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College football's official champions

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Some modern football fans who clamor for an "'official" intercollegiate championship are unaware that such a title once did exist. To find proof, you have to dig deeply into football history -- all the way back to 1877, in fact, the first year the game was played under rules established by the American Intercollegiate Football Association.

Earlier, each team played the game according to its own traditional rules. Almost every intercollegiate game had to be preceded by a meeting between the captains, or their representatives, to establish concessionary rules.

In 1876 Princeton, the game's prime mover, saw the need for a common code under which all games would be played and invited other colleges to join it in a meeting to reach that goal. Representatives from Columbia, Harvard and Yale accepted, and on Nov. 23 adopted rules quite similar to the rugby game played in England. Having done so, they all enthusiastically agreed to form an association requiring each member to play the others for an annual championship. All that is, except Yale which declined membership until 1879 when it took an active role. Columbia, lacking a permanent playing field, was in and out of this elite group, as would be Pennsylvania which joined in 1885 along with Wesleyan.

The AIFA, popularly called "The Association," dominated college football for nearly two decades. It wrote the rules, produced the top teams, and set the standards for others to follow. Non-members were considered second-rank, and their records always followed those of AIFA teams in post-season writeups. Members of this elite group played non-members before the championship games, much as NFL teams play preseason games today. Captains and coaches used these games to test their talent and to give rookies game experience.

More often than not members won such games by wide margins. Occasional close shaves, and even a loss, didn't matter much because such games were not counted in the final standings.

Disputes about the championship were surprisingly few, occurring only when tie games clouded the issue. In 1880, for example, Princeton and Yale played a scoreless tie in the famous "Block Game" in which both teams frequently touched the ball down behind their own goal line rather than surrender it. That year Yale contended it deserved the crown because the Elis had resorted to the tactic fewer times than had the Tigers. Princeton countered that claim with the fact safeties had been given no scoring value. Furthermore, Princeton supporters argued: "You have to beat the champion to claim his title. A tie doesn't do it." (The Tigers had won the it the year before.)



19th century Durkin engraving

The second dispute was the 1884 Yale-Princeton game which was called because of darkness with 18 minutes left to play and Yale ahead, 6-4. Since the rules required two full 45-minute halves be played, the referee declared the struggle "no game." Yale protested and, having won the title the year before, used 1880 Princeton logic to claim the championship. The Association, however, upheld the ref's decision.

Much the same thing happened two years later. The Yale-Princeton game was delayed nearly two hours because the appointed referee never showed up. The game was played in a heavy rainstorm, contributing to the scoreless first half. After a lot of slipping and sliding in the second half, Yale tried a field goal and missed. Eli star Fred Wallace fell on the ball in the endzone, and the substitute referee awarded a touchdown. Yale supporters stormed the field in a victory celebration, causing a 15-minute delay before order could be restored. Only a few more plays were run off before it became too dark to continue. Using the precedent of

1884, the referee declared the game no contest with a score of 0-0.

Since both Princeton and Yale claimed the championship for these three years, the AIFA in 1890 appointed one representative from each of the two schools to come up with an official list of previous champions.

This committee-of-two rubber-stamped all uncontested championships, but failed to agree on the disputed years. The resulting report, approved by the AIFA, names the official champions of the late 1870's and the 1880's:

1877 - Princeton	1882 - Yale	1886 - no champion
1878 - Princeton	1883 - Yale	1887 - Yale
1879 - Princeton	1884 - no champion	1888 - Yale
1880 - no champion	1885 - Princeton	1889 - Princeton
1881 - Yale		

Harvard wrestled the title from these two teams in 1890 as the sacrosanct nature of the AIFA's championship received its first challenge. Harvard withdrew from the Association in October of 1890, but after beating Yale, the organization's title holder, 12-6 in its final game won acclaim as the Number One team. Yale stormed back in 1891-92-93, however, winning the crown three years in a row. Mark 1893 as the last year the title was official.

Sharp disputes over eligibility requirements split the AIFA into factions unwilling to compromise in 1894. Both Penn and Wesleyan resigned in November of that year, following which the group dissolved in disharmony.

The University Athletic Club in New York City hastily established a rules committee that took over the rules-governing function, saving the game from chaos. However, the days of "official" intercollegiate championships were over. Beginning in 1894 the national title was awarded by your local sports editor to his favorite team, providing a long-lasting subject of debate for subsequent generations of sports fans.