Run It Down
the Field Again,
Fellows

Grady Clay

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 dice-shooter’s field, the space it takes to swing a cut—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,
around the Cape of Good Hope, across the Atlantic, up the Amazon and into dry-land 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 imaginings! 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 house (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 roam 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. 15, 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 side-tracked the project. The fence is gone. (Keith Schneider, "Borech’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!" (BPCC Comment, 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."


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 Greentop, 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 fields."

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fields equipped with machines to process varieties of recyclables.” (Sauer, 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 Hargreaves, 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 2,500 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 180,00 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, Reunion 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 developers switch dimensions from horizontal to vertical, to win: 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." (Cosmopolitan, May, 1990.)

Columnist Erna Bombeck certified how things go in the Heartland of America with this tasty morsel: "With
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, pitch-
men, charity exhibits and caterers for
tailgate parties, if we were to include
rooms for garages, associated gymnasium
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 foot-
ball fields.

Besides offering food for thought,
the football field serves other functions
almost too numerous to mention: as a
barroom, an ego test plot, a bet-
ting 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.

There is here operating a rule of
some sort, namely, that the wide and
boisterous world of multi-mega-
structure and of multi-arc complexes,
annexation areas and re-development
intervention zones continues to outstrip
the powers of advertising writers to
accommodate its shifts and scene
trends. Football field is a familiar tool
for driving that expanding world down
to human conversational scale.

Requiem for the Medical
Dental Building