Throughout its existence, the National Football League has had to fend off several attempts at establishing competing leagues and alternative football offerings (MacCambridge, 2008). Of those challenges, the United States Football League (USFL), which kicked off in March of 1983 as a spring alternative to the NFL’s fall schedule, came closest to unsettling the existing football world order. Although it folded after a tumultuous three years, and its demise “would end for the foreseeable future the regular challenges by upstart leagues” (MacCambridge, 2008, p. 361), the USFL serves as a case study of media’s role as agents protecting institutional arrangements.

Using institutional work, legitimacy, and rhetoric scholarship, this research examines the rhetoric employed in Sports Illustrated, Sport, and The Sporting News in response to the USFL’s attempt to challenge the NFL’s dominance over professional football in North America. Media accounts “have been considered a particularly useful source for analyzing the roles of actors in institutional frameworks” (Riaz, Buchanan, & Bapuji, 2011, p. 190) and we extend previous considerations of the media’s role in institutional debates (Krippendorf, 2004; Riaz et al., 2011). Furthermore, we highlight the relative importance of legitimacy dimensions in the sport context.

To analyze our data, we followed “a modified version of content analysis” (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2005, p. 42), employing both deductive and inductive elements. First, we scoured our target media for articles published on the USFL between 1982 and 1986. Second, we read and open coded all article excerpts (Corbin and Strauss, 2014), noting actors’ positions regarding the USFL. These arguments constituted first-order themes. Using these first-order themes, we analyzed data again, looking for underlying common threads or recurring patterns in the arguments presented against the USFL. These emergent categories, linking related statements and actor positions, constituted second-order themes evidencing thematic distinctions (Krippendorff, 2004). Central to our data analysis was the organization and coding of second-order themes according to their dominant rhetorical strategies.

We identified six rhetorical strategies: questioning USFL leadership’s credibility, emphasizing past failures and the USFL’s lack of tradition, ridiculing prominent characteristics, dismissing the USFL as generally inferior, accentuating the USFL’s lack of talent, and sowing doubt. Strategies included features of classic rhetorical strategies like logos and pathos, but also involved cosmological constructions. Through our examination of the narratives aimed at maintaining the NFL’s role as the sole legitimate provider of football in the US, we provide a nuanced example of how a powerful institution is protected against challenges through media-framed rhetoric aimed at different legitimacy dimensions. In this scenario, the presentation of information was decidedly skewed against challenges by institutional incumbents, creating a media market saturated with information preserving the position of the NFL. This research is also timely, as it sheds light on the ways in which long-standing institutions and leagues, via the systems within which they reside, maintain their authority and/or legitimacy in the face of seemingly powerful countercultural movements.