

SPECIAL ROSE BOWL ISSUE

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Dear Colleague:

A sort of good-natured hysteria swept over Wisconsin with the winning of the Rose Bowl--the first time in the University's history--against UCLA. The mood began with the victory over Michigan and the tie with Ohio State. It soared with the trouncing of Michigan State in Tokyo, which crowned the Wisconsin team as Big Ten Champion. And it boomed and flared like an exploding firecracker with the triumph in Pasadena. A sea of red (Wisconsin's color) flooded the sun-drenched Rose Bowl stadium. Where were the Californians? When the team returned to ice-bound Madison, two days later, 12,000 fans cheered them. One happy boy's ear was the color of his Wisconsin jersey. On January 6, the team is scheduled to receive Presidential blessing.

How to understand the phenomenon? First, what we have here is an entrenched American myth--the rags-to-riches meta-narrative. Four years ago, we were at the bottom of the totem pole. Now, well, let me just say that the view from up here is great! Second, there is the curious mix, in football, of planning, cooperation, teamwork on the one hand and on the other individual excellence--individual displays of skill, stamina, and courage. Even a critical theorist in Wisconsin may be caught (momentarily) offguard and feel a surge of pride for which he will compensate later in anorgy of deconstruction.

College football offers an interesting insight into society at large, namely, the usefulness of creating difference between groups as a preliminary step to establishing significant contact. Without the uniforms, can anyone tell the Wisconsin and UCLA teams apart? Would the same sense of excitement prevail if it were a contest between two groups of nearly identical young men rather than between two different species--Badgers and Bruins? Deep down we know, of course, that we are not badgers--that Wisconsin is a human state, not a badger state. But we pretend to be Badgers in order to generate sufficient difference for the outcome of the game to seem to matter. The contest drew on real emotion: a serious fight nearly broke out in the stadium. Yet the result of the Wisconsin-UCLA contest and of many such football contests throughout the country on New Year Day is to sustain a sense of national cohesion. Real differences, which might have led to interethnic violence and even war, are transcended by artificial differences, which can generate only entertainment. We forget that we are blacks or whites, and remember only--what bliss!--that we are Badgers, not Bruins.

Best wishes,

