

CHANGING TIDES

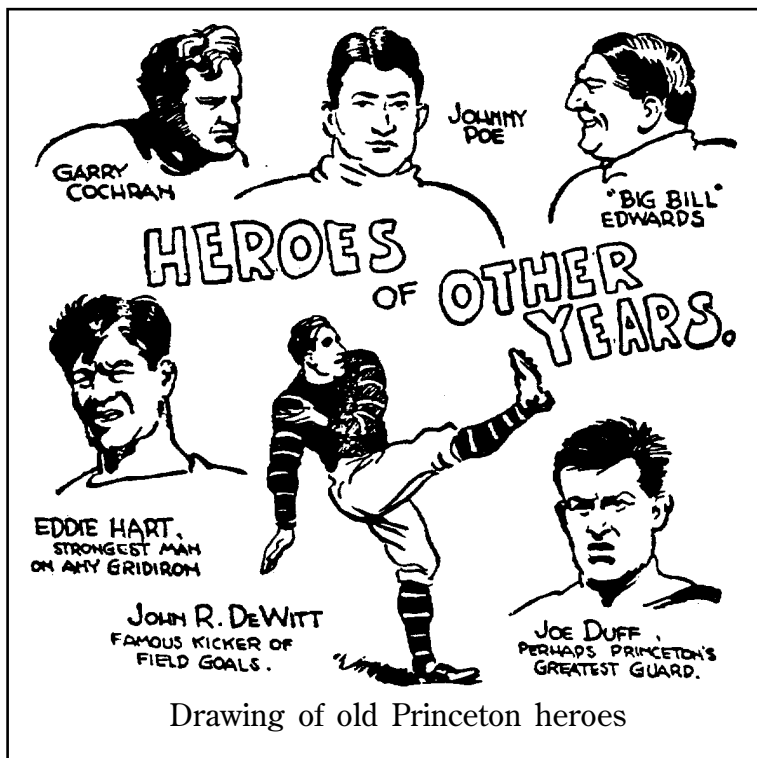
COLLEGE FOOTBALL 1919-1930

PART 1 of 3

By Ray Schmidt

The history of college football has been distinguished by a number of unique eras, during which the sport underwent significant changes in its fundamental structures, both on and off the field. While each era has its strong supporters, the decade of the 1920s is most commonly advanced as the period of college football's greatest transformation. For the purposes of my paper, I have defined the era as extending from 1919 through 1930.

Prior to this era of the 1920s, college football was a sport that operated predominantly in a semi-regionalized campus setting. Games were primarily played in relatively small stadiums, with only Harvard (1903), Syracuse (1907), Yale (1914), and Princeton (1914) having constructed steel and concrete stadiums with relatively large seating capacities before World War I. There had been intersectional games dating back to college football's earliest days; such as the Michigan-Cornell matchups in the 1890s or Brown's visit to Chicago in 1899, but the truly long-distance intersectional game was not a part of the college football scene until the Tournament of Roses games of 1916 and 1917.



From its earliest days, college football had been significantly influenced by the Eastern universities, most notably the so-called "Big Three" of Harvard, Princeton, and Yale. Whether in rules-making, style-of-play concepts, or in filling out the annual All-America selections; the Eastern schools had wielded more than their fare share of clout.

The timetable for the other regions of the country beginning to play a larger role on the college football scene was delayed by several events. The greatest factor of all was the concern over the sport's on-going level of violence. This manifested itself in the Western Conference (or Big Ten) from 1906 to 1907, when member schools were allowed to play football schedules of only five games, and thereafter still were required to play annual schedules

that were shorter than those of major schools in other regions. On the Pacific Coast, schools such as Stanford (1906-1917) California (1906-1914), and Southern California (1911-1913) played rugby instead of American football, significantly retarding the development of technical playing skills on the West Coast.

With the onset of America's involvement in World War I, the impact on college football was significant. Due to manpower shortages, some schools such as Tennessee, Georgia, Cornell, Alabama, and Colgate dropped the sport for either one or both of the seasons 1917 and 1918. The

Big Three of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton each fielded informal teams during those years, and played only a limited number of games, all against military-related opponents.

When World War I ended the American servicemen flocked back to the states, and the country was about to become a much different place. Ahead lie the days of Prohibition, the Red Scare, the continued expansion of capitalism and the booming stock market. But the 1920s was also to be a time of release from the tensions and the ordeals of the war. The youth of America had been very much changed by the European conflict, and what was about to follow was a revolution of manners and morals. And with the growing emphasis on training and expertise in the commercial world, education would become a major cultural force in American life; with college enrollments doubling for the period between 1918 and 1930.

When college football resumed in 1919 there was an attitude of change in the sporting world. The war-time years had allowed the major universities of the Midwest and West Coast to close the gap in technical playing skills between themselves and the Eastern schools. But much more significant was the spirit of entrepreneurship that pervaded the thinking of the major football universities and sport promoters from coast-to-coast.

This was the dawn of the “Roaring Twenties”, what eventually came to be known as “The Golden Decade” of sports; or what writer Westbrook Pegler described as “The Era of Wonderful Nonsense”. And college football was ready to fully play its role in this national sport phenomenon, while at the same time transforming itself into much of what we know the sport to be today.

From the earliest days of intercollegiate football, the sport had served as a major backdrop for the on-going struggle between the athletic and academic factions of the universities. As mentioned, evidence of the struggle between athletics and academics can be found back to college football’s earliest days. At the turn of the century, Professor CA. Waldo of Purdue looked back at the midwestern universities of the 1890s and noted that “Brawn was the surest way to college preferment . . . to enter college intellectual attainment was no longer necessary. Teams were becoming a permanent and paid body of men, and the whole thing was rapidly assuming a gladiatorial aspect.”

When Columbia University decided to drop football in 1905, Professor Lord of the school’s committee on student organisations said that “only by such a radical action can the university and college life be rid of an obsession which . . . has become as burdensome to the great mass of students as it has proved harmful to academic standing.” But there were also members of the academic community who saw value in sport, such as Dr George Norlin of Colorado, who in 1908 said that “athletics are not merely an incidental interest of student life, that are a vital and important element of an institution’s educational policy.”

As college football headed into the days following World War I, it was with plenty of supporters who believed that the sport could manage itself and that it had a rightful place in the education of America’s youth. Delegates to the last NCAA convention had unanimously indicated that there would be no return to the commercialized systems that were opposed by college authorities, while an editorial in the University of Detroit’s *Varsity News* said that “around the game of football is cemented all that is known as college spirit, all that training for loyalty and friendship that is the real basis of an education.”

Connecting intercollegiate sport with America’s success in the war effort and the resulting patriotic fervor, General Robert Wood, an advocate for college football, was quoted as saying that “athletic training, especially the training the college men got in their various games, was one of the great contributing factors that helped us win the war.”

The decade of the 1920s would serve as a stage for the very peak of this battle over the place of athletics in the university community. Many of the transformations in college football between 1919 and 1930 would fundamentally revolve around this debate, which would culminate in the final days of 1929 with the issuance of the Carnegie Report. But as the era of the 1920s unfolded, the sport of college football continued moving along on its unstoppable path toward a much more nationalized and commercialized structure.

While there were many forces of change at work in the world of college football during the 1920s, four of the more significant were:

- 1) The nationalization of college football;
- 2) College football as big business;
- 3) Football at the Catholic colleges and other minority schools;
- 4) The rise of intersectional football.

-> I. The nationalization of college football

The first of the major transformations I would like to review is the “shifting of power” on the field of play away from the Eastern “Big Three”. In 1919 Princeton suffered a shocking defeat at the hands of West Virginia, and a contemporary Eastern historian named Donald Herring later wrote that “so great a victory for a minor team foreshadowed the beginning of the end of the reign of the Big Three. If any date will serve to mark the end of a football era, November 1, 1919 is it.”

But it was Yale’s unexpected setbacks that proved the most damaging to the regional prestige of the Big Three. In both 1919 and 1920, little Boston College handed Yale shocking defeats that foretold the approach of gridiron parity among the Eastern colleges, while also helping to trigger the expansion of big-time football among many Catholic universities. Yale’s response to the two defeats was to drop Boston College from its schedules after 1920. When Harvard was beaten by little Centre College from the South in 1921, there was no longer any doubt that the gridiron balance of power was shifting.

While universities in the Midwest had been regularly providing challenges to eastern supremacy since early in the century, it was the awakening of the sleeping giants on the Pacific Coast that ushered in the true nationalisation of college football. While the University of Washington had fielded outstanding teams under coach Gil Dobie before the war, it was the great teams at the University of California beginning in 1920 that touched off the lust for power in the West.

By 1921, Stanford and Southern California had committed to chasing after some of the gridiron glory being enjoyed by Cal, and both schools would ultimately import nationally-prominent coaches to guide their football destinies. Stanford, needing good teams to help fill its giant new stadium, hired the already-legendary Glenn (Pop) Warner in 1924; while U.S.C. hired Howard Jones in 1925. Both coaches had backgrounds rooted in Eastern college football, and quickly they would have the two Pacific Coast schools battling for regional and national gridiron supremacy.

While the balance of gridiron power may have been shifting away from the Eastern Big Three, their alumni and athletic department people certainly were not ready to accept the change. Princeton brought back Bill Roper as its head coach in 1919, and Yale returned Tad Jones to take over its football program in 1920. Both were highly capable and respected football men, and neither accepted losing. Jones, speaking at a rally before the Harvard-Yale game of 1920, made clear what the priorities were, at least against Harvard: “The team that takes the field Saturday will fight to its last ounce of strength for you because they are Yale men. Yale expects victory -

demands victory - demands that every man give his whole to Yale.”

But not everyone subscribed to this fanatical approach to athletic competition. Yale professor George Gundelfinger wrote a letter to Jones and, equating the coach's comments to the recent German militarism, described them as Prussianistic “rot”, “under the disguise of loyalty to one's Alma Mater, whose students are supposed to be educated men and not barbarians.”

More telling for the future of Yale football were the remarks made by newly-appointed university President James Rowland Angell, who in March 1921, just months after Jones' comments, said “I want clean, honest intercollegiate athletics, so conducted that they . . . do not unreasonably invade the time and attention of the members of the team.” This was the same Dr Angell who, as a faculty member at the University of Chicago, had delivered a paper to an NCAA convention, in which he denounced the spectacular aspects of the large football games, and compared these great games to the circus, the prize fight and gladiatorial combat.

But the most serious blow to the football prestige of the Big Three came in the form of revisions made to their “Triple Agreement” in 1922. Harvard had fielded an outstanding football team in 1919, and then capped off its season by playing in the Rose Bowl game in California. A trip such as this had never before been considered by a Big Three school, but on this occasion the Harvard administration wanted to use its football team as a vehicle to generate enthusiasm for the school's major endowment fund-raising campaign. But the Harvard trip also produced a significant flood of proposals over the next few years for intersectional games involving the Big Three schools. After seeing the hysteria surrounding Princeton's 1922 trip to Chicago, the three university presidents decided they had seen enough.

The basic athletic agreement between the three schools, originally written in 1916, was revised to prohibit any post-season or championship contests, along with the banning of games involving long and expensive trips; in other words, intersectional games. But worst of all was the imposing of a September 15 date for the start of football practice each Fall, as it further eroded the Big Three's gridiron prestige by placing them two weeks behind their regional rivals each season.

As the decade of the 1920s progressed, schools from the Big Ten and Notre Dame joined the Pacific Coast powers in dominating college football. Southern football also made significant advances during this period in overall quality of play, sending five teams to the Rose Bowl between 1926 and 1932; thus completing the true nationalization of college football. And in the East the on-field power had been wrested away from the Big Three by schools such as Pittsburgh, Dartmouth, Pennsylvania, and Army. As early as 1925 columnist Westbrook Pegler was writing that the Harvard-Princeton-Yale trio was finding “the title of Big Three more a burden than an ornament for it attracts somewhat derisive attention to their defeats which are not infrequent.”

TO BE CONTINUED