

American Ball Sports: Origins and Evolutions

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American Ball Sports: Origins and Evolutions

Ball Sports in America have been around in some form or another for many years, and over time, have steadily evolved into the modern ball sports we know today. The history of ball sports in America can be traced all the way back to the Native Americans, who created and participated in what some consider to be the first team sports in American history. Added to this are the sports brought to United States soil by the immigrants from Europe. It is truly difficult to know exactly what was the first ball sport in America, but what we can say is that sports over time have evolved and changed with society. Contemporary Americans have put their own spin on the ball sports we have inherited.

Ball Sports throughout time have inspired, influenced, and entertained us unlike few other pursuits. The United States is a very unique country, and unlike other countries or nations we are not defined by one main religion, or ethnic group, rather we are defined by a civic identity. A civic identity that is shared by over 300 million Americans, and ball sports has played a crucial role in helping establish this identity. In order to see how these ball sports have played a critical role in our society, it will be useful to go back and take a look at their origins. Once that is established it will be important to gain insight on how they diffused from other countries. Furthermore once we establish the origin and diffusion of ball sports, it will help us understand that ball sports, both at the amateur and professional levels, have

provided America with a shared language, a language that has contributed to the discussion of issues rooted deep in American Culture.

Lets first start by defining what exactly a ball is. According to Merriam – Webster Dictionary, “a ball is a round or roundish body or mass. A spherical or ovoid body used in a game or sport (hacker. 2011. In *Merriam-Webster.com*.). A ball can be used in many different ways for numerous activities; it can be kicked, thrown, or hit with objects. Today many types of balls are made from mostly rubber, however this form of material was unknown outside the New World until after the voyages of Columbus. The first Europeans to witness bouncing rubber balls were the Spanish, who participated and invented a certain game known today as “the Mesoamerican Ballgame.” Balls that were used in other parts of the world before Columbus were created from other material such as animal skins or bladders, which at times could be filled with numerous materials to help change the weight and feel of the balls.

The first place we should start History is Mesoamerica more than 3,500 years ago. As mentioned above, the Mesoamericans were the first people to invent rubber balls, and the game that went along with it. “They did this by using one of their natural resources available to them, the rubber tree”(Blomster, J. P. 2012). The formation of these rubber balls was a process and their technique of rubber ball making has survived for centuries. The size of the balls produced varied from location to location, along with the characteristics of the balls. They ranged anywhere from the size of a softball to the size of a beach ball and could weigh up to eight pounds. Some were hollow and some were filled with human skulls and a variety of other things. Many people have raised questions about the origins of

ballgames. Questions such as, why were the ancient Mesoamericans the only ones who invented and played such a sport? Why not the ancient Greeks, Romans or Egyptians? And the answer is because the Mesoamericans discovered the way to make the ball bounce; they were the first people who started using rubber and latex for the purpose of a ball game. The Mesoamericans began using latex and rubber around 1600 BC and found many different ways to use the materials to their advantage. The Ancient Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians all had their own various types of ball games and activities, but they lacked the true natural resource of rubber, that really separated the Mesoamerican's way of playing from theirs. The Ancient Mesoamerican players would have most likely played this "ballgame" on a masonry field within an "I" shaped court (Blomster, J. P. 2012). Most of the courts that have been discovered are in a particular "I" shape with two parallel walls on each side, with a long alley way considered to be the actual playing field. Experts don't exactly know how the game was played, but according to the book *Sports, Gambling and Government* "the winners were offered wealth and prestige, while the losers sometimes paid with their life due to scarification" (Borish, L.J., & Phillips, M.G. 2012).

The ancient ballgame had many more meanings that we don't know about, but what we do know is that it was truly one of the first ball sports documented. Also, as mentioned above, the Mesoamericans were able to introduce the Spanish to the "bouncing ball," which in turn opened a whole new world to the idea of sport and competition in Europe. This simple game of the Mesoamericans, among many other

influences over time has shaped the specific ball games we see in not only our society, but also societies all over the world.

Lets dive into a culture that has had a heavy influence on American ball sports and take a look at how some of their main ball sports have influenced our own. There is no better ball sport to start with than what is called “the worlds game,” and that game is soccer.

Soccer

Soccer, otherwise known as football North of Mexico, is considered the most popular sport in the world, and like many other sports, the origin of soccer is not that clear. Some believe that it started in China during the second and third centuries, and others believe soccer came invented by the ancient Romans. So without knowing how exactly soccer came to be in Europe, there is ambiguity in the history. We do have evidence of actual printed materials that suggest modern soccer in Europe was born in England in 1863. Around the 18th century in London there were many universities and clubs that played ball games similar to modern day soccer. A major problem with the games being played is that there was no set rules or regulations. So every club or university had there own way of playing. This ball game continued on for a while, until a group of eleven people from various universities and clubs in London hosted a meeting in an English tavern.

(<http://www.fifa.com/>). Also According to the *FIFA website* the meeting took place at what is known today as Freemasons Tavern, and was designed to create a new set of rules for controlling the matches being played. Without knowing it, this meeting would ultimately start what is now one of the most organized and world-renowned

ball sport and resulted in the development of the Federation International de Football Association. From there it didn't take long for the Football Association to grow, and by 1869 it became a fully functional organization.

Once soccer cemented itself in English culture, it began to spread rapidly. British traders, sailors and soldiers introduced the sport to different parts of the globe until the sport known as "football" became global. With increasing international matches, the need for a single controlling entity emerged, and that entity was called the The Fédération Internationale de Football Association, or otherwise known as FIFA. Once the emergence of FIFA came about the sport became a staple in many societies around the world, and is known today as the "worlds sport." Soccer not only created a global connection among nations, but it also unintentionally sparked a whole new type of ball sport, which in turn brought a completely different aspect to the history of how ball sports are played (Schofield J. 2012).

Rugby

After the development of soccer, another popular ball sport was born. At one point this ball sport was actually intertwined with soccer and when push came to shove this ball sport branched off and developed a name of its own. As stated above, before the formal formation of European football, Universities and clubs played different variations of "football" or "ball games." In some games players were only allowed to strike the ball with their hands or feet, and in others they were allowed to use both. When the formation of the Football Association finally became official, rules were created forbidding the use of hands (Richards, 2006). This was a

controversial for some of the members, and from the disagreement of one rule the formal creation of rugby came to be. However, long before this separation occurred rugby could be traced back to a couple of key events. In 1830 in England, legend has it, that a boy by the name of William Webb Ellis had a strong dislike for the sport and rules of football as played in his time. So William, who was a student at the Rugby School of England, ran onto a football playing field, picked up the ball and ran with it. Not long after this legend became known, in 1845 the first set of rules were written for the sport and from there it branched off from the Football Association in 1863. Once they were able to establish and create their set of rules, they were able to develop their own union, which led to birth of the Rugby Football Union in 1871 (Richards, 2006).

The ball sports of soccer and rugby are just two examples among many others in the European sporting culture. These two are prime examples of how ball sports have the power to influence one another and evolve over time. We have barely scratched the surface of the vast array of ball sports from around the world, and one key element human migrations, contributed heavily to the continued evolution of ball sports.

Ball Sports and the United States

Ball sports in modern society are some of America's the most popular forms of mass entertainment. People from all over enjoy participating and watching the competition and passion these games bring. Millions and millions of people attend ball-sporting events and tune in each year to cheer on their favorite team or player.

When looking at the influence ball sports have in America, we first have to take a step back and look at the origins of how these games came to our great country.

Prior to the founding of the American Colonies, it has been debated that the Native Americans were the first people on the soil that became the United States to practice and participate in ball games. Ball sports were a cultural practice within the Native American community. Even though some of the games were similar to those played in Europe, the Native Americans played these ball games with a different context and meaning. Ball games in Europe during the time were played more for leisure and fun, whereas the Native Americans played these ball games for ceremonial and ritual purposes (Schofield, J. 2012). The main types of ball games that were played were quite similar to that of modern day lacrosse. This so-called lacrosse type of game involved the use of sticks to pass or hit a ball and sometimes the matches lasted days, or even weeks. The name of this particular ball game varied from tribe to tribe as well as the rules, but more often than not games were associated with healing practices, burial rituals, prestige and status. It was reported in the *American Anthropologist*, that Cherokees who played stick ball (also known as lacrosse) were prepared before games with prayers, pipe smoking, body painting, and many other rituals designed to enhance spiritually rather than to ensure them victory (Mooney, James 1890). These games could be played internally among members of the same tribe, or they could be played externally with other tribes. Most of the ball games played were mandatory and were not voluntary, but most importantly the games were played for the respect of individuals and tribes as a whole (Mooney James 1890).

During the 18th and 19th century American society was growing at a tremendous pace. Colonial America was at its tail end and the technological and industrial revolutions were increasingly becoming part of the community. Millions and millions of European immigrants were pouring into the country and from 1836 to 1914 over 30 million Europeans migrated to the United States (Cain, L. P., & Haddock, D. D. 2005). Along with immigrants came their customs, and the spread of new ball sports in America were underway. Population increase contributed to the growth of ball sports, but many other factors helped as well. Advancements in travel, technology, education, factories, and companies, were all gaining speed and contributed to the evolution of the sporting culture. American society was booming and these were all vital pieces to the complicated puzzle of the American ball sport industry. From all the growth and expansion in society, people started to gain more wealth and more time than they ever did before. Around this exciting time in America recreational hobbies and activities such as ball sports took place and started to grow in popularity. It was around this era that the first known organized ball sports team; the New York Knickerbockers' was created. The Knickerbockers' was a baseball club created in the 1840's and is an important part to the history of ball sports. As mentioned earlier football, basketball, and baseball were all apart of the ball sporting culture during the 1800's, but baseball was the most popular. It was one of the first ball sports to be organized in United States, much like soccer was in Europe. Baseball has been associated with American culture for centuries and find out just how important this ball sport is to our society.

Baseball

Baseball has been and is an important part of American culture. Many Americans grow up with baseball; playing it before they can even count or understand the rules. It is taught to most kids at a young age and is considered a glorified ball sport in our society. A good comparison is the importance soccer is in Europe. When kids and people in America are taught how to play baseball, we find a respect for the game and the respect we get from playing it has turned the game into a tradition of American culture. Baseball has become large; it has created itself into a business that has been able to successfully aid the structure of ball sports. Professional baseball players and teams have become recognized all over the world, and the ball sport has been able to create many positive outcomes that spring from a simple game is astonishing. The origins of baseball can be traced all the way back to none other than the great nations of Europe. Earlier forms of baseball were played in countries such as Ireland, France, and England. Their forms of baseball all had different name like "roundball," "goalball," or simply "base" (Seifried, C 2010). Once again like most other ball sports in Europe back then, there were no official set rules, so the type of baseball played differed form place to place. Once the European immigrants started flooding into the country the early games of baseball were introduced and the modern version started to develop.

Baseball has been apart of American culture for w while now, and can be traced all the way back from the Civil war era. According to the article *Sports History and Modes of Expression*, in 1845 the sport of baseball was officially born, and a man by the name of Alexander Catwright was responsible for the creation and original rules.

Catwright was also responsible for the first ever organized ball sport team in America. The baseball club called the New York Knickerbockers' and according to the article *19th Century Baseball* The first recorded baseball game was in 1846 when Alexander Catwright's Knickerbockers lost to the New York Baseball Club. The game was held at the Elysian Fields, in Hoboken New Jersey (Unknown 2012). As more and more teams and clubs started to form in the 1800's, the need for organization in the sport was urgent. It was around 1858 that the first baseball league, the "National Association of Baseball Players" was founded. Once the league was founded, the skill level and competitiveness of the games increased and people started taking notice. The popularity of the sport went up and matches started to draw spectators. As soon as it was clear that these matches between baseball clubs were worthy of an admission fee the game started to evolve even more. The aspect of professionalism eventually took over the baseball game and in 1869 the first all professional team the "Red Stockings" was founded (Seifried, C 2010). The switch from amateur to professional meant that the players were now getting paid. Not long after additional baseball clubs jumped on board and the National Association of baseball players was shortened and changed into the "National Association," which was the first professional ball sport league in the United States. The league consisted of eight teams, which competed against each other regularly. Every player in the National Association was under a contract and professionalism in ball sports was under way. Another professional league consisting of six teams named the "American Association" would soon follow in 1882. From there the ball sport of professional baseball has become a foundation that mirrors shifting values in American society.

Around the time baseballs popularity was growing, the amount of race discrimination in America during the 19th century was a huge issue, and still hinders our society. Looking back in time it was the simple ball sport of baseball that truly helped influence this issue in a positive way. Baseball was able to shed some light on the equality issues that were rooted deep in American culture. Many African Americans turned to ball sports to help cope with racial discrimination in the 18th and 19th centuries. Ball sports were used as a way of unifying the black community, and baseball was one of the most unifying sports for African Americans. (Reyna, A 2011). With the formation of the sport, many early black baseball teams were started. The earliest being the 1876 Pythian Baseball Club of Philadelphia. These baseball clubs would play other African American clubs around the area and would compete for what was called “The Color Championship of the United States.” Eventually the Color Championship became a staple in the African American community and they would create a league of their own called the “Negro National League” which was founded in 1931 (Reyna, A 2011). The Negro League and the Professional baseball leagues of whites were kept segregated for years, until the famous story regarding Jackie Robinson took the stage in 1947. When Jackie broke the color barrier in baseball it gave the nation and society an example to follow. Eventually, people came to realize that African American not only had a place in Baseball, but they had a place in the rest of society too.

The importance of baseball should not be underrated. In a sense it has created an array of mini stepping-stones for our values and beliefs to emulate. It has helped society overcome both major and minor issues. It is a marketing ground for

commercial interest, and an important role model in the American way of life. Baseball is just one among many ball sports that contemporary Americans have come to love. Not far behind baseball making a huge impact on American culture is another ball sport, American Football.

Football

It has been said that baseball is our country’s pastime, but American football is our country’s passion. American football has truly developed into our nation’s prime spectator game, even though it may not generate as many recreational participants as other ball sports like basketball, baseball, and soccer. Football through its development and exposure to our society has become the main ball sport to watch. Football is also known to be the creator of the most watched sporting event in Americans history, the Super Bowl. Each year the Super Bowl is the most-viewed sporting event in the United States, and year after year the ratings for this single ball game seem to grow. Footballs popularity is not just at the professional level either, it can be seen in the youth, high school and collegiate levels as well. The following is an example of the 50 most-viewed sporting events from the previous year of 2012.

50 Most-Viewed Sporting Events of 2012

* CBS/Turner Sports generally did not provide combined ratings and viewership for NCAA Tournament telecast windows this year. As a result, individual NCAA Tournament telecasts are listed.

(<http://www.sportsmediawatch.com/>).

#	Date	League	Event	Net	Rating	Viewers (000)
1	Sun., 2/5/12	NFL	Super Bowl: Giants/Patriots	NBC	47.0	111,346
2	Sun., 1/22/12	NFL	NFC Champ.: Giants/49ers	FOX	30.6	57,635
3	Sun., 1/22/12	NFL	AFC Champ.: Ravens/Patriots	CBS	27.4	48,676

4	Sun., 1/15/12	NFL	NFC Divisional: Giants/Packers	FOX	25.3	45,120
5	Sun., 1/8/12	NFL	AFC Wild Card: Steelers/Broncos	CBS	24.0	42,371
6	Sat., 1/14/12	NFL	NFC Divisional: Saints/49ers	FOX	20.5	35,601
7	Sat., 1/14/12	NFL	AFC Divisional: Broncos/Patriots	CBS	18.5	34,161
8	Sat., 1/7/12	NFL	NFC Wild Card: Lions/Saints	NBC	18.2	31,780
9	Sun., 1/15/12	NFL	AFC Divisional: Texans/Ravens	CBS	19.0	30,963
10	Sun., 1/8/12	NFL	NFC Wild Card: Falcons/Giants	FOX	17.3	27,735
11	Sun., 1/1/12	NFL	Reg. Season: Cowboys/Giants	NBC	15.7	27,624
12	Sun., 1/1/12	NFL	Reg. Season: Regional	CBS	15.1	27,004
13	Mon., 1/9/12	NCAAF	BCS Champ.: Alabama/LSU	ESPN	14.0	24,214
14	Sat., 1/7/12	NFL	AFC Wild Card: Bengals/Texans	NBC	13.5	21,893
15	Mon., 4/3/12	NCAAB	Final Four: Kentucky/Kansas	CBS	12.3	20,869
16	Sun., 1/1/12	NFL	Reg. Season: Regional	FOX	11.6	19,596
17	Thu., 6/21/12	NBA	Finals: Thunder/Heat Game 5	ABC	10.9	18,416
18	Mon., 1/2/12	NCAAF	Rose Bowl: Oregon/Wisconsin	ESPN	10.2	17,558
19	Tue., 6/19/12	NBA	Finals: Thunder/Heat Game 4	ABC	10.5	17,455
20	Thu., 6/14/12	NBA	Finals: Heat/Thunder Game 2	ABC	10.4	16,670
21	Sat., 3/31/12	NCAAB	Final Four: Kansas/Ohio State	CBS	9.6	16,603
22	Tue., 6/12/12	NBA	Finals: Heat/Thunder Game 1	ABC	9.9	16,195
23	Sun., 6/17/12	NBA	Finals Thunder/Heat Game 3	ABC	8.8	15,549
24	Sat., 5/5/12	Horse	Kentucky Derby (race portion)	NBC	9.0	14,800
25	Sat., 3/31/12	NCAAB	Final Four: Kentucky/Louisville	CBS	8.4	13,908
26	Mon., 1/2/12	NCAAF	Fiesta Bowl: Okla. St./Stanford	ESPN	8.4	13,684
27	Mon., 2/27/12	NASCAR	Sprint Cup: Daytona 500	FOX	8.0	13,669
28	Sun., 4/8/12	Golf (M)	The Masters, final round	CBS	8.0	13,487
29	Sat., 6/9/12	NBA	ECF: Celtics/Heat Game 7	ESPN	7.7	13,346
30	Sun., 1/1/12	NFL	Reg. Season: Regional	CBS	8.1	13,331
31	Sun., 1/29/12	NFL	Pro Bowl	NBC	7.3	12,498

32	Sun., 3/25/12	NCAAB	Elite Eight: Kansas/UNC	CBS	7.1	11,683
T33	Thu., 6/7/12	NBA	ECF: Heat/Celtics Game 6	ESPN	6.8	11,068
T33	Sun., 6/3/12	NBA	ECF: Heat/Celtics Game 4	ESPN	6.8	11,068
35	Sat., 3/24/12	NCAAB	Elite Eight: Ohio State/Syracuse	CBS	6.7	10,949
36	Tue., 7/10/12	MLB	MLB All-Star Game	FOX	6.8	10,900
37	Tue., 6/5/12	NBA	ECF: Celtics/Heat Game 5	ESPN	6.3	10,251
38	Sun., 7/1/12	Olympics	U.S. Olympic Trials (Gymnastics)	NBC	5.9	10,021
39	Sun., 6/17/12	Golf (M)	U.S. Open, Final Round	NBC	6.0	9,633
40	Tue., 1/3/12	NCAAF	Sugar Bowl: Michigan/Va. Tech	ESPN	6.1	9,572
41	Wed., 6/6/12	NBA	WCF: Spurs/Thunder Game 6	TNT	6.0	9,498
42	Sun., 3/4/12	NASCAR	Sprint Cup: Subway Fresh Fit 500 (Phoenix)	FOX	5.6	9,230
43	Mon., 5/28/12	NBA	ECF: Celtics/Heat Game 1	ESPN	5.6	8,989
44	Wed., 5/30/12	NBA	ECF: Celtics/Heat Game 2	ESPN	5.7	8,809
45	Sun., 3/18/12	NCAAB	Third Round: UNC/Creighton	CBS	5.7	8,799
46	Fri., 3/23/12	NCAAB	Sweet Sixteen: Kentucky/Indiana	CBS	5.2	8,702
47	Sun., 3/11/12	NASCAR	Sprint Cup: Kobalt Tools 500 (Las Vegas)	FOX	5.2	8,528
48	Mon., 6/4/12	NBA	WCF: Thunder/Spurs Game 5	TNT	5.5	8,507
49	Fri., 1/6/12	NCAAF	Cotton Bowl: Arkansas/Kansas St.	FOX	5.0	8,363
50	Sun., 5/6/12	NASCAR	Sprint Cup: Aaron's 499 (Talladega)	FOX	5.1	8,348

(Numbers from various sources, including Sports Business Daily, Son of the Bronx, ESPN and Turner Sports)

The top 14 viewed sporting events are all football games and throughout football is clearly listed the most. Through this evidence it is clear that American Football is a game that is unique to our culture, but it is also a game mainly played solely in our culture. Even though there are some football leagues over seas and in other countries the popularity is not as strong in other places as it is in the United States.

So why is it that Americans love this ball game so much? Why didn't it spread and gain popularity over seas? Questions Aside it is clear that football was designed to reflect the United States of America.

Like most other ball sports, football is believed to have originated in Europe, and that it's ancient roots specifically came from the English game of Rugby. As noted rugby diffused into the United States via European Immigrants, and once in the states, people's fascination about the game grew. People seemed to really enjoy the sport due to the mixture of technique, violence and strength. Early football in the U.S. was played similar to that of rugby in Europe, but was disorganized as was when it was developed in England.

Football game really started to gain popularity in the northeastern part of America and it was in 1862 that a man by the name of Gerrit Smith Miller established the Oneida Football club of Boston (Webb, M 1974). It was the first organized team the game of football had in the United States. Additional organized teams started developing and in 1869 that the first organized colligate match in America was played between Rutgers and Princeton. More years passed and organized matches continued to occur, but it was in 1872 that football truly started to become Americanized (Webb, M. 1974).

In 1872, at Yale, Walter Camp a player, coach and strong advocate for the game began toying with the early football rules. Keep in mind that at the time the rules of the game were still pretty vague, and they very much resembled the original game of rugby. Walter Camp's main goal was to solidify and generate a consistent code for the sport. Eventually Camp along with a committee of his choosing tweaked some of

the early rules of the game and put an American spin on the sport that originated in Europe. Here are some of the main rules Walter Camp wrote that were able to separate American Football from rugby.

- *one side retained undisputed possession of the ball, until that side gives up the ball as a result of its own violations*
 - *the line of scrimmage*
 - *11 on a team instead of 15*
 - *created the quarter-back and center positions*
 - *forward pass*
 - *standardized the scoring system, numerical scoring*
 - *created the safety, interference, penalties, and the neutral zone*
 - *tackling as low as the knee was permitted - 1888*
 - *a touchdown increased in value to six points and field goals went down to three points - 1912*
- (<http://inventors.about.com>).

Later, Camp was rightfully so, dubbed the Founder of American Football and is still credited today for starting the most popular ball sport in American Culture.

The Rules were a major factor in separating American football from rugby, but there was also another factor that widened the gap between the two ball sports. That factor was protective padding. The introduction of protective padding entered the game not too long after the game was created. The first recorded piece of padding was a nose guard designed by a collegiate football athlete from Princeton (Webb, M. 1974). When the first collegiate football games were played in the 1870s, players' attire usually consisted of normal street clothes and handkerchiefs that would be wrapped around their heads. Occurring to the physical nature of the game and lack of protective gear, injuries started to become an issue. The earliest football pads starting popping up in the late 19th century, as players used a variety of light materials that could be tucked under their clothes for better protection. Throughout the era more and more pads and protective gear appeared. These included hip pads,

shoulder pads, and kneepads. Players used the pads through the early 20th century and it wasn't until the so-called "Leatherhead era" that players started using helmets (Seifried, C. 2010). Helmets were made completely out of leather and offered protection for the players ears and head. The helmet however, didn't become a norm in the sport until the 1940s. Padded protection has evolved overtime in the sport and still continues to be a relevant topic of discussion in American football today. With all these changes in the sport over time, Americans can truly call the ball sport of Football their own.

These changes played a key part in the success of the sport and more professional and collegiate leagues were created, such as the famous National Football League (NFL) and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). American football had formed its own identity and the compelling ball sport started cemented itself in the culture.

Before World War II, baseball was still the overwhelming favorite in American culture, but once the war ended, football's rise to the top began. The success and popularity of football can be linked directly to television (Cain, L. P., & Haddock, D. D. 2005). People immediately realized the potential it had for generating revenue as well as reputations. People realized that the athleticism, teamwork, and violence of the game would pull people in. No other American ball sport took better advantage of the opportunity provided by new electronic media than did football. Football more or less has been a way to show American spirit. and much like the ball sport of baseball, football has had the ability to unite people of different race, creeds, and backgrounds

Americans have molded these sports into their own. The United States is a unique country, and unlike other countries or nations it is not defined by one main religion or ethnic group, rather it is defined by a civic identity. Ball sports in general have added to their cohesiveness.

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