

CHANGING TIDES

COLLEGE FOOTBALL 1919-1930

PART 2 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—which I have defined as extending from 1919 through 1930—is most commonly advanced as the period of college football's greatest transformation. In the second installment of this series, we will examine two more of the major events from that era.

→ College football as big business

Probably the most significant transformation within college football during this era was the advent of the big business environment among the universities. With game attendance already on the rise in 1919, most colleges found themselves unable to capitalize on the growing demand for tickets. After seeing the economic potential of big attendance figures during the 1920 season, such as the 78,000 for Yale-Princeton or the 75,000 for Harvard-Yale; the stadium building boom was ready to be launched.

In 1921, Stanford University stunned everyone by constructing a 60,000-seat stadium in just 4 1/2 months time, using a method similar to that of the amphitheater at ancient Pompeii. Stanford dedicated its new stadium in 1921 with the annual showdown against California, and packed over 62,000 fans into the new arena. In 1927 the stadium would be expanded to hold 87,000.

After the 1921 season the Big Ten Conference announced a record year in both attendance and gate receipt totals, even as Yale was rejecting a proposal to increase its stadium capacity to 117,000. By 1922 many universities around the country were making plans for the building of new or greatly expanded stadiums, while the Big Ten was projecting an attendance figure of nearly 2-million for that season. In the season of 1922 Ohio State opened its new 63,000-seat stadium, and proceeded to jam in over 72,000 fans for the dedication game against Michigan. At the end of the 1922 season Yale announced gate receipts of over \$400,000, for a new collegiate record.

The growing structure of intercollegiate sports would soon require conference officials to assist in their administration, and one of the first to act was the Big Ten in July 1922, when it named Major John L. Griffith as its first athletic commissioner. Griffith, who had been in charge of the United States Army's physical education training in 1919, believed that the country's great interest in sports was in part a result of the national pride in the physical accomplishments of American youth in winning World War I. In a 1922 letter, Griffith noted that the Republican Party had been swept into power in 1920 with a platform that included "federal encouragement of these matters which pertain to the physical betterment of our youth.

The sizable attendance and receipt figures, with much larger totals coming in the very near future, obviously were being noticed by members of the academic community and the media. A New York Times feature article on the stadium-building craze compared the atmosphere of a football game at the Yale Bowl to the "mob psychology" of a gladiatorial contest of ancient times. In an article for the Boston Herald, James Knox of Harvard wrote that: "Stadia have been built simply because of the known demand for seats. The seats are in demand because football comes nearer crystallizing the underlying traits of human nature than any other game evolved."

In a 1923 syndicated column, sportswriter Lawrence Perry looked toward the very near future, and wondered how long athletic ideals would hold up in the face of such potential riches. College football's legendary patriarch, Walter Camp, declared that, "we may have gone too far in the erection of huge bowls, and stadiums, but time alone can tell - meantime these structures yield the necessary funds to support not only the major but minor sports, and to defray the general athletic upkeep."

And there was the defense of the athletic faction whenever the big business aspect of intercollegiate sport came under criticism—not only were minor sports being supported by football, thus providing physical training and conditioning for many students; but the larger universities such as Michigan and Ohio State were also plowing much of the football-generated money into the construction of additional buildings and facilities for the use of the entire student body. In just one of numerous examples, Sydney Hutchinson, Chairman of the University of Pennsylvania Athletic Council, declared in 1923 that football supported no less than 17 other athletic teams at Penn, while also providing funds for maintaining the tennis courts, squash courts, and three athletic fields.

The building of new or expanded stadiums continued at a brisk pace right through the end of the decade; including universities such as Illinois, Georgia, Minnesota, Pittsburgh, and Nebraska. Many of these new stadiums were constructed as memorials to America's fighting men of World War I. As an appeasement to the academic element, the initial design plans for the stadiums usually included such things as built-in theaters, mosaics designs, fountains and Roman columns; most of which were among the first things cut

when cost controls were necessary.

In 1925 it was estimated that nationally college football had attracted 12 million in attendance, while two years later, for the 1927 season, Associated Press was estimating a national attendance figure of nearly 25-million. In 1928 Yale announced its third consecutive season of over \$1 million in gross receipts for football.

With the onset of the Depression in late 1929, the stadium building boom came to an end for the era. Many of the universities that had financed their stadium construction through the issuance of bonds, now found themselves defaulting on the payments; a situation that would continue well into the 1930s. And many schools, faced with major reductions in football attendance and revenues, were forced to cut back or even eliminate many of the minor sports for a period of years. But the stadiums were still standing there, and when prosperity began its return in America later in the 1930s, the universities were well-positioned to again capitalize on the box office bonanzas.

-> The rise of intersectional football

The-next item of transformation to be touched upon is the expansion of intersectional play and

the return of the big-city games. As noted earlier, intersectional football games had been occasionally in evidence since the 1890s, while New York City was serving as a big-city host for the Yale-Princeton game as early as 1880. With the dawn of the 1920s, intersectional play began to assume a more prominent position on each season's football schedules.

After the excitement of Harvard's trip to the Rose Bowl game, at the end of the 1920 season, Ohio State actively lobbied for a berth in the Rose Bowl against California. Then in 1921, just one season after Dartmouth had made the same trip, Penn State traveled to the Pacific Northwest to play Washington, while Chicago was travelling east to meet Princeton in the first of their famous two games. The Big Ten Conference had tightened its restrictions on long-distance intersectional play even before the Eastern Big Three had done so in 1922, including the adoption of a ban on post-season games after Ohio State's Rose Bowl appearance in 1921. In the University of Chicago archives can be found a 1922 letter, in which Amos Alonzo Stagg attributes these restrictions to the fallout from the 1921 Taylorville-Carlinville professional game scandal.

Catholic schools and the Southern universities were considerably more tolerant of intersectional play. In the 1920s, schools from the South and Southwest considered intersectional games in the North an opportunity to validate their region's place within the national framework of competitive college football. Sportswriters from Southern newspapers used repeated allusions to the military past of the South's "Lost Cause"; describing football trips to the North as "invasions" by collegians who were representing the pride and heritage of Dixie. Newspapers even took Southern schools to task for scheduling intersectional games that put them at a disadvantage, and often complained that "too many Southern universities are allowing themselves to be outgeneraled while defending Dixie's regional prestige."

The sports pages of the era were always filled with rumors of proposed intersectional "dream" games. In late 1921 the University of California was unsuccessfully trying to lure either Princeton or Yale out to the West Coast; while in 1924 Notre Dame, in the national spotlight because of its Four Horsemen backfield, was rumored to be playing Yale and Harvard in 1925, neither game taking place.

Notre Dame and Southern California did begin their major intersectional series in 1926, after earlier efforts at arranging a game in 1924 had failed. Trips to the Eastern Seaboard later in the decade by Southern Methodist, Stanford, and California created even greater interest in the long-distance intersectional game. But not all the negotiations for intersectional games made it into the newspapers of the day. At the Yale archives is a letter written at the end of this era, in which the Olympic Committee secretly attempted to lure Yale's football team to Los Angeles for a matchup against Southern Cal, as part of the 1932 Olympic Games. After much internal debate, Yale officials reluctantly refused the offer.

In the 1920s, game promoters and athletic officials were quick to see the potential profits to be made in playing games at a big-city neutral field. The Army-Navy classic had been played almost exclusively at Philadelphia's Franklin Field since 1899, but the service academies moved their game to one of New York's stadiums on six occasions during the 1920s, while the annual Notre Dame-Army game was moved to New York City as of 1923. Throughout the 1920s New York City would be the most successful at attracting major college games to its stadiums, despite the professional environment these big-city games usually created. With the opening of Chicago's mammoth Soldier Field, that city also became an active bidder for major college games, hosting the 1926 Army-Navy game that attracted 110,000 fans; the 1927 Notre Dame-Southern California game that drew 117,000; and 1929 Notre Dame-Southern Cal with an estimated 120,000 fans.

TO BE CONTINUED