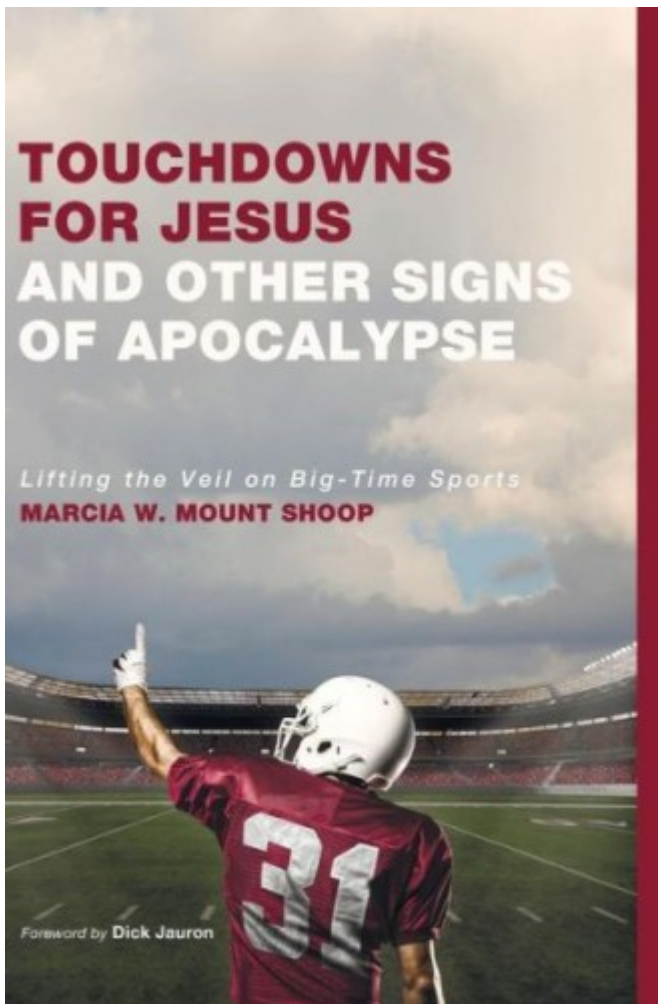


Touchdowns for Jesus and Other Signs of Apocalypse, by Marcia W. Mount Shoop
reviewed by [Joseph L. Price](#) in the [November 12, 2014](#) issue

In Review



Touchdowns for Jesus and Other Signs of Apocalypse

By Marcia W. Mount Shoop
Cascade

After Notre Dame upset Army in 1924, Grantland Rice penned one of the most enduring football tropes in American sports journalism. He used a biblical image—the four horsemen of the apocalypse—to emphasize the terminating power

of the Fighting Irish backfield. Wreaking metaphorical famine, pestilence, destruction, and death on their gridiron opponents, they then led their team to an undefeated season.

Marcia Mount Shoop realigns football with apocalyptic thought by using the theological concept of “the unveiling of truth” to analyze the systemic dysfunction of professional football and of the near-professional football programs at major universities. She pursues this theological critique because, as she observes, sports “capture our imagination and elicit our deepest emotional outpourings much more than any religion does.”

Acknowledging that references to apocalypticism suggest a cosmic cataclysm, complete destruction, and final judgment, Mount Shoop nonetheless identifies the core of apocalyptic not with the end of the world but with its power to disclose distortions, defeat evil, and introduce radical change. She also understands that sports can provide vitality, strengthen community, and inspire transformation. An apocalyptic analysis exposes the demonic tendency of big-time football to perpetuate systemic sexism, racism, and classism, and it helps to restore the potential of sports to provide redemption by revealing people’s true identity. In light of the current domestic violence and child abuse cases involving National Football League players Ray Rice, Adrian Peterson, and Greg Hardy, her critique is all the more pertinent.

Mount Shoop is uniquely positioned to bring this creative reflection to bear on a sport she loves. A Presbyterian minister with a doctorate in theology, she also knows sports from the inside as a former celebrated college track athlete and as the wife of John Shoop, a prominent Big Ten coach who formerly served as the offensive coordinator with the Chicago Bears.

Empathizing with fans who believe that the world makes more sense in a stadium than it does anywhere else, Mount Shoop explores why they care so deeply about football. One factor is fans’ creation of “fantasms”—the projected identities of players, coaches, and teams on the basis of their respective roles. Fans’ vitriolic cries against a coach, for instance, ignore the true character of the person on the field. The screams are directed to a phantom of the coach and simply express the fans’ hopes and dreams about the game. Their shouts in frustration reveal the depth of their identification with the team itself.

Mount Shoop also prophetically decries the institutional distortions and abuses of big-time football, drawing on sociological data and personal experience to support her argument. The demographic and economic statistics are the most revealing. Although 65 percent of the players in the NFL are black, the economic benefit of their play overwhelmingly goes to a few nonplayers, particularly the team owners, all of whom are white. In fact, the financial disequilibrium is so severe that the majority of NFL alumni face bankruptcy within two years of retirement. In the National Collegiate Athletic Association, the disparity between the economic advantages and disadvantages of the privileged and the poor is equally striking. Although the NCAA's revenue in a recent academic year approached \$1 billion, most of the players in Division I football and basketball, who generate the bulk of the funds, live below the poverty line.

To personalize these racial and economic issues, Mount Shoop focuses on the situations of accused student athletes at the University of North Carolina, where her husband had served as an assistant coach before he was fired—along with the entire coaching staff—during an NCAA investigation of 18 football players and one coach, all African American. They had been suspected of NCAA infractions related to academic regulations and rules about support of student athletes. In large part this book provides Mount Shoop with an opportunity to engage in a kind of liberation theology, constructing a narrative and conducting an analysis from the perspective of those who were under investigation.

At the heart of her complaint is the story of Devon Ramsay, a former NFL prospect and a student mired in deep poverty. Ramsay was accused of academic dishonesty for having followed the suggestion of a tutor to shift a couple of sentences in one of his essays. Without any evidence—the paper itself no longer existed at the time of the university's investigation—he was withheld from games because of the possibility of an infraction.

According to Mount Shoop, the university had repeatedly advised Ramsey not to secure legal counsel because doing so would imply guilt. During the investigation he had no recourse to a statement of his rights because no such statement exists in the NCAA's rulebook. He was eventually exonerated, but without the challenge of regular competition, he lost ground to other pro prospects, and his hopes for a football career were sacked.

During one interim between school terms, another player whose family was trapped in poverty had fainted because he hadn't eaten for days. He had been receiving his allotted per diem for food while the university's cafeteria was closed, but he had sent the money home to help his family pay the bills. If he had accepted a complimentary meal while receiving his food allowance, his eligibility would have been endangered.

Mount Shoop points out that many athletes cannot afford to purchase appropriate clothing for professional job interviews, yet they would violate NCAA regulations if they were given a business suit. By contrast, no stipulations exist against supplying a suit for a scholarship student in law or business.

Although these cases might seem to beg for a sociological analysis rather than a theological one, Mount Shoop focuses on the spiritual challenges of these situations by questioning how in such a distorted football culture Christians can fulfill the biblical imperative to feed the hungry and care for the poor without placing oppressed players in a more precarious situation.

Though she asserts that "there is more to cultivating just systems and thriving communities than good intentions and individual accountability," her suggestions for transforming the dystopia of big-time sports depend on individual action rather than systemic revision. Nonetheless, her astute critique in *Touchdowns for Jesus* reveals her deep faith and her palpable love of football and family.