

The great scandal of 1915

By Bob Royce

The name Brickley was spoken with pride throughout New England when it was associated with Harvard's great teams of 1912, '13 and '14. It became one spoken with shame and scorn, however, when it was associated with the great scandal of 1915 -- a controversy the New York Times called "one of the most disrupting conditions that has ever occurred in college athletics."

Charley Brickly was a superstar at Harvard. His field goals helped win championships his sophomore and junior years, and he was elected to captain the 1914 team. A two-time All-America, he most likely would have won the same honor his senior year if an appendectomy had not prevented him from playing against Yale and Princeton. So it was no wonder that eyebrows were raised when the name Brickley appeared at fullback in Trinity College's lineup for its first game of 1915.

Inquisitive reporters, assured that Trinity's Brickley was not Charley but his brother George, dug into the matter. Their investigations disproved any suspicion that Charley was attempting to stretch out his college career under an assumed identity. The Brickley in question was Charley's brother, but that did not end the matter. George, they discovered, had played some professional baseball for both Lawrence (in the New England League) and, briefly, the Philadelphia Athletics.

Trinity's response to his disclosure amounted to "so what?". Brickley, college officials said, was a bonafide student. How he earned the money for his tuition was his business.

The Hartford, Conn. school's indifference shocked those simon-pure Easterners whose representatives governed not only football but all college sports. Williams College, which had lost to Trinity 38-0, immediately severed athletic relations with Trinity. Both N.Y.U. and Columbia formally requested that Brickley be withheld from the lineup when their teams played Trinity later in the year. Trinity's official response was: "If we were playing ... baseball we would remove him," but since the game was football, they saw no reason to.

N.Y.U. students staged a massive protest, contending that Trinity's use of a professional not only gave the New England school an unfair advantage, but also would endanger the amateur standing of their own athletes. When Trinity refused to withdraw Brickley, N.Y.U. cancelled the game. Columbia made two formal appeals to keep Brickley on the sidelines before following N.Y.U.'s example. With its only two money-making games cancelled, Trinity invited Holy Cross and Fordham to fill the gaps but was met with polite refusals.

The Trinity team must have been affected by the storm of controversy now raging around it, for neither Brickley nor his teammates played up to par on Nov. 6, when their beat efforts resulted in a scoreless tie with Tufts. Once assured that the school's administration would not give in to such demands, the team again played with confidence. on Nov. 20, Trinity beat Wesleyan 9-0. Brickley scored a touchdown and was credited with runs of 30, 37 and 50 yards, one of his beat performances of the year. Trinity closed out its season with a 5-0-2 record, but was a villain in the eyes of all those who cherished amateur athletics.

To put this story in proper perspective, one must remember that football had no nationwide governing body in 1915. Only the elite members of the Rules

committee and colleges that chose to follow its code were bound by its eligibility rules. Each conference set its own standards, and non-conference schools were free to live by whatever rules they chose. So Trinity was within its rights to put Brickley, or any other student into its lineup, regardless of his amateur standing. The real crux of the matter was that both the Intercollegiate Association of Amateur Athletics of America (ICAAAA), which governed all other college sports, and The Amateur Athletic Union were sticklers on the definition of an amateur. According to their rules, any athlete who accepted money in any way connected with his athletic ability was considered a "pro", as was any athlete who competed with or against him in any event.

Those standards made professional athletes not only of Brickley's teammates, but also all of Trinity's opponents -- as well as their opponents and their opponent's opponents. By letting Brickley play football, Trinity had touched off an epidemic of professionalism that threatened to destroy amateur athletics. Suddenly, all football players at Amherst, Bates, Brown, Tufts, Williams and Wesleyan were suspect. Through them, the "disease" had been spread to N.Y.U. and Columbia (even though they had refused to play Trinity), as well as Rochester and Syracuse. Most serious in the minds of Eastern elitists was Princeton's having become contaminated by playing both Syracuse and Williams, then spreading the germs to both Harvard and Yale.

Ironically, amid the wailing and gnashing of teeth, Trinity had hired a New York law firm to consider suing N.Y.U. and Columbia for breach of contract. After advising against the suit, the lawyers publicly stated: "There is not the least doubt that professionalism has been spread far and wide." Considering that Syracuse had played Michigan, Montana and the Oregon Aggies, no part of the nation seemed safe from the epidemic.

Under severe pressure, Trinity College president Henry Perkins bent but did not break. On Dec. 9 he announced that the school would ban all major league baseball players from sports in the future. At the same time, he made a distinction between minor league players and those who were regulars in the major leagues, and also took a slap at schools like Yale which gave scholarships to athletes. "In my opinion," he said, "it is better to have no eligibility rules whatsoever than to have a rule which is likely to be evaded and generate a spirit of hypocrisy."

In 1916 the AAU maintained its hard-nosed definition of an amateur, but took no action, suggesting that it would deal with any scandal-based problem on a case-by-case basis. The ICAAAA couldn't afford that luxury. Faced with a solid six-month schedule of intercollegiate sports, the organization had to deal with the problem immediately. Considering the chaos it had to deal with, it's not surprising that the group waffled, effectively aiding with Trinity's stand. Never mentioning the word "professional", the ICAAAA came up with a radically new concept of amateur eligibility that permitted an athlete to compete as an amateur even if he'd previously received money -- if he had written permission from an official of his university.

An ironic twist is that Perkins, who only months before had been branded as the real villain in the scandal, would smile at the outcome as it affected college football. The Eligibility Committee (consisting of representatives of Harvard, Princeton and Yale) reviewed his comments and called five Yale athletes on the carpet for having received questionable scholarships.

The scandal marked a bitter split between the AAU and the IC-4-A which never healed. The story ends on a real anti-climax, however, because World War I brought amateurs and pros from service teams together, and for the duration of the war all eligibility rules were suspended.