

Football and Thanksgiving: An American Tradition

Nick Dunn

For many Americans, sports define the winter holidays. While Thanksgiving has deep meanings of its own, it has become the occasion of now-traditional, and very popular, football games. Many Americans have these days off of work, so they are more likely to be available to watch, attend, or even play in football games. Indeed, one of my fondest Thanksgiving memories is of playing football on a field in Lanzhou, Gansu Province, China with my American friends. So far from the USA, we Americans felt at home because of this Thanksgiving tradition.

Football is a very common sight on Thanksgiving Day and the weekend following. Almost from the start of American football around 1870, amateur and scholastic teams played football on Thanksgiving. Often, these games decided league champions.

The modern tradition of professional football games on Thanksgiving didn't start until 1934, when G.A. Richards, a Detroit radio executive, bought a successful NFL team, moved them to Detroit, then staged a Thanksgiving Day game (complete with radio broadcasting!), to try to take some of the sporting-event market share from the well-established baseball team, the Detroit Tigers. Richards' Detroit Lions lost to the Chicago Bears (yea! Illinois!), but the event was a marketing and financial success, with a sell-out crowd of 26,000 fans in attendance, and 25,000 more disappointed fans who would have attended if tickets had been available. The Lions have played almost every Thanksgiving Day since then, and the Dallas Cowboys began a similar Thanksgiving tradition in 1966.

College football is rarely played on Thanksgiving Day, but the weekend following is often called "Rivalry Weekend." Many Division 1 university teams play historic, cross-border or intra-state rivalry games, usually with an old, long-standing trophy that the winner gets to keep for the year. The Fighting Illini have played the other Illinois team in our conference, Northwestern University, almost every rivalry weekend since 1892, with first the "Sweet Sioux Tomahawk" and then the "Land of Lincoln" trophies spending a majority of those years here at the University of Illinois.

So, in addition to the traditions of thankfulness and turkey dinners, football is a great way to participate in the Thanksgiving holiday. Tune in to the NFL games after Thanksgiving lunch, cheer on Illinois as we battle Northwestern, or even join a game with American friends. Happy Thanksgiving, and Go Illini!



'Tis the Season for Giving Back

Jessica Wade

While the holiday season is notably associated with shopping and consumerism, there are other aspects to the holidays. Many Americans take time during the holidays to reflect on the things for which they are thankful--and in the end, feel more grateful, compassionate, and charitable than at any other time of the year. Because of this, various community activities, volunteer opportunities, and charity donations are on the to-do list for Americans during the holiday season.

Just how popular are philanthropic efforts during the holiday season? 40% of all individual charitable donations are made in the month of December. America has the largest charitable sector in the world: Americans contribute more than \$300 billion per year in money plus \$260 billion in volunteer hours. There are more than 1.1 million registered charities to choose from—and that can make selecting a charity or volunteer effort difficult.

If you are considering a donation to a charity or other non-profit organization, a little research beforehand can help you decide which charity would use the donation in the best way possible. There are a variety of websites, including [Charity Navigator](#), [Wise Giving Alliance](#), and [GuideStar](#), which provide invaluable information and research on a large number of charities. Reading about charities can help you avoid making last minute or split-second decisions, and ensure that your donation is not only used wisely, but will help those most in need. Human service organizations suffered large financial losses during the recent recession and only 12% of all charitable donations ultimately go to these charities. Organizations that focus on feeding needy children, provide housing, support youth development, and provide disaster relief are often the organizations most in need.

Are you looking for a more 21st Century way to give back? Many Americans skip Cyber Monday (the online shopping version of Black Friday, the day of crazy deals and crazed shoppers the day after Thanksgiving) in favor of [#GIVINGTUESDAY](#), a global day for giving back. Founded in 2012 by New York's [92nd Street Y](#) in partnership with the [United Nations Foundation](#), December 2, 2014 will be celebrated as a day of generosity and giving. Visit the website for an array of ideas for activities that you, your family, and your colleagues can do to give back.

The Champaign-Urbana community offers a wide variety of opportunities to volunteer or make donations. [Champaign County Community Christmas](#), [Habitat for Humanity Gift Wrapping](#), [Carle/Salvation Army Toy Drive](#), and the [Salvation Army Bell Ringing](#) are yearly activities. Visiting a [nursing home](#) during the holiday season can be a great way to lift someone's spirits and provide company. If you are looking for ideas on campus, visit <https://cuvolunteer.org> for more ideas.

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Eating Your Way Through the Holidays

Jennie Avery

Interested in learning about holidays in the US? A great way to immerse yourself in the culture is to join in the gatherings associated with the numerous holidays that fall between the end of November and the beginning of January. During those gatherings, be sure to pay special attention to the food! As in many cultures, holidays in the US each boast their own individual menu to help revelers really celebrate the season. Here are the brief background stories behind four of the major fall/winter holidays celebrated in the United States, with special emphasis on the foods enjoyed during each. Bon appetit!

Hanukkah: To understand the foods of Hanukkah, one must have at least a cursory understanding of the history of the holiday. In the Hanukkah story the Maccabees (Jews) defeat their Greek-Syrian oppressors only to find after the battle that they had only enough oil to light the menorah (traditional candelabra) for one night. Miraculously, the oil lasted for eight nights. Oil clearly holds a significant role in the story of Hanukkah, and today, that importance is reflected in the foods consumed on the holiday, which are traditionally deep-fried. The most common are latkes – potato pancakes, cooked in oil – and doughnuts – known in Hebrew as “sufganiyot,” and of course, deep-fried in oil.



Thanksgiving: A holiday that focuses almost entirely on food (with a little bit of thankfulness on the side), is Thanksgiving. While most holidays have a religious or cultural focus that is complemented by the fare, Thanksgiving is arguably the opposite – with all eyes glued to the overflowing table. There is a general belief that the foods that are eaten in the US at Thanksgiving became traditional in remembrance of their consumption at the “First Thanksgiving” in 1621 during which the settlers and the Native Americans shared a festive meal. However, a bit of research shows that it is highly unlikely that many foods that are commonplace at contemporary Thanksgiving feasts (including cranberry sauce and perhaps even the iconic turkey) were actually included on the menu at the original Thanksgiving, where the guests probably dined on berries (not in sauce form), fruit, pumpkin, squash, corn, lobster and waterfowl. Turkey gained popularity as a Thanksgiving staple later on, based on its nativity to the land as well as its large size which made it possible for one bird to feed an entire family. Cranberry sauce, especially the jellied kind that comes out of a can with an appetizing squishing sound, was also likely not found at the first Thanksgiving, since, while berries were abundant, sugar was not, making jellying impossible. Another mainstay of the traditional Thanksgiving meal is stuffing, known to some as dressing and to others as filling. The disagreements about this food item don’t end at what to call it. The recipes are endless – from bases made of white-bread, to corn-bread, to oysters – and one can be found to fit nearly any taste.

Experience Thanksgiving for yourself at Urbana High School. Click [HERE](#) for more details.



Christmas: All over the world, people have varying ideas of what constitutes a traditional Christmas meal, ranging from tamales in Guatemala to beetroot soup with dumplings in Poland. The US is no exception. Many of the culinary traditions in the US were brought over by the colonists from Great Britain, including ham, eggnog, and gingerbread.

Ham is a very popular main dish at many Christmas dinners in the US. The tradition of eating ham during the holidays can be traced back to parts of Europe, where it was eaten as a tribute to Freyr, a Germanic pagan god, who represented harvest and fertility. The Catholic Church later embraced the Christmas ham as a way of testing the faith of Jewish converts to Catholicism, as the devout would eat the ham, while those who still clung to their Jewish identity and rituals would not. Eggnog, a drink traditionally made from frothed eggs, milk and sugar, is a holiday drink that was brought to the US by colonists, who put their own twist on it after arriving in the “New World” by adding rum. Today you can find many different varieties of eggnog – with rum or brandy, and even some without eggs! (Drink responsibly) For your Christmas dessert, one of your options may be gingerbread cookies. These cookies originated in Europe, and are traditionally cut into shapes, including gingerbread men, which at one time were eaten by young women with the belief that this would ensure they would find a husband. In the US, constructing houses out of gingerbread is a common activity at Christmas, and there are a number of contests and displays that you can participate in and see during the holiday season.

Kwanzaa: Kwanzaa is a relatively recent addition to the American holiday season, with its establishment in 1966 by Dr. Maulana Karenga, who hoped to create a holiday that would encourage African Americans to embrace and celebrate their roots and culture. The celebration is based on harvest or “first fruit” festivals which are common in Africa, and the name “Kwanzaa” is taken from a Swahili phrase meaning “first fruits of the harvest” (matunda ya kwanza). With the focus on the harvest, the foods most common at Kwanzaa celebrations are fruits and vegetables, with corn in particular holding a special place of importance. Corn cobs are placed on a Mkeka (mat), to represent the children in the family, or all of the children in the community if there are no children in the household.



Ice Hockey with Martin

Martin McFarlane



In the United States, most sports have distinct seasons. American Football begins at the start of Autumn, and runs into the first month or two of the new year. Baseball is primarily a summer sport, starting in mid-Spring and running until the American Football season gets going in earnest. But Ice Hockey- or simply hockey as it's known in the US- struggles for attention in mainstream sports media, as its season starts in October when American Football is popular, and continues all the way into late Spring and early Summer. In doing so, it also clashes with basketball season, and therefore suffers by competing directly against two more popular US sports at all times.

Which is a shame, because hockey is a fantastic sport, and the figures don't back up my claim in the previous paragraph that it's not as popular as basketball. In fact the NHL (National Hockey League) had a higher average attendance last season than the NBA (National Basketball Association). However the NHL is boosted by attendances from seven Canadian teams, and hockey rules in Canada. In the US, basketball is still more popular, as hockey is not as easy a sport to cultivate from the grass roots. Basketball courts are found throughout the US, whereas ice rinks are less easy to come by. Another factor here is college sports...

Last newsletter we talked about the strange world of college sports in America, particularly American Football. Well, basketball is right up there in terms of popularity, and 351 schools have top-level (division 1) basketball programs. Hockey? The number is only 59. That's almost six times more schools that have basketball programs compared to hockey. As a member of the University of Illinois community, I'm sorry to inform you that we are not amongst the 59 schools. The Illini hockey club does exist though, playing other teams from universities without a varsity or scholarship hockey program, and you should absolutely check out a game while you're here. Hockey has traditionally been the 'fourth' sport in the US behind American Football, Baseball, and Basketball. But with attendances dwindling in MLB and NBA venues, soccer and hockey are closing the gap rapidly. The Big Ten, the athletic conference that Illinois belongs to, recently formed a hockey league as a response to the growth in popularity, with Penn State growing its club team (similar to the one Illinois has) to a fully-fledged Division 1 team to join the new Big Ten league. While many hope this is the path Illinois will eventually take, you can still see some great action at the UI Ice Arena. Tickets are only \$5 for students (\$9 general), and you can see what a great atmosphere can be generated in such a small, packed venue.

Despite the lack of a division 1 hockey program at the University of Illinois, hockey's popularity has risen greatly in the area over the last few years, primarily due to changes in Chicago. The Chicago Blackhawks are the state's only NHL team, and for decades their games were not broadcast on television. Blackhawks management believed that tv exposure would reduce attendances. However a change in management switched that philosophy, and to the surprise of very few, the opposite occurred. More tv exposure for the Blackhawks led to a growth in the fanbase and more hockey fans, which increased the demand for tickets. Fortuitously, this coincided with one of the best Blackhawk teams in decades, who won two national titles in four years (2010 and 2013). Champaign is located almost halfway between Chicago and St Louis, and a growing rivalry with the St Louis Blues, a championship caliber Blackhawks team, and mass television coverage, have all combined over the past decade to see that hockey has never been more popular in Central Illinois.



ISSS Holiday Movie Picks

To help you get into the holiday spirit, ISSS staff members have shared their favorite holiday movies. Happy watching!

Classics

Jessica: [The Homecoming: A Christmas Story](#) — This story about The Walton Family, living in rural Virginia during the 1930s, is a movie I watch every year. If you want to see what life was like during Depression-era America, this is a good place to start. The film also has strong themes of family and giving, and captures the spirit of the Holidays.

Carol: [A Charlie Brown Christmas](#) — I've probably watched it every year since it was first shown on TV in the 60's and watch it every year with my daughters. It's sweet and really makes me laugh—especially Snoopy. Peanuts is a staple in the US and stresses the "true meaning" of Christmas beyond all the glitz.

Briaunna: [Miracle on 34th Street](#) (the 1947 one!) — I have loved this movie since I was little. It makes me all warm and tingly inside and takes me back to when I was a little girl, curled up by the fireplace on my beanbag chair with hot chocolate watching this movie with my family. It includes both the Thanksgiving Holiday and Christmas. It shows how adults do not believe in Santa Claus, but children can despite that.

Comedies

Amira: [Elf](#) — starring Will Ferrell. This movie is great because it is hilarious, heartfelt, and shows New York City in all of its holiday glory. "Elf" is a perfect movie to watch if you are unfamiliar with the details surrounding the story of Santa Claus and his workshop.

Guaxara: [Family Man](#) — Christmas is meant to be family time and enjoying being together, far from the nowadays concept of compulsive shopping. This film emphasizes the obsession of those who identify success with materialism: The more you have, the happier you are. Nicolas Cage, a fast-lane investment broker, is offered the opportunity to see how the other half lives and wakes up to find that his sports car and girlfriend have become a mini-van and wife.

Erin: [Home Alone](#) — A classic from my childhood. Now my daughter loves it, too! I like to watch this while wrapping Christmas presents.

Julie: [A Christmas Story](#) — I usually host my family at our house over the holidays and we always make time to watch that movie. Everyone from my almost 90-year old parents to my nieces and nephews love watching the story of Ralphie, who is obsessed with getting a Red Ryder BB gun for Christmas even though everyone tells him he'll shoot his eye out. A Christmas Story is set in the 1940s, and according to my parents it is very true to the time period. This movie offers a glimpse of Christmas past in a small Midwestern town, and a generous helping of American-style humor. It's a must see!

Alternative

Nick: [The Ref](#) — A character- and dialogue-driven comedy set at Christmas that uses the sudden tension of a burglary/hostage situation to help the characters break through decades-old family tensions and build stronger relationships than ever. While very strong adult language and situations mean this movie isn't for everyone, The Ref has been a favorite holiday season movie in my quirky (but wonderful) family for over a decade.

Martin: [Die Hard](#) — The Christmas theme is actually surprisingly strong in this movie. Christmas imagery and decorations are everywhere, themes of redemption and rebirth are prevalent, and the title character even gets covered in soot coming down a chimney (ok, a ventilation system) just like Santa. Also, it's culturally significant! If you're looking to study American cinema in the 80's, there are few better examples of the all-American hero battling the world than the lead character, John McClane. Sure, the list is pretty endless in that category, but only Die Hard did it at Christmas. Also, there are a lot of pretty big explosions. You won't find THAT in It's A Wonderful Life.

Jennie: [The Nightmare Before Christmas](#) — Not your typical Christmas movie. Watch as Jack Skellington, a resident of Halloween Town, discovers Christmas for the first time and tries to bring this new holiday back home. I love the quirky mix of Christmas and Halloween—it's a little bit dark and a whole lot of magic.

