

On Deciphering Ameriglish as a Cultural Tool (Part Two)

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The American language is replete with vocabulary derived from sports – especially from two of the four major professional team sports (baseball and football, basketball and ice hockey being the other two) – and even Americans who might have limited interest in sports seem to have an ability to understand and to use such words, expressions, and idioms. This is particularly true in cases where a sport-based metaphor has passed into the general domain of discourse, whether via knowledge or by an acquired feel. In a sense, sports have become not only a major recreational obsession of the American nation but also a key component of popular American culture, permeating such things as clothing (e.g. caps, shirts, and jackets with team logos), housing paraphernalia (e.g. curtains, bedding, rugs, and drinking utensils with team logos etc.), television (sports programs are always on-air), attitudes and behavior (be tough, be confident, win!), and of course language. This article, the second in a series on “deciphering Ameriglish,”¹ delves into some of the sports-based vocabulary in that language and makes some observations about how such vocabulary has come to play an important role in shaping the American mindset.

An eclectic way to begin is to cite Christopher Patten, the last British Governor of Hong Kong and now Chancellor of Oxford University, as he was quoted in a newspaper article about some of his thoughts in response to Barack Obama’s having been elected American President: “Europe has to step up to the plate, as you Americans say.”² While the expression “step up to the plate” need not allude to anything in diplomatic English or in any U.K. variant of the language, and neither would it seem that a working knowledge of Ameriglish is essential for a British statesman or politician, the context of the sentence above suggests that Lord Patten had understood, correctly, that it means to “try to get something done,” to “assume responsibility,” or even to “take charge.” If “step up to the plate” were to be dissected by an Englander or other Briton without a knowledge of American sports, it could very well be interpreted to mean something like “walk to the flat thing that food is

put on” and not metaphorically refer to anything else, although it might be a message to start eating. To understand the Ameriglish idiom, it is necessary to know what “the plate” is, as well as what is expected of somebody who “steps up” to it.

In baseball, the sport from which this idiom is taken, a person on the offense is supposed to touch, in a prescribed order, four equidistant bases which are laid out in a square to score a “run” (equivalent to a point). This is the main objective of the game of baseball, and the “batter” (the person who uses a “bat,” which is a club or a stick that meets certain requirements) has to stand next to the base called “home” and, all things going well, eventually move around the bases as a runner from “first” to “second” to “third” and, completing the square circuit, to “home.” “Home” is also referred to as “home base” and – for some unclear reason, but connected to its being a pentagonal rubber slab stuck in the ground and not above the surface – “home plate,” and “home plate” is often referred to as “the plate.” When it is somebody’s turn to bat, that person “steps up to the plate” – but not on it (because if the batter touches “the plate” while hitting the ball, the batter is out), over it (because once the pitch is on the way, the batter would be called out for switching sides), behind it (because that’s where the catcher and one of the umpires squat), or even in front of it (because that’s not allowed) – and tries to do something with the ball thrown (“pitched”) in the general direction of “the plate.” Hence, the batter “at the plate” has to try to get something done, that is the batter has assumed responsibility in the sense of doing something positive toward getting runs for its team. There is no equivalent of “the plate” in mainstream sports in the U.K. and, Canada and Australia being excepted if “mainstream” is loosely applied, elsewhere in the British Commonwealth, but practically every person raised in the United States has learned this piece of vocabulary regardless of whether it is interested in baseball.

Another use of baseball terminology to convey the idea of taking responsibility or of being in charge is the expression “to be on the hill” or “to be on the mound.” In this case, the person being referred to is on the defensive side and, as the “pitcher” (the person whose main task is to throw the ball in the general direction of “the plate”), is entrusted with the task of making it difficult for the batter to do its job. There are many tricks that the pitcher has at its avail (doing strange things with its arms or the rest of its body before throwing, changing the velocity of thrown balls, making the ball go in different directions, throwing the ball at or near the batter to scare it, and maybe doing some other things that are technically against the rules), but the pitcher is required to have one foot on or touching a rectangular slab of rubber

as it goes through its motions that lead up to the actual delivery of the ball toward “the plate.” This slab of rubber is raised ten inches (25.4 centimeters) above the rest of the playing field and – it being terribly difficult to stand on such a slab on its own – is surrounded by a pile of tamped down sand that tapers away in all directions and looks like a little hill, which it is sometimes called but otherwise referred to as a “mound.” Hence, to “be on the hill” or to “be on the mound” is as grave an activity as to “step up to the plate,” and Americans in general know this.

Baseball itself is a sport played with an object which resembles a spherical rock weighing between 5 and 5.25 ounces avoirdupois (roughly 141.75 to 148.84 grams) and painted white with some red stitches going around it. This is a relatively hard object which, if thrown at a high velocity, can severely hurt a person, so warning is given to people in the United States as they grow up that baseball is “hardball,” that is a game played with a hard ball. It requires not only cultivating a variety of skills, but also acquiring a sense of bravery and – often enough – not being afraid to intimidate or hurt others. For people who are not as talented or not as tough as those who make their way up the baseball hierarchy, theoretically to the major leagues, there is an alternative known as “softball,” a game played with a larger and somewhat softer ball, on a smaller field, and generally with less demands on acquired skills and bravery so that basically anybody can learn to play it (especially the “slow-pitch” variety) reasonably well. “Hardball,” in contrast, conjures a psychosomatic quality of toughness, skill, and seriousness of purpose so much that it and the expression “to play hardball” have made their way into general discourse to convey the idea of something being done with the intent of winning, dominating, hurting, or at least getting a useful advantage. Here, from the *Third Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary* (2009),³ is an example of how “hardball” on its own might be used:

[1] “Pam and her colleagues are going straight to a lawyer to sue their boss over sexual harassment.” “But aren’t they going to try to talk it over at the workplace?”
“No, they’re smelling millions.” “Wow, talk about *hardball!*”

That a no-nonsense, all-business feel with high stakes right from the beginning exists is rather clear from the context in this exchange, but in the next example from the same publication, this time with the verb “play,” it would seem that knowing the idiom is required in order to understand the nuance it conveys:

[2] If Jerry’s going to try his luck in Hollywood, he’s got to learn how to *play hardball*, and that “Thespian of the Year” award he won here isn’t going to help.

In this case, the actor (thespian) appears to have been quite good at some minor level

(e.g. in high school, college, or a local troupe) but will have to do even better and most likely become (more) competitive and cynical if he is to survive or succeed at the highest level (Hollywood).

Whereas “to play hardball” certainly conveys the intent of employing skill, toughness, and seriousness in an activity, the simpler “to play ball” can do, as in this case from the *Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary* (2008):

[3] If Iran persists in its nuclear ambitions, the State Department is fully prepared to *play ball*. It will use America’s diplomatic strength to isolate Iranian agents and any foreign governments and companies who do business with the Islamic Republic.

In this case, “to play ball” seems to have the same meaning as “to play hardball,” but it can also be interpreted to convey a lesser threat. Although the United States is ready to engage Iran seriously and with apparent consequences to be paid, it is difficult to assess the toughness of the threat. If “hardball” would have been used, it is very likely that the “diplomatic strength” would have been explicitly complemented with a military threat, meaning that Iran would have to worry not only about attempts to isolate it in international politics and business, but also about a direct attack involving missiles and other weaponry.

In order to keep the focus on terminology from baseball – “to play ball” can refer to any ball-based game or sport – it is worth noting that the instruction “play” or “play ball” is required from the home-plate umpire before a baseball game can commence. A basketball or football referee has no such obligation, and neither does an ice-hockey referee because that sport does not use a ball; for such “officials,” blowing a whistle (which baseball umpires do not have) suffices to get players ready to begin. It is possible to hear “play ball” being jokingly added to the end of the national anthem – “... the land of the free and the home of the brave, play ball!” – because the anthem has ceremoniously been sung by thousands of people en masse just before the beginning of a major-league or minor-league baseball game, and is therefore a lead-in to the main attraction. Taken from its application in baseball, the expression “play ball!” can be used in the sense of “begin,” “start,” or “commence” for any activity, sporting or not.

Returning to the example in item [3] above, if Iran were to reply to the State Department with a “play ball!,” the United States would metaphorically be in the position of pitcher, and Iran in that of batter, because it looks like the United States has to get things going. Although batters are on the offense (the side trying to score),

they have to be prepared to be aggressive and defensive, and in this case Iran might very well have to “step up to the plate,” or “step into the (batter’s) box,” with a sense of disquietude. Now, if a batter steps up to the plate feeling nervous or incompetent, it is not likely to do well at the task assigned, and the pitcher and catcher (the fielder who tends to squat near the batter and catch the balls thrown by the pitcher with some regularity) are likely to detect the weakness and take advantage of it. Hence, a good batter must have courage and confidence as well as a means to resummon them, or at least give the appearance of their existing, when shaken. The best way to do this, and most professional and semiprofessional batters do it every time they step up to the plate, is to carve out a small linear hole in the batter’s box in which they plant their back leg for stability. Because the most popular way, by far, to do this is to kick away at the soil, the expression “to dig in with one’s cleats” is used – the “cleats” here being footwear with metal attachments (technically, the cleats) underneath that somehow make a player’s footwork easier to do – and sometimes this expression is shortened to “to dig in.” So now, about two years after the model for citation [3] was published, and with Iran having made further progress in its nuclear program, the United States appears to be getting closer to “playing hardball,” and Iran looks very much like it has “dug in with its cleats.”⁴

What happens next, of course, depends on a whole sequence of activities. In baseball, a good pitcher generally has to be able to throw at least three types of pitch or the batters will be able to hit the ball well (but, given that there are eight other fielders on the defense, not necessarily safely). The top three pitches used are the fastball, curveball, and slider – so called because they are respectively a straight pitch thrown at the highest speed of all types of pitch, one which is thrown in such a way that the speed of the ball is the slowest of the three given here and that the ball drops down as it bends away from the side of the pitcher it was delivered from, and one which is more-or-less in-between the other two – and there are others used by some pitchers like the change-up (a slower version of the fastball), screwball (in terms of direction, the reverse of a curve and slider), forkball (held between the index and middle fingers when delivered), and knuckleball (held in the fingertips and pushed toward the plate), while some pitchers have even dared to throw the “illegal” spitball (the fingers are moistened with saliva before holding the ball). With a repertoire of pitches in its arsenal, the pitcher endeavors to get the batter “out,” and the best way to demonstrate skill in this regard is to “strike out” the batter, which is to say that the mix of pitches was sufficient enough that the batter

could not put the ball into play and ended up swinging and missing the last pitch or the home-plate umpire thought that the batter should have tried swinging at that pitch. “To strike out,” then, is to fail, so if a game of hardball is enjoined over Iran’s nuclear ambitions, it is very likely that the United States would eventually like to be in the position of saying something along the lines of “Iran struck out with its nuclear-weapons aspirations.”

The expressions “three strikes and you’re out” and (from the song “Take Me Out To The Ball Game”) “it’s one, two, three strikes, you’re out at the old ball game” are so well known in the United States that even people who have very little knowledge or interest in baseball or its variants (notably softball and kickball) understand their allusion to failure. If, for example, a child is misbehaving in a classroom, it would be within reason for the teacher to warn the offender that “that’s one strike,” implying that the third strike would bring serious ramifications. So much so has this concept of three strikes become a part of the American mentality that it has even seeped into legal terminology because of its metaphorical value. Commonly applied terms are “three-strikes law,” “three-strikes legislation,” and “three-strikes policy,” as well as the less formal “three strikes and you’re out,” all of which designate a principle which states that the third conviction of a felony (not necessarily the same felony) results in a very serious punishment, in most cases spending the rest of one’s life in prison. Here, from the *Third Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary*, is an example of how such a term might be used:

[4] Yes, it is true that we do get repeat offenders who are not violent and don’t deserve to be shut away for life, but we still think that our state’s *three-strikes legislation* has an important role to play in our criminal justice system.

“Strike” therefore has taken on the meaning of “conviction of a felony,” and a “felony” used to be a major crime (as in an offense against society) but seems to be in the process of etymological expansion and associated consequences, which is not going to be discussed here.

Going back to the types of pitch, in the earlier days of baseball history, the “fastball” and the “curveball” were the essentials. In “hardball,” it is the fastball which is important because it expresses power and has the ability to scare the batter, and once in a while a pitcher might very well throw directly at the batter with the latter purpose in mind. Still, hitting batters with pitches is not advised because it will only lead to the other team scoring runs (hit batters get to go to first base, and a sequence means that the runners get to move up bases), so the primary use of the fastball

is to try to get the ball past the batter, into the catcher's mitt (big, webbed glove), and – when two strikes already exist – to strike out the batter. Typically speaking, a slower moving pitch is easier to hit (witness slow-pitch softball, in which the ball is basically lobbed to the batter and strike-outs are very rare except for when there are technicalities which get created and applied, stupid or spiteful umpires, and/or truly incompetent players who are better advised to go do something else), but once in a while a slower pitch can disrupt a batter's sense of timing and make its task of hitting the ball into play a bit more frustrating. Of the two commonly used “slow” pitches, the change-up and the curveball (the slider is reasonably fast), the latter has caught the popular imagination because not only is it slower but it also moves in a way that some people used to think was an optical illusion, and in a sense it came into existence as a means to try to distract or confuse batters. Hence, “to throw a curveball” or “to throw a curve” has entered the common lexicon to mean “to distract” or “to create some confusion,” as illustrated by this sentence in the *Third Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary*:

[5] McCain *threw a curveball* in the election campaign when he chose Palin to run on his ticket.

Most Americans would interpret this to mean that Sarah Palin, in late 2008 the Governor of Alaska, had been chosen by Senator John McCain to run as his Vice-Presidential candidate as a red herring (a distraction) or to confuse some people (perhaps in the opposition camp who had to devise campaign strategies). This is a valid assessment because after she was chosen, a lot of attention shifted from serious issues to Governor Palin, a fresh novelty and an attractive woman, so much so that it was possible to forget that it was McCain who was running for President and that there were serious issues confronting the country.

If Senator McCain would have won the Presidency, it would have been within reason to argue that this “curveball” contributed to “striking out” his opponent, Senator Barack Obama, yet it is more likely that batting terminology would have been used because a President McCain would have “scored.” In this context, and assuming that Palin would have turned out to be at least a noteworthy variable which tipped the election his way, it could have been said that McCain “hit a homerun” through choosing her. This suggests that not only did he succeed, but also that he did so in an impressive way because a “homerun” or “homer” is the best that a batter can do in any appearance “at the plate,” that is one turn at batting; it involves all four bases getting touched in proper succession on the same play, usually because

the ball was hit on full flight into “fair” territory beyond a fence which hems in the “outfielders” (furthestmost defenders).

Baseball sometimes comes across as a game played by idlers, a sport in which defenders mainly seem to hang out (that is occupy space or mark territory) in the field, people on the offensive team seem to spend most of the time sitting on a bench in a “dugout” or leaning against its fence, and all but one of the umpires do not seem to do much, while even aficionados of the sport must surely get bored with a lot of the goings on. Generally speaking, the top three busiest people who are directly involved with the progress and fate of a game are – in order – the home-plate umpire, the catcher on the losing team, and the catcher on the winning team, after which come the pitchers (except for those who make only brief appearances) and the first-base umpire; everybody else spends most of the time waiting for something to happen, and when it does, anything from a mild stirring to pandemonium ensues. The players and umpires must always be anticipating a breach of the calm, and their anticipation is most heightened at what is known as a “full count.” This is a situation in which the batter has three “balls” in its favor and two “strikes” against it, and which means that the next pitch, unless “fouled” away by the batter, will cause something to happen; because another “ball” sends the batter to first base and another “strike” means the batter is out, neither the pitcher nor the batter has the option of being wasteful, an idler, or incompetent on the full-count pitch. Similarly, the expression can be transferred into regular discourse to describe a critical or crucial stage in an activity when something has to happen, as exemplified by this exchange in the *Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary*:

[6] “Did you see that letter from H.Q.?” “No, why?” “It looks like we’ve got a *full count*. Either we find a way to convince the bank to lend us that two million dollars by Wednesday, or we’ll be out of jobs.”

Perhaps, like the batter who fouls off the full-count pitch, they can find a way to delay, but eventually there will be a time of reckoning – one or the other, no two ways about it, and everybody had better be ready for something to happen.

Because of problems concerning the offensive side of the sport in the major leagues that peaked in 1968, some changes were made in 1969 to make the job of the pitcher more difficult, and in 1973 the American League went a step further by creating the position of “designated hitter,” which was controversial at the time and even remains so today among baseball purists. At the option of the manager, a person can be assigned the task of batting for another – at the professional level,

the pitcher because pitchers are usually notorious batters – throughout the game. By analogy, the expression can also be used to refer to any person who has been assigned to represent another person or an institution, as suggested by the following from the *Third Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary*:

[7] Our Ambassador to the United Nations is America's *designated hitter* when it comes to holding the president of Sudan responsible for the genocide in Darfur.

Without a knowledge of the baseball term, this statement could be interpreted in a dangerous way, along the lines that the ambassador has been personally entrusted with a violent task. Rather than being asked to physically hit (as in punch) or – since “hit” can convey this meaning – to kill the Sudanese president, the ambassador will most likely represent the United States through idealistic jabber and lobbying other influential people among the international political elite to get something humane done. The expression “designated hitter” also inspired that of the “designated driver,” a person whose task is not to drink alcohol and/or not to use drugs so that it can operate a vehicle soberly while transporting at least one other person who has consumed alcohol and/or drugs during a social occasion.

Before moving on from baseball, it is worth noting that the commonly used word “southpaw” comes directly from the sport. Practically every Ameriglish speaker knows that a “southpaw” is a left-handed person, but by now it would seem that most people do not know its origin, which has to do with the proper layout of a baseball field. Before night games existed, it was necessary to afford batters visual protection from the mid- to late-afternoon sun since they had enough trouble dealing with pitches coming at high speeds or arcing in their general direction, hence the fields were laid out so that the sun would go down behind them, meaning that west was behind the batters and the bases were closely coordinated with the cardinal directions (first base to the south, second to the east, third to the north, and home to the west). Thus, when a left-handed pitcher threw to the batter, the pitcher's arm moved through and the ball came from the southern half of the mound, and somehow the direction “south” got combined with “paw,” an animal's hand, to refer to such a pitcher. “Southpaw” subsequently infiltrated the mainstream language so that anybody who tends to favor the left hand over the right for any purpose can be labeled such, and four recent presidents (Gerald Ford, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama) have demonstrated that members of this sizeable minority can reach the pinnacle of American society.⁵

Although baseball is claimed to be America's national “pastime,” as in an activity

that passes time in an enjoyable way, it is questionable that it is the most popular sport in the United States, especially when viewing and participating are combined. Ever since it was discovered that film from several cameras could be used for close-ups and to show all sorts of things that viewers normally do not see when the ball is in play, the American game of “football” (warball?) became a rather interesting product for television. Because of this, football has developed into a sporting staple to rival baseball over the past four decades, and it has also lent some of its vocabulary to the mainstream language.

Just as “to hit a homerun” means to succeed, to have success, or to do well at something, so too does “to score a touchdown,” the following passage from the *Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary* being illustrative:

[8] Mildred’s attorney *scored a touchdown!* He dug up an old law from the days of the Great Depression and cited some obscure precedent that hasn’t been overturned, and that basically forced the court to order the charges against her dropped.

Without an understanding of football terminology, there would be a confusing feel to the first sentence – might not, for example, a “touchdown” be something done by a flying object when it lands, and what does “score” mean in such a context? Although the remainder of the citation hints that to score a touchdown requires considerable effort and is an admirable achievement, it is necessary to know at least vaguely what a touchdown is in football to get the feel for the idiom. Not only is a touchdown a means of scoring, but also (like a homerun) it is the optimal way to score; in this case, it involves the offense getting the ball into a targeted ten-yard “end zone” – beyond the one-hundred yard playing field where scoring does not occur – and thereby earning six points, the maximum allowed on any one play.

Both offenses and defenses can score in football, but usually it is the task of the offense to try to score, while the defense usually tries to stop that from happening. Of the eleven members of the offense that are participating in any given play, the most important person is the “quarterback,” the person who stands behind the “center” to receive a backward hand-off or pass that initiates play and who therefore has to do something with the ball, hopefully according to a plan which it had informed its teammates of within roughly thirty seconds of receiving the ball. Nowadays, a coach tends to tell the quarterback what to tell its teammates, but still, the quarterback has discretion to change the coach’s orders according to developing circumstances, which is part of the leadership skills that quarterbacks hone alongside their athletic skills. In a sense, the quarterback is the boss in the field of action, and that essence

has carried the word “quarterback” into the mainstream language to mean “a person who directs others,” as in this sample from the *Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary*:

[9] Barney’s the *quarterback* here because he can get the employees to do anything.

He learned how to lead by playing that position in high-school football.

Substituting “quarterback” with, say, “pitcher” or “catcher” will not work because neither of those baseball players has the stature to issue instructions as does a quarterback (although a catcher can come close, but most of its instructions are given to the pitcher, who itself often wields veto power), and neither of the other major sports (basketball and ice hockey) has a position so much into control as any of these three.

In football, there are all sorts of plays which are designed to make things happen, but the focus is on whoever has the ball at any given time. The player who is holding the ball and moving around as if to get a result is said to “carry the ball,” which is what any person acting with responsibility can be said to do in mainstream Ameriglish. Another expression from football that has made its way into regular language is “end run,” a play that involves somebody running with the ball more-or-less laterally, or parallel to the goal line, before finally turning toward the targeted end zone in an attempt to gain yardage. By analogy, this expression can be used to allude to behavior which requires doing something that seems to be going nowhere and then suddenly making a clear attempt toward achieving a goal or objective:

[10] Talk about an *end run*. Tucker tried unsuccessfully for months to get a loan from his bank, so finally he used \$250,000 of his own money to get his business started.

In this example from the *Third Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary*, the aspiring businessman kept petitioning his financial institution for some assistance, kept getting rejected, and ended up using some money he already had to do what he wanted. The apparent futility in trying to get the loan, for some unstated reason, must have been part of the plan – perhaps looking for a systematic weakness – because the final change in course of action was always available.

Because of its heritage, American culture is dripping with Christianity, and football has not been immune to such religious influence. Not that football players, coaches, and other personnel are necessarily moral exemplars or religiously devout, but they are aware that the mother of Jesus can be hovering above them at a time of despair:

[11] Uncle Jim said that when he was young, he watched the Cowboys beat the

Vikings on a *Hail Mary pass* in the playoffs.

The “Hail Mary pass” is a desperate play, usually toward the end of a game, in which the offense relies on the ball being thrown a long way forward in the hopes that somebody on the team will catch it and score, the other (and more likely) scenario being defeat. “Hail Mary,” that is “Ave Maria,” seems to mean “pray for the divine mother’s intervention,” but why she should lower herself to even consider the outcome of a warlike game is beyond the understanding of this author. Still, the expression has caught on and moved into mainstream discourse, as the following example from the *Third Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary* (as is item [11] above) illustrates:

[12] This article raises the question of whether the Republicans chose a Black to be the chairman of their National Committee as a *Hail Mary pass* to counter the fact that the Democratic president is, well, half Black.

So, a “Hail Mary pass” can be interpreted to be any desperate act, or at least any act perceived to be desperate.

In comparison to baseball and football, basketball and ice hockey appear not to have contributed much to mainstream Ameriglish, partly because these two sports seem to be less popular and probably because a lot of their vocabulary is too arcane (e.g. icing the puck) or refers to an event that occurs over and over and thereby loses its impact (e.g. a basket). Still, basketball – nicknamed “hoops” because of the metal rims which support the open-bottom “nets” that are the goals (“baskets” from what were originally used) – has contributed the expression “full-court press,” a defensive maneuver to put pressure on the offense from the moment it tries to inbound the ball from the baseline under its own basket or at least from very deep in its own territory, to standard American jargon:

[13] The gangster forced his cronies to do a *full-court press* to scare the unfriendly legislature into shelling out millions of dollars for his business adventure.

This sentence, from the *Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary*, suggests that a “full-court press” is a flurry of activity to try to get what is wanted when the circumstances are not very good, and it can also imply a form of attack from a defensive position. There is also the term “slam dunk,” the act of forcing the ball directly and violently downward through the hoop and net to earn two points, that is readily understood by Americans, as in this example from the same book:

[14] Ease up on the North Koreans. If you go for a *slam dunk* by attacking their nuclear reactors, they might retaliate by starting a war on the peninsula.

The “slam dunk” captures the spirit of attaining a goal in such a way that an emphatic point was or is made, and the attack alluded to here would be quite dramatic.

There are, of course, mainstream Ameriglish expressions which are not derived from one sport only. “To be on the playing field,” for instance, basically translates as to be engaged in an activity at least somewhat seriously or competitively, a “playbook” is a set of plans, a “scorecard” is any means for making a comparison, and “to be behind on the scoreboard” – that is, to be losing – means not to be doing well. When “the ball is in somebody’s court,” that somebody has been put in the position of having to react, but it must be said that this is an erroneous idiom because nothing will happen in a ballgame played on a court (e.g. tennis, basketball, volleyball) unless a ball is available, that is in the court.⁶ The analogies in these cases are rather clear, but somehow the expression “to be in the ballpark” has drifted from meaning to be in a physical area or vicinity into to be valid, reasonable, close, or close enough.

Examples having been given, it is now time for the author to “step up to the plate” and offer something analytical. The meat of this article “kicked off” – from football, started – with a quotation from a famous Briton using an American idiom and went into what, to knowledgeable Americans at least, would appear to be a naive explanation of how that idiom can be understood as “to assume responsibility” or “to try to get something done.” After reading the explanation, those who do not know much about the game of baseball might be able to picture what is meant, and those who do know the game of baseball might appreciate how what they take for granted is not necessarily easy to explain or readily understood. This is an example of cultural training that people on the inside of a culture are likely to overlook until attention is drawn to it by somebody on the outside (or playing the role of an outsider).

The sports-based vocabulary presented in this article is essentially American in context, although any user of Ameriglish or even another form of English could acquire it and, at least when communicating with most Americans and others who happen to be familiar with American popular culture, apply it with relative ease. But it is not particularly advisable to try using such vocabulary in non-American settings because it might not be understood (a slam dunk – what, in my coffee?), could give a completely wrong impression (a designated hitter – and I’ll hit the bastard back!), or taken with a twist (you scored a touchdown – where, in a brothel?). For this reason, and because sports-based vocabulary can be used instinctively even by Americans in higher social stations and internationally, American interpreters at

important events such as a presidential summit tend to be native Ameriglish speakers who can relay sporting idiom into conventional, non-sporting idiom of the targeted foreign language.

Of course, some idioms in the Ameriglish sports-based lexicon are not restricted to American usage – the expressions “kick off” (generally, from soccer) and “the ball is in somebody’s court,” for example, can be used in other forms of English – but a lot of the expressions are culturally tied and suggest that sports have played an important role in shaping the American mindset, at least in the last couple of generations when sports appear to have replaced religion as the opiate of the people. Without pretending to be “scientific” about this, or to provide statistical evidence and analyses, important factors in the rise of sports in cultural influence would seem to include (1) improvements in programs, facilities, and equipment for children’s sports, (2) the same for adults’ sports, complemented by substantial time being available for such activities and their interest in them, (3) an almost quantum leap forward in the attractiveness of and interest in professional sports because of the monetary earnings of top athletes, and (4) an increase in the number of sporting events which are televised. The first two reflect the rise in material wealth and demands for recreational possibilities within society at large over the last thirty-plus years, while the latter two reflect the transformation of professional and top amateur athletes into familiar figures who compete with movie stars and their ilk for idol status.

That there is an amazing array of sporting events televised, and that there are cable television stations devoted all the time to sports, cannot be overlooked in considering the impact of sports-related vocabulary on regularly used Ameriglish. Long gone, for instance, are the days of the Saturday-afternoon televised baseball game being a special, although regular event during the baseball season – the “game of the week” was chosen with care – and long gone are the days of Monday-night baseball being an extra-special televised game on three (yes, three – only three) occasions throughout a season; as with baseball, so too with the other major sports at least, being that it is now possible to become overdosed with televised sports, and people do get hooked on this drug so much so that sports have a controlling influence on their mentality, behavior, and values. As if to express this, or at least to exemplify it, for well over twenty years now the expression “March Madness” has been in the Ameriglish lexicon and can be traced to the impact of virtually constant televising of games, analyses, and other events related to the roughly monthlong tournament to determine the “national champions” in college basketball. Although the expression

seems to have been coined in a positive context – the tournament is packed with tension (lose and you're out), the games can have exciting and even crazy endings, the fanaticism of fans reminds an observer of the origin of the word “fan,” and the television commentators and analysts help to drum up excitement – it would be within reason for an outside observer or somebody not particularly interested in the tournament to see “March Madness” as a diagnosable malady, one for which the symptoms include addiction (to the television programs), unhealthy behavior (notably couch-potatoing and consuming junk foods), and mind-control (obsession with the sport, event, personalities, and such like; identification with and adoption of a value system).

It would be within reason to state that most Americans who are fans of a major sport or of sports in general have been drawn in and maintain their interest mainly through television. The owner of the Dallas Cowboys, arguably the highest-profile football team, recently noted that only about seven percent of National Football League fans have actually ever attended a league game,⁷ which probably says more about the influence of television than it does about the attractiveness of in-vivo observation of a game, and the ratio of events watched at the actual site to events watched on television by now must be very small for sports aficionados and addicts. In this context, the sports commentators and analysts have become an intelligentsia of sorts, something which is hinted at by this statement in the *Third Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary* (under the entry “wear a/the hat”):

[15] Sports commentators have to wear the hat of an analyst, that of a historian, that of a coach, that of an ethicist, and that of God knows what else.

The point is that the sports commentators and analysts have to be or, because they are assisted by researchers and handlers, are at least made to appear knowledgeable, authoritative, and even morally correct. Some of the information they relay to their audience, for instance, is so arcane and esoteric that a Harvard or U-Cal-Berkeley professor might be envious, and just like professors might have done in the past, they approve of or condemn certain activities and behavior in a way that is not difficult to figure out.

This influences the American language in the sense of vocabulary and – although not of great interest in this article and the publications related to it – the means of linguistic delivery. Whereas it is true that members of the sports intelligentsia use vocabulary that already exists within the lexicon of whatever is being covered, and sometimes create neologisms, most importantly they contribute to spreading the

vocabulary among members of their audience (in a sense, their students), who can feel comfortable using what they already know, add to their vocabulary, and apply their knowledge among those in the know, which eventually filters out and circulates among those not specifically or originally in the know. This sort of diffusion has not necessarily been subtle, and nor has it been forced on unwilling guinea pigs, but it is rooted in a sizeable core or hearth from which the process has been able to proceed. Factors behind the existence of this core include such things as children being introduced to sports directly and via television, demands for recreation and entertainment for both children and adults, the dramaticization of sporting events and idolization of athletes and other sports-related personnel, and sports serving as distractions from more serious and difficult-to-understand social issues and events. There is also a dream-like element of children wanting to become well-known athletes and adults somehow or another wishing that that's what they were, as well as a tendency to identify with and remember the winners and influential plays. In this context, such metaphors as “step up to the plate,” “be on the mound,” or “be the quarterback” square with the principle of America being the “land of opportunity,” and given the socioeconomic emphasis placed on success and achievement, it is not surprising that many Americans dream of hitting a homerun or scoring a touchdown. Those are the things that “heroes” do.

Notes

1. The first article, “On Deciphering Ameriglish as a Cultural Tool (Part One),” was published in the previous edition of this journal – *Studies in Language and Culture* 31, 1 (2009): 173-191 – and others are to follow.
2. Joyce Hor-Chung Lau, “The Worldview of Hong Kong’s Last Governor,” *International Herald Tribune* (November 21, 2008). The following is the entire paragraph with the quote, its context becoming clear: “‘Because of the Iraq debacle, Europe has spent the last five years sitting on their hands, criticizing America, saying, ‘If only we had a more multilateral president in Washington,’” Patten said. ‘Now that we’ve got one, are we going to send more support to Afghanistan, or take a lead on climate change? Are Britain and France prepared to lead in reducing nuclear stockpiles? Europe has to step up to the plate, as you Americans say.’”
3. This is the fourth dictionary in the George Jap series; it was published after the script

for Part One of “Deciphering Ameriglish” [note 1] was prepared. In the three “Advanced” dictionaries are examples of how each entry might be used, and these examples were derived by paraphrasing something in a written publication (usually a newspaper), recalling something heard or overheard, or writing original material that could come across as authentic.

4. Although diverging somewhat from the thrust of the text, shortly after Barack Obama became America’s president, an American journalist noted that an advisor to Mahmoud Admadinejad, Iran’s president, “left no doubt that the Iranians want to *play hardball*” (S.P.’s italics) in regard to the package of differences between the United States and Iran; Trudy Rubin, “Iran Reluctant to Unclench Its Fist,” *Albuquerque Journal* (from *The Philadelphia Inquirer*) (February 12, 2009).

5. Strangely, “northpaw” for a right-handed person is not used, probably because right-handed people are in the vast majority and therefore do not require a colorful nickname.

6. Because of the contextual meaning of having to react, or to take one’s turn, the pedantically correct and presumably too long idiom would be “the ball is in somebody’s side of the court.” This would seem to have been taken from such minor sports as tennis and volleyball.

7. “Game” is assumed from the context: Jerry Jones, the owner of the Cowboys, “likes to point out that just 7% of National Football League fans have ever set foot in an NFL stadium, and he figures that the way to push that percentage higher is to make the stadium experience better than what you get at home.” See Richard Lacayo, “How ’Bout That Stadium?” *Time* (September 28, 2009): 53.

