

Touch. Flag. Tackle.

The flight is from boundaries...The longing is for freedom.
Carole Maso

Touch

The rules, he said, are easy. Touch with both hands. Not one. No pushing, no grabbing. Especially below the belt.

The rules, he said, were easy.

When I played offense I always played wide receiver. Too scrawny for guard or tackle; too slow for running back. So I played wide receiver, claiming I could catch far and deep, promising not to drop the ball (though at times, I did), opening my arms in anticipation of receiving all that he would give, catching the ball with the swiftness of a hawk when it seizes its prey in flight.

I caught the ball with one intention only: to be touched by him, with both hands. Not one.

(No pushing, no grabbing. Especially below the belt.)

The rules, he said, were easy.

I played wide receiver to his corner back, timing my pace to accept defeat, eagerly awaiting the fate of both his hands on my torso, or my back, or my waist—wherever he would place them, even if only for a moment. Hoping no one, not even he, would notice that the moment mattered.

And the touch came freely, and the touch came fast. At times the touch came soft like a breeze scarcely passing by; other times hard like a block of ice splitting itself in two. And I welcomed it the way the shore welcomes the evening's ebb.

I welcomed it, ignoring all boundaries.

Little did I know that in touch football, passing plays are far more common than running

plays. Still, I yearned for the pass and dreaded the run because the run meant seeing those hands on someone else's body. The touch, unforgiving and wasted.

Touch football originated in the Navy, he once said, but that didn't explain why we played it every weekend in the churchyard on the corner, Portuguese women in their shawls and cars passing by to witness the touch, umpires all. And it didn't explain why week after week I found myself wanting to play—needing that touch the way summer needs children in order to feel worthwhile.

It's safer than tackle, he said, as if safety were my concern, and injury not worth the contact.

Flag

The rules of the game are as simple as touch, is what he said. *Only instead of touching, the defense must remove the flag from the offense to end the down*. He said this, tying the cloth to his waist.

So we wore flags. Flags external. Flag appendages. We wore flags, unaware of the distance they created. We replaced touch with strips of fabric, exchanged skin for polyester and pretended not to notice.

This was a sport that seemed cold, but at the same time exciting. In my mind's eye it was his way of asking for a chase, so a chase is what I gave him.

As defense I always crossed the line of scrimmage. Offside. Out of line. Somehow never noticing the boundary until after the penalty was called. Perhaps this was a foreshadowing of how I would choose to later live my life. As defense I always crossed the line of scrimmage—sometimes intentionally, sometimes not.

Blitz count: One Mississippi. And the sweat formed on my brow.

Blitz count: Two Mississippi. And I shivered, eyeing the flag.

Blitz count: Three Mississippi. And the ground pulsed beneath our feet as I ran for the flag and learned that, if done just right, I could get away with one hand (and sometimes two) just below the belt.

Tackle

The goal: To physically interfere; to cause the other to touch some part of his body to the ground other than his feet or hands.

We're older now, is what he said. *Old enough for tackle*.

And the tackle is what I learned:

Step One. Identify your object.

Step Two. Run toward him at full speed, keeping your head up at all times. Do not let him know you've anticipated this moment all your childhood.

Step Three. Aim your face at the center of his chest or inside shoulder. Do not let the eyes roam further—not to muscles in his arms, nor his legs, nor his thighs—no matter how tempting it may be.

Step Four. When approaching him, wrap your arms around his waist, perhaps force your shoulder onto his hips. Look down—even close your eyes—but only if no one is watching.

Step Five. Pull him into you and drive him to the ground. Drive him with all your force, with all the language you have come to learn, with all the energy your childhood has produced. Use your legs to balance, your arms to hold, your intellect to remind you that this is all part of the sport, and there are no boundaries to cross.

Pull him into you like a lover, if you have to.

But remember the basic rules: no pushing, no grabbing. Especially below the belt.