

# My Left Tackle

Rachel Toor, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 27, 2007

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I am in the market for a left tackle.

I do not play football, nor do I watch. But recently I read Michael Lewis's new book, *The Blind Side*, which uses an SUV-sized young man as a vehicle to look at race, class, and football in the South. Along the way Lewis explains how left tackle became one of the most highly prized—and paid—positions in football.

Here, in my limited understanding, is what happened: Lawrence Taylor.

When that linebacker came on the scene, teams needed to protect their quarterbacks, lest LT and his ilk crush them like cigarette butts. Most quarterbacks are right-handed, so when they pull back, twisting and turning to make million-dollar passes, their left side becomes a broad-shouldered, wasp-waisted target. Keeping those expensive quarterbacks safe, Lewis argues, became an unsung, rarely noticed, but important and lucrative job.

Someone who allows you to do what you do best. Someone who protects you while you take risks. Someone who guards you from dangers you can't see.

Who wouldn't want a left tackle?

Those of us who write have more than one blind side. Our twists and turns of mind make us vulnerable to sacking. Our focus often narrows. Who protects us?

Editors, of course, and agents. The review process used by scholarly presses and journals can ferret out weaknesses in manuscripts before the permanence of publication. But what about when you're still practicing? Suited up, perhaps, but not ready for a big game?

Graduate students have coaches. The mentoring process, when it works, can be a series of drills and exercises to develop intellectual muscles. But what about after grad school, when you're out there on your own, in a job, in a new place, with people who you may or may not feel are on your side? Who will shield your academic flank?

The problem comes from the realities of daily academic life. There is never enough time to do the teaching, advising, and writing that is part of the job; finding energy to help a colleague often gets lost between the intention and the undertaking. Asking someone to read a paper, an article, or a book manuscript is, let's face it, an imposition. No one really wants to read unpublished work. And the effort that goes toward polishing someone else's work is often, even if asked for, underappreciated.

As I pointed out in an essay last year, most of us wouldn't show our work if we didn't think it was good. What we want, if we're being honest, is the correction of some typos and a pat on the head. Once someone notices problems, we have to fix them, which is hard work and not as much fun as scrubbing the toilet. But for most of us, once the initial sting of good and right criticism has passed, we put our heads down and get back to work. And we are thankful to the reader who has saved us from ourselves.

But what if we each had a bunch of readers? If we met regularly with people we respected, regardless of field? If sessions were "conducted in the sincere spirit of inquiry after truth, without fondness for dispute or desire of victory"? Every Friday night, starting when he was 21, Benjamin Franklin brought together 12 men from disparate backgrounds to discuss matters of the day. Every three months, one of the members of the club, known as the Junto, was required to offer up an essay, prefiguring, in some oblique way, the writing workshops of today.

In the mid-1990s a quartet of English professors at Duke University formed a writing group. Alice Kaplan's *French Lessons*, Cathy Davidson's *36 Views of Mount Fuji*, Jane Tompkins' *A Life in School*, and Marianna Torgovnick's *Crossing Ocean Parkway* were the result. Those women read one another's works in ways that made each memoir better and more accessible to larger readerships.

Here's another Duke story. Some 30 years ago, my friend Peter Klopfer trained for a marathon with three other middle-aged academics. During their weekly runs, they took turns talking about their fields. Henry, a physicist, explained how quarks were discovered. Peter, a zoologist, lectured about mother-infant attachment. Seth, a topologist, would draw mathematical figures in the dirt when the group stopped for water, and Orrin, a geologist, would drive the course the night before in order to coordinate his talk with appropriate geological illustrations.

The questions they asked one another, Peter says, were in many ways more helpful and interesting than those they would get from their departmental colleagues.

While some small part of me recognizes that not everyone's idea of bliss is covering 20 miles on a Sunday morning, the idea appeals because, like Franklin's Junto, the members were from different disciplines. They forced one another to speak beyond jargon, to explain, without dumbing down, the complexities and implications of their work.

There are, I know, dissertation-support groups and departments where junior faculty members meet to share work. There may even be places where folks like Peter's—with senior people from across disciplines—meet. If so, I'd like to hear about them.

Because such sharing is, I believe, the way to produce scholarship that is good and readable and that transcends the monograph. It's the way to find smart readers who will remind you that nothing goes without saying, that coded language is the refuge of the lazy and the weak, and that people outside your field may well find your material interesting, if you help them along the way.

Most university press editors are not schooled in the disciplines in which they publish. When professors whose work I was interested in publishing at Oxford University Press asked me where I had done my training in classical studies, I was happy to reply that I hadn't been trained in the classics, but in publishing. That, I argued, worked in their favor. Most people know how to talk to scholars in their own disciplines.

I am perplexed by those who do not seek trusted readers. One friend, a professor who thinks of himself as a writer rather than an academic, seems proud that he never asks anyone to read unpublished work. How much better would his books be, I wonder, if he did? If someone asked him to move along more briskly, or suggested cutting self-indulgent passages?

Bartering has become a lost art. If we keep in mind that asking someone to read a manuscript is a burden, it's good to come armed with a reward. (Cookies work for me.) The nature of a writing group is that of a collective. It functions if everyone gives according to her abilities, and gets according to her needs. I've been in groups where people show up only when their own work is being discussed. That is called mooching.

What if we thought of ourselves as teammates, each bringing different skills, but all invested in the game of making books and scholarship as good as they can be?

There are a lot of people on a football field. Each has a job—even if it's taking two steps and knocking the fluff out of someone. Though it can be bruising, having the fluff knocked out of your writing is not a bad thing. Especially if there's someone wearing your colors to help you to your feet.

If I ever found my own personal left tackle—someone to ease my way and protect me from being squished—I would probably marry him. There's a reason left tackles are so expensive; good ones are hard to find. Universities are replete not only with beefy football players, but with the kinds of people who can help protect our blind sides. We need only seek them out, be brave enough to ask for help, and then offer something in return.