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Places

Title

Run It Down the Field Again, Fellows [Speaking of Places]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9ft9n1w8>

Journal

Places, 6(4)

ISSN

0731-0455

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Publication Date

1990-07-01

Peer reviewed

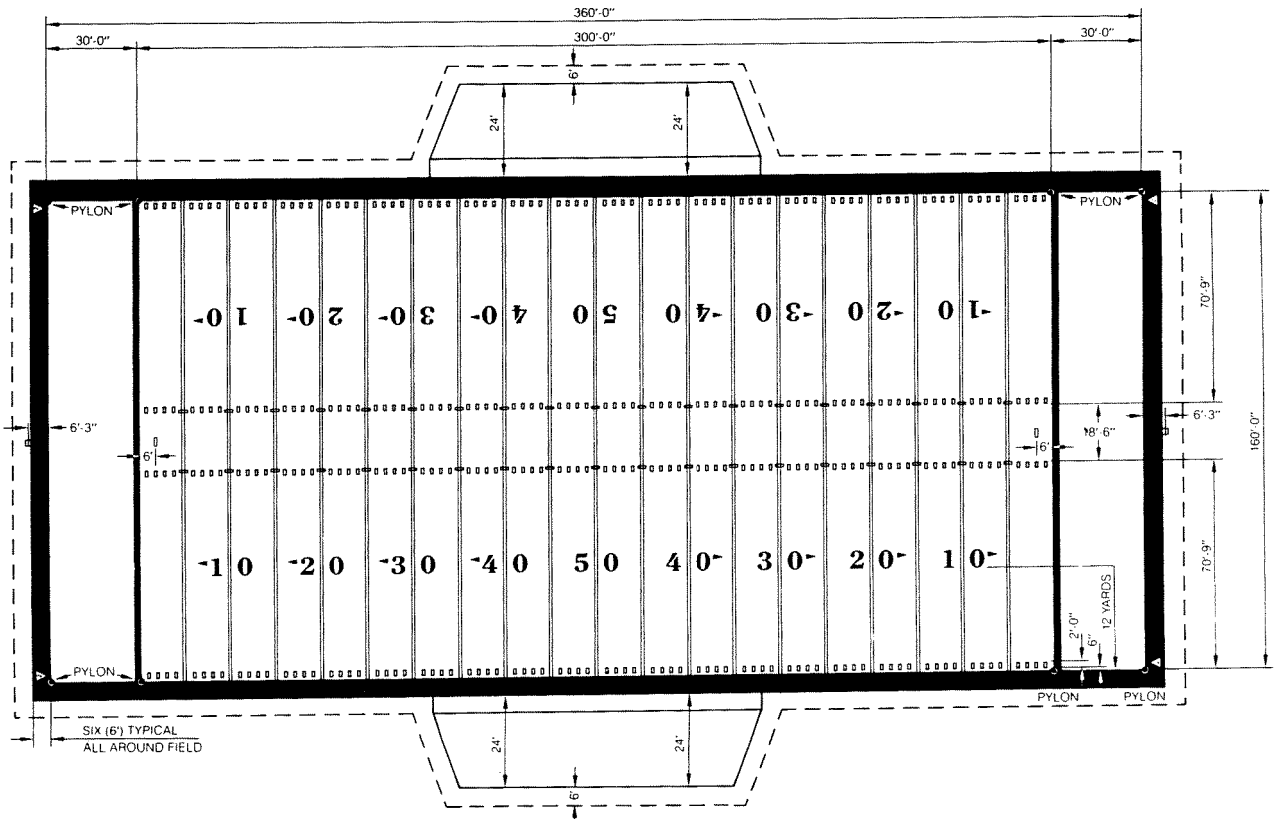
Run It Down the Field Again, Fellows

How many of us can measure, without a ruler, that good old American yardstick, a yard? Or pace off, exactly, one hundred yards? Or explain to a city boy the size of a 200-acre farm?

How we deal with territory—the comparative size of yuppie tracts in suburbia, the debatable size of a dove-shooter's field, the space it takes to swing a cat—set me to wondering: Is there a universal yardstick for describing complex environments?

I got one answer in Brazil. My wife and I were inspecting the pulpwood plantation developed by Daniel Ludwig, that amazing American adventurer. He had floated a giant power plant and pulp paper mill from Japan, across the Indian Ocean,

Grady Clay



**For the record: the dimensions
of a standard football field.
Courtesy National Football
League.**

around the Cape of Good Hope, across the Atlantic, up the Amazon and into drydock by the Jari River. There they sat, turning out 900 tons of fine white paper pulp every day—one-third over rated capacity.

Finally our guide uttered the magic words: “Each of these plants is as long as *three football fields*.”

That was the key to ubiquity, to universal imagibility! Every sports-loving audience in the U.S. surely must have the size, shape and dynamics of *football field* writ indelibly upon its visual psyche—a national unit of psycho-geographic size and shape. (Dimensions: 120 yards long, including end zones, by 53 yards wide, or 360 x 160 feet. It comes to 57,600 square feet, or approximately one and one-third acres per football field.)

This is not the place to delve into how this imprinting came about, but to look at its penetration into popular imagery. *Football field* pours off magazine and newspaper pages, not by any means limited to the sports page. It cascades through TV travelogues and travel magazines. It has emerged, along with such timeless phrases as “head-high” and “knee-deep,” as a near universal unit of space and dimension. It is to space what the 60-second commercial has become to time, the paragraph to newspapers and *the hour* (as in “five-minutes-before-the hour”) to National Public Radio.

Let us first allow the expert T. Boone Pickens a few words on choosing targets for corporate takeover: “Concentrate on the goals, not the size of the organization. You can’t measure a place by size, unless it’s a football stadium.” (*Fortune*, Feb. 16, 1987.)

Now to embellish our point with a random scattering of examples. We zoom in modestly, then shift to a wide-angle lens.

A giant radio-telescope in West Virginia is “half the length of a football field in diameter.”

(Gideon Gill, Louisville *Courier-Journal*, Sept. 13, 1986.)

The type of oil barge that gets pushed between New York, Providence, Boston and Portsmouth, N.H., “is considerably larger than a football field and carries 150,000 barrels of oil; at 42 gallons of oil per barrel that is more than six million gallons or six million dollars worth of oil” (1986 prices). (The Boston *Phoenix*, Sept. 2, 1986.)

A “chunk of farmland the size of a football field just outside St. Charles, Mo.,” that once was surrounded by chain-link fencing, was designed for “the world’s first field test of a living, genetically engineered microbe,” but in 1986 the Monsanto company sidetracked the project. The fence is gone. (Keith Schneider, “Biotech’s Stalled Revolution,” *New York Times Magazine*, Nov. 16, 1986.)

The glacier at the base of Mt. Rainier “is about a football field thick.” (Commentator on National Public Radio’s *Nature Scene*, Sept. 14, 1987.)

The “fabulous new \$80 million Birmingham (Ala.) Turf Club” has a seven-story clubhouse/grandstand that accommodates 20,000 spectators “and is large enough to cover an entire football field!” (BRPC *Comments*, Jan./March 1987.)

The U.S. national forests “were born out of a nation’s horrified reaction to the unauthorized logging that left Michigan a stump patch and sent the prime areas of Wisconsin and Minnesota down the Mississippi as lumber rafts bigger than football fields.” (Wallace Stegner, *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 20, 1988.)

Six hundred feet—“about two football fields”—has become the standard distance for billboards to stay back

from a public highway, according to Jefferson County (Ky.) regulations. As a result, billboarders have adopted “junior billboards” in an effort to avoid the two-football-field limitation. (Angelo B. Henderson, Louisville *Courier-Journal*, May 26, 1987.)

In Venice, Italy, the famous tourist destination plazas “vary in size, some little more than a courtyard, others larger than two football fields.” (Lennard and Lennard, “Stepping Out in Urban Design,” Boulder Pedestrian Conference, 1985.)

Outside Washington, D.C., the project director of Tyson’s Galleria II, E. Wayne Angle, “estimates that, in an automobile-oriented environment, 600 feet is about as far as Americans will walk before getting in their cars. That’s the length of two football fields without end zones.” (Joel Garreau, “The Emerging Cities,” *Washington Post*, June 15, 1988.)

If you “Turn historians loose in a room as big as two football fields and filled with old documents . . . there’s no telling what they’ll turn up.” (Charles Wolfe, Louisville *Courier-Journal*, Feb. 15, 1985.)

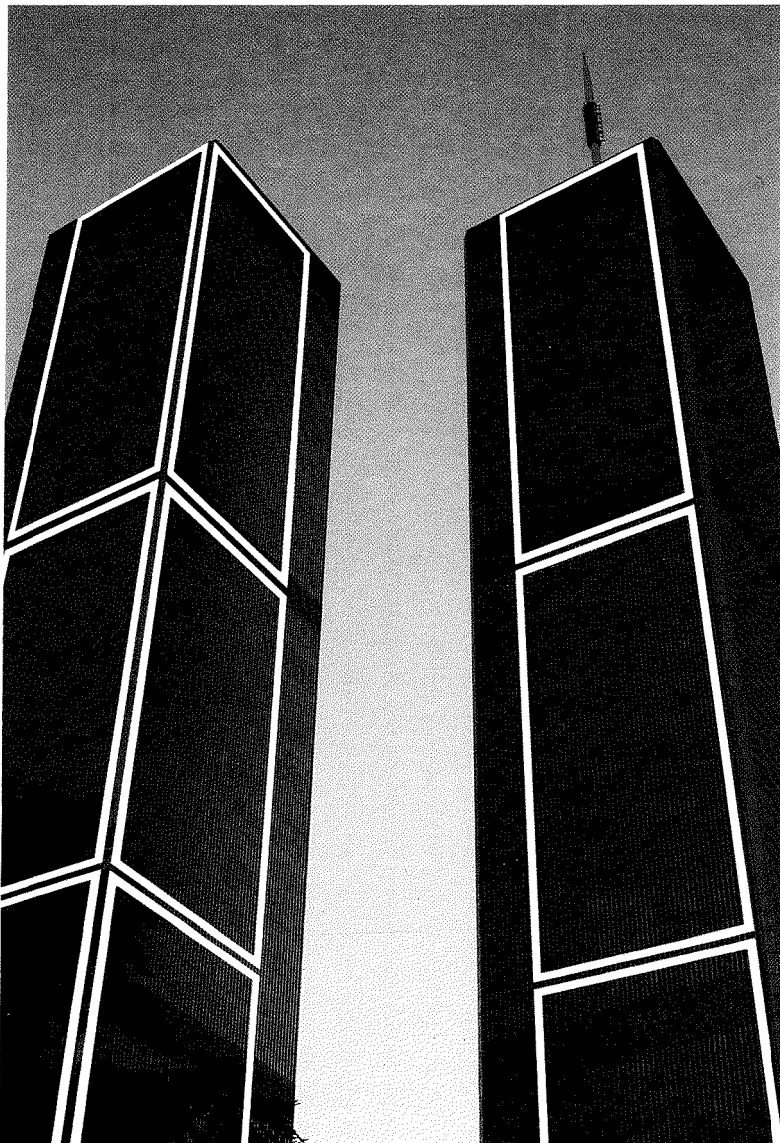
Now, moving one football field upscale we come to the new cruise ship S.S. Norway which “is longer than three football fields.” (*Denver Post*, Oct. 6, 1986.)

The flight deck of the aircraft carrier Theodore Roosevelt, on entering service in 1986, measured in at longer than three football fields. (*Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 26, 1986.)

An underground tire fire in Greenup, Ky., burned “as many as 200,000 discarded tires in an area the size of three football fields” along the Little Sandy River. (Associated Press, June 8, 1988.)

The Recycling Center at San Rafael for Marin County, Calif., has an indoor facility “as big as three football

Each facade of the World Trade Center has enough room for three whole football fields, with plenty of space left over.



fields equipped with machines to process varieties of recyclables.” (*Sunset*, May, 1988.)

Harlequin Plaza, a spiffy adjunct to offices in Denver’s eastern suburbs, is about the size of one football field. The new entry to Candlestick Park, San Francisco, is about the size of three. (George Hargraves, landscape architect, San Francisco; author’s journal, May 25, 1988, Washington, D.C.)

On their 46,000-acre Big Cypress Reservation in south Florida, the Seminole Indian tribe in 1987 set up a \$4 million, 5,600-seat bingo hall “the size of two football fields.” With this and other bingo operations, plus tax-free cigarettes, the Seminoles have become “one of the nation’s most prosperous tribes.” (Associated Press, March 22, 1987.)

“A conventional store (i.e., supermarket) now covers about 22,500 square feet. ‘Superstores’ may run 50,000 to 100,000 square feet and often include many additional services—pharmacies, video rentals, even bank branches. ‘Hypermarkets,’ rather like a supermarket crossed with a discount retailer, cover 100,000 to 200,000 square feet (that’s four football fields).” (“How to Save \$2,500 a Year in the Supermarket,” *Consumer Reports*, March 1988.)

During construction in 1956, “the largest dock in the gulf Intercoastal Waterway system from Mexico to Florida” was built “the length of four football fields.” (New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, Nov. 18, 1956.)

The 1986 corn harvest looked to be so huge that in Central Illinois a grain elevator owner built an outdoor storage bin “the size of five football fields.” (Associated Press, Aug. 18, 1986.)

During the construction rush occasioned by arming up for the Vietnam War, Ruscon Construction Company in 1967 built a 400,000-square-foot

building at Charleston, S.C., for making helicopter engines. It “could hold ten football fields under one roof.” (Grady Clay, *Right Before Your Eyes*, Chicago: Planners Press, 1988.)

In Florida, a report on terrorism says the “minimum safe distance” from an exploding ammunition truck is “the length of 12 football fields” in all directions. (*Los Angeles Times*, May 4, 1986.)

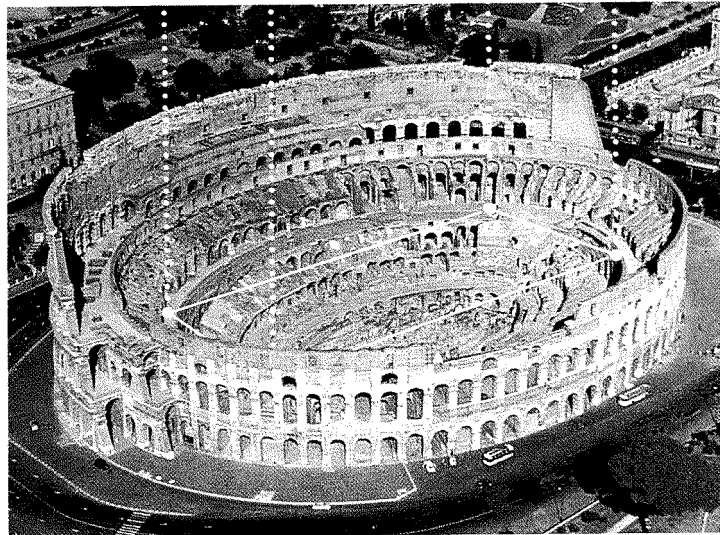
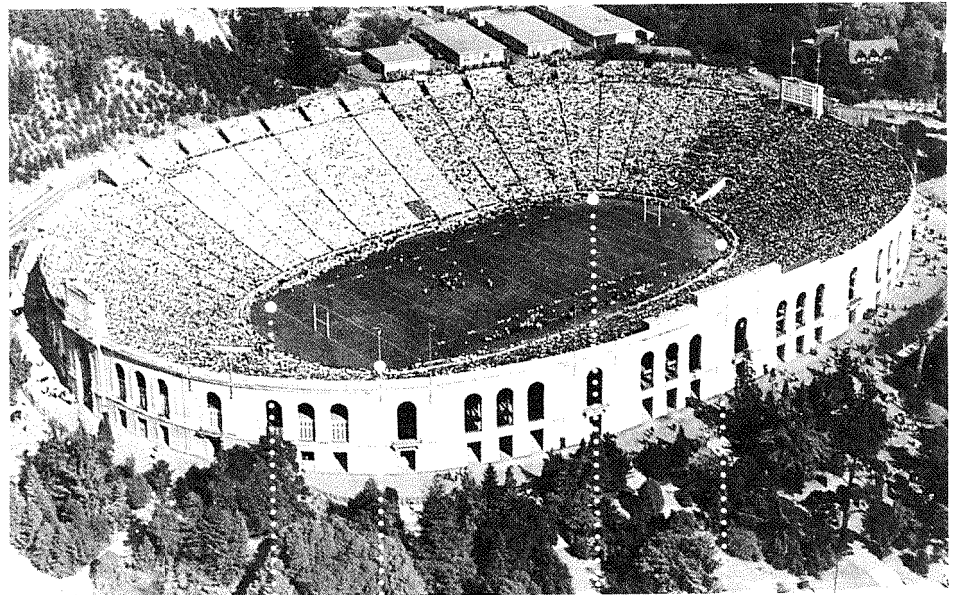
Walter Sullivan (reporting for the *New York Times*, Sept. 25, 1985) observed that inside Meteor Crater, Calif., “twenty football games could be played simultaneously before two million onlookers” (some of them, no doubt, quite uncomfortable).

United Parcel Service at its Louisville (Ky.) Air Park, planned “a \$16 million expansion [which] will nearly double the size of the main sorting building to almost 900,000 square feet—enough for 20 football fields.” (*Louisville Courier-Journal*, Apr. 3, 1988.)

Some eager describers switch dimensions from horizontal to vertical, to wit: A new resort swimming pool in Puerto Rico is said to be “nearly two football fields longer than the Empire State Building is high.” (*New York Times*, Sept. 14, 1986.)

Disaster looms in football-field dimensions: “CORRECTION: In last October’s Almanac, we stated that South American rain forests are being destroyed at the rate of one football field per second. In fact, this is an often quoted figure for the destruction of *tropical* rain forests. Though estimates vary, one researcher says that South American rain forests are destroyed at the rate of one football field every five seconds.” (*Conde Nast Traveller*, May, 1990.)

Columnist Erma Bombeck certified how things go in the Heartland of America with this tasty morsel: “With



How the Roman Coliseum stacks up against an American football stadium (Memorial Stadium at the University of California, Berkeley).

Top photo courtesy University of California, Berkeley.

Bottom photo courtesy the Italian Cultural Institute.

all the flap about nutrition, Americans devoured 71 football fields of pizza in a day last year.” (Sept. 16, 1986.)

As a final note, it should be observed that *football field* itself is only one ingredient in the territorial game. If we add its accoutrements—special access roads; V.I.P. parking; public parking lots; space for hawkers, pitchmen, charity exhibits and caterers for tailgate parties; if we were to include room for garages, associated gymnasias and occasional Tent Cities and motel complexes—we would end up with a 50- to 200-acre operation, plus half mile traffic jams. Now we’re talking real size . . . say, a hundred or so football fields.

Besides offering food for thought, the *football field* serves other functions almost too numerous to mention: as a battleground, an ego test plot, a betting venue, a fashion showplace, a reunion site, a coming-of-age ritual ground, a yardstick in multiples of ten, and—for a host of Americans—the site of the largest crowd gathering in their lifetime experience.

There is here operating a rule of some sort, namely, that the wide and booming world of *multi-mega-superblock* and of *multi-use complexes*, *annexation areas* and *redevelopment intervention zones* continually outstrips the powers of advertising writers to accommodate its shifts and scene changes. *Football field* is a familiar tool for cutting that expanding world down to human conversational scale.

Requiem for the Medical Dental Building

Detail of cornice and
sculptural elements.

All photographs courtesy
Arthur Allen.

