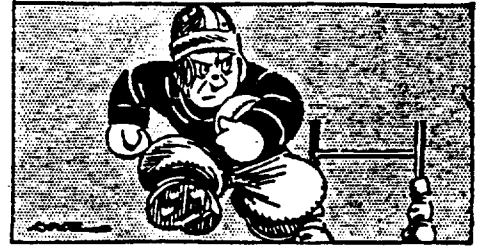

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WALTER E. McCORNACK NORTHWESTERN'S CELEBRITY COACH

By Robert Pruter

Wallie McCornack was a long forgotten football coach from the first decade of the last century, when in 1995 his name was briefly resurrected to the public after Coach Gary Barnett produced Northwestern University's winningest season with a 10-2 record; that is, since the 10-1-4 record achieved by the school way back in 1903, when McCornack was the coach. (Based on incorrect information most news reports said that Barnett bettered McCornack's win-loss record)

McComack was the Gary Barnett of his day reviving the school's fortunes in football, but unlike Barnett he arrived at the institution as a distinguished coach and great things were expected of him almost immediately. McCornack was considered one of the best coaches in the country during his five year coaching career, first at Dartmouth (1901-02) and then at Northwestern (1903-05), and his name deserves to be remembered in the annals of college football history.

McCornack was born in Chicago on January 22, 1875, in a middle or upper middle class family proud of their Scottish heritage. He grew up in the Englewood community, which was fortuitous for his future career, as Englewood High in the 1890s was one of the premier athletic powers in the state, and competed fiercely with another football power, nearby Hyde Park High for supremacy on the gridiron. McCornack attended Englewood (fall of 1889 to the spring of 1893) at a time when high schools were still elite institutions, and given his academic background plus his football experience at Englewood, McCornack was considered a real prize for any football-playing university. In the early 1890s, the best football was played in the East, and McCornack chose to attend Dartmouth (in Hanover, New Hampshire), which although a second-tier school compared to Harvard, Yale, or Princeton, was prestigious nonetheless.

What kind of football experience did McCornack bring to Dartmouth? He was small in stature, but in the early 1890s that was not as difficult a barrier as it would be in later years. He was also the standout player on a champion team. When McCornack entered Englewood in the fall of 1889 he joined the school's very first football team as left end. As probably one of the smallest players on the team he was lucky to make the starting lineup. During his sophomore year, McCornack, according to the Englewood High School Journal "developed into a brilliant player." In his junior and senior years playing as left halfback he led Englewood to its first two league titles. He was elected captain both years, at a time when the student captain largely served as the coach.

Thus, when McCornack entered Dartmouth in the fall of 1893 he had already demonstrated considerable football playing and coaching skills. At Dartmouth he played quarterback for the school each of his four years there and served as captain the final two years (again, the captain played a large role in coaching). When Dartmouth came to Chicago in 1894 to play the Chicago Athletic Association team, McCornack was described as the "quickest man on the Dartmouth team and adds much life and snap to the play." Dartmouth unfortunately was a second-rate

football power, and during his four years produced a 21-14-1 record, nine of those losses coming at the hands of Yale and Harvard. McCornack graduated with a BS degree in 1897, and then enrolled in Northwestern Law School, receiving a Bachelor of Law in 1899.

While back in Chicago, McCornack, as was the custom in the 1890s, served as an alumni coach for his old high school, Englewood. In the fall of 1897, in his first coaching experience, he led Englewood to a 10-1 record and its third consecutive Cook County Championship. Upon finishing law school, McCornack returned east to coach at Exeter Academy. Outing magazine cited his 1900 team as "reaching a high point of excellence." At the beginning of the season, the team was not considered promising, and McCornack, said the magazine, "pursued the wise policy of building up his team for the sole purpose of defeating its ancient enemy, Andover." A successful season in 1900 was often measured by one game; as Harvard measured its season based on a victory over Yale or not.

Dartmouth 1901 and 1902

McCornack's success at Exeter brought him to Dartmouth which hired McCornack as coach for the 1901 and 1902 seasons, during a period when it was customary to use alumni coaches.

In the 1901 season McCornack turned the Dartmouth program around dramatically, taking a 2-4-2 team from the previous year and garnering a 10-1-0 record, with the only loss coming at the hands of Harvard. What opened some observers' eyes were the hefty scores by which Dartmouth mowed down its opponents - New Hampshire College (51-0) Boston College (45-0) and Bowdoin (35-6). The Bowdoin game was typical of the speedy type of football McCornack favored (reflecting his own skills as a player), where the Dartmouth team exhibited "magnificent teamwork" and "rapid playing," according to the New York Times. But Dartmouth's program had a long way to go to play competitively against Harvard or Yale. In the Harvard game on November 16, the Crimson used only substitutes and still handily beat Dartmouth 24-12.

The 1901 season closed with a Thanksgiving game against Brown, which the Hanover men had never previously defeated. The game was originally scheduled for November 23, but as the student newspaper, The Dartmouth related, Dartmouth defeated St. Paul's school at Concord, New Hampshire, on Saturday by the score of 24-0. The game was made possible by the postponing of the Brown-Dartmouth game until Thanksgiving day, and the canceling of the St. Paul-Trinity game. The object in playing was to enable Coach McCornack to try out, against a team unacquainted with the signals, some of the plays which were to be used against Brown. (Note that the Carlson scorebook does not list this game.)

Come the Brown game, instead of using its speed against Brown, McCornack opted to play smash-mouth football against the greatly outweighed Brown team. The Dartmouth players simply pounded the ball up the middle through the smaller Brown players (in the language of the day this was called "line-bucking"). Dartmouth won 22-0, a superb ending to the school's best ever season.

The following year (1902) for McCornack was fairly respectable as well, with a 6-2-1 record, the two losses to Amherst and Harvard and the tie with Massachusetts. The game against Harvard sealed McCornack's reputation in the East, as Dartmouth only lost by a score of 16 to 6, giving the Crimson an exceedingly hard tussle. This year Harvard played its first string against what it thought would be an easy opponent. After Harvard took possession on the opening kickoff it moved the ball down the field, but lost it to a fumble. "Then," as the Chicago Tribune reported, "came the surprise of the year. Dartmouth, with lightning like rapidity, shot its offense time and again into the left side of the Harvard line, and down the field went the two teams, Dartmouth

rarely requiring more than two downs to get its distance.” And so it went throughout the game, but Dartmouth killed its dramatic drives with inopportune fumbles. In the third quarter Dartmouth had a 6-5 lead, and a tremendous upset was in the making, but Harvard rallied for the win. Most observers felt that the Dartmouth players outplayed Harvard, but fumbles cost them the game.

McCornack again closed the season against Brown University, on the Saturday before Thanksgiving Day beating the school in a tight game 12-6. While the overall win-loss record did not match the previous season, Dartmouth, based on its performance against Harvard, was ranked sixth in the country by preeminent football writer Caspar Whitney of Outing magazine.

McCornack Joins Northwestern

What brought McCornack to Northwestern was the disastrous 1902 season the Purple had experienced under Coach C. M. Hollister, who led the team to a 5-6 overall record and a 0-4 record against Western Conference teams. McCornack had garnered such a stellar reputation in the East that there was a groundswell of opinion by Northwestern team members, students, and alumni at the end of the season not to renew Hollister’s contract and to replace him with a new coach, and specifically they had McCornack in mind. When Hollister recognized the sentiment and retired, Northwestern’s Board of Control abided with public demand and unanimously voted to hire McCornack under a three-year contract.

Said the board president, O. S. Long, of McCornack, “We have considered him all along as the logical candidate. His knowledge of both eastern and western football, together with his experience as a player, was much to his credit. We have done everything in our power to probe his record as a coach and find that it is flawless.”

Such was McCornack’s reputation that there was much talk of the new coach completely turning the program around the first year. The Tribune reported, “His friends say that before his regime comes to an end the greatest team in the history of football at Evanston will be on the gridiron”

McCornack did not promise a championship, and like all top coaches he was stern taskmaster on teaching fundamentals. He said “I will start out by drilling the material in the elementary or more simple forms of play, such as catching and running back punts, and get the men to follow the runner as quickly as possible. Until these things are done satisfactorily formations will not be touched.” Again, he was emphasizing rapid movement.

McCornack also voiced the same complaint that Northwestern coaches have voiced throughout

the school's history—that the school has insufficient numbers of quality athletes—asserting “at Northwestern, unlike other large Western universities, the opportunity for securing a champion team is poor....there are only about 450 male students at Evanston, and from this small number the material for an eleven must be selected.”

The pre-season prognosticators singled out McCornack and his Northwestern team as bearing watching. The Inter-Ocean scribe noted that the material was “unquestionably better” (this view would change), and “besides, there is McCornack, the idol of Dartmouth. Down East they call McCornack a great coach, and those who have watched him put the Purple candidates through preliminary work believe the East has not misjudged him McCornack is a very hard worker and he can make the men work He has no end of clever innovations to aid in practice. He is original and inventive. He may be expected to spring a surprise.”

The paper also noted that Northwestern added new “dormitories for training quarters,” and—according to Walter Paulison in his Tale of the Wildcats – McCornack introduced to Northwestern the charging machine and the tackling dummy, plus long practice sessions.

Northwestern in the first six weeks of the fall of 1903 played a large number of practice games, seven in all – two high schools (North Division and Englewood), Marshall Field Wholesale House, Fort Sheridan, Chicago Dental College, an alumni team and Northwestern College of Naperville (now North Central) These games should be considered equivalent to the early season exhibition games that the National Football League engages in today. McCornack used the games (none of which were ever played with full 35-minute halves) to try out players in various positions and try out plays in scrimmage game conditions Not once in any of these games did McCornack ever start his first string.

Northwestern won six practice games and tied one (where the team was split into two squads), but what the newspapers reported on these contests were not kind. In the eyes of the sportswriters, Northwestern did not exhibit sufficient superiority. The Inter-Ocean headlined Northwestern's 22-6 win over Northwestern College in Naperville with “Northwestern Is Humiliated” and “Poor Showing by Evanston Squad” Against the Chicago Dental College, which Northwestern beat 18 to 11, the Inter-Ocean reported that the “Northwestern' game was erratic and marred by frequent fumbles and offside plays” The pre-season promise of new glory for Northwestern seemed to be slipping away.

The 1903 Regular Season

The first weekend in October launched the “regular” season for the Western schools, and Northwestern easily dispatched Lombard College (22-0) and Washington University (St. Louis) (23-0) in successive weekends. That only 20 and 25 minutes halves were played indicated that these schools were meant to be patsy opponents for purposes of burnishing the record and giving the players some wins under their belt before meeting real competition, mainly Big Nine opponents. That year Northwestern was scheduled to play Chicago, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Purdue, but the Boilermakers midseason were in a severe train wreck and their game with Northwestern was canceled.

What the sportswriters considered the true test of Northwestern was Coach Amos Alonzo Stagg's University of Chicago team that they would meet on October 17. The annual contest between Northwestern and Chicago had become the biggest game of the season for Chicago society and for Chicago newspapers to cover. From the late 1880s on, Chicago society had made it a point to select one game of the season to make their appearance to be seen This social ritual was established in imitation of New York society, and during the 1890s Chicago society's game

of choice was an annual Thanksgiving Day game, often featuring some team from the East and the University of Chicago.

By 1903, however, the holding of a big Thanksgiving Day game for the benefit of society had faded considerably, and the city's social elite instead had latched onto the annual matchup between Northwestern and Chicago, whatever the day in the season it fell on. The Chicago newspapers were therefore primed to give the game maximum ink, with multipage broadsheet write-ups, including the requisite column on who was attending from society.

The Chicago newspapers for such a game needed to give their Sunday readers a great dramatic story on the game, and in 1903 Northwestern gave them one, shocking heavily favored Chicago by holding their opponents to a O-O tie. The Inter-Ocean exclaimed, "Make a laurel wreath and when it is made place it on the brow of Coach Walter McCornack of Northwestern. For yesterday afternoon on Marshall Field he turned loose the greatest football team that ever wore Northwestern's royal purple, and that great team came so near to sending the championship aspirations of the proud Maroons a-shimmering, that Stagg and all Chicago men will tremble at the remembrance of it for seasons to come."

As to how the game went, the Inter-Ocean writer contended that Northwestern outplayed Chicago throughout the contest, but just could not convert the dominance into a score. At one point a fumble on the four-yard line ended a threat. That dominance was wholly attributable to McCornack according to the writer, who exclaimed, "But who is responsible for this drawn battle, this reversal of form, this working wonders? Why, the man who was mentioned in the beginning and the proper recipient of the laurel wreath, the man was carried off Marshall Field after the game on the shoulders of Northwestern rooters, delirious with joy at the showing their supposedly weaker team had made. To McCornack, and to him alone, belongs the full credit for the truly wonderful performance of the Northwestern eleven."

The writer explained that the game cemented McCornack's reputation in the West, because he was able to achieve a tie against Chicago with lesser quality players according to the consensus of the sportswriters. Said the Inter-Ocean scribe, "out of mediocre material he made a first class team" The following week, Northwestern traveled to Cincinnati and wholoped the Cincinnati team in a laugher, 35-0. Northwestern met its second Western Conference opponent on October 30, slipping by Illinois by 12 to 11. Illinois was not having a good year, as it ended up with the worst record of any of the Western schools.

Northwestern met Notre Dame on November 14, and came away with a 0-0 tie, and interestingly the Inter-Ocean, now persuaded of Northwestern's abilities, asserted that Notre Dame "earned a claim to rank among the best elevens of the West" by virtue of holding Northwestern to a "standstill." The game must have been a disappointment to McCornack, as he had predicted a victory, but afterwards said "Notre Dame is the best team we have been against this year. They have wonderful defense. We played our strongest game of the season. I am satisfied."

Prior to Northwestern's next match, against Wisconsin, the Inter-Ocean writer said, "The excellent showing made by Northwestern this year was wholly unexpected from the material on hand at the opening of the season and the form shown by the team in its practice games." Against Wisconsin Northwestern managed a 6-6 tie, and according to the Inter-Ocean the Purple were severely disadvantaged in the game by being considerably lighter and banged up, but played with few mistakes while Wisconsin was done in by fumbles and penalties.

The Northwestern Media Guide lists 1903 as the year the school won the Big Nine championship, based on a record of 1 win and 2 ties, as it was the only school in the conference

not to have lost a game But that is not how the newspapers saw the title outcome in 1903, which they left up in the air as to which school should be champion. They noted that Northwestern did not meet Minnesota or Michigan – two teams they deemed vastly superior to the Purple – so there was no way for them to declare a champion for that season.

The final game of the season for Northwestern was, typically, the Thanksgiving Game, and this year it was with the Carlisle Indian School. Not only did the game represent Northwestern's only loss for the season, it was the only game where Northwestern was thoroughly outclassed, 28 to 0. The Carlisle Indians, as reported by the Inter-Ocean, exhibited "cunning, a bagful of tricks, and superior agility on a slippery field."

Near the end of McCornack's first year at Northwestern, the Chicago Tribune said, "Coach McCornack of Northwestern has been frequently alluded to this season as the most brilliant coach in the country, after adding to his success at Dartmouth, has the feat of making Northwestern, hitherto a total failure in football one of the most prominent teams in the west his first year." The Inter-Ocean said, "Considering the material he had to start out with McCornack has made the best record of any coach in the West this year. Barring Phillips he had no men of really first-class caliber. Most of his material was mediocre. Yet he turned out a first-class team."

The payoff for the Northwestern program was also beneficial for the bottom line as well, being the most financially successful in the school's history. The school ended up in the black by \$6,218.07. But the success of the program was tempered by McCornack's announcement in December at the annual football dinner, that at the end of his three-year contract he planned to give up coaching for good.

TO BE CONTINUED