

# On High School Homecomings

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The village youth elect their royalty, dance for the elders, and engage the nearby villages' champions in combat. Gridiron combat, that is – high school football, American style, and the biggest game of the year is Homecoming (unless the team makes the state tournament).

Homecoming is a football game followed by a chaperoned dance, preceded by pep rallies, parade, and week of festivities. It is most common (if not exclusive to) the U.S and Canada, formed with the countries' globally-atypical unity between schools and sport leagues. After attending my high school alma mater's 2013 Homecoming rally, I decided to produce a primer, comparing it to the two other most prominent events of the American high school year: Commencement and the spring formal dance of Prom. In all three, a close-knit community of students use humor to personalize their turn at enacting rituals familiar through mass culture, older siblings, and the school system. Homecoming embraces absurdity the most blatantly, being rooted in the colorful iconography of high school sports.

## Homecoming: Background

A formal history of Homecoming has not been written (if you know of one, please let me know!), making tracing the specific origins of traditions difficult and beyond the scope of a short blog post. Despite its ubiquity, Homecoming is infrequently discussed in academic literature, much like summer camp, the American childhood rite on which I wrote my MSc dissertation and a [Material World post](#). For contemporary examples of what it has grown into – however – Youtube remains a bottomless font of [video documentation](#)).

Broadly speaking, Homecoming grew up with 20<sup>th</sup> century American education and sport culture. The origins of a large, school-sponsored party around a football game date to late 1800s and early 1900s, with the increasing popularity of [inter-mural rivalry games](#) at both colleges and high schools. The University of Missouri makes a strong [if disputable](#) claim to being the first place at which the general format ("[a spirit rally, a parade and more than 9,000 fans packed into Rollins Field](#)") became a regular annual event following its introduction at a 1911 game against the University of Kansas. The neighboring states and their universities had been rivals dating back to the 1850s pre-Civil War Missouri Compromise that saw Missouri enter the Union as a slave state, and subsequent [Bleeding Kansas](#) conflict and land grabs designed to tilt Kansas toward either Slave or Free for its impending national incorporation. It was natural the rivalry would translate into sporting events, arguably its primary manifestation today. The Homecoming format itself grew as school districts, colleges and their sporting events expanded throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Reduced to its broad outline, the Homecoming of today sounds like an anthropological archetype, awash in iconographic displays, suffused with a strong current of absurdity. Students elect a Homecoming “king” and “queen” (criteria: popularity) whose primary duties will be to share a dance at the school-sponsored party after the evening game, and return the following year to pass their baton and scepter to the new court. The main event day is preceded by a “Spirit Week,” during which students are encouraged to come to otherwise-normal classes dressed for theme days, such as “Pick a Decade Day,” “Pajama Day,” and “School Spirit Day.” And, of course, the schools’ football teams are marked by totemic nicknames: cowboys, lynx, cadets, and broncos, to name a few from my school’s conference.



For universities, Homecoming is a time when alumni are invited to return - to see old friends, celebrate the campus experience, watch the game, participate in a variety of events, and remember to make a donation when the alumni office calls. In high school, local pride may be at stake; in college, sports play an important role in fundraising and public relations. This is part of a broad program of “cultivating lifelong institutional loyalty,” which Magolda (2003) described as “eclips[ing] all other ceremonial aims” at Commencement. Publically-funded high schools have few incentives – financial or otherwise – to encourage loyalty from graduates. Most attendees to the parade, coronation, and game are parents and classmates of the players; recent graduates; and/or other local residents who are likely to have complicated feelings about the place and their own role in it.



For high school students, Homecoming is an autumn counterpart to the springtime Prom, the centerpiece of which is a chaperoned formal dance, preceded by the presentation of the students to the community during the Grand March (the *promenade* from which it gets its name). “The prom symbolizes one of the few spaces authorized by adults in which kids practice being adults, though in class-scripted ways,” writes Best (p.151), describing the dance as a space in which students (usually in their last two years of secondary school) enact an idealized version of middle-class responsibility, respectability, maturity, and success, while still under adults’ expectations to adhere to a sanitized vision of childhood and refrain from other mature behaviors: “Proms were historically tied to a schooling project used to govern the uncontrollable (youth). By enlisting youth to participate in middle-class rituals like the prom, schools were able to advance a program that reigned in students’ emerging and increasingly public sexualities,” writes Best (p.10).

As Best describes, Prom’s institutionalized nature – both as a pop cultural touchstone and school-sponsored event – engenders both adherence and resistance, as the young adults involved subvert the sophistication of the event such as by informalizing their formal dress, sneaking off with their significant others for private time, boozing (illegal until age 21 in America), and otherwise enacting their own visions of unencumbered maturity. For a personal favorite depiction, listen to [The Hold Steady’s “Massive Nights.”](#) which gleefully-yet-world-wearily indulges the adult-ungoverned aspects of a high school dance.

For students, the myth and visuals of Prom are romantic: everyone looking their best and dancing with their dates. As Best describes with Prom – participation, adherence, and resistance is likely to be coded by students’ comfort with the institutional goals of the events. In my experience, many adults see uninvolved students’ lack of participation as a symptom more than cause of social marginality. Prom involves romance and play at being middle-class high society for a night.

Homecoming aligns itself with extra-curricular participation. It’s a common stereotype that the Homecoming king is on the football team, the queen a cheerleader. At my high school, participating in extra-curriculars is not a requirement for attending the student dance, though involvement in the coronation pep rally emphasizes autumn activities: football (of course), volleyball, dance team, cross-country running, and pep band – the latter two of which I participated in as a student.

For examples, see [this Youtube video from another](#) school: court candidates identify themselves based on their extra-curricular involvement, and argue for their worthiness by demonstrating a sense of humor. [This video dispenses with the extra-curriculars](#), focusing on their joke-telling ability.

Carnavalesque elements suffuse Homecoming; the dress-up days and royalty election directly recall European *carnival* traditions dating back to the Middle Ages. Yet while *carnival* suggests a temporarily topsy-turvy world, despite the added humor, little about the functionality of school actually changes during Homecoming week: students attend class in costume but otherwise continue about their work; the football game itself proceeds much like any other football game, except with a bit larger crowd and a more elaborate halftime; and the school dance could be one of a handful that happens throughout the year.



Carnival, Cologne 2013

Students' actual investment in the festivities (and adults' expectations thereabout), however humorously they take them to be, may vary. "We [teachers] pay Homecoming lip service, but I doubt many teachers care much, two-thirds of students don't care much either, and identical people get elected every single year," suggested a friend of mine who teaches in a small Kansas town. Her assessment seems consistent with my own high school memories: despite all the supposed hoopla around the event, and even though I would consider my school a supportive place, as a slow cross-country runner with little interest in sports who was bad at finding dates, my (and my friends') own investment felt somewhat tempered.

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Bypassed in the formal image are the ample lighter elements that come in the enactment process: the skits, parades, the temporal stakes in *electing royalty*, the inside jokes displayed for the slightly-larger audience of parents and community – and the ways in which these bridge the tension that comes with peers taking their turns to enact the *fun-but-storied* ritual. If we take the typical outline—the election, the game, the dance – at face value, the humor seems to arise almost outside the ritual, to challenge its piety.

## Material World

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My north-central Iowa hometown has a population of around 3,000, and its high school's four grade levels total between 250-300 students any given year. Most who attend (with the notable exceptions of some Latino migrants and foreign exchange students) have grown up together since elementary school, and play sports with [a handful of similarly-sized schools](#) within an hour's radial drive. I write as a one-time participant, current observer, with the assumption that the basics I describe are common to many American high schools.



The students arrive via parade. The King and the Queen: five candidates of each, chosen from the Seniors (4th and final year of high school) by the student body, arrive via classic car. Other high school athletes, cheerleaders, and musicians, arrive via hayracks, semi-trucks, and fire engines – all staples of regional parades, large, visually-impressive vehicles than can easily carry an entire team or civic club.



They travel past houses with trees strewn with toilet paper. While [norms may differ and be debated](#), locally, “t.p.’ing” is (more often than not) considered a visually expressive act of

harmless vandalism, often performed on public property and the homes of well-liked students or teachers. Not-so-well liked folks get egged, and the eggers get more aggressive visits from law enforcement.



The parade leads to the pep rally, several choreographed dances, and the coronation: all held on the asphalt track that encircles the field. The dance team dances; the dance team girls dance with the football boys; the teachers dance; and the seniors' parents dance. Some parents have apparently chosen to participate for the amusement of their kids, some to their mortification. Again, YouTube offers some examples ([Gangnam Style](#), [Backstreet's Back](#) and [Call Me Maybe?](#)). At my old school, the teachers dance to Randy Newman's "[Short People Got No Reason to Live](#)" - a reference to the opposing team's rather atypically non-aggressive mascot, The Midget. One by one, the teachers attack a doll-midget in effigy – tackling it, pile-driving it, throwing it about. Then the cheerleaders get the crowd worked up with some routines, encouraging the crowd to stomp and yell to well-known beats. During my years there, a local performer acted as the school's "oldest cheerleader" at the event well into her 90s.



The backdrop to this is the uniformed football team, varsity and junior varsity, who remain just outside the track, inside the field. Some seem comfortable standing before the crowd, others bored. The only participants who remain determinedly detached are the coaches, who look on with benign if stony-faced authority. The overall tone is amusing, lighthearted, a well-liked teacher announcing events and names via the loudspeaker, joking with the people who've offered themselves up for display.



The pep rally culminates in a parody of both democracy and monarchy: the election of royalty. The candidates stand on the field in pairs, are described with half-joking biographies (almost all seniors are quite excited to be first in line for lunch their final year). The former queen crowns the current king with a fairy wand-like scepter; the outgoing king gives the queen a tiara - one of the few practical duties attached to the honor. These tokens are of symbolic value, but plastic and of little monetary value, likely less so than the bouquets presented with them. Usually, the outgoing royalty pace back and forth a few times for suspense, or offer the crown to a member of the crowd, as the emcee cracks a few more jokes.



After these conscripted and volunteered performed displays, and after the game, the kids retire to

'their' dance under the watchful eye of chaperones.

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Homecoming has a sense of importance granted by tradition: the iconic outline of election and competition, from [still photos in Yearbooks](#) and [the pop-culture of yesteryear](#) that remain ever-present in the American school experience. The cultural prominence tends to emphasize the more formal elements (the game and coronation), lending the humor of the pep rally and Spirit Week an air of subverting Homecoming's place in culture.

Best never notes the ways in which the schools themselves rein in Prom's pomp, though from experience I can say that my hometown's Grand March emcee often has a similar (if more subdued) joking tone in announcing the couples. Magolda (2003) says of Commencement, the greatest disconnect between practice and articulated institutional goals is an undercurrent of perfunctory weariness: "Mechanically and technically, the performers excelled; yet only a few performers conveyed the feeling that they believed in the performance. Yet he also writes of the hallowed event: "Although intellectualism is an espoused institutional core value, the commencement performance vacillated between a comedy club routine and a collegiate pep rally." These tensions, I would argue, are not from ritual enacted imperfectly, but rather institution, students, and audience articulating a semi-conscious acknowledgement of the differences among depictions, expectations, and practice, of communal familiarity concretizing an oft-recited cultural script.

### Sources:

Best, A., 2002. Prom night: youth, schools, and popular culture. Routledge: New York. Accessed through Taylor and Francis e-library edition.

Magolda, P.M, 2003. Saying good-bye: an anthropological examination of a commencement ritual. *Journal of College Student Development*. 44 (6), pp. 779-96. HTML version accessed.