Transition: Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.

Promo: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

Music: "Huddle Formation" from the album *Thunder, Lightning, Strike* by The Go! Team—a fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. Do you like football? I mean, not everyone does. And this being NPR, there's a fair chance that you might not. But me, personally? I grew up with an autographed picture of Jerry Rice and Joe Montana on my wall. Now, I'm not the number one football fan in the world. If I had to pick between a San Francisco Giants baseball game and a San Francisco 49ers football game, I'm probably going to go with the baseball game.

Chuck Klosterman, though—Chuck Klosterman, the writer—thinks a lot about football. And he watches a lot of football too. Sundays? Booked solid. Thursdays, want to meet Klosterman for dinner? Well, you know, depends on what game is on. Saturdays too—college football. But Chuck Klosterman isn't really a sportswriter. He kind of writes about everything: the rivalry between the Lakers and the Celtics, time travel as a plot device in fiction, the Eagles' song, "Take It Easy", and now football.

That's actually the title of his new book: *Football*. In it, he examines the cultural impact of the sport as it relates to American life. Is it heady? Yes, slightly. But it is also very fun and funny and fascinating, even if you're not a football fan. Let's get into it.

Transition: Upbeat, funky synth.

Jesse Thorn: Chuck, welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm happy to see you again.

Chuck Klosterman: It's good to see you as well, Jesse.

Jesse Thorn: Maybe this is a stupid question, because you once played football in high school. But when you are watching a football game on television, what percentage of what is happening would you say you understand?

Chuck Klosterman: That's a very tricky question. It's sort of like… when you put food in the microwave, do you understand what's happening? I mean, in a large sense, you obviously do. It's very clear.

Jesse Thorn: Molecules are shaking, right? I don't know. *(Chuckles.)*

Chuck Klosterman: Yeah, well, it's like it's causing the molecules to rub up against each other, and the heat comes from inside. There's all these— And there's another level of how did that happen? How did they—? So, I would say that when I'm watching on television, I have sort of a rudimentary understanding of 98% of what's going on. But in terms of how the game would look to an offensive coordinator or a player himself or whatever, I probably recognize 20% of what's happening.

You know, Bill Belichick once had a quote where he said—you know, he had to go back and watch the tape of the game he had just coached. And they asked him like, "Well, what percentage of the game can you gather and absorb just from watching it live?" And I think he said less than 2%. So, even a guy like that feels like he has to study the tape to understand what's happening, even though he's literally creating what's happening.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, it occurred to me that—as a basically lifelong football fan—if I'm watching the 49ers game, I know what a screen pass is. I know what a slant is! But as soon as that analyst starts talking about the concepts involved, I'm like, "I guess I don't know anything?" *(Chuckles.)*

Chuck Klosterman: Well, that is a strange aspect of football that sort of differentiates it against most other sports, which is the level of complexity—that you have 22 people doing different things all at the same time, you know? And rehearsed things. Like, the things that they're doing are not extemporaneous.

Jesse Thorn: Well, let me give you an example, right? I got *John Madden Football* on a PlayStation… 2, I'm going to say, when I was in college. My housemate, Nathaniel, he was great at video games. He learned the rules of football immediately. One team has the ball; they're trying to score a touchdown; that's six points. That kind of thing. And as soon as he knew about 12 things—like, what the difference between a pass-oriented defense and a run-oriented defense was, he started destroying me. *(Chuckling.)* Because he was better at video games than me.

What makes football an exciting sport for somebody who has the level of understanding that my housemate Nathaniel had after he learned basically, you know, you shouldn't run on third and long? And also, for somebody who played college football, has played thousands of hours of *John Madden Football*, like has a really deep understanding of the game. What makes it exciting for both of those people?

Chuck Klosterman: I think a big part of this is the way it is broadcast on television. When you're watching a football game, you're mostly watching it from one angle. You're watching it essentially from midfield with the camera pointed down toward the players, the players moving horizontal across the screen. You usually can't even see all 22 guys. Usually, the free safety is out. Maybe the both safeties are out of the picture. When the play starts, there's like five seconds of hyperkinetic, very violent action. There's 22 things happening at once. You're hearing these collisions you can't actually see sometimes.

Your sort of natural inclination is to follow the ball. But even that is imperfect, because if the quarterback throws the ball deep, there's going to be this sort of moment of tension where it's going to be unknown if the guy he's throwing to is open or covered or if he's throwing the ball away. It's unknown. No one knows it. It wouldn't matter how much football knowledge you have. There is a second where it's impossible to know what's going to happen next.

Jesse Thorn: Because he's essentially throwing the ball offscreen.

(Chuck confirms.)

He's throwing it out of frame.

Chuck Klosterman: In a sort of surprising way—like, this is certainly nothing that could have been planned by the people who broadcast television or the people who invented football—that sort of unknowing, that moment of unknowing democratizes the experience for the consumer. It is kind of a paradoxical idea. But in some ways, football is so complicated that it makes it more accessible to everyone. Because it is virtually impossible to really understand what is happening, even if your entire job is that. Even if you're an analyst in the booth.

Jesse Thorn: I care, personally, dramatically more about baseball than I do about football. However, if I was at an airport and there was a miscellaneous football game on, I would probably be more interested in watching it than if there was a miscellaneous baseball game on. What do you think makes football interesting as a casual viewing experience? As like a broad cultural viewing experience, rather than as an expression of fandom, specifically?

Chuck Klosterman: You know, there was a time 100 years ago when the biggest sports were—you know—baseball, boxing, and horse racing. And then for the last

half of the 20th century, we would have said, "Well, the biggest sports are football, basketball, and baseball." And we still sort of talk that way now. But in truth, every sport outside of football is almost a niche interest now. I would argue probably the NBA is probably the second biggest sports league in America, and it is just dwarfed by the NFL. I mean, the second biggest sport in America after pro football is college football.

So, it might be—in a sense—just your understanding that football imbues society with ideas that the other sports just don't do in this country. I mean, it's— You know, I mentioned this in the book, and it's a statistic kind of everyone knows now I guess almost. But like in a year—like, 2023, of the 100 most watched television broadcasts that year, 93 were NFL games. And then three more were college football games. Now, a lot of that has to do with the fact that they're live events, but it's still strange. It still doesn't make sense that a sport became so dominant over everything else. Like, not just the other sports, but every other thing that can be televised?!

Jesse Thorn: Like, soccer isn't like that in Brazil.

Chuck Klosterman: It doesn't seem to be that. I mean, it's certainly it's a huge sport there. It's the sport of the country for sure. But baseball is huge in Japan. But it would be unthinkable that we would say, like, "Oh, do you know 93 of the most popular 100 broadcasts in Japan were baseball?" That would never happen. And it wouldn't have happened in the United States 25 years ago! I mean, football was already the most popular sport in the country, but not the way it is now in this position of dominance.

Jesse Thorn: So, I would describe the appeal of baseball as a marking of the passage of time, a way to be outside in pleasant weather. You know, that's the baseball stuff. I'm not a soccer fan; but like soccer, I think, is about a kind of like ubiquity in that anyone can access it, and it is reflective of national and regional identities like nothing

else. It is like a club that you belong to. How would you characterize what the special appeal qualities of football are?

Chuck Klosterman: I kind of see that there's three kinds of sports—at least in the United States. There are sort of cerebral sports like baseball; sports where there is a small amount of action with a large amount of consideration over what the action you just saw meant and what the action coming could mean. Then there's sports like soccer and basketball, combat sports, auto racing to some degree, where it's kind of continual action that can become, at its highest level, sort of mesmerizing. And then the third thing is football. That's like the third sort of outlier where it is a cerebral sport, in that there are these long periods where nothing is happening and we're just talking about what did occur and what might occur and the strategy and all that. But then the actual moments of intensity are so physical and so almost overwhelming that it almost creates the sensation or the illusion of nonstop dynamic play. I think that's what football offers that other sports do not. And I mean, that's why its marriage with television is so meaningful.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, football is a sport that has the visceral highs of any other American team sport. Like, that excitement is so visceral that you can't look away from it. Like, even a failed football play involves a lot of exciting action and violence. *(Chuckles.)*

Chuck Klosterman: Well, you know, you make it— I think like another kind of interesting point about this is where it's like football's weird advantage is that even bad football games are surprisingly watchable. Sometimes you'll see a bad football game because, due to injury or circumstance, neither team has a viable quarterback; or the weather is so extreme that no one can move the ball or kick. In these situations, the game becomes more interesting.

Thursday night football is often criticized as this kind of terrible version of NFL football, because the teams only have a few days to prepare. They're just coming off having played, so the possibility of injury is higher. They're still kind of, you know, in pain from the previous game. And yet, those games—to someone like me—are often very fascinating. Because it's like a team is trying to succeed within these obstructions that are just a reflection of nature—like how long it takes the body to heal, how long you need to figure something out, how much planning can you do in a short period of time?

It's a little bit like you're watching a play, and the people in the play just have not had a time to rehearse enough. So, there's going to be situations in the play where they're just going to have to ad lib. And that's so antithetical to what we think of what theatre is supposed to be. But sometimes it's like, "Well, that's interesting how they handled that." Football works in the same way.

Jesse Thorn: We're going to take a break. When we come back, more Chuck Klosterman, do not go anywhere. Do not touch that radio dial. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Chuck Klosterman. He is an award-winning pop culture writer who covers music, film, politics, and sports. He's got a new book out. In *Football*, Klosterman reflects on the ways America's most popular sport has become intertwined with our identity as Americans. And he also makes the argument that the best football player of all time is a guy you might not ever have heard of. And guess what? If you want to watch this interview, you can do it all! You can do it on NPR.org or on our YouTube page. You can also see clips on Instagram and TikTok. If you're wondering whether Chuck

Klosterman wore a football-related t-shirt to the interview, there is only one way to find out! Smash those like and subscribe buttons on the *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* YouTube page. Okay, let's get back into our conversation.

Let's talk for a second about video games. I'm 44 years old. So that means that I was a child who went to my friend Jody's house to play Nintendo when *Tecmo Football* was released. It means that when *John Madden Football* was released in the early 1990s, I had my own first console, a Sega Genesis. And it means by the time I was in college, video game football was designed as a simulation in some ways.

Chuck Klosterman: John Madden plays a huge role in this. Like, when they were making the original *Madden* at EA Sports, the idea was like, "Well, maybe we'll just make a good game. And maybe if John Madden"—this guy who's now an analyst for CBS—"maybe he'll just give us like his name. We can slap it on it, and then it'll give it some credibility.

And John Madden was like, "Well, no, I've got to be involved with this." And the only thing he cared about was verisimilitude. I mean, initially EA Sports wanted *Madden* to be a seven-on-seven game, because it would save RAM. It would be like easier on the computer. And John Madden was like, "No, it's got to be 11 on 11. And here's my old Raiders playbook. Now, use this to sort of make realistic plays and realistic blocking schemes."

People playing it loved that part of it. They loved the language of it. They love that even if they couldn't necessarily run some of these plays, they could see how it is described as text. And if they heard an announcer on TV say that, it's like, "Oh, I understand what a trap is now! I understand that you're going to leave a guy unblocked, and you're going to bring a lineman across and trap him." So, now you have kids who start playing that game young. Let's say they become very good

quarterbacks. They're a high school kid now, and they have a chance to play college. They probably have a more sophisticated idea of the language of football—almost the semantics of it, the construction of it—than somebody in the past would have had maybe coming out of college, having played.

One of the benefits of a simulation, any simulation, is not so much that it shows you what the world is like, but it does sort of illustrate what the world potentially could become. And a lot of the things that were only done in a video game setting are now common in actual football. And I don't know if you see that in many other things.

Jesse Thorn: You're talking specifically about always choosing the Philadelphia Eagles, so that you can always use Randall Cunningham?

Chuck Klosterman: *(Chuckles.)* Well, no, but a lot of people felt that way about Michael Vick. Michael Vick was kind of the guy who broke the *Madden* game in the same way that Bo Jackson sort of broke the *Tecmo Bowl* game. Because they'd made Bo Jackson so fast, and he was so unlike every other player that it almost became this unfair thing. But that was also like the first kind of a hinge moment in this, where—prior to Tecmo Bowl—I think the thinking was that: "Who's going to play a football video game? Well, probably a kid who can't actually play football. Like you know, he might not even like football at all. He wants to play a game. So, we'll use football sort of as a way to create games that the kid who doesn't like sports might also be attracted to."

That shifted when they used real guys! Because then it was like, "Oh, so this has a relationship to reality. This has a different kind of meaning now." And since then, any moment that seems too disconnected from actual football is seen as a huge flaw. Whereas that would not have been the case in the past. People would not have been upset about a player being inaccurately ranked the way they would now.

Jesse Thorn: Who is the greatest football player of all time?

Chuck Klosterman: Well, in this book, I make the argument that it's Jim Thorpe, but I'm really making an argument about how greatness should be gauged. My argument is that if you're actually going by who would be the most productive on the field next season, the greatest player of all time is always going to be whoever is the greatest player right now. Because of the way society changes, the way technology changes, the way training changes, the fact that you're able to sort of view everything that has happened in the past, the experiences of other people are imbued in you; that technically the greatest football player of all time will be whoever is the best player in the NFL next season. And the year after that, it will be someone else.

But the idea of greatness, if we're going to talk about it as a concept, can't be looked at in that way. What I am interested in is the first elite rendering of something whose qualities are still contained in all of the future versions up to now. And that's why I sort of make this argument for Jim Thorpe, that the idea of what makes a football player great sort of begins with him in the 1920s in that period when he's playing for the Carlisle Indian School. It's sort of like, you know, it was an 11-on-11 sport, a touchdown was six points, the first down was ten yards. There was passing. There was strategy. That's the beginning of it. And he was sort of the first model of what a great football player is. And the first model is the model we use.

Jesse Thorn: Whose name do you type into YouTube? I type Barry Sanders into YouTube. I mean, sometimes I'll type in Bo Jackson.

Chuck Klosterman: This is actually kind of an interesting question! Because now I'm trying to think. I typically type "first NFL films." 'Cause I like watching the old NFL films, particularly things I haven't seen before. But what you're really asking is like, "Whose highlights do you enjoy watching the most?" And for me, the answer actually

is Walter Payton. And part of it has to do with NFL films, because there is so much incredible slow-motion footage of Walter Payton running the football, holding it in one hand—which they used to always call carrying it like a loaf of bread, even though no one really carries bread this way. But he's like—you know, and you see the breath coming out, because it's cold in Chicago. And you know, in slow motion watching someone's breath sort of unspool, for me—I mean, that's just incredible to me. So, that probably actually is the guy who I would watch the most on YouTube, now that you mention it. I didn't really think of that until just now, but that would be my answer.

Jesse Thorn: Do you think that video game guys—like video game Michael Vick and video game Randall Cunningham—had an effect on real-life football? And I'm thinking specifically of the idea that to be a good quarterback, you had to stand in the pocket, not run, and throw 20 trillion times so that you could be smart enough to throw to the right guy. And anytime you ran was evidence that you were less experienced, more impulsive, less smart, whatever.

Chuck Klosterman: Did it affect the way the players saw themselves? Possibly. I do think that what you're talking about more relates to the idea of the person who was playing *Madden* or playing *EA College Football* or playing any of these games as a young man, a young person, and now they're an adult who's an offensive coordinator in college. And some of the things that they learn from those games—about time management, about sort of how to set up one play by using a different play prior to that—I think those are the things that video game football probably altered, more so than the idea that somebody would be like, "Well, you know, Michael Vick has 94 speed, so he can run away from anybody. So, if I can become slightly faster than all my opposition, I can play like Michael Vick." I don't know if that happened.

But I do think that it is pretty undeniable that things you see in football now on the field in the past would have only been seen in a video game context. It's almost maybe like a laboratory, you could say, where for the first time you could kind of say like, "Well, okay. If we only have 18 seconds left in the first half and we have the ball at our own 25, is there any value in attempting to get into field goal range?" Well, in real life football, that's a hard question. The inherently kind of conservative-coded logic of football tells you no. You just want to eat up the clock, go in the locker room. But when you're a kid, you just want to see what happens. And when those kids grow up, they may remember that.

Jesse Thorn: Even though you play the opposite way when you're playing video games, like some kind of weird, conservative brain psychopath.

Chuck Klosterman: Yeah, yes.

Jesse Thorn: You're all about punting in videogame football! *(Chuckles.)*

Chuck Klosterman: Yeah! And like, you know, I just always want to run the wishbone, and I just want to run the option. I just want to eat clock. And you know, to me, there's nothing more satisfying and more maddening to the guy I play against to receive the opening kickoff and score on the first possession in the second quarter. I can eat up the entire first quarter. And you have to run the ball almost every down. And you often have to—you know, get a fourth and inches and convert, and get a fourth and inches and convert. But that's so satisfying to me.

Jesse Thorn: We're on public radio right now. Chuck, I know that you belong on public radio and I belong on public radio, but football doesn't always belong on public radio. Sometimes we have to justify it. So, if somebody out there is the kind of person who has already started composing in their head an email to their local station about why we were talking about football rather than talking about something important,

why are we talking about football rather than talking about something important? Should they care about football?

Chuck Klosterman: I wish I cared less! Like, now that football is over, it feels like I have unlimited free time on the weekends.

(Jesse laughs.)

And I don't feel like I have to plan my life around this. I mean, it is sort of embarrassing to me when like someone will say to me that they want to do something on a Thursday night! And I'll be like, "*(Sighs.)* Okay, I do think that there's a Sunbelt game that night. And I know one of those teams has a chance to make the playoffs if they run the table…" But I can't say that! I can't not go to dinner with a person because I want to see a game from the Sunbelt conference between a team who's 6-and-0, and a team who's 4-and-2 or whatever. It's this thing that—like, I'm almost compelled to do it. Like, I'm compelled to care about it.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, I have to say that when COVID lockdowns were happening and everything was just such a nightmare, maybe the thing that upset me the most was the possibility that I wouldn't get to listen to baseball games. *(Laughs.)* I just needed it so bad! I just needed my baseball friend.

Chuck Klosterman: But okay, I'll tell you what though. COVID was, to me in some ways, a collection of ominous signs for sports though. The realization that we still have to play these games, we have to put fakes fans up in the stands, we have to have the NBA players all live together in the bubble and play this basketball tournament! We still have to play these NFL football games. The Big Ten has every school closed, but we still have to play the football games if you can get enough guys who are not positive for COVID. It just really illustrated how economically fragile these things are. Like, we see the NFL as this absolutely irrefutable monolith of economic power, the

amount that it commands or demands—however you look at it—from like the platforms and the networks who show these games, how much it matters economically to these communities. But the thing is, it can't just stay stable. It can only expand. It's a simulation of capitalism in general. Like, it has to constantly get bigger. And if there's anything that puts something at risk, it is the idea that the only way to stay alive is to become more powerful. That has not worked for anything in the history of mankind.

Jesse Thorn: We'll wrap up my conversation with writer Chuck Klosterman in just a minute. On the other side of the break, football is dangerous. It's violent. No one really disputes that. But despite it, millions and millions of us watch. Why does Chuck? And also, why do I? We'll get into it after the break. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Promo:

> **Mark Gagliardi:** Hey, what's up, everybody? My name is Mark Gagliardi, and I host *We Got This with Mark and Hal* on the Maximum Fun Network. Would you like to introduce yourself as well?
>
> **Jessie:** My name is Jessie and I am from Minneapolis, Minnesota.
>
> **Mark:** Hi, Jessie from Minneapolis, Minnesota. Jessie, you are our Maximum Fun Member of the Month.
>
> **Jessie:** I'm so delighted to hear that I'm the member of the month. Thank you.
>
> **Mark:** Is there a first episode that you remember?
>
> **Jessie:** The pretzel shape episode. That's pretty classic.

Mark: Yeah! Both of us just killed off each other's answers and went with pretzel rod, which is clearly not the best.

Jessie: No. *(Chuckling.)* That is a terrible pretzel!

Mark: As our Member of the Month, you have a parking spot at Maximum Fun Headquarters, as well as a $25 gift card to the Maximum Fun Store. We say at the end of the episode, "We wouldn't do it without you, and we couldn't do it without you." So, thank you for that.

Jessie: You're welcome.

Speaker: Become a MaxFun member now at MaximumFun.org/join.

Transition: Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: I'm Jesse Thorn. You're listening to *Bullseye*. I'm talking with writer Chuck Klosterman.

I used to read Ta-Nehisi Coates' blog when he had a blog. And I always liked to read the ones about football. *(Laughs.)* And at some point, Ta-Nehisi Coates—the world's most principled man—signed up for no more football. Like, he signed—he put his name on the petition never watching or talking about football again. I remember thinking, "Hm. I feel bad for these guys destroying themselves for my entertainment. And I guess I don't watch boxing ever since I saw Mike Tyson bite Evander Holyfield's ear and it really freaked me out when I was 16 or whatever. But I kind of think I'm going to keep watching football." *(Laughs bashfully.)*

To what extent did you buy the "football is in jeopardy of collapse," and to what extent do you think football is in jeopardy of collapse now, 15 years later?

Chuck Klosterman: The idea of football collapsing now is impossible to me. Right now, in 2026. *(Stammering.)* I almost can't imagine what event would have to occur for that to happen. I do think in the future, probably two generations from now—the year I kind of use in the book is probably 2070—I do see, for a combination of like economic and social reasons, that football could be in this kind of precarious position that causes a major work stoppage. Because it is so unusual now for someone who watches football to have a real personal relationship to the game. Like, just not having played, but even knowing anyone who played, having a father who played. I think that as time moves on, football will sort of just become like kind of an entertaining distraction. An extremely popular one, but that's what it will be. And entertaining distractions can be replaced.

So, I do think that, in the future, I think that it will recede from the center of culture. If we look at football as the last real element of the monoculture—like, if we use Taylor Swift, maybe to those two things—if those are the only two things left of the monoculture, I don't think there will be anything left in 2070 like that, unless it's some kind of AI thing that we can't live without or whatever. I mean, the concussion thing is strange, because— You know, it was like around 2010/2012. That's when people were talking about this constantly. And it seemed kind of like an unavoidable problem, in the sense that to remove that from football would stop it from being the sport that it is.

Which is why any time—even like, you know, they changed the kickoff rules for the NFL this year. It's done differently now. The players line up closer to their guy receiving the kick and it's all—you know, it's done for safety. And it doesn't really impact the game that much. In fact, the way it altered things in some ways makes the game slightly more interesting. But because everyone knows it was done for safety, football traditionalists are like, "I don't really like this." Because they know that every

move in that direction moves football away from sort of its core aspect with its core ethos, which does involve collisions and violence and these things. But, you know, when all the—there was just a period when it seemed like you'd watch an NFL game, and there would be three situations where a guy would get hit and just drop to the ground and not move, and he would know that you're not supposed to move if you think you might have a concussion. That has mitigated. You don't see as much of that now.

And I think it's because: one, surprisingly, guys did change the way they hit. I didn't think that would be possible. I was like, "There's no way a strong safety can change the way he hits guys in the open field." But they did. They did make those changes. And also, the NFL did a real brilliant thing, which is every time there's a guy who had research about CTE, they were like, "We're going to hire you." They just hired every guy who could become a critic. So, that was a real smart move. And I mean, arguably diabolical. But…

Jesse Thorn: This is going to NPR me out here, but I read this book by this *New Yorker* guy where he spent a year with the New York Jets, called *Collision Low Crossers*.

Chuck Klosterman: I read that book. That's a great book. That's one of the best football books ever written.

Jesse Thorn: But the things that every football player does to do this one window of violence every week—because it's so intense, so brutal, so complicated and all-consuming, so physical—are things that I can't even wrap my head around. Like, the only things that I can think of where people treat themselves and their lives in that way are like people who are trying to kill people. Yeah, just that. *(Laughs.)* Yeah, yep, no. Can't come up with another one.

Chuck Klosterman: Well, no, no. The thing is—what you're describing, though—Like, we're not watching football as a blood sport. Nobody's watching it hoping a guy gets hurt or see a guy get killed. Or the people who do that are so on the margins. However, if you remove that, all of the things that we do—like, the strategy, the athleticism, the skill—means less. You know, it's like if football was flag football, some of the things would be the same. But a lot of things would be different, and the overall experience would be completely reinvented. I will sometimes use this comparison of like a guy who wants to climb K2. A guy's climbing K2, he doesn't want to die doing that. But if there was no chance that he could die climbing K2, it would not be the thing that he spent the last 30 years dreaming of doing. The fact that it is a dangerous thing and that there is a real risk involved takes the technical experience and sort of completely amplifies it.

So, like you're saying, like do I feel bad watching guys potentially hurt themselves? And you know, of course, I think of these things. The biggest thing, of course, is the idea of micro-concussions—the idea that every time two football players collide helmet-to-helmet, they're getting a small concussion with no symptoms that's just building up overtime. But *(sighs)* I think that you have to sort of accept that a life lived with the sole goal of trying to extend it for as long as possible is a wasted life. There has to be part of life where—that there is something that can go wrong, that there is some risk in this, that it is dangerous. You know?

We try to remove danger from the lives of our kids constantly, and I'm always torn about this. Because, of course, I don't want my kids to ever get hurt. And yet I know that if I had removed every experience from my life that was technically dangerous or technically not healthy or—you know, my life value would be reduced by so much. You watch a football game, and these guys are living a rarefied life—a life that they couldn't probably live in any other way. And I don't just mean financially. I mean, their

social status and their self-worth and the idea that they have this skill that they're able to apply. There are some people out there, I'm sure, who feel like they don't want this. They have to do this. There's no way that they could have a life the way they have if they didn't do this thing that, in their view, is probably sort of like a self-imposed prison or whatever. You know, that's probably there.

But I mean, you know, the question of agency is a hard one. It's your choice to do this podcast. But there might be part of you who's like, "Well, I want to have the best life I can. And the only way to do that is this one skill that I have that sort of sets me apart from other people." Or "I could make more money if I was a corporate lawyer, but that would be—I could never live with myself." Like you know, did you really choose what you do? I don't know.

Jesse Thorn: Right. I decided not to become a model.

Chuck Klosterman: Yeah, perception. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: People kept asking me.

Well, Chuck, thank you so much for talking to me. Thanks for this great book. I enjoyed it so much. And I'm always happy to get to talk to you about things you've been thinking about.

Chuck Klosterman: Well, thank you for having me on. I think this is my third or fourth time on this show? I still have that nice t-shirt you gave me way back when, with the little rocket going on. Yeah, you know?

Jesse Thorn: Aw. Isn't that nice?

Chuck Klosterman: Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Kevin says fourth. Congratulations.

(Chuck laughs.)

Chuck Klosterman, everyone. His new book is called *Football*. Like all of Chuck's books, it is a wonderful trip through the mind of a very bright, very funny deep thinker. You can grab it at your local bookstore or at Bookshop.org.

Transition: Bright, chiming synth.

Jesse Thorn: That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye*, recorded at Maximum Fun World Headquarters in the historic Jewelry District of downtown Los Angeles. The Los Angeles Marathon was this past weekend! Passed right near our office. Congratulations to everyone who ran that. Although—eh, there's a part of me that feels like you ran too far.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun, Hannah Moroz. Our video producer is Daniel Speer. We get booking help on *Bullseye* from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music comes from our friend Dan Wally, the DJ! Also known as DJW. You can find his music at DJWsounds.bandcamp.com. Our theme music, written and recorded by The Go! Team. It's called "Huddle Formation". Thanks to The Go! Team. Thanks to their label, Memphis Industries, for providing it. Special thanks this week to Eric and Michelle Stolberg at Digital One in Portland, Oregon for recording our interview with Chuck Klosterman.

You can follow *Bullseye* on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. In fact, I suggest to you that you should follow *Bullseye* on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube! It's not just an option. It's a thing I encourage you to do! I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature sign-off.

Promo: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

(Music fades out.)