the front, the author of an editorial entitled "The Greater Game" wrote,

there will be a more genuine pleasure about this game played in mud-stained khaki than will ever be felt on the League club grounds at home during these days when the Empire is calling as never before on her sons.²⁸

Those who espoused this rhetoric of duty to nation and empire expected all Britons to debase their local identity in the service of a greater British identity. As will be shown, members of the football community were quick to ensure that the public record reflected that team owners, players, and fans were not the shirkers that the anti-football voices portrayed them to be.

Parliament Addresses Football

Detractors of the professional game often implored Parliament to use their power to stop the playing of the professional game for the benefit of the war effort. Parliament remained fairly quiet about football, in comparison to the fervent discussions of professional football that took place in the editorial pages. Members of Parliament were cognizant of the strong negative opinion on football, an opinion reflected in some of their debates. However, their rhetoric and stances on football tended to

²⁷ Poster reproduced in Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: the story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York: Free Press, 2001), 97.

²⁸ G. E., "The Greater Game," *The Times*, November 30, 1914.

be more moderate than those of the professional game's most staunch opponents. The British Parliament's most discussed solution to 'the football question' was to levy a tax on the price of entry for professional games to dissuade attendance. On December 20, David Lloyd George, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, was asked about the possibility of levying a tax on the price of entry at football matches, a prospect that reportedly received noticeable support in the House of Commons.²⁹ Similarly, the prospect of ending the practice of offering discounted rail fares for travelling football fans was briefly debated on November 24. Conservative MP W.C. Bridgeman asked whether the practice still existed, assuming that the government's wartime control of the railway meant that the practice had ended.³⁰ Indeed it had not. Bridgeman would go on to advocate for a scheme that called for using the money raised from football fans travelling by rail to directly fund the war.³¹ During the same question period, Colonel C.E. Yate, another Conservative MP, asked a question about levying a tax on the price of entry for all non-uniformed football spectators, yet was unanswered.³² Short of ending the professional game through the nationalization of football fields, using taxes to increase the price of football was the best option available to Parliament for dissuading participation in the game.

More radical than the tax solutions were Parliament's limited references to the notion that they should vote to nationalize football grounds in order to put a definitive end to the professional season. Parliament's limited debate on the potential nationalization of football grounds reflected a larger trend among opponents of professional football. Critics who argued for the nationalization of professional football grounds wanted Parliament to take definitive action against those professional teams who, in their view, ignored the gravity of the war by continuing play. Their desire for a parliament-imposed solution mirrored the stance of critics who advocated for a "gate tax" solution. One editorial in *The Times* that was published on November 24, 1914 called for Parliament to pass an act that would dissolve the professional game outright by making the collection of gate money illegal.³³ Despite

²⁹ "Parliamentary Correspondence: War Exemptions," *The Manchester Guardian*, November 20, 1914.

³⁰ "House of Commons, War Business Only," *The Manchester Guardian*, November 24, 1914.

³¹ Mason, *Association Football and English Society*, 252.

³² Ibid.

³³ "Football and Fighting," *The Times*, November 25, 1914.

their discussion of potential solutions, direct Parliamentary intervention did not result in the cancelation of the game.

International Respect and Image

For critics of the professional game, participants in football culture not only shirked their duty to the British war effort by remaining loyal to the game, but disregarded the war efforts of Britain's allies as well. In this second genre of anti-football editorial, detractors of football argued that the continuation of professional football actively hindered Britain's ability to stand in solidarity with France, Belgium, and to a lesser extent, Russia. Many critics were also embarrassed about what their German enemies might have thought of the British obsession with professional sport. Anti-professional football voices argued that their allies would be rendered incredulous by a nation whose obsession with sport was so strong that it had the potential to hinder its war effort. Critics of the game framed their objection to football through this language of embarrassment. They were ashamed of what they perceived to be a lackluster, unpatriotic response to Britain's declaration of war, and it was the continuation of professional football that embodied their embarrassment and disappointment. Language such as "disgrace" and "national scandal" was used to qualify how anti-football Britons felt about the game's continuation during wartime. These negative descriptions were often applied to other sports as well, including horseracing, a pastime that received almost as much criticism as professional football.³⁴ Football, though, received the most vocal critiques. One editorial writer called it "a hypnotic obsession which occupies their whole mind and makes everything else seem relatively unimportant."³⁵ In critics' minds, the outbreak of the First World War obligated Britons to relinquish unnecessary frivolity and place all their energy behind the war effort.

Those who invoked the language of embarrassment to characterize their distaste with professional football did so in order to defend the reputation of their nation among their allies, who had already suffered greatly before Britain had fully committed to the war effort. One author found it shameful that Britain had not followed the lead of Germany and France by implementing a draft, instead allowing thousands of young men to spectate horse races and football matches.³⁶

³⁴ "Racing and the Press," *The Times*, March 6, 1915.

³⁵ "Hypnotic Football," *The Daily Mail*, November 26, 1914.

³⁶ "A Plea for Compulsion," *The Times*, November 24, 1914.

The idea that Britain had not yet implemented a draft perplexed many more authors whose opinions were published, especially since they argued that the obsession with football was the key reason for the failure of recruitment campaigns. In one letter to the editor published in 1915, a man who argued for the implementation of the draft claimed that the football question never would have existed if “British manhood had done its duty and insisted on national service.”³⁷ Other editorials echoed this opinion, and argued that the question of leisure’s place during war would have been solved by the implementation of compulsory service.³⁸ In the eyes of those Britons who sought conscription, their nation’s response to the war lacked resolve, and professional football’s continued existence was a manifestation of that glaring deficiency.

Those who argued that Britain’s continuation of football during wartime was tarnishing its reputation among its allies and was an affirmation of its inferiority to Germany were strengthened by the German invasion of Belgium. Germany’s invasion of “brave little Belgium” received a great deal of coverage in the British press, coverage that blended accurate reporting with overtly anti-German sensationalism.³⁹ Indeed, Germany’s invasion of Belgium and its treatment of Belgian civilians were markedly brutal, but the pages of British papers highly exaggerated their cruelty: stories of Germans using the fat of corpses to make soap, and the oft-repeated story of German soldiers crucifying a captured Canadian soldier quickly became parts of the anti-German canon of stories published by British newspapers.⁴⁰ The British government also used the sensationalism of the “Rape of Belgium” to appeal to potential recruits. Depicting women and children fleeing a burning village, a poster emblazoned with the slogan “Remember Belgium” implored British men to “Enlist To-Day,” to ensure that no more innocents would be harmed in such a vile way.⁴¹ Historian John Patrick Stewart argued that the portrayal of suffering and scared non-combatants in this poster was meant to remind British men of their prescribed societal role as defenders of the domestic realm, as well as illustrate that by enlisting, they could personally prevent such a tragedy on British soil.⁴² Such tragedy did occur; the 1914 German naval raids on the seaside towns of Hartlepool and Scarborough demonstrated

³⁷ W. Heron Maxwell, “Sport and the Nation,” *The Times*, March 15, 1915.

³⁸ “Compulsory Service,” *The Times*, May 15, 1915.

³⁹ Gregory, *The Last Great War*, 49.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 53-54.

⁴¹ Stewart, “Mobilizing Manliness,” 36.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 37.

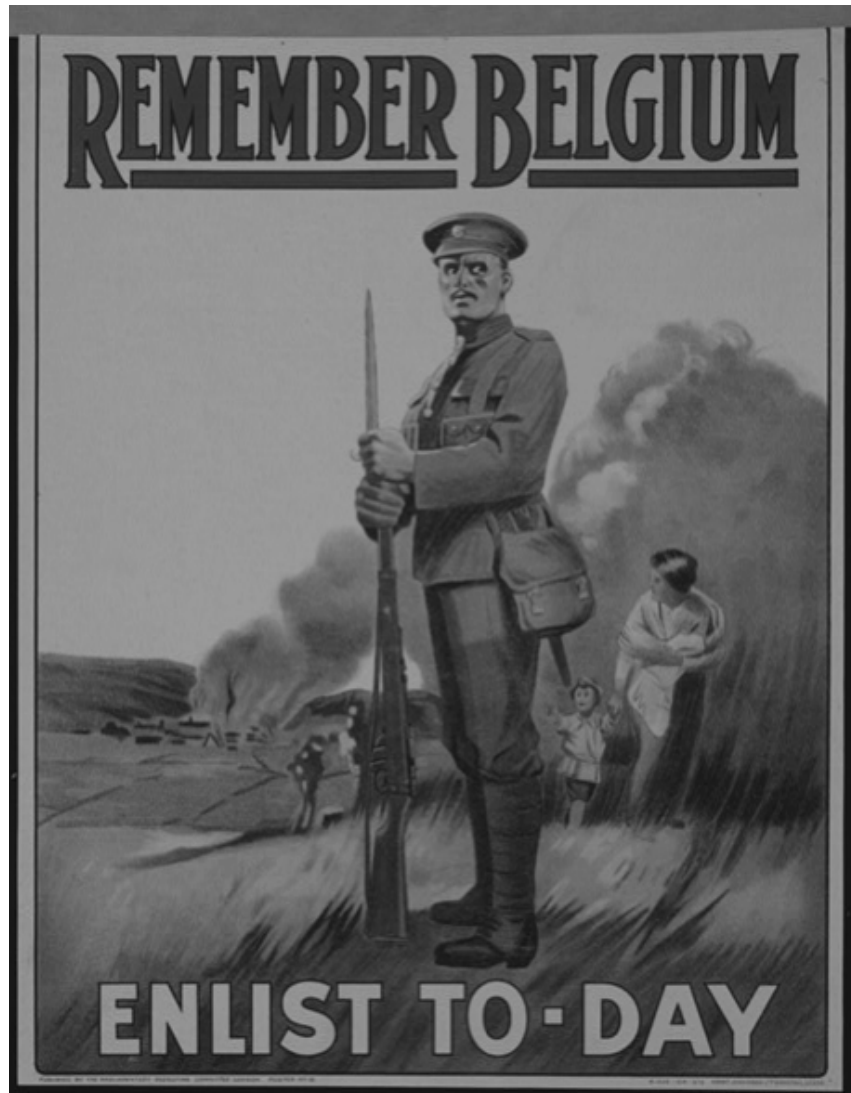


Figure 1: *Remember Belgium—Enlist to-day*, 1915.

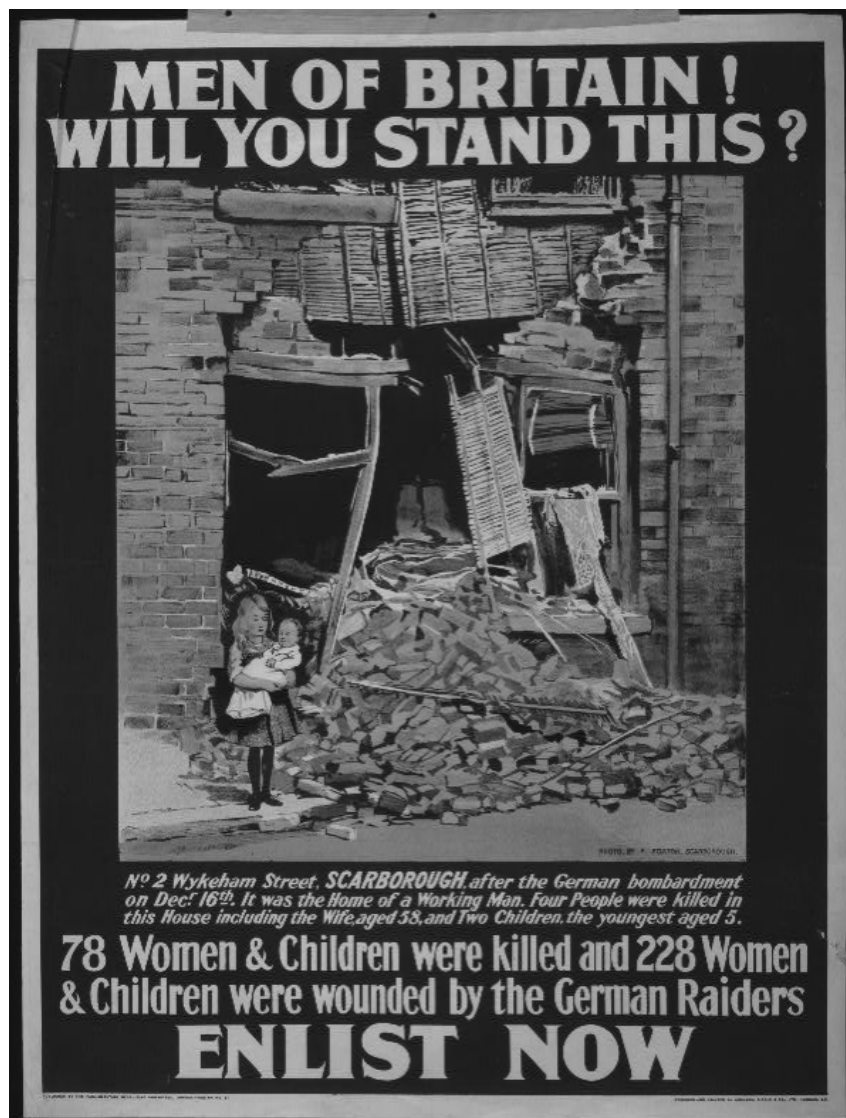


Figure 2: *Men of Britain! Will you stand this?* 78 women & children were killed and 228 women & children were wounded by the German raiders. Enlist now, 1915.

that British civilians indeed needed protection from British men. Again, recruitment posters reminded British men of their duty to defend domesticity. The most famous to use imagery from these raids depicted a young girl holding a baby, standing outside the remains of her bombed-out house, with the caption “Men of Britain! Will you stand this?”⁴³ This poster directly appealed to men, as it challenged them to join the war effort, or risk their families becoming casualties like those at Scarborough and Hartlepool. British women and children who had previously been sheltered from the horrors of war had now become casualties. As historian Joanna Bourke argued, the rights that British men exercised were conditional on the potential destruction of their bodies during wartime. Posters such as these reminded British men that the time had come for them to take up the duties expected of those who had been afforded a privileged place in society.

Football and sport more generally were used as subject matter for recruitment posters that discussed how Britain was viewed internationally. The most famous poster, advertising for the Football Battalion, used the words of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, a German newspaper, to directly challenge football players and fans. In an article, the paper claimed that “The young Britons prefer to exercise their long limbs on the football ground rather than to expose them to any sort of risk in the service of their country.”⁴⁴ The poster juxtaposed this quote with a depiction of British soldiers in the heat of battle, remembering the football matches that they had left behind, saying “We know you’ll come” to the football players and fans who have yet to enlist. The effects of this poster were multiple. Primarily, the German newspaper excerpt maligned the place of sport in wartime society. The poster also addressed fears that the British male obsession with football during wartime highlighted the “decadence and femininity” of British manhood, as historian John Patrick Stewart put it, at a time when Britain needed its men to risk life and limb in defense of the homeland.⁴⁵ And for those sportsmen who were not convinced by the barbs of the Germans, recruitment posters reminded them of the sacrifices of their fellow sportsmen. One poster highlighted the positive response of Rugby Union

⁴³ Stewart, “Mobilizing Manliness,” 42.

⁴⁴ Johnson, Riddle, & Co., Ltd., *Young Men of Britain! The Germans Said You Were Not in Earnest. “We Knew You’d Come- and Give Them the Lie!” Play the Greater Game and Join the Football Battalion*, 1915, POS - WWI - Gt Brit, no. 252, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C., <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003675290/>.

⁴⁵ Stewart, “Mobilizing Manliness,” 69.

players, claiming that at least ninety percent of players had volunteered for the army. More importantly, the poster highlighted that all of the rugby athletes, who had played for the English national team in the previous year, had volunteered for service.⁴⁶ If the athletes who had the most to lose could volunteer, lesser-known sportsmen and the men who supported them surely could too.⁴⁷

Critiques that invoked the language of national embarrassment did not subside once professional football was cancelled. The eventual cancelation of the professional game did not even appease some Britons, as, in their mind, football had already done its damage to the war effort. Quoted in an editorial written by noted social reformer Frederick Nicholas Charrington, a detractor of the game wrote,

The citizens whose team holds the English Cup during the great war will be branded for ever [*sic.*] as the people who stood round [*sic.*] and urged on young men to play, while their fellows went forth to fight for their homes and their women.⁴⁸

In reference to a popular political cartoon, Charrington stated that it would be more fitting for Kaiser Wilhelm II to present the 1915 FA Cup instead of the British Lord Derby, due to what he and many others perceived as professional football's profound hindrance of Britain's war effort.⁴⁹ While this opinion is one of the most extreme of those that invoke the language of national embarrassment, it does follow the pattern of those who argued that professional football's continuation meant that Britain was at least one step behind its allies and enemies in the First World War.

Combatting the Critique of Football

The editorial sections of Britain's newspapers did not universally condemn professional football during wartime. Although defenses of the professional game made up the minority of newspaper editorials, the articles that defended professional football's place in British society

⁴⁶ Publicity Department, Central London Recruiting Depot, *Rugby Union Footballers Are Doing Their Duty. Over 90% Have Enlisted. British Athletes! Will You Follow This Glorious Example?*, 1915, POS – WWI - Gt Brit, no. 144, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C., <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003668167/>.

⁴⁷ Stewart, "Mobilizing Manliness," 71.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Frederick N. Charrington, "The 'cup Final' in Manchester," *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, April 1, 1915.

⁴⁹ "The 'cup Final' in Manchester," *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*.



Figure 3: *Young Men of Britain! The Germans Said You Were Not in Earnest. "We Knew You'd Come—and Give Them the Lie!"* 1915.



Figure 4: *Rugby Union Footballers Are Doing Their Duty. Over 90% Have Enlisted. British Athletes! Will You Follow This Glorious Example?* 1915.

were keenly aware of the rhetorical landscape in which they existed, offering spirited rebuttals to the anti-football arguments that dominated the newspapers. One theme that defenders of football touched upon was the relationship between class dynamics and the critiques of professional football, namely the upper-class attacks on the professional game. Those who defended professional football's role in society were cognizant of the upper class's traditionally negative attitude toward the game, an attitude that defenders of the game felt was reflected by the upper-class belief that football was singularly responsible for poor recruiting results.

Accusing wealthy and well-off Britons of hypocrisy, one author proposed a tax on the labor of servants, chauffeurs and groundskeepers in the hope that the aristocracy and upper classes would sacrifice their luxury just as working- and middle-class Britons were expected to do.⁵⁰ This author viewed the persuasion of servants to retain their posts during wartime to be particularly hypocritical, because working-class men in most other professions were often heavily pressured by their employers to volunteer.⁵¹ Those who defended football considered upper-class defenders of horseracing to be extremely hypocritical. One author wrote that the double standard that football faced would prompt working-class men to ask, "Why should we stop our football whilst the horse-racing people still hold their meetings?"⁵² At the very least, those who defended football wanted all sports to be subjected to the same standard to which football was being held. Even after professional football was suspended, some critics of the upper classes felt that they were resisting their own call to "play up" and sacrifice leisure for "the Greater Game." Writing an editorial about a dozen chauffeurs he saw "lounging about" at a golf course, a man whose sons had volunteered for the army considered the "retention by private persons of these men to be a public affront."⁵³ To many in the working class, it was clear that the sport they loved was being judged by a different set of rules.

Some defenders of professional football classified the game as the lesser of two evils. A letter to the editor, written by the Reverend W.H. Ashton in December of 1914, communicated this view of the game. Though this author opposed the continuation of the professional game, he argued that a decision like the cancelation of football would force spectators to fill their free time through pastimes more morally

⁵⁰ "The Recruiting Problem," *The Observer*, November 22, 1914.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Charles Bright and Leigh Grauge, "A Protest," *The Times*, March 4, 1915.

⁵³ "Chauffeurs Who Ought to Be in Khaki," *The Observer*, June 6, 1915.

obnoxious than football, namely the consumption of alcohol in public houses.⁵⁴ Reverend Ashton further argued that professional football should not be singled out and labeled as the most odious form of leisure.⁵⁵ Although he, like others, remained critical of the sport, their critiques were not blind to the fact that professional football had become an integral part of England's twentieth-century working-class culture, and its absence would not go unnoticed by those who enjoyed it. Despite a disdain for the sport in principle, a utilitarian argument existed for the professional game's perceived ability to order the working class, and divert them from more destructive pastimes.

Affiliates of professional football clubs, alongside their supporters, took to the pages of the editorial sections to defend their place in society. David Calderhead, the chairman of Chelsea Football Club during the war and a former player himself, outlined what his club was doing to support the community during wartime in a September 14, 1914 column entitled "What Football is Doing." Calderhead mentioned how Chelsea was quick to offer monetary resources to hospitals and charities involved in the war effort, as well as offering the club's grounds and offices to aid in the recruitment and training of soldiers.⁵⁶ More important than the actions his club took, though, was the case that Calderhead made for what professional clubs like Chelsea could do for the war effort. He argued that the continuation of professional football could mean that the local businesses that benefited from professional football would continue to prosper.⁵⁷ In addition, he promised that Chelsea FC would provide 100 jobs to unemployed men with families who could not participate in the war or in other forms of employment.⁵⁸ Indeed, the board member's discussion of how his club cooperated with the war effort is reflective of a greater trend across Britain that saw football clubs attempt to demonstrate their value to a society at war.

Like Calderhead, many who defended professional football recognized the game's potential value to the war effort. Published correspondence between War Office Secretary B.B. Cubitt and FA Secretary F.J. Wall revealed a deference on the part of Wall to the recruitment effort, even admitting a willingness to cancel football, and an understanding on the part of Cubitt that professional football had the potential to boost the success of enlistment drives and the training of

⁵⁴ "Football, Drink and the War," *The Manchester Guardian*, December 2, 1914, 3.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ David Calderhead, "What Football is Doing," *The Daily Mail*, September 12, 1914.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

new recruits.⁵⁹ These two leaders appeared to be much more cordial than the firebrands on their respective sides, as they acknowledged how each could work with each other. On September 28, 1914, a football referee chastised critics for their indiscriminate critiques of the game. Though the author agreed that the idea of playing football during wartime did have an air of absurdity to it, he asserted that the cancelation of the season would disrupt the livelihoods of thousands of footballers, many of whom used professional football to provide for their families.⁶⁰ Most importantly, like other authors, he demanded to know why football was being singled out as the *only* form of deleterious leisure, arguing that if football deserved to be suspended, then all other forms of public leisure should suffer the same fate.⁶¹ Another football executive took to the opinion pages in order to defend his sport's place in wartime society. Writing under the name "A Football Director," this individual agreed that football should be suspended during the war, as he believed it hindered the success of recruitment efforts.⁶² However, he critiqued those who claimed professional football was making large profits at the expense of the war, pointing out that his club, and many other professional clubs, held large amounts of debt, and, as a result, barely paid dividends to shareholders in the club. Bristling at the idea that directors like him pocketed massive revenues while Britons died in Europe, the author argued that the continuation of the season helped to prop up local economies by employing footballers who supported their families.⁶³

While this director had no sympathy for footballers with no dependents who continued to play, he understood the motives of footballers who played to support their families, arguing that three-quarters of the players who earned "above average wages" were married men who with wives and children.⁶⁴ The author argued that many footballers used their salaries to ensure that their families remained safe and comfortable during wartime, instead of supporting frivolous bachelor lifestyles. As well, the director discussed how many of these players' contracts could not be terminated until the end of the season,

⁵⁹ F.J. Wall and B.B. Cubitt, the Secretary, "Football and the War," *The Sunday Times*, September 13, 1914.

⁶⁰ "Football and the War," *The Daily Telegraph*, November 28, 1914.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² E. V. Speller and A Football Director, "Football in War Time," *The Times*, November 27, 1914.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

forcing owners like him to honor them during the first year of the war.⁶⁵ From this perspective, professional football and its players were not acting malevolently by playing, but simply trying to make the best of a complicated situation.

The notion that the attack on professional football was indiscriminate or undeserved was often repeated by defenders of the game, especially in the face of critiques that overtly blamed the sport for the failure of recruitment efforts. One editorial author writing in December 1914, found it incredible that professional football players were blamed simply because their profession required physical strength, especially since, as he argued, football clubs were encouraging their players and fans to volunteer.⁶⁶ This author, who wrote under the pseudonym “Not a Killjoy,” argued that the attacks on football acted as a concession that delayed the implementation of conscription yet satisfied the need for recruits.⁶⁷ There were also arguments about the value of allowing professional sport to continue in order to ensure that morale at home remained high. Although these arguments did not specifically speak to the value of professional football to society, they did recognize that football and other recreations had become entrenched institutions of British social and cultural life. One author, who wrote in defense of football, claimed “Now, in my opinion, the news of a really great German victory would act less as a fillip to the spirit of the German nation than would the news that all recreation in England had been stopped.”⁶⁸ Professional teams often cooperated with recruiting efforts and, more generally, sought to enumerate the ways that they could remain beneficial to a society at war, even in the face of critics that maligned them as harmful to the war effort.

The refusal of the Football Association to outright cancel the season often overshadowed support for the war exhibited by professional footballers, clubs, and staff. Compared to other sports, professional football remained an obstinate outlier, especially given that the Rugby Football Union, one of association football’s main competitors, suspended play shortly after the declaration of war.⁶⁹ Even more embarrassing for professional football was the fact that the rugby leagues and teams that cancelled play were amateur, a point that further sullied the reputation of the already maligned professional game. Indeed,

⁶⁵ Speller and A Football Director, “Football in War Time.”

⁶⁶ “Killjoys and Football,” *Hull Daily Mail*, December 4, 1914.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ “The Moral Value,” *The Daily Telegraph*, March 16, 1915.

⁶⁹ Russell, *Football and the English*, 75.

anti-football editorialists often used the example of rugby to shame professional football, praising rugby as the sport that had “done its duty.” As a December 1914 column pointed out, the reported rate of enlistment among members of rugby clubs was noticeably higher than that of members of football clubs.⁷⁰ In addition to this setback, rugby’s status as a sport played more by the middle class than the working class added an additional twinge of tension to a debate whose battle lines had already been shaped by class considerations.

The Final Decision

The Football Association’s decision to finally cancel play at the end of the 1914-1915 season was influenced by a multitude of factors. As has been addressed, the numbers of working-class men that did volunteer for the army caused a reduction in revenue for individual football clubs, making the game less profitable. Financial concerns were both part of the FA’s decision to continue play during the war and cancel play beginning in Fall 1915. Cited in a *Manchester Guardian* article, F.J. Wall, the Secretary of the FA, claimed that the abrupt declaration of war in 1914 made it difficult to cancel play, as contracts for that year’s games had already been negotiated and agreed upon with the players.⁷¹ He argued that it was much easier for the FA to cancel the upcoming season because they had not entered into any contracts in anticipation of cancellation.⁷² However, financial considerations were a secondary concern when public opinion had turned against football. The FA’s official history states that although they had been advised by the War Office to sanction the 1914-1915 season in the name of maintaining public morale, they nevertheless received criticism for the continuation of play.⁷³

Meeting separately from, but on the same day as the FA, the Football League passed a measure to suspend league play. This decision forbade the payment of players’ wages, even for those who had volunteered for the war.⁷⁴ The decision allowed for clubs “to arrange matches without cup medals or other rewards, to suit local conditions,

⁷⁰ H. Jeafferson Brewer, “Rugby and the War,” *The Daily Telegraph*, December 3, 1914.

⁷¹ “An End of Football: No Cup Ties or League Games Next Season,” *The Manchester Guardian*, April 20, 1915.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ “The History of the FA.” The Football Association. <http://www.thefa.com/about-football-association/what-we-do/history> (accessed July 14, 2017).

⁷⁴ “Football or No Football During the War: No Official League Competition,” *The Manchester Guardian*, July 20, 1915.

provided that they do not interfere with the work of those engaged in war work.”⁷⁵ However, the Football League’s decision to cancel its season did not come easily. Representatives from four clubs, Arsenal, Everton, Lincoln City and Bradford, spoke against the original resolution, with Arsenal’s representative, Mr. Norris, and Bradford’s representative, Mr. T. Maley, arguing for the necessity of sport as leisure during wartime.⁷⁶ Reportedly, Mr. Norris specifically “wished to dissociate himself from those who said that football interfered with recruiting.”⁷⁷ Despite these critiques of the resolution, professional football was not saved, succumbing to the pressure of public opinion. Professional football did not return until 1919, a full year after the war’s conclusion. Due to the suspension of play and the war service of players, it took some time for teams to adjust to peacetime and prepare for a new season.⁷⁸

Conclusion

Professionalism in football was a casualty of the Great War. The sport of football was not. After the 1915 decisions by the Football Association and Football League to cancel their competitions, amateurism became the model by which the game was played during the war. At the front lines, football quickly became the favored pastime of the British Expeditionary Force. Games of football were played during the “Christmas Truce” and a football was punted into no man’s land during both the Battle of Loos in 1915.⁷⁹ The Battle of the Somme in 1916 enshrined football’s place in the history of British participation in the war.⁸⁰ Indeed, after the suspension of professionalism, editorial sections were no longer filled with critiques of the game, but with appeals from British soldiers at the front asking patriotic Britons to donate the footballs so they could play.⁸¹ The professional game remained an object of enhanced scrutiny even after the war’s conclusion. Leeds City Football Club was dissolved in 1919 because the club continued to pay

⁷⁵ “Football or No Football.”

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ With specific regard for the administrative side of the game, an article in the *Manchester Guardian* from August 31, 1919 mentions how, due to the war, some teams did not maintain their membership with the Football Association, and thus had to re-enroll as participants. A Special Correspondent, “The Football Association: Meetings in London To-Morrow,” *The Manchester Guardian*, August 31, 1919.

⁷⁹ Mason, *Association Football and English Society*, 255.

⁸⁰ Veitch, “Play up! Play Up! And Win the War!” 363.

⁸¹ Pte. H. Webster, “Who Will Give a Football,” *Hull Daily Mail*, October 20, 1915.

the salaries of its players who volunteered to fight in the war, going against the decision to suspend all professional football activities during the war.⁸² Football as a pastime was never the main problem. Football as a professional sport and a financially lucrative industry was the main target for critics.

When placed in the greater context of British history we see that the Football Debates were about much more than curtailing societal excesses during wartime. At their core, the Football Debates addressed the question of what it meant to be a British man during wartime and what the nation expected of its citizens. The conflict between those expectations and the way members of the working class situated themselves in society led to the discord that defined the Football Debates. Informed by close to one hundred years of organized sport's evolving role in British society, the question "to play or not to play" asked much more than whether professional football had a place in a society at war.

⁸² "Leeds United History," Leeds United. <https://www.leedsunited.com/club/leeds-united-history> (accessed July 14, 2017); "Leeds City Expelled," *The Daily Mail*, October 14, 1919. Leeds City's board of directors were given the opportunity to produce financial documents in order to prove their innocence, but their refusal resulted in their suspension from the Football Association and their demotion to the Second Division.

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Figure 2: Johnson, Riddle & Co., Ltd. *Men of Britain! Will you stand this? 78 women & children were killed and 228 women & children were wounded by the German raiders. Enlist now*, 1915. POS - WWI - Gt Brit, no. 39, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2003675289/>.

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Figure 4: Publicity Department, Central London Recruiting Depot. *Rugby Union Footballers Are Doing Their Duty. Over 90% Have Enlisted. British Athletes! Will You Follow This Glorious Example?* 1915. POS - WWI - Gt Brit, no. 144, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C. <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003668167/>.

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