



Michael Oriard Oral History Interviews, March 17, 2015

Title

“A Scholar in the Locker Room”

Date

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Location

Valley Library, Oregon State University.

Summary

The primary emphases of interview 1 are Oriard's experiences as a student athlete and as a professional football player. In tracing this period of his life, Oriard discusses his family background, his upbringing in Spokane, and his earliest involvement in football. He also recalls his love of literature growing up, and his particular interest in modern American fiction writers. He then describes his high school experience as a student athlete and shares his thoughts on the allure of football to those who play it.

From there, Oriard recounts his recruitment out of high school, and his ultimate decision to attend the University of Notre Dame and to walk on to the school's football team. In discussing Notre Dame, Oriard reflects on the cultural environment at the university in the mid- to late-1960s. He also describes his experiences as a member of the freshman football team, a year during which Notre Dame won the national championship in football while he and all other freshmen were not eligible to play. Oriard also speaks to the training and support system available to football players during his years at Notre Dame, his academic progression from Physics to English, his social experience as a student athlete, and the evolution of his college career as a football player, during which he advanced from a walk-on to a team co-captain and an All American.

Oriard next reflects on his decision to pursue a dual career as a professional football player and an academic. In this, he recalls his graduate school years at the University Washington and Stanford University. He also notes his NFL experiences as an offensive lineman with the Kansas City Chiefs, the injuries that brought about the end of his NFL career, and the short period of time that he spent playing in Canada before completely retiring from professional football.

Near its end, the interview changes focus to Oriard's initial years at Oregon State University. He recalls his decision to take a faculty position in the OSU English department, his perceptions of the department and the university at that time, and his early research and writing, including a memoir. He also describes his scholarly work habits and his experiences as a teacher, including two academic exchanges in Germany.

Interviewee

Michael Oriard

Interviewer

Chris Petersen

Website

<http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/oh150/oriard/>

Transcript

Chris Petersen: Okay Mike, if you could please introduce yourself with today's date and our location and your name?

Michael Oriard: My name is Michael Oriard, it's March 17, 2015 and we are in Valley Library.

CP: Alright, so we are going to talk a lot about your OSU associations and your time as a football player, but we'll start at the beginning. You were born in Spokane, is that correct?

MO: Born in Spokane in 1948.

CP: Is that where you were raised?

MO: Raised my whole life there.

CP: What were your parents' backgrounds?

MO: My dad was an independent business man, he sold explosives. His father and uncle started the business back in the teens, and my dad was a musician. He, after the war, second world war, he spent some time in southern California and Bay area trying to get established as a professional jazz musician, and that's a tough business and he came home and joined his father and brother in the family business.

My mother grew up in Kansas City, Missouri. They met when Dad was in the service and stationed in Olathe, Kansas and got married, I think like six weeks later. One of those things that shocked and horrified parents, I'm sure, all over the place in World War II. But it lasted until they both died.

CP: What was Spokane like for you growing up?

MO: Spokane was more a big town than a small city when I was growing up and, you know, I don't think kids think much about the place they live, but I realize in retrospect it was a really good place to grow up. And mine is the privileged generation; we were just allowed to run free as kids. Our parents didn't have to worry about us. And I had a pretty typical middle class life, background, upbringing in Spokane; went to Catholic schools, was an altar boy, went to the local Jesuit high school, took piano lessons for seven years, as all of us kids did, though I found later our dad never really pushed us very hard because he knew what a brutal business it was and he didn't really want to see us trying it and being disillusioned. And I had an older brother. I was a second of seven kids, which is kind of a privileged position. The older brother breaks your parents in, then the younger brother kind of rides in his wake.

And my brother was incredibly smart. We are all smart, but my brother was incredibly smart and I was nineteen months younger and about his size. We ended up the same height but I was always taller. He spurted in high school, so I always had this illusion I could beat him at something, and of course I couldn't, I couldn't beat him at anything, but I think that, more than anything else, sort of formed my character, a kind of dogged persistence with the vague expectation that somehow it will all turn out okay at the end. He didn't play sports. He debated in high school, that was his chief extracurricular activity. He and his partner won the state championship as seniors in high school. So, when I started playing football in, oh I think it was the fourth grade when I started playing organized football, it was all mine. It was where I could sort of find myself apart outside of my brother's shadow.

CP: Was football the primary sport for you or did you play other sports?

MO: You know, in those days kids played all the sports in season, and football was the one that I was most suited for. I wasn't a great hitter. I thought of myself as a nifty centerfielder in baseball but not a consistent hitter. In basketball, you know, playing basketball only in season, only at practice, you don't get very talented. So, football was the sport where sort of determination could matter a lot and make up for lack of skills or intense training or whatever. And sports just wasn't that big a deal of course, back in the fifties.

CP: Did you have a football hero as a kid?

MO: You know, the first guy I can remember, I think, was Billy Cannon who played for LSU, and in 1958 or so, I think it was '58, not '57, he—Mississippi and LSU were 1 and 2 and LSU beat them on, I think, as I recall, I think it was a long punt return by Billy Cannon. And I saw that on television and there was a game of the week on television and that happened to be the game that week. And that was the first kind of heroic football play that I can recall.

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In Spokane we were what, seventy, eighty miles from Pullman, so Washington State was our team and they had a guy named Keith Lincoln. I think that was a little bit after Billy Cannon, but bottom line is I sort of became conscious of football through the media around the age of nine or ten.

CP: How about literature?

MO: I just always loved to read. My dad nearly graduated from college. He said that he lacked one philosophy course that he needed to graduate from Gonzaga U when he went into the service. And my mother was very smart but she didn't go to college. I mean women in general didn't in those days. But without parents being pushy or anything like that, it was just always assumed that school was important, you were going to go to college. Somehow even I got in my mind really early on, maybe from my brother, I don't know, that I was going to get a Ph.D. in something someday, and that sort of thing. And Mother read to us when we were young. I don't have memories of that, I don't have, you know, early childhood memories, but books were just always around the house and I loved to read from early on and continued all the way through.

CP: Was there a fiction writer that captivated you when you were growing up?

MO: Well okay, so we got to jump ahead a little bit from when I was a little kid to into high school. And in high school I loved the talented sentimentalists. I loved Fitzgerald, I loved Steinbeck. I also discovered Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* sometime late high school, Kurt Vonnegut, you know, there's a lot of writers. Everybody loves *To Kill a Mockingbird* but I love those writers that, like I say, I realized only after the fact that they are really kind of sentimental. Or J.D. Salinger, shoot how could I miss Salinger? I mean I so wanted to be one of the Glass children when I was growing up. But yeah, those were the writers that I was drawn to.

CP: Yeah, modern Americans mostly.

MO: Yeah, modern Americans, and I was susceptible to whatever was out there. I had this favorite little used bookstore. My brother and I'd go down there and we'd just go through the stacks and we'd find things that looked cool. So, I think that was the way I ended up reading *Lord of the Flies*. That's definitely the way I found *Catch-22*. I think that's the way I found *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, just browsing through stacks of a very small used bookstore. But better for a kid to have a shelf that size to go through than, you know, seventeen walls to try to fathom.

CP: Take me through your high school experience, both as an athlete and as a student.

MO: So, Gonzaga Prep in those days was all boys, and I later sort of grumble about the social retardation that results from going to an all-boys schools, but actually ended up deciding it was probably good not to be cautious and self-conscious the whole time I was there with girls. Notre Dame being all-boy, that was different, that should have been different.

But back in those days, the teachers were mostly Jesuits, there was still enough recruitment to the Jesuit order. It was a very, it was a non-elective, very traditional kind of curriculum. As I recall, we had three choices. We could take a scientific curriculum, a classical curriculum or an honors classical curriculum. And if you did a scientific curriculum, the only difference was I think you got maybe one more math class and you got French in your junior and senior years after two years of Latin. Honors, in the classical curriculum, you did four years of Latin instead of the two years of French, and in the honors classical you did the four years of Latin plus two years of Greek. And I don't know what we had to give up for that, probably that extra math course.

Anyway, so I did the honors classical curriculum. It was sort of the most elite and my older brother, who was always the buffer for me on these things, told me to do that. So, I got a very good Jesuit education. I ended up, like a whole lot of good Catholic boys, altar boy and all that, I wrestled around in my what we would call middle school years, though

it was first through eight in those days. But whether I had a vocation to the priesthood and should I consider going to Bishop White Seminary instead of Gonzaga Prep, and as I recall it, and I don't think I'm misremembering, I wanted to go to Gonzaga Prep so I could play football while I go to school, so football saved me from a misguided pursuit of a vocation that I clearly didn't have.

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But then I played football there and in the ninth grade, I wore a leather helmet. I think back on that every now and then, and I wore a leather helmet because it was probably from the thirties, maybe the forties. My high school didn't have very much money at all and they didn't, they didn't suit us up very fancily. We wore jerseys that were unbelievably thick and stitched up and patched. I mean our jerseys were probably twenty years old and all that. So, it was a different world then. And I had an old school coach who was really sharp-tongued and rough and all of that kind of stuff, but that suited me just fine because I was going to work hard anyway.

And as I think back on it, I don't think I even started as a freshman. I'm not sure of that. I know as a sophomore I didn't start, and then there was a coaching change midway through the season. This is on what we call the B Squad and I became a starting tackle and I was sort of elated, of course, by that early success. And then I started my last two seasons and was captain my senior year and tore cartilage in my knee in the first game of the senior year, and so hobbled around the whole season and then had surgery afterwards. So, it became a kind of recurrent pattern. Things would be going really well and then I'd have this injury that just sort of spoils the uncomplicated pleasure of it.

And I again, long after the fact, realized that, you know, that's not such a bad thing. I mean that's actually the more common experience. I mean, very few kids go through sports just sailing through with nothing but success and all of that. I'm always skeptical about the virtues we've claimed that we learn through sports. But for me, football definitely reinforced the doggedness that was already there from having this older brother. And I really worked through my adolescence in high school football, and even college football. I was a top student, I was valedictorian and all of that. But I sort of took that kind of stuff for granted and football was the arena in which I was sort of more publicly tested. Playing in Joe Albi Stadium under the lights in high school was a kind of rite of passage sort of experience for me.

You know, when I look back, I stopped playing football at the age of twenty-six and at that point had played football for something like sixteen, fifteen or sixteen out of my twenty-six years on the planet. It was a big part of my early life and I look back on it now and realize that I was lucky, I was a beneficiary. I came away from it with mostly positive impact, not very much at all of the kind of negative impact that it has for a lot of kids.

CP: Can you talk about the allure of the sport? I mean the consequences of football are known to many by now, but it's a sport that continues to draw people on a huge level, and as one who played it, can you talk about what it's like to be a player?

MO: Well you know, as a player, and I've thought about it, written about these things so much, so whether I'm sort of retroactively remembering things that I've thought about a whole lot later, there's always a possibility. But I was definitely, I was definitely drawn to that cult of toughness. And I know now as an historian of football, that this cult of toughness, which has always been a part of football, but it was particularly pronounced in the fifties and sixties, the threat of the Soviet Union out there was a challenge to our collective manhood and all of this kind of stuff. And little boys are oblivious to that, but tackling and being tackled is an unnatural thing to do.

And we blocked and tackled with our shoulders rather than our heads. We had crummy equipment. In grade school we had to buy our own equipment, so I had, you know, they didn't have Kmart in those days, but I had the equivalent of a plastic helmet you would buy at Kmart.

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But we blocked and tackled with our shoulders, so we really weren't putting ourselves much at risk. But it seemed enormously risky and challenging and so on when you first started doing these things. And the elation, the sense of discovery and relief and self-realization when you have one of these encounters and you walk away unharmed and all that,

memories of tackling a much bigger kid or having to take on a much bigger kid and surviving, all of that kind of stuff was meaningful and important to my child and adolescent self.

There were also the—you know football is this very interesting tension between violence and beauty and I had some of those beautiful moments too. In late grade school, let me see, I got to try to get this right. Either part of the time—I at least spent part of the time as an offensive end, as a tight end, and so I did catch some passes. And I have a vivid memory, as vivid as any memory that I have of my past, of a practice that was in fall, it was getting dark, we could barely see and okay, the coach, who is the brother of one of our players and had played at the local high school says "okay, one more play," and I'm going to be the quarterback and he said, told "the receiver's just been running down the field," and I ran down the field, I don't know, twenty, thirty, forty yards, and this guy, who wasn't one of us kids, he was in his early twenties, threw a long, long, long pass. It must have been truly forty, fifty yards or whatever, and I'm just running and running and running, I could barely see and I looked over my shoulder and could barely see and stuck up my arms and it felt into my arms and I caught it. And that was just so cool, so cool.

And sports, football provides those opportunities. Basketball probably provides a whole lot more of those. There must be experiences in basketball of kind of feeling weightless and utterly, utterly at home in the universe and all that kind of thing, but you get those things in football too. But for me, I was a lineman and most of what I did was block and tackle. And so, the kind of gritty, determined, hunkered down, stick your shoulder in there, take your licks, deliver the licks, and the psychological, emotional payoff of that was what mattered more to me. And that's, the mention of football is either terribly misunderstood or terribly criticized by those who are appalled by violence of any form.

I mean, to accept football as a meaningful experience, you have to accept the fact that, or you have to accept the proposition that there is aggression and even violence in us. And it's probably biological, not just cultural, but then culture interacts as well, in a lot of ways. But if you accept that premise that it's there, football can be, isn't always, but it can be a kind of useful outlet for those kinds of things. And as I said, I know now that blocking with our shoulders rather than our heads, which I didn't learn to do until I got into college, protected us from stuff that we now know is just horribly dangerous and may mean the end of football as we know it.

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In the days, years when I played it, this is through the NFL, concussions were understood medically as bruises to the brain that healed in the same way as other bruises; just give them a little bit of time and they're okay, no sense whatsoever of the long-term consequences. I mean, it was understood that a really severe concussion, particularly the subdural hematoma resulting, or something like that, could be really dangerous, but in general, concussions were not thought to be dangerous. You know, getting your bell rung, getting dinged or whatever was just an okay part of the game. A little bit unpleasant but you know, it goes on all of that. But having blocked and tackled with my shoulder rather than my head for those what, five years in grade school and four years in high school, first nine years I played, during those years which we now know are the most potentially risky with a developing brain, I was protected from the possible consequences without really knowing it.

CP: We're you recruited out of high school?

MO: A little bit. I made visits to Idaho and Washington State, was there one other? I mean those were the two local public universities. Dee Andros actually was coach at Idaho at the time. I was sort of, kind of recruited by two of the military academies, and I entertained that briefly, but only briefly. Nobody ever actually got to a point of offering me a scholarship, but I sort of decided to walk on at Notre Dame fairly early on. So, I don't know for certain that I wouldn't have been offered a scholarship. I just don't know. I mean the recruiting of me was extraordinarily casual, and I think recruiting in general was pretty casual in those days.

I mean I was a first team All-City player as a senior, but I was a two-hundred pound, 6'4", whatever I was, tight end, defensive end would be the way I would have looked coming out of high school. And that wasn't too small, to play at Washington State or Idaho, and the assumption would be that you would get bigger, but when I got back to Notre Dame, the smallest scholarship alignment on the team was 240 pounds. And I had never seen a football player who weighed over 220 who wasn't just a fat tub. I mean it was just a different world back there. So, the basic answer is no, I wasn't recruited out of high school, but slightly qualified.

And I actually, I didn't apply for a scholarship, but I had, my dermatologist actually, who was treating my acne, was a Notre Dame grad and he contacted the coaching staff at Notre Dame on my behalf and said I was interested in a scholarship. It turns out there was a guy there who later became really important to me, who was six years older or so and played at Notre Dame, but he came, he actually went to my high school for a couple years, then moved to Olympia for a couple years, but he was the head recruiter in the Northwest for Notre Dame. And so, they knew I was interested, and he must have sent them some game film or something. But anyway, they declined to offer me a scholarship but invited me to walk on. So I was, it was known as an invited walk-on when I went to Notre Dame.

And that decision was made fairly early on, and how it was made by Notre Dame, well you know, I was a Catholic kid and Notre Dame just—I graduated high school in '65, so the '65 season was my last, and Ara Parseghian had become coach there the year before and revived the program. So, Notre Dame was sort of in the sports news again, but surely it was in my consciousness anyways, a Catholic kid, though the Jesuits didn't have much use for Notre Dame. My teachers all wanted us to go to Gonzaga U, Seattle U, University of San Francisco, Santa Clara, the Jesuit schools on the west coast. And I thought it was important to go to a Catholic university. I mean the Jesuits really convinced us that, you know, they told us these stories about—I had this one, I realize now, lunatic teacher who talked about a kid who decided to enroll at the University of Idaho, that secular den of inequity, and was driving to campus to enroll when he was crossing railroad tracks and hit by a train and killed, and we were supposed to take that as the moral lesson for what happens when you go to secular dens of inequity.

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And I didn't quite buy that, of course. I mean I was a smart kid but I was really, really susceptible to my Catholic upbringing, so going to a Catholic university, you know I could have gotten into Stanford or Harvard or Yale with my grades and SATs and all that kind of thing. It never dawned on me that this is what a smart high school kid ought to think about doing. So, I applied once place, Notre Dame, and that was it.

CP: What was the adjustment like for you, going to college, a place far away from home?

MO: Yeah, two thousand miles away, which I think in itself is a great education. Chicago was my first big city. A bunch of us actually, I think seven of us from my high school graduating class went back. So, I didn't show up knowing no one at all, but very quickly became part of a different world and lived in the dormitory for four years, which was fairly typical in those days, and actually lived with the same group of kids for most of that. But yeah, being away from home, and being away from home in those days was really being away. I mean, we called home collect once a month and maybe wrote your mom once a week or whatever, if you were really dutiful. But you were out on your own. And this was the Vietnam era and this was the Civil Rights and Black Power era and, you know, just a whole lot of growing up took place for college kids in the late sixties. And being away from home created the conditions where a lot of that could happen, and was a part of it.

CP: Were those social movements prevalent on the Notre Dame campus?

MO: You know, Notre Dame was relatively conservative as a Catholic institution, but even relatively conservative institutions were profoundly antiwar by 1968, '69. The draft hovered over our heads. My senior year was the first year of the draft lottery, so we all lived under the shadow of Vietnam awaiting us and, you know, there wasn't any bombing of ROTC buildings. I'm not sure whether we had ROTC or not. We probably did. There wasn't any of that kind of real radicalism like at San Francisco State or Wisconsin or Columbia or whatever, but like the rest of the collegiate world, we were on the antiwar part of the spectrum and moving increasingly that way as the era played out.

You know, the Chicago Seven, the 1968 Chicago convention was just in our backyard. And you know, I never had a TV set in my room and my chief source of news was the local campus paper. So, we were in our own little adolescent cocoon at the university, sheltered from a whole lot of stuff but knowing it was out there and it awaited us. And maybe not as fully aware of exactly what was going on at all times and all that, but there was no way not to be political in that era. And yeah, Notre Dame was just part of that.

Also Notre Dame, while I was there, was in the process of becoming a real university instead of a provincial Catholic college. Father Hesburgh became president in early 1950s and brought Notre Dame into the modern world. And so when I

was there, it wasn't the—there was no mandatory chapel, my freshman year they abolished, halfway through the year they abolished the requirement that you had to wear a coat and tie to dinner, because we abused it outrageously, you know, wore white t-shirts, and I had a Goodwill sports jacket that was three sizes too small so that I could pop out the seams and then you'd just tie it in a half knot, and everybody did that and so they finally just—

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So Notre Dame, socially and culturally, was becoming less conservative and less provincially Catholic, but also intellectually. We had to take four courses of theology and four philosophy, and I had a Mennonite minister for a biblical theology class and I had a Buddhist for a comparative religion class and, you know, it wasn't, like I said, it was Notre Dame having entered the modern world and on its way of becoming a really first-rate university. Conservative, yes, but only relative to the really radical places around the country.

CP: So, you joined the team in 1966 as a walk-on freshman and the team wins the national championship that year, is that correct?

MO: Correct, yeah.

CP: Can you take me through your experience of that? I don't gather you played a lot?

MO: No, no, no, but see freshmen weren't even eligible then. Freshmen did not become eligible in football until 1973. So, the freshmen practiced against the varsity and then had their own practices and we had our own, I believe it was a three-game season. So for example, we played the Michigan State freshmen in Ann Arbor the night before the classic Michigan State—Notre Dame that ended in a 10-10 tie when they were one and two in the country.

And so, I practiced against that national championship team. I remembered lining up against Alan Page, who was the biggest, blackest man I'd ever seen in my life and was so terrifying to me, you know, and I just wanted to survive. And Alan Page went on to become one of the really great men of the world of football and a Supreme Court justice. So, those guys were, I was a freshman when freshmen were ineligible, but I was also a walk-on. So, I don't really feel that I was a part of that 1966 national championship team.

Some guys from my class lobbied for a long, long time as I understand it, and finally five, six, seven years ago got approval to purchase national championship rings. Because they were part of a team, they practiced, they – freshmen became eligible later on. But I thought, if I had a national championship ring from 1966 I'd feel I had to keep explaining how I didn't really deserve to have it, no, that wasn't my team, that was my college – my school's team. So, freshman year I was on the freshman team and I actually did quite well. I beat out some scholarship players and ended up starting at least one, maybe two of the three, I think two of the three games as a defensive end at, by this time, 6'5" and, I don't know, 205 pounds or whatever, and I could handle these 240, 250 pounders. I was a physics major. It was all leverage. I got lower than them, I could stuff them, you know, and that kind of thing. And I was this dogged kid, this younger brother. And so, I actually did quite well. But again, I learned these things after the fact. I mean, the varsity coach is looking down at the freshman team thinking about their prospects. Look at this skinny defensive end, and he's a skinny defensive end, a non-scholarship player, and there ain't nothing here.

But this guy I talked about who recruited in the Northwest, a guy named Brian Boulac, became kind of my mentor and counselor and champion on the freshmen team. And then as a sophomore, I never suited up for a varsity game, I was on what we called the prep team, preparation team. Most schools call it the scout team, they're running the plays against the varsity. And Brian Boulac was my prep team coach and whenever I did something good, he made sure the coaches on the other side of the ball heard about it, you know, "way to go Oriard," that kind of stuff. And I practiced hard. I mean, the varsity guys hated me. I was one of those guys that went really hard in practice, because my only self-respect came from beating them in practice sessions. We'd have goal line scrimmages at the end of practices a couple times a week. And if we could stuff them and keep them out of the goal line, I mean that was the only achievement, success that we had.

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And quite frankly, it was easier for me as a walk-on because that's where I had no right except to expect to be. Most of my teammates were scholarship players who had imagined something better for them. So, it was easier for me to play really

hard and not just, you know, "why bother, I don't have a chance anymore." And at the end of that season, right before spring football started, I got called in and was asked if I wanted to try playing center, and it turned out that the center in my class, the recruited center had a chronically dislocating shoulder, and it just wasn't going to heal. And so, they just needed another body. And because I had worked hard, busting my ass, done some good things and been noticed and was being championed by Brian Boulac, they gave me the shot at a center. I thought centers were fire hydrants, short and squatty, and I was this tall, rangy guy, but of course I said yes. And then things worked out.

CP: And the center is sort of the quarterback of the offensive lineup, if I understand correctly? You'd never played this position before?

MO: Right, right. Yeah, I mean okay, so the centers have to be smart, right? And offensive linemen in general. In fact, my junior year, the starting five interior offensive liner, we had a combined GPA of, I think, 3.4 or something. Offensive and linemen are always the smartest and worst athletes on the team. It doesn't take as much athleticism to be an offensive lineman. And the center is supposedly the smartest of all of them. It does turn out, in fact, that a whole lot of centers have been really, really smart, but it is also a fact that making the line calls as a center is not the same as doing differential equations in your head. I mean, it is not all that complicated. But yeah, I mean offensive linemen tend to be coachable, hard-working, smart and not the most talented guys on the field. Although today, I mean some of these guys are freakish. You know, 320 pound left tackles that are unbelievably quick and all of that kind of stuff. But that's a different world from the one I played in.

CP: What was the environment for training and the support system that was available to players at Notre Dame at that time?

MO: It was such a simpler world in those days. I mean, we had pretty good facilities, we had a nice old stadium with kind of crummy locker rooms, it had benches and metal lockers. The first couple years I was there, we lifted weights in the offseason on our own in an old fieldhouse or kind of barn, wherever. You know, there's just nothing there. We had some nice practice fields. While I was there, they built the first of their sort of major sports facility, a kind of two dome, looked like a brassiere, two domed thing that had a hockey rink and a basketball rink, and on the outside we had lockers. And so, we used some of those lockers. So, we had nicer facilities but then for the games we used the lockers in the stadium like everybody else.

But when the facilities arms race started happening in college sports, and I was following this, I thought "you've got to be kidding me." And then when it became apparent that these were recruiting to—wait a minute, somebody go to a college because they got a nicer locker room? You got to be kidding me. All of that is just alien to somebody from my generation. The support staff, academically was—I think Notre Dame was one of the early ones, early on, to do this, to have somebody kind of overseeing the academic standing of athletes. There was no golden age in college sports, college football, when every player was on the dean's list and majoring in the most serious subjects or whatever. But when I was at Notre—while I was at Notre Dame, the way I think about it now in relation to today is that I got the best education my institution offered me.

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And I started out as a physics major. It was my older brother's influence. He was just a brilliant mathematician and he—we all had to take calculus and there are three levels of calculus and the third one was the honors calculus, was the most theoretical, and math majors took it and physics majors could opt for it and my brother said "yeah, it'd probably be a good idea if you took that." So, I did the honors calculus. And I had it, so freshman year for chemistry, physics and the honors calculus, and then I had physics lab or chemistry lab in the afternoon, I just came late to practice. And it was the same of the varsity guys too. One of the backup quarterbacks was an engineer and at least one day a week, maybe two in some years, he had to come late to practice. But that's the way it was. But, so all freshmen had to take calculus, there wasn't a major where athletes could hide out at Notre Dame, though there were teachers that not just athletes, but everyone, knew; somebody—the baseball coach also taught math and his nickname was—his name was Jay Kline, he was known as Ninety-Nine Kline. There was a Father Brennan who taught English and he was known as A.B. Brennan. So, there are these guys that not just athletes would seek out, but athletes could seek out.

But they had to major in something real and so on and there was somebody kind of looking after them. I've talked to some of them over the years and you know, it was possible to slide by at Notre Dame, like it was possible to slide by everywhere else. But something was more likely to stick because you couldn't avoid it all together. But I was a walk-on, I was there as a student first. And so, I never got advised by anybody in the athletic department, and because I was kind of an elite student, they had this kind of unique program that I was part of where I got really good advising and all that kind of thing.

So, I majored in physics my first year but as it happened, my most inspiring teacher was my English professor, and I'd always loved to read. And because I was in this program, I had a, instead of taking freshmen composition or whatever, I took the survey of English lit with a lot of writing, weekly writing attached to it by a senior professor instead of a graduate student. And so, at the end of my freshman year I said "oh yeah, maybe I'll double major in physics and English" and talked to one of my advisors, and you could tell a kid this in 1967: "quit worrying about what you want to be," and I was enamored of the idea of being a physicist, "and just do what you really most enjoy and worry about the jobs later." And you could tell a kid that honestly in '67 without misleading them. So anyway, I switched to English by the beginning of my sophomore year.

But I followed an utterly academic track, not an academic track within the athletic department. So as I say, I got the best education my institution offered while I was there. Not everybody on the football team did, but the difference between then and today is it was available to them if they were so motivated. And I know one guy who's three years ahead of me and he became a distinguished activist and sport sociologist and all that. And he's written his memoir that talks about kind of just drifting academically for three years or two years or whatever and then having an awakening and then just sucking up everything he could learn his last year and so on and then went on to get a Ph.D. and all that kind of thing. So, as I say, it was available for those who wanted it and sought it out, even if they didn't all take advantage of it.

CP: You had a lot of success as a football player in the last two years at Notre Dame, certainly your senior year, and it also sounds to me like by the time you graduated you had a pretty clear idea of what you wanted to do with your life.

MO: Yeah, okay so I was moved to center and during spring ball was learning the position and I think I was probably number three on the depth chart and the quarterback I worked with was Joe Theismann, who went on to be a very good football quarterback, and if you saw Joe today I'm sure he would still have really bent, swollen knuckles from all the times that I jammed his fingers while I was learning to play the position, snap the ball and be moving to block and all that good thing.

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By the start of the season junior year, I was number two on the depth chart, backing up a guy named Tim Monty and got to play about a quarter in each of the first four games and played quite well and got called in by the coaches one day after the fourth game and they said "we're moving you to the first team." Oh my God, you know, and I go out there and there's a board in the locker room with the depth charts and there I am on the first team and I go "oh my God, it's happened," you know. I didn't even tell my roommate for fear by Friday or Saturday it would be gone and reality would have reasserted itself. But I started the fifth game, so I started six games my junior year and really did play well. And then my senior year, started the whole season.

That business of tearing cartilage in my knee the first game of my senior year in high school replayed itself at Notre Dame in a scrimmage in spring ball of my junior year before my senior year. We were just lining up for a routine extra point, or maybe it was a field goal in a scrimmage, and I was snapping the ball with my head down and some eager freshman, sophomore to be, got about nine yards back and timed it to hit me just as I released the ball and boom, you know. And I got a long neck. Offensive linemen should not have necks, they should have swivels. And it pinched the nerve in my neck, what is sort of colloquially called a stinger, but a stinger is not like a bee sting, I mean your whole arm goes numb. It causes neurological damage, so your whole arm goes numb and you're in excruciating pain, but then it will go away after a period of time. But once it's done, then you're susceptible to re-pinching it again.

So, I played my senior year with this pinched nerve and at least a couple, three times a game, I would sting. I'd go back to huddle and I'd be shaking my arm trying to get it back to functioning for the next play and so on. And it also meant that in blocking I had to be always conscious. By now I've learned that the way you block, like tackling, is you stick this part of

your head under the other player's numbers and then take him the way—he'll slide off one way or the other and you take him that way, unless the play is predesigned and you got to take him that way.

And in those days, most teams played what was known as a 4-3 defense, which meant the center was uncovered and he was blocking middle linebacker, which meant having to be quick and get out there and cut him off one way or the other. And cutting somebody off means you're going to take them to your shoulder. If the player's up the middle, I had to take him on head-on. Then it was a little more precarious for me, because I had to make sure that I didn't jam. It was snapping my head back that would cause the difficulty. And so, blocking was, instead of being simply reckless, I had to be conscious of bracing myself at the moment of impact and so on.

The most enjoyable games that I played at Notre Dame were probably the ones in my junior, when it was a revelation to be a starter that very first game and all of that, and then when we played Southern Cal at the end of the season. And I can still picture this block where I got to the safety and Bob Gladioux scored and it was a kind of uncomplicated pleasure, and senior year was a more complicated pleasure. There was still the enormous satisfaction of being a starter and having everything work out so well, but the experience on the field was a little bit less simple my senior year.

But things worked out well, yeah. Things worked out well for me. I had really a fairytale experience at Notre Dame. I said earlier that when I look back I was a beneficiary, and this is certainly one of the most visible benefits, but getting a first-rate education at the same time, I got all kinds of benefits that were not so sort of apparent in the record, as it were.

CP: Was Joe Theismann Joe "Theezman" at this point?

MO: No, he was already Joe Theismann. I think that happened when he first arrived. He was a year behind and so I wasn't present when that was played out.

[0:50:10]

CP: What was he like as a personality?

MO: He was a nice guy, he was a year behind me, we roomed together on the road. He was a nice kid, a nice young man. I mean, I was a kid then and he was kid, he was a nice kid. And he had the reputation for being—later got the reputation for being cocky. And maybe that happened more the next year when he was a senior, but as a junior among seniors, maybe he just didn't get carried away, and then when he was with the Redskins, I don't know. But my experience with Joe is I liked him, we got along great. I didn't hang out with football players away from the field at all, so it wasn't that I would have hung out with Joe off the field too and then didn't for any reason, no. But I liked him and we got along well.

CP: I'm interested in your social experience, especially by the time you're a senior, you're a co-captain on the football team, an All-American at a campus where football is number one, what was that like?

MO: Yeah, I mean it was really cool but it was sort of a private experience. I mean, I did not walk around campus feeling like a big deal. I lived with the same guys all four years, I had the same roommate for the last three years, and our life together and our experiences and our sense of things didn't change over those four years. I mean, during the season my schedule was very regimented. It took a lot less time than it does today, but practice would start about three, so you'd head over, trudging up to practice in drizzly fall, cold days, no fun, no fun. But you go out to practice at three, or three-thirty, whenever it was, and then have dinner in one of the dining halls. And it was the same food that everybody else ate, just a little more of it. It wasn't high quality food.

That's another thing that's amazed me about the modern university, is food courts trying to please students at the dining table as if they're customers in a restaurant. That wasn't part of mine. We had the mystery meat and all of that kind of stuff. And then after dinner we'd have our meeting, and be out of that by, I don't know, eight, eight-thirty, and then I'd go to the library and I'd stay until eleven or whatever and then walk back alone to the dorm and go to bed, get up in the morning and do it over again. In the dining halls, not for training day but for regular meals, I was not in any way a conspicuous person. I guess it's that football was integrated into the campus. And there were not athletic dorms. And so there were always some football players in the dining hall or in the bookstore or whatever and it just, it was just not a big deal. There was none of that kind of celebrity stuff that's a part of the game today where Tim Tebow or whoever can't go to a party because everybody's got a cellphone with a camera on it. No, it wasn't like that at all.

So, I had the very quiet, the real, intense, but satisfaction of what I had achieved and what had happened and all of that without it in any way sort of distorting my social life at Notre Dame, which was an all-male social life. Saint Mary's across the road, we outnumbered them seven to one and I maybe had, I don't know, three or four dates in four years or whatever. Could have had more maybe, maybe I didn't capitalize on my football status, but I didn't know how because I was socially retarded from Gonzaga Prep.

CP: Well, you finished up at Notre Dame and it sounds like you had an idea in your head of what you were going to do. What you did pursue was sort of a dual career as a football player and continuing your academic studies, as well.

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MO: Yeah. I became an English major without any desire to teach and didn't know what I was going to do with it but, you know, I've been told forget about that. And somehow my senior year, I started to think that teaching would be a good thing. It was an era in which we sort of disparaged the mere making of money as a life's goal. You wanted to do something meaningful or whatever. And teaching seemed to be the way to do it and I loved to read and it gave me an opportunity to live with books and so on. And in a way, it's a kind of a foolish reason to go into a lifelong profession. You know, you love books, okay well there's the whole life that's a part of that, that you don't know anything about.

But by my senior year I decided I wanted to teach and I applied for a fellowship that no longer exists. It was the Danforth Fellowship specifically for—you didn't have to teach but it was for people who intended to teach and it was a terrific fellowship. It gave you full tuition, board and room for four years or for whatever it took you. And so, when I won a Danforth fellowship, it sort of confirmed that. I was also, I interviewed for a Rhodes scholarship and did not get it. And had I gotten a Rhodes, I would have taken the Rhodes and never played football.

But I got the Danforth Fellowship, so graduate school was taken care of no matter what happened. And so, I applied to Virginia, Stanford and Washington. Washington was my fallback. And I got into all three—or no, I got into Virginia, excuse me, and then Washington and not into Stanford. And Virginia was a better school. I didn't know anything about it but I learned after the fact from a colleague here who went there. They brought in about a hundred and twenty first-year students and then gave twelve fellowships the following year. So, it was just ruthless. Now, with the Danforth I would not have been affected by that, but it would not have been a friendly environment for me.

But anyway, I went to the University of Washington because by this time, I had gotten back with my girlfriend and we were intending to get married down the road, and so I wanted to be in Seattle. She was in Spokane, in Cheney, Washington. And they were amenable to my showing up in January rather than September, so that's how all of that played out.

If there had been a conflict between graduate school and football, I would have gone with graduate school. You could make the decision: well, I'll go to play football as long as it goes and then start graduate school or whatever. But one, I was a student first and a football player second, and two, I had this Danforth Fellowship and I doubt that I could have persuaded them to hold onto it for me until I was ready to take it. So, had there been any conflict, it would have been graduate school rather than football. But because Danforth and University of Washington were both amenable, I started graduate school in January.

And then that first year in Kansas City, we played at Oakland at the end of the season and came out four or five days earlier because it's a whole lot warmer in the Bay Area in December than it is in Kansas City, so we came out early to practice for the game. And we happened to be in Palo Alto practicing at Stanford and I walked over to the English department and introduced myself and I said "you know, I applied last year and didn't get in; two things have changed since I applied: I have a Danforth Fellowship"—which, without my saying it means "you don't have to give me a dime"—"and I played a season in the NFL." And I thought they might find that intriguing, I think this will be a positive, not a negative, though this is 1970, this is when the war is still raging in Vietnam and there are people who are talking about football as a fascist sport and all that kind of thing. But I thought it would make me more interesting than your typical applicant, and he said "oh yeah, you should reapply." So, I reapplied because I'd had the opportunity to do this in person, because the Chiefs happened to be in Palo Alto in December, and I got accepted. So, Stanford turned out to be a great fit for me, too.

CP: You finished the masters at Washington first, though?

MO: No.

CP: No? Okay.

MO: No, I did two terms, the two terms at Washington and then started at Stanford and transferred the credits.

CP: Was writing about football something that you thought you might do from the get-go?

[1:00:25]

MO: No, not at all, not at all. And this was just before literary theory took off and all the kind of critical approaches to, you know, the cultural approaches to literature and Marxist and feminist and racial and so on, and it was an era when all of the basic books on the major writers had been written and graduate students were sort of scrambling around for topics. And I didn't even know what area of—you could major in American literature at Stanford. It was British and American but you could, American literature could be your area, you'd just have to be responsible for British literature too, for your qualifying exams.

And so, I didn't even really know exactly what area or field I was most interested in or who I would write about. And I must have narrowed it down to American. I was interested in American literature by the time this happened, but the guy—my Chaucer professor, a guy named Emerson Brown, talked to me one day, he said "you know, with your dual interests, American literature and football, have you ever thought about writing about sports literature?" And not only had I never thought about it, I never knew such a thing existed. So, it was obviously a kind of a natural fit. So, I did the dissertation on American sports fiction.

But then, coming out with a Ph.D. in Stanford and getting a teaching position here, I spent the first half of my academic career kind of running away from it. I was in American literature, you know. I taught Melville and Faulkner and Twain and James and Hawthorne and Eudora Welty and all the rest. I didn't teach only Ring Lardner, Mark Harris. So, I spent the first half of my career in my own mind trying to prove that I could write about Melville and Faulkner and not just Ring Lardner and Mark Harris and so on. I wrote a very big, overly ambitious book that dealt with all the major American writers, and the doing of it liberated me from that defensiveness.

And so, midway through my career I sort of reinvented myself as a cultural historian of football. I had always been interested in American studies, but it looks from the outside like "oh, football player who gets a Ph.D. at Stanford and then writes about sports." It didn't play out quite so simply as that, in my own mind anyway. I mean all of this defensiveness was in my own—well no, it wasn't entirely in my own mind. I mean, I could not have gotten a job at a more prestigious English department with a dissertation on American sports fiction. I could not have written my first, published my first book on American sports fiction at a more prestigious English department and anybody take it seriously.

At Oregon State I was sort of free to do what I wanted to do, ironically because the liberal arts aren't taken so seriously here, which was a kind of weird freedom at the same time it's an unfortunate thing about this institution.

CP: I want to talk about the Chiefs briefly. You joined them at probably the high-water mark in the history of the franchise, it just won the Super Bowl and they had just joined the NFL as well. I'm sure it was an exciting time to be there.

MO: You know, playing in the NFL was not nearly as exciting as playing at Notre Dame. It didn't mean nearly as much as playing at Notre Dame. I mean, I had worked through my adolescence, I'd proven what I needed to prove at Notre Dame, none of that was necessary in Kansas City. Kansas City, overall, was just a really interesting experience with a group of guys who otherwise I would have had no contact with. Playing at Notre Dame, I was captain of the team but I never really felt fully a part of the team, because I'd come from the outside. And all my friends were away from the team and so on, so these were my teammates during practices and games and so on, but then my life was elsewhere. In Kansas City, I was actually more, felt more part of the team than I had at Notre Dame.

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And my teammates were some really extraordinary men. Willy Lanier, who is not only one of the greatest middle linebackers who ever played but was this incredibly articulate, thoughtful, smart African American. A majority of my teammates were black and they were as unlike each other as any comparable number of white folks are unlike each other. I mean, it was an education in the reality of race in America, as opposed to the stereotypes.

And the NFL itself was not nearly the big deal under the media spotlight then as it was now. But it still was professional football. And so there was a little bit of that glamor, though not a ton. But the locker room was an interesting place and the experience within. And finding that I could survive an encounter with Curley Culp in scrimmage was an interesting experience. It just didn't mean quite as much as it would have a few years earlier. But yeah, it was, this is another of the ways in which I was fortunate I joined a veteran team that had just won the Super Bowl, so these were mature men, not wild lunatic, crazy young guys. This was before steroids, this was, I have enormous respect for my former teammates. Not for everything they did in their lives or whatever or everything about them, but these were interesting, for the most part intelligent men doing a hard job with dignity. And it was an interesting experience. It just wasn't as formative for me as high school and college football, particularly college football had been.

CP: You mentioned the locker room, how were your academic pursuits received by your teammates?

MO: Well, I was a smart guy and one of the ways I was smart is I kept it to myself. I didn't go around sort of parading the fact that, you know, "oh, what are you doing in the offseason?" "Well, I'm going to be working on a Ph.D. program with Stanford," you know. And I think actually I was more envied than not for having a real life in the making away from football, because in this era, nobody was making enough money to live on after they retired. The highest paid guy on the team, our quarterback, Lenny Dawson, was making somewhere around a hundred. My fellow offensive linemen, all the many time All-Pros, were making like forty and fifty. Everybody had to have, everybody knew the end was coming and it might be sooner than later if there was an injury, and what they were going to do with their lives was a matter of concern and all that. And so the fact that I had this life in the making away from football, because I kept my mouth shut and went about my business and was, in other ways, a good teammate, it played out just fine.

I had one teammate who was a wide receiver from Alabama who used to call me Chaucer and he came up to me one day and he starts reciting the opening lines of the *Canterbury Tales*: "Whan that Aprill with his shourës sootë/The droghte of March hath percëd to the rootë," but he did it in an Alabama accent and I go "what the—?" you know, "this is amazing." So yeah, it was okay, what I did, it was okay.

CP: Well, I gather that in the NFL years you had some injuries and you went to Canada for a brief period of time and concluded your career in 1974 after a players strike?

MO: Yeah the, you know I had minor injuries. My first year, I was on what was then known as the taxi squad. Now they call it the practice squad or something. Anyway, the roster was forty guys, then seven guys on a taxi squad making three hundred dollars a week and available if there are injuries and so on. And I only suited up for one game, the last game of the year, which didn't qualify that year as a year towards my pension. It took three years to be vested. So, I ended up playing three years beyond that and was always a backup offensive lineman because I was smart, I could play any positions. And even at 240 pounds, I could get away with it in those days. And actually 240 pounds, I wasn't that small for a center. I mean, I was rangy 240 but I think the guy who started was maybe 248 but he was more like six foot, 6'1" than 6'5," and then played on the special teams.

And this was before the special teams became really, really specialized. I mean today, NFL holds on to players to be special teams players. The guys that went 4.3 40s and 4.4 40s and real head hunters and play with reckless abandon. And in those days, special teams were the backup offensive and defensive players, supplemented as needed by guys who were starters. And so, it was just a different NFL than it is today. But I got through all of that without too much physical harm. I twisted, I had a bad knee from high school and aggravated that and I had to drain it every week for a few weeks and those kind of things, but relatively minor. And because I wasn't starting, I wasn't taking the head blows that I now know retrospectively could have been dangerous and all that, so I got through my NFL career pretty much unscathed, you know, aggravating my pinched nerve. I mean I got a messed up spine today, everything is compressed, even the way I played football, the blows, tons of blows to joints and all that stuff isn't good for you. But I'm in really pretty good physical shape for all the years I played.

My career in the NFL came to the end, came to an end in '74, which would have been my fifth season in Kansas City. It was the first of the major player strikes. It was during training camp and I got cut right at the end of it under circumstances that made no sense except as retaliation. When they cut me, they were left with one center. You don't do that to yourselves. Not that the center's the most important guy on the team, but if the one center you've got is injured and you don't have somebody reliable to back him up, you've got a real mess on your hands. And cutting me as a backup as opposed to cutting a starter, which would be more shocking but more harmful to the team, it just didn't make sense to me except as retaliation.

And so, at twenty-six, at the end of sixteen or whatever years of playing football, the last experience was going to leave a bitter taste, and so when I got a call from a team in Canada to come up, and they start their season earlier because it's colder up there and they end in November, yeah it gave me an opportunity to go out on my own two feet, as it were. And being a big deal in Canada was not that big a deal to me, but it gave me a chance to quit when I was ready. They wanted me to come back and by this time I had done everything but finish my dissertation at Stanford, so I got to walk away after a total of five years, a little bit sooner than I had planned. I had planned to keep playing until I finished my dissertation, until I finished my Ph.D., and then it was a tough job market in those years. I figured well, I don't get a job I'll keep playing until I get a job. And so, that ended a little prematurely. And it left me without a pension. I didn't play long enough to qualify for the pension.

But you know, I look back on it as a wholly positive, yeah, wholly positive experience, and a very interesting thing to have done, that not too many people get to do. And without my knowing it at the time, it's become something that I've written about, and when I sort of freed myself to write about it, I realized my personal experience was a great enhancement to my scholarly research in understanding the meaning of the sport in our history, which is basically what I've written about. So yeah, the NFL years were very useful that way. In fact, for my understanding of football, maybe the most useful years of all.

[1:15:43]

CP: Let's move into OSU. You came here in 1976?

MO: Mhmm.

CP: How did that come about?

MO: Okay, so 1976 I'm finishing up at Stanford and the job market is part of the Modern Language Association's annual convention right after Christmas, and tough job market and graduate students would, you know, "okay, how many interviews do you got, da, da, da, da," you know, and I had five interviews at MLA and Oregon State was one of them and it was the one that most interested me, being from Spokane, so for my wife and me to—by this time we were married—to be in the Northwest but not in Spokane, so we would have our own life but close to our families was ideal. And actually I got the rejection letter from Oregon State, which turned out to be a mistake on their part. They had three positions that year and they made offers and then sent the "no thanks, wish you well" letters to the rest of us, and then one of the people that they offered a position to turned them down and then "oh my God," and so they called me and said "are you still available?" and yes, I was. And so, I ended up here. And it was the one job in the Northwest so again, it was very fortuitous that this worked out.

CP: What was your perception of the university and of the department when you joined?

MO: The profession of—well probably it's probably true of most academic disciplines, but I only know my own, it's so much more professionalized today. It's astonishing how naïve I was coming out of graduate school about any number of things that every graduate student gets well-groomed and tutored in these days. So, I didn't really know much about the university. Somehow I figured out that the English department was more important at the University of Oregon than at Oregon State, so my hypothetical first choice for a position out of graduate school would have been Oregon rather than Oregon State, but when it was Oregon State, okay, you know. And it's maybe not quite as good but it's where I want to be and surely get enough and so on. But I had no understanding about sort of the historical place of the liberal arts at the Land Grant university and all of that kind of business.

And when I arrived here, there was this really sense of excitement, and it turns out that three of us were hired together, all in American literature; David Robinson, Kerry Ahearn and myself, and so immediately of course, we bonded with each other. And we were either the second or third group of new hires that actually were hired with an expectation of scholarship. The department and the college were just beginning a transformation that has played out considerably since then. And we were brought in as kind of young Turks, you know, "we're going to help turn this place around" sort of business. And actually the chair who hired us kind of, not very diplomatic or politically wisely, kind of let us know that there were these old farts in the department and then there's you young Turks, and da, da, da, da. Well, turns out the old farts in the department were these wonderful men and some women and very supportive and accepting and so on, and good people and good teachers, and they'd not been scholars no, it had never been expected of them.

[1:20:04]

But the department, when we first arrived, was a wonderfully congenial place where, as a really naïve, new assistant professor, I wasn't handicapped. I had sort of the space and freedom to figure things out and to learn the expectations and figure out how the profession worked and figure out how academic publishing worked. You know, the idea that you would have published in graduate school, it was just not part of anybody's awareness. David Robinson came in with something like thirteen publications from Wisconsin and he was this sort of phenomenon, this kind of freak of nature. That hadn't been anybody's expectation in those days. And so, this was a very good, good match for me and my innocence and naïveté.

And when I go back to MLA meetings for the next few years for various reasons and run into my former classmates from Stanford who got positions at Harvard or Princeton or wherever, their positions were always three years and out, no tenure track jobs, but in more prestigious places. And then, some others had tenure track positions at more prestigious places, but it was quickly apparent to me that I was happier where I was than they were where they were. For whatever reason, not only then but ever after, I was never institutionally ambitious. So, the English department's lack of a Ph.D. program and kind of national visibility and all that kind of thing was not a problem. I mean, I could do my work here as well as any place else. And in fact, doing it here I didn't worry about—if I had been teaching at Princeton, I'd have spent a whole lot of time worrying about whether I belonged at Princeton or not and whether I was worthy of my colleagues. And there was just none of that here. So, it was a good place for me to get established.

CP: Was there any sense of connection to Bernard Malamud at that point? He had been gone for a while, but not that long.

MO: Yeah, very much his ghost hovered heavily over the department in those days and several of my colleagues had been his colleagues. And one of them, Chester Garrison, was still a relatively close friend and Chester and Louise brought Bern and Ann out my first or second year, I mean really early on, so we got to meet him and talk to him about it. And of course I talked to him about *The Natural* and he was wonderfully gracious and all that kind of thing. But yeah, he was the kind of presiding genius of the place, and you know the Malamud Room in Moreland Hall. I think it was, actually I don't know for sure whether it already existed in 1976. But yeah, this was definitely the place that Malamud had taught and all of us young faculty were sort of, not encouraged, but we were told about *A New Life* and we all read *A New Life*. We were usually told "yeah, if you want to know how this place used to be, read *A New Life*," so we all knew that.

CP: Well, how did you go about settling in?

MO: It was very easy, I came out of the NFL, the most money I ever made in the NFL was twenty-seven thousand dollars my fourth year. But I came to OSU not as a former graduate student but as a former NFL player with enough money saved up to put a down payment on a house. So, my wife and I immediately bought a house on arrival, one of those little three bedrooms out by Cheldelin, Village Green area. First house we'd ever owned, and that was really cool. My wife had taught two years at a Catholic School in Palo Alto area before we came up and right before the school year started, got hired as a half time kindergarten teacher at Franklin School so, was in the, I think it was halftime. Anyway, but yeah, got a teaching job right from the get-go. And so, kind of those major challenges of a transition, where you live and what you do, was solved for us.

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So, we settled in right away and David and Kerry immediately became friends and we also even became friends with a remarkable group of instructors who were our age and hadn't finished their Ph.D.s yet. And this was a time when instructors could teach for only three years. It was a position designed for people who were ABD, you know, who were finishing Ph.D.s but still had to write their dissertations. But it was just a remarkable group of energetic young poets and writers and teachers that we became part of. And from the get-go, we got introduced to OSU basketball. The football was dreadful, but you know I was curious about it of course. Actually in those days, faculty could not get a season basketball ticket without getting football as well. And so, we did the football games and the basketball games and settled very easily into the community.

CP: What was that like, sitting in the stands for you, for the football games?

MO: It was pretty painful. I mean the football was really pretty bad. And I refused to leave games early, I thought that was disrespectful to the players, so we stuck them out to the bloody end, time after time. But you know, it became a focus of our social life. When we came to Corvallis, social life was in—there were no restaurants here. All the people who'd lived here for some time were all good cooks, and so small dinner parties were the thing. And we didn't have kids yet. So, more so basketball than football, but football too became kind of the focus for social life with parties afterwards or dinner parties afterwards and that sort of thing.

CP: Let's talk a bit about research and writing. It looks like 1982 was a big year for you in terms of publishing. You published a book that was an extension of your dissertation, I gather, but you also published a memoir.

MO: Yeah, the dissertation book, it was my dissertation and like I said, I knew nothing about publication and presses and all that kind of thing. And I found this, I found a book advertised on sports published by this company, jeez, I'm blanking out, that's really weird. Anyway, a publisher of textbooks, basically in Chicago. And I didn't know that getting it published with a more prestigious press was more important. And I mean, I couldn't have got it published by a more—I was sort of unwittingly part of the generation that sort of created sports studies in this country.

So anyway, I sent this manuscript off and they accepted it, and this is fairly early in the seventies, seven or something like that. And then I just didn't hear from them for a long, long time. I mean, it was like a couple years. I mean, they accepted it and then it was a couple years before they sent back an edited version and there was all this craziness in it. The reader was offended when I described a scene in the novel *North Dallas Forty*, a kind of an orgy, and it wasn't graphic but the mere mention of things going on there was offensive to this person. I go "you've got to be kidding me," and so I wrote back "you don't really want to cut this" and so on, and so then I waited a little while and oh, they'd defer to my judgement, and by this time, it was supposed to be a history of sports fiction from the beginning to the present, well the present had advanced about three years and 1979 there'd been a whole bunch of new novels published, including a fourth book by Mark Harris after a trilogy about this one character. So, I figured I had to come to terms with those, so I wrote more stuff and sent it on to them and then waited. I mean, it was really a kind of weird experience, and I didn't realize how weird it was because it was my first experience.

Anyways, so the book finally came out in '82. In the meantime, in 1980 I had this experience of, I used to bring the *Oregonian* sports page into the office with me and read it at my desk in the morning and then start the day, and I pick up my paper one day and this teammate of mine, a guy named Jim Tyrer, had killed his wife and himself the night before, and it was just stunning to read this, oh my God, you know.

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And the article described how he'd gone to the Chiefs stadium, Arrowhead Stadium that day to see—in fact, there was a game against the Seahawks, I believe. And after the game, he'd walked around the upper concourse after everybody left, and when I pictured him up there all alone, looking down on the field where just six years before he'd been a hero, and having written this dissertation on sport literature, I knew the story of the tragedy of the former athlete who's life peaked at twenty or twenty-two or whatever. And it was really haunting to read about Jim. I mean, I'm actually getting goosebumps right now as I'm telling you this, these many years later.

So anyway, I sat down and I wrote a piece, kind of a eulogy to Jim as the tragic former player sort of thing and sent it off to the *Kansas City Star*, and this is all snail mail in those days, and I got a really nice letter back "this is a very nice piece

but we've covered it pretty thoroughly now, thanks for sending it to us." And so, goes into a file. And I'm playing squash a couple times a week with a colleague friend, Bill Galperin, and somehow this came up and Bill says "you know, the *New York Times* on Monday has a page that doesn't have to be exactly topical. I mean, more thoughtful kind of pieces, and you really ought to try them." So, I sent this piece to the *New York Times* and they loved it and they published it.

And shortly after I get a letter from an editor at Doubleday asking if I'm working on a book. And I wasn't but I could be persuaded. And so, I did it. I would write my memoir, came out of this invitation from Doubleday and I go "now wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute, there have been sports memoirs, but they're by stars, I'm an ordinary player." And the editor gets back "well, that's the point. This is the experience of an ordinary player."

So, I wrote the book, they gave me an advance contract with not a huge advance but enough to buy myself out of teaching for a term to work on it, and I wrote what I thought of not as my memoir, because that just seemed so absurd to even contemplate, but a book about football from the perspective of my experience. That's a memoir but it's the way I could kind of come to terms with it. And it was a tremendously useful experience for me as a writer, because the book had to engage readers and you had to be really conscious of your audience, and what I learned from that experience was how to think about audience and try to be engaging as a writer, but without in any way dumbing down. I mean you know, there's, not dumbing down, a football memoir is not all that all difficult to do, but I carried that over into all my academic writing. I mean, everything I've ever written as an academic in scholarly publications and all that kind of thing, I try to make readable, and not only readable but actually engaging. And if it's not, it's my failure. It's not that I didn't think it was worth doing, it's because I didn't pull it off. And doing this without dumbing down. But the way I think about it is I'm not capable of thoughts so profound that I shouldn't be able to express them clearly. And not all my academic colleagues around the country share that view. In fact, the stereotype of academic writing is that it's pretentious and it's show-offy and its purpose, underlying purpose, seems to be to not be understood, because if you're understood, the reader will realize that it's not that profound, so profound after all.

So, it was a very good experience for me as a writer early in my career and it was a hoot to have this commercial book published by Doubleday, which coincidentally happened to come out the same year as my first academic book. When academic books are published, you know they're there but they're a little bit like the tree falling in the forest, you don't know if anybody even notices they're there. The reviews don't even come out for a couple years and all that, whereas with a trade book, commercial book, the responses are pretty immediate.

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So, I had some cool things to do around it and invitations to write from *Sports Illustrated* and the *New York Times* and all that kind of stuff. So, it gave me that, my first entrée into writing for a popular market as well as an academic market, and I've kind of kept both going ever since and occasionally try to bring them together to see if that's possible, and wrestle with that as an ideal, a book that is fully accessible and enjoyable but also fully informed and worthy of the term "scholarship" and all that kind of thing. That goal really emerged for me in 1982 through that experience.

CP: You've written prolifically, I'm interested in work habits. How does one go about generating as much scholarship as you have?

MO: Well, I don't know if I should say today I'm still, because I have been retired now for almost two years and I'm trying to wean my way, myself away from it, but throughout my career I remained that dogged younger brother. I worked hard, I also worked efficiently. I, in a couple instances, took on sort of massive projects, immense amounts of material to try to bring together and all that kind of thing and learned that you just dive in and you start kind of chomping away and you get something kind of rough and messy on the first go around and then you shape it and all that sort of thing. And for me, the pleasure of writing is never in the first draft where it's trying to get the stuff on the paper and the argument right, it's in the revising where you try to make it sing a little bit and all that.

But summers, I only taught summer school twice the first year we were here and you had to sign up for summer, teaching summer in the fall, and so we had just moved here and just bought a house and didn't know how things were going to go financially, so I signed up for summer school just on the chance we'd need the money. And the second time was when we moved into a new house and had our second child and my wife was going to take a two-year maternity leave, and so I taught summer school again as a way to make sure we got through the economic disruption. Other than that, my summers

were always my time for—I mean I always worked at my office, I didn't work at home. I came in in the summer five days a week. I mean not, I wasn't so obsessive that I neglected my kids and my wife and all that kind of stuff, but I was very disciplined, and once I was here I used my time very efficiently. So, that got things.

And then during the school year, the rhythm of the term, you start off the first few weeks and then you got midterms, so you'd have a couple batches of midterms to grade and then you'd go a few more weeks and then you'd have a couple batches of papers to grade, and then shortly after that you're going to have a couple batches of finals to grade. So, there'd be four, five of the weeks of the term would be pretty much doing nothing but teaching, but the other weeks of the term, I tried to do some writing, a couple hours when I could grab it in the morning, and the afternoon, or whatever. I worked hard, I worked efficiently, I worked doggedly, got it done.

CP: Was teaching something that came pretty easily to you?

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MO: No, teaching wasn't easy. The thing about teaching is you don't have control over what happens in the classroom. At least if you're—I mean if you're lecturing, you control that, but if your teaching is trying to engage students, you're more dependent on them, in a way, than you are on your own preparation. And I always prepared, even if I was teaching a novel for the twelfth time. I always read through my underlines again and went through my notes and made new notes and all that kind of thing. But once you stand up there in front of the classroom, how they respond to you, whether they engage with you is going to determine how the class is going to go. And that, you know, of course I had really good days and not so good days and a few awful days and all that kind of thing, but it was always uncertain till it happened, and I'd come out of a class after a really good day and I'd rush back to my office and try to recreate the sequence of questions or statements or whatever that got us into this great discussion and then the next time I taught that, I'd get those notes out and try it again and nothing happened. So, it was always more improvisational than sort of calculated and planned out.

So, no. And for me it was always about trying to engage the students. And if they're just not engaged or they just don't like this, that made it hard. I mean, there's nothing more painful than trying to convince students who hate something that they should really love it. So yeah, it wasn't easy. And grading papers never got easy. I hated it that the students cared so much about their grades and that was the thing that most mattered to them. I also thought it was pointless to do this unless I could figure out something to tell them that would actually help them become better writers, and that was really hard to do sometimes. And sometimes it just, I mean this needs so much work, so much improvement, what can you give a student that will help them take the steps? And then the possibility that they don't care, they only care about the grade. So yeah, so grading papers was always hard. And then just the classroom dynamics never, never was easy. I mean, I never, ever walked into a classroom just you know, "we're going to wing it today, we're just going to have fun today." No, I was that dogged younger brother in the classroom, too.

CP: Well, I have a couple small topics to talk about and maybe we'll conclude for today and pick up – I've got a lot more to talk to you about, if that's alright. But you spent a period of time as the acting director of the American Studies program?

MO: No.

CP: No? I'm wrong about that? Okay.

MO: Yeah, it was offered to me at one point. David Robinson and I talked about it but decided, I decided I wasn't going to do it, yeah.

CP: Okay. You also had a series of exchanges in Germany, is that correct?

MO: Yeah, I did twice. In '82 I taught in Stuttgart for one semester and in '89 I taught in Tübingen for one semester. Both times on exchanges arranged between myself and the other professor. The first time, we filled in for somebody who dropped out, and then that gave us the experience to try to replicate the second time. But we basically traded houses, jobs and cars. We kept our own salaries from our own institutions and then went over to the other person's university and lived in their house and rode in their car. And it was terrific. It was just terrific. And the first time in '82 we had one boy and he was like a year and a half old and the second time we had two sons and they were like four and eight and particularly

for the older boy, the younger one was only four the second time around, but for the older boy it was, it really opened him up to the world. And he's now teaching Spanish at a Portland high school and, having lived seven years overseas, is just consumed with travel and cultures and languages and all that kind of thing, and the seeds were planted in those teaching exchanges.

And in '89, in teaching in old West Germany and the very first thing we did when we arrived in April was go to a conference, a Fulbright conference. I had a Fulbright partial maintenance thing to supplement the exchange that time, and so met with other Fulbrighters in Berlin and we had lots of briefings from State Department people and all that kind of thing. Not a clue what was going to happen that fall. We went to East Berlin and we saw the wall, all of that stuff. I don't think anybody in the State Department had a clue what was going to happen then. We sure didn't.

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And so, for our sons, particularly the eight year old, that was another cool experience, having been there just before history happened. And I taught American Studies in Germany, so I have, *nur ein bisschen Deutsch*. I could not possibly teach in German. And the Germans, they all have tremendous English, which is a great comfort but it's also an embarrassment that we Americans depend on their knowing our languages, not we knowing theirs.

CP: Alright Mike, well thank you for this, and we can pick up next time in the early nineties, that sound all right?

MO: Okay, alright.

CP: Terrific, thank you.

[1:46:35]