

# Making an International Legend: The Media, Pat O’Dea and Midwestern Football in the 1890s and 1930s<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Pat O’Dea (1872-1962), born in Kilmore, Victoria, Australia, played Australian Rules football briefly for the Melbourne Football Club, but made his fame in American football where he was the star fullback for the University of Wisconsin Badgers between 1896 and 1899. O’Dea’s skills, particularly his massive punting, drop- and place-kicking abilities, were legendary. He was widely recognised as one of the best players of his day and his record established him as one of the best kickers of all-time in American collegiate football.

O’Dea’s story became more intriguing as time progressed, particularly as he disappeared between 1917 and 1934 only to be discovered living under an assumed name in California. O’Dea was brought back triumphantly to Wisconsin where his legend was relived, revived and retold in the early 1930s and at various times through to his death in 1962. Little is known about O’Dea in Australia and he does not appear as a significant figure in many recent discussions of football history in the United States. This article explores the career of Pat O’Dea at the University of Wisconsin and his subsequent ‘reappearance’ and examines press coverage of O’Dea in the late 1890s and again in 1934.

## Introduction

A century before Darren Bennett, Dave Nilsson, Luke Longley, Michelle Timms and others embarked on successful professional sporting careers in the United States, brothers Patrick and Andrew O’Dea were prominent Australian figures in American sport. Yet, so little is known of them in Australia that neither appear in the editions of the *Oxford Companion to Australian Sport*, a collection that involved contributions from scores of historians of Australians in sport. This article examines the sporting record of the younger of the O’Dea brothers, Pat, known as the ‘Kangaroo Kicker’, who played elite level football in Melbourne and at the University of Wisconsin and who subsequently disappeared between 1917 and 1934. Drawing on the approach of Michael Oriard in his excellent volume *Reading Football*, I analyse the making and re-making of the O’Dea legend in the print media during his playing days in the late 1890s and after his return to Wisconsin in 1934.

At the time that Pat O’Dea played for the University of Wisconsin (1896-99) college football was in a state of rapid transformation from a

student-driven campus-based activity to a public and popular spectacle. While east coast universities such as Harvard, Yale and Princeton had developed into football powers with their annual games receiving great media attention by the 1890s in the midwest, universities, such as Wisconsin, Chicago, Minnesota and Michigan, were also beginning to attract broad local and regional support. Oriard discusses how the popular press created an American spectacle out of college football in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>2</sup> His work, however, focuses on the east and the New York based press.

Midwestern newspapers began by the second half of the 1890s to give football prominent coverage. In the particular, the Chicago press focussed on several teams in the region and giving particular coverage to the Universities of Chicago, Illinois, Wisconsin, Northwestern and Michigan. At the time, Amos Alonzo Stagg had been appointed professor of physical culture as well as football coach at Chicago and his teams were highly successful Stagg was the first midwestern coach to take his team to play powerful eastern teams and to generate a reputation for midwestern football. According to historian Robin Lester, Chicago's narrow loss to the great Pennsylvania team in 1898 was the game that 'put western football on the map'.<sup>3</sup> In 1899, Chicago, Wisconsin and Michigan all played competitively against eastern teams.

Eastern experts and the media assumed that the standard of Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Pennsylvania and other eastern schools was far superior to the football played anywhere else. The champion school from the east was thought to be the best team in the country. As a result of the perceived east coast superiority and the great travel times to the east, the title of 'champion of the west' began to be awarded to enable teams in the midwest to compete for a championship. The snobbery of Ivy League schools was evidenced in a letter sent from the Yale captain to Pat O'Dea as Wisconsin captain in 1899. Wisconsin was due to travel east to play Yale but could not get Yale to agree to fixed time halves of football. Yale's captain argued that they viewed all matches prior to their game with Princeton as 'practice' games.<sup>4</sup> Eventually an arrangement for 25 minute halves was agreed.

In the 1890s the press began to create sporting heroes and legends through their coverage of football. Leading coaches such as Stagg mentioned frequently and sensational reports of players' exploits began to appear by the late 1890s. The two most prominent college players in the midwest in this period were Clarence Herschberger of Chicago, and Pat O'Dea of Wisconsin. Herschberger was the first non-eastern player to be named to Walter Camp's All-American team and both he and O'Dea were hailed as great kickers.

In the period between 1895 and 1900, football in the midwest rapidly became a popular spectacle with crowds for big games such as Wisconsin vs. Chicago growing from around 5000 to 20,000. By the early 1900s many football playing students began to receive distinctive treatment in the classroom such as special examinations. In addition, in 1903 a recruiting war broke out in

Chicago between the Universities of Chicago and Michigan as they both tried to attract the best high school athletic talent from Chicago's schools. By the early 1900s university athletes became effectively separated from the rest of the student body.<sup>5</sup> In the late 1890s however, students at most institutions tried out for positions in the weeks leading into the football season and team rosters were not entirely predictable from one season to the next. In 1898, for example, Wisconsin nearly had to cancel part of their season due to the lack of players. Mass pep rallies, special trains to away games and media attention all worked to raise popular consciousness of football as a public spectacle. S.W. Pope argues that this was part of a process of creating an elite popular culture that was centred around the exclusive arena of higher education. The annual Thanksgiving Day championship in New York City by the late 1880s became an opening event on the elite social calendar. Such was football's popularity by the 1890s that a 'highly rationalized, profit-oriented entertainment business had' taken the place of older amateur sport.<sup>6</sup> Thus by the time Pat O'Dea's career at Wisconsin began, the media and social elites had begun to place great emphasis on college football.

### **Coming to America: Pat and Andy O'Dea**

Andrew O'Dea was born in 1867 and Patrick John O'Dea in 1872 on a horse, sheep and cattle ranch at Kilmore, about eighty kilometres from Melbourne.<sup>7</sup> The elder O'Dea was 'a famous amateur oarsman, football player and boxer in his youth'. He was a successful rower in the 1880s and competed for the Yarra Yarra club in Melbourne. Andrew went overseas in the 1880s and, according to reports from Wisconsin sources, came to the United States in the retinue of famous Australian boxer Frank (Paddy) Slavin, the 'champion heavyweight of the Antipodes'.<sup>8</sup> Andy O'Dea left Slavin and coached rowing between 1894 and at least 1906. In 1894-95, he coached at the Lurline Boat Club in Minneapolis, Minnesota, from 1895-98 and 1900-1906 at the University of Wisconsin in Madison and during 1899-1900 at Harvard.<sup>9</sup> O'Dea managed to do well financially out of his coaching. On his second stint at Wisconsin, he earned an annual salary of \$1000.<sup>10</sup> O'Dea was responsible for a number of innovations in rowing at Wisconsin. He is, for example, credited with introducing the 'Yarra Yarra' stroke into American rowing. He was particularly successful as a rowing coach at Wisconsin taking his 1896 crew to Yale where they defeated the Yale freshman team in a two-mile race. O'Dea's crews of the early 1900s narrowly lost in major eights races at Poughkeepsie against Ivy League universities, finishing second to Pennsylvania in 1900, third to Cornell in 1901 who set a record time that stood for 27 years, and second again in 1902 to Cornell.<sup>11</sup> O'Dea's talents were also put to good use on the gridiron and he trained Wisconsin's football team in 1898.<sup>12</sup> It was due to Andy O'Dea's presence at Wisconsin that his younger brother Pat appeared there in 1896 and then went on to footballing fame.

Patrick John O’Dea became one of American football’s greatest early heroes. He played for the University of Wisconsin as a full-back from 1896 to 1899 and captained the team for both the 1898 and 1899 seasons. Before going to Wisconsin, though, he became a successful young Victorian Rules football player, playing for the Melbourne Football Club between 1892 and 1894 in the Victorian Football Association competition.<sup>13</sup>

The first mention of O’Dea as a footballer of note came in May 1892. The *Australasian*, reporting on a match between Melbourne and Ballarat at the Melbourne Cricket Ground, stated:

Good goal-getters are a rarity and a blessing, consequently Melbourne may plume themselves on their good fortune in having in their midst two such accurate marksmen as O’Dea and H. Graham. On Saturday, playing against Ballarat . . . each of the men secured a couple of good goals. Those gained by O’Dea were particularly meritorious, as they were handed in each instance from a distance of fully 60 yards.<sup>14</sup>

In 1893, O’Dea was shifted to play centre-wing for Melbourne, a move that utilised his overall speed and his long kicks that sent the Melbourne forwards into attack. *The Australasian*, reporting on the 1893 match between Melbourne and Port Melbourne, commented that ‘The fine long kicks of the last-mentioned player [O’Dea] were of great service to his side, and produced many opportunities of scoring’.<sup>15</sup>

The length of O’Dea’s kicks were the most telling part of his game in both Australian and American football, though he was also noted for his speed. He often used a special ‘twirling’ kick that went very high in the air and dropped almost straight down on opposing players. This style was adapted from the drop-punt end over end kick common in Australian football rather than the spiral or torpedo punt used in American football.<sup>16</sup> The end result was a kicking style that was unique and caused opposing players to fumble many of his kicks.<sup>17</sup> Other aspects of O’Dea’s play were occasionally suspect in both codes. A report from 1894 comments on how he started a match very well but ‘except in his kicking, which was always a telling item’ he ‘fell away’ as the game went on.<sup>18</sup> No doubt O’Dea would have gone on to a very successful career in Australian football, but he departed just prior to the formation of the Victorian Football League, which, in 1897, was designed to pit the top sides against each other in annual league competition.

### **Making the Legend of the Kangaroo Kicker**

Pat O’Dea arrived in Wisconsin in 1896 reportedly to pay a surprise visit to his brother Andy and because he was ‘tired of Australia’.<sup>19</sup> Legend has it that Pat turned up during a football practice and punted a stray ball back to the team

whereupon he was asked to join the team. He played in a game against Lake Forest in 1896, reportedly averaging over fifty yards on his five punts, but broke his arm in practice a week later and was out for the rest of the season.<sup>20</sup> One punt sailed over the opposition for a total distance of 85 yards.<sup>21</sup> Wisconsin went on to be 'Champions of the West' in 1896 winning all their games except for a tied game with Northwestern. Some later accounts incorrectly state that O'Dea led the Wisconsin Badgers to the western championship in 1896.<sup>22</sup>

O'Dea really began to make his American footballing name in the 1897 season and increasingly Wisconsin's style of play centred on O'Dea's kicking. At the time, field goals were worth five points, a touchdown four and conversions and safeties two each. In 1898 a touchdown was increased in value to five points, but still equal in value to a field goal, while the conversion was reduced from two points to one. Thus a quality goal kicker could make a big difference in an age when most games between top teams were low-scoring affairs. In the first game of 1897, O'Dea played only the first half, scoring a touchdown and a goal as Wisconsin beat Lake Forest 30-0.<sup>23</sup> In the game against Minnesota on 30 October, O'Dea's kicking helped the Badgers to a 39-0 win, the first time Wisconsin had ever won at Minnesota. The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* front page headline reported the following day that 'O'Dea's Kicking, Including a Goal from the 40-Yard Line, the Feature of the Game' as Wisconsin won in front of 6000 fans. The *Pioneer Press* reported that 'His kicking was wonderful, Minnesota could not handle his long high punts. O'Dea often punted from 50 to 60 yards. He made a drop kick from the forty-yard line that was startling'. The *Pioneer Press* also commented on the length and height of O'Dea's kicks that allowed teammates to move down the field to stop potential punt returns.<sup>24</sup>

Another feature of O'Dea's play was his ability to kick on the run, often at full speed after running for several yards, and then punt the ball downfield, a tactic helped by his training in Australian football. On one play in the Minnesota game he ran ten yards and booted a sixty yard punt, on another he ran fifteen yards before punting down field forty yards whereby Wisconsin recovered the ball. O'Dea came off late in the game after making several long runs and punts of fifty yards or more and scoring field goals.<sup>25</sup> The Minnesota game was also covered by the *Chicago Tribune* which stated that:

Wisconsin has a star kicker in O'Dea, and he was used on every possible occasion. He did all manner of kicking, from a single punt half way across the field to a goal from the field and a drop kick goal after a kick out. Nothing prettier has been seen on this field for a long time than the manner in which he kicked the goal from the field.<sup>26</sup>

The following week at home, Wisconsin struggled to defeat a stubborn Beloit team. O'Dea's kicking was again a feature of the game,<sup>27</sup> and one report

commented that O'Dea 'saved the game' with a drop goal as Wisconsin won 11-0.<sup>28</sup> It is likely that the team suffered a let-down after the big win at Minnesota and took Beloit too lightly in looking forward to their confrontation with the University of Chicago that would likely determine the champion team of the West. At the game, Chicago's Clarence Herschberger scouted the Badgers, and O'Dea in particular, in attempts to find a weakness.

After only a few games, O'Dea was rapidly establishing himself as a star football player in the midwest. His reputation was secured in the 13 November game against Stagg's powerful University of Chicago team. The game was discussed in the press with great anticipation. The *Milwaukee Journal* stated on the eve of the game that:

it is probable that Milwaukee will send a large delegation to the game, for it is attracting unusual interest in all quarters'. On 'change, in the restaurants and everywhere that men meet for a short talk, the conversation eventually swings to the merits of O'Dea and Herschberger as kicking full backs or the chances of the Badgers.<sup>29</sup>

Herschberger was unable to play and his replacement was no match for O'Dea as Wisconsin defeated Chicago for the second straight season, winning 23-8. The *Chicago Tribune* stated: 'O'Dea's great kicking does it' and published a drawing depicting O'Dea preparing to kick on page three of its Sunday edition. A record crowd to that time of nearly 10,000 spectators turned out to watch the match:

An enormous throng of people filled the grandstands to bursting and lined up ten rows deep all along the edge of the great whitewashed field. The spectators stood on sawhorses, overturned barrels, and the covering of the grandstand. They sat astride of fences, peered out of windows, and hung on to telegraph poles. Far off in the distance – so far that the individuals in the mass were scarcely distinguishable – the roofs of overlooking buildings were black with people.<sup>30</sup>

An estimated 2000 Wisconsin students travelled down to Chicago for the game along with the university's band. The students were also equipped with horns to increase their noise-making capacity. The *Tribune's* report on the game itself began with the simple words 'O'Dea did it' followed by a description of O'Dea: 'He is the slender, light-haired young man who plays full back for Wisconsin and is known in Madison as the "Kangaroo Kicker."' First he won the game and then he saved it, and afterwards his colleagues profited by the state of mind in which Chicago had been put and won it all over again several

times'.<sup>31</sup> After Wisconsin scored a fluke touchdown, O'Dea put them further in front with a forty yard drop goal. Despite the praise for O'Dea, he was unsuccessful on several attempts at goal, but the reporting in both Chicago and Milwaukee downplayed the missed kicks. The *Milwaukee Journal* was effusive in its praise: 'O'Dea was given plenty of time to get off his kicks and no fullback ever kicked better. He was the bright star of the day'. The *Journal* did go on to suggest, however, 'While he fell down sadly on his kicking from touchdowns and only scored one field goal from five tries, his work was beautiful to watch'. Additionally, the *Journal* commented that he fumbled several punts. The report ended praising his running' ability and the punt of the day that travelled 65 yards.<sup>32</sup> At this stage, then we see a fairly balanced view of O'Dea through discussion of his great kicking exploits, but tempered with comment on missed kicks and other aspects of his game that were not up to the expected high standard.

The focus on O'Dea's kicking exploits came at a time when calls for banning football were growing ever louder. A leading Chicago alderman, Nathan Plotke, attended the Wisconsin-Chicago game and was horrified at the brutality. The *Chicago Tribune* of 14 November 1897 reported on the growing 'revolt' against football as many argued the game was too violent. It repeated an argument from the *New York Times* that suggested 'the game is too much played by college students; it takes too much of their time, and enlists a degree of interest and attention altogether disproportionate to its importance in the schemes of man's existence on earth'.<sup>33</sup> Many calls were made for reform to take the game closer to rugby union or association football or to at least open up the game. With teams willing to charge at the line and play for position through kicking, O'Dea's style of play was well suited to the game as it was played then and the attention drawn to his kicking ability helped to divert attention from some of the more unsavoury aspects of line play.

Wisconsin sealed the Western championship of 1897 after its 27 November 22-0 victory over Northwestern on a cold rainy day with the field in terrible condition. As a result, only 3000 fans turned out. O'Dea was again an effective punter, but the conditions made goal kicking difficult. O'Dea left the field before the end of the game for the second time in the season.<sup>34</sup> With reports throughout the season concentrating on his kicking achievements in leading Wisconsin to its victories, O'Dea's fame was on the way to being secure.

O'Dea was named captain of the Wisconsin team for the 1898 and 1899 seasons. Although the team did not repeat its championships of 1896 and 1897, O'Dea performed numerous kicking feats during his final two seasons for the Badgers. Wisconsin lost most of its starting players after 1897, with only three returning for 1898. Early season results in warm-up games saw Wisconsin defeat Ripon 52-0, Dixon 76-0 and Rush 42-0. The future of O'Dea's career as a football player was in doubt during the 1898 season, however, as athletic and other leaders at the University of Wisconsin called for the cancelling of all

games and the disbanding of the football team after three games due to a shortage of players. At a mass meeting on 27 October, prominent members of the faculty, community, coach Phil King and team captain O'Dea spoke. O'Dea urged Wisconsin men to not only support the team but to participate as players:

The support accorded to the football team this year has been exceedingly disheartening. It is all very well to get out to the games and root, but rooting will not win our games for us. What we want is more candidates out on the field, and when they come out to stay out; not come out for one night, then quit. It is a lamentable fact to have men quit because they do not get a show in the first games. A position on the team can only be made by good, honest, hard work. If a man should not get a place on the team let him get down and work hard and say to himself, "I'll make the team." This is the right kind of spirit: the spirit of a man and a true Wisconsin student.<sup>35</sup>

With the main games of the season against Minnesota, Chicago and Northwestern lying ahead, the crisis was a very serious one. The team survived the crisis but headed into the big three games as decided underdogs according to the University of Wisconsin's daily newspaper.<sup>36</sup>

Wisconsin's team came through with flying colours in the first of their important games, defeating Minnesota 29-0 with a team of largely new players and without O'Dea who was unable to play. On 12 November, Wisconsin faced Chicago, which fielded one of its most powerful teams, in front of 10,000 spectators. The Chicago team proved too strong for the smaller Badgers winning 6-0. After the game a mass rally of Wisconsin supporters was held at the Victoria Hotel in Chicago with the Governor of Wisconsin in attendance. The crowd cheered their heroes as if they had won the game. Governor Scofield led off with a speech praising the Badgers. Then Pat O'Dea was:

cheered and cheered again as he stepped into view. The light-haired Australian was apparently a vastly different man from the mud-begrimmed warrior that fought such a good fight against odds but a few hours before. He seemed to take defeat hard, but no one could withstand that cheering and a smile crept over his face. As he stepped on to the desk the air was filled with hats and canes. Cardinal banners were again unfurled, and for a few moments pandemonium reigned. O'Dea's face brightened as he started to speak, and at the first sound of his voice the rotunda became quiet. "I am sorry we did not win but boys they had a better team. It has been a hard fight, and the sweetest part of it is to see you fellows here, cheering as if we had won for you."<sup>37</sup>

The *Chicago Tribune* again led praise for O'Dea with its report of the Wisconsin rally, the game and again through the depiction of O'Dea in a large drawing in kicking pose. The *Tribune* qualified its praise at the end of the season, however, in discussing its All-Western team. The *Tribune* stated: 'No better kicking full back than Pat O'Dea of Wisconsin exists, and his ability as a drop kicker is too well known to be commented on but he is weak in other departments of the game'.<sup>38</sup>

Wisconsin closed out its 1898 season with a resounding 47-0 victory over Northwestern on Thanksgiving Day. Again O'Dea led the team by example: 'Every one figured that O'Dea would work havoc with the chances of the home team, but that he would do such phenomenal punting and drop-kicking as that which electrified the crowd was beyond the wildest dreams of his most ardent supporters'.<sup>39</sup> O'Dea kicked a record drop goal from about sixty yards out (the official record was later reported as 62 yards) and repeatedly struck high, long punts of sixty yards. His punting was so successful that the *Chicago Tribune* described it as 'miraculous'.<sup>40</sup>

In 1899, O'Dea played his final season for the Badgers returning to captain the team for a second year. Wisconsin began well with a 36-0 win over Beloit with O'Dea scoring three field goals from four attempts and a touchdown run that began on his own ten yard line.<sup>41</sup> On Friday 13 October the University of Wisconsin's daily newspaper, *The Daily Cardinal*, urged students to attend the 'Greatest Ever Event in the History of Football' by coming to a mass meeting at Library Hall to 'arouse enthusiasm for Northwestern and Yale games'. For the first time in the history of Wisconsin mass meetings, female students of the University also attended. Mass meetings such as this, which later became known as pep rallies, began at Wisconsin in 1893 prior to the annual game with Minnesota. The Badgers were soundly defeated in the game and the meetings were abandoned until 1896. From that time they became an important feature of the calendar during Wisconsin's football season.<sup>42</sup> Buoyed by the student support and the 4000 present at the game, the Badgers at their Camp Randall home field soundly defeated Northwestern the next day by 38-0. The *Daily Cardinal* reported that one of O'Dea's punts travelled 75 yards, while the *Chicago Tribune* commented on a sixty yard punt, another that sailed over the heads of the opposition and the success of O'Dea's 'twister' kicks that soared high in the air allowing his teammates to cover the opposition and force several fumbles.<sup>43</sup>

After the game with Northwestern, the Wisconsin team headed east for their 21 October game against Yale. Prior to the game, Wisconsin held practices in secret to avoid Yale scouts.<sup>44</sup> The easterners played with the wind in the first half and O'Dea was called upon several times to punt out of trouble. At half time the score was 0-0. University President C.K. Adams sent a message to O'Dea to encourage the team. In the second half with the wind, O'Dea unleashed some of the longest kicks ever recorded in a football game,

with punts of eighty and 72 yards reported on the day. Against the run of play, Yale scored on a 95 yard touchdown run to win 6-0.<sup>45</sup> In the *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, Pat O'Dea accepted blame for allowing the Yale player to elude him. The *Tribune* also stated that O'Dea's longest kick travelled 75 yards in the air. An analysis of the game by Walter Camp, Yale coach and founder of modern American football, was included in the game coverage. Camp praised O'Dea's punting skills and commented on the overall quality of the Wisconsin team.<sup>46</sup>

O'Dea came away battle-scarred from the Yale game but played brilliantly under an injury cloud in the 11 November game where Wisconsin defeated Illinois 23-0 in front of 5000 spectators in Milwaukee. Prior to the game, the *Chicago Tribune* argued that O'Dea's form in 1899 had been poor in comparison with the previous two seasons and that he was not in the best of condition.<sup>47</sup> It is possible, though, that O'Dea carried injuries throughout the first part of the season. The next day, however, the *Sunday Tribune* called O'Dea's performance a 'triumph'. O'Dea's high kicks again caused many fumbles and he struck a brilliant drop-goal of sixty yards.<sup>48</sup> Later this kick was hailed as a college football drop-kicking record made even greater due to the high wind and poor conditions.<sup>49</sup> O'Dea followed up the Illinois performance with another great kicking display in the Badgers' 19-0 defeat of Minnesota the following week in Minneapolis in front of 6000 spectators. O'Dea scored two drop-goals and a safety amassing twelve of the team's nineteen points.<sup>50</sup> The *Minneapolis Journal* reported that one of the drop goals was scored from fifty yards out on the run after O'Dea dodged an opposing player.<sup>51</sup> Wisconsin then had a record of four wins over leading Western teams and the sole loss to Yale heading into the Thanksgiving Day game against Michigan.

The Third Mass Meeting of the 1899 season was called for Tuesday, 28 November prior to the Thanksgiving Day battle against 1898 western champions Michigan. New songs were composed for the occasion, including one specifically about Pat O'Dea to the then popular tune of 'Margery':

Oh, Pat O'Dea

The greatest, strongest team in all this land so free,  
 A speedy team so fine,  
 The Card'nal's ninety-nine,  
 A team sublime.  
 And every team that meets her, fate decrees to fall;  
 For it's completely lost when Pat's leg kicks the ball.  
 One kick from this brawny iron leg will cause the foe  
     To wail and woe;  
 For Pat's the only boy in all this land so free,  
 This famous punter, Pat O'Dea.

Chorus:

Oh Pat O’Dea, oh Pat O’Dea,  
    We love you more and more.  
Oh Pat O’Dea, oh Pat O’Dea,  
    You’re the boy that we adore;  
        Your leg is ever sure and true,  
        And always kicks a goal or two.  
        The team and rooters worship you.  
Oh Pat O’Dea.

To this brave lad forever we shall proudly sing.  
He is the boy we love.  
And in the games we play  
The cry “O’Dea,”  
We’ll yell to every foe, because their game will show  
There is no other lad to see like Pat O’Dea.  
The East and West will surely have to see  
That we can’t lose in Patrick’s shoes,  
For he’s the only boy in all this land so free,  
The famous punter, Pat O’Dea.<sup>52</sup>

The meeting was not only a pep rally to urge on the players, but a practice session so that Wisconsin fans would be coordinated in their cheering at the game in Chicago. Governor George W. Peck agreed to lead a section of Badgers fans in the cheering at the game following a precedent set by Theodore Roosevelt at Yale-Princeton games. Special trains ran from Madison and Milwaukee to carry Badger supporters to Chicago.

The Mass Meeting’s efforts were successful and an inspired Wisconsin team defeated the larger Michigan team 17-5 in front of another record Chicago crowd estimated to be as high as 30,000 though managers at the game claimed that only 22,000 fans attended. Michigan tried to rough up O’Dea during the game. After a half of such play, O’Dea became frustrated and punched one of the Michigan players. He was ordered from the field for the rest of the game with Wisconsin in front at the time by 11-0. The Chicago Tribune printed a large drawing of O’Dea kicking on the run encaptioned ‘Full Back Patrick O’Dea of the Wisconsin Team Making One of His Sensational Kicks’.<sup>53</sup>

As a result of the Wisconsin victory, both the Badgers and the University of Chicago remained unbeaten by other Western teams. An end-of-season battle was arranged for 9 December in Madison for the Western championship. The 8000 seats built around Camp Randall field were overflowing for the game that would be both O’Dea and Coach Phil King’s last for Wisconsin. Unfortunately for them, Stagg’s Chicago team was too good on the day winning 11-0. The *Chicago Sunday Tribune* reported that ‘The game was spectacular. Madison went football crazy. From end to end the little lake-bound city was covered with cardinal. Every house was draped in cardinal. Special trains ran from

Chicago and all the Wisconsin towns sent in crowds'. O'Dea and former Chicago star Herschberger gave a kicking display for the crowd before the game. For once during a game O'Dea was outperformed in the kicking department by Chicago's Kennedy.<sup>54</sup>

Thus Pat O'Dea ended his college football career on a slightly sour note. Still, he had been a highly successful full back and kicker in his three main seasons at Wisconsin, helping the team to win the Western championship in 1897 and to come close in 1898 and 1899 losing to the University of Chicago in both seasons and narrowly losing to Yale in 1899 in the team's first foray to the east. O'Dea was widely known in the midwest for his kicking prowess and won admirers in the east as well with his punting against Yale. O'Dea's feats as a kicker were widely recognised. Indeed, O'Dea sometimes tried to psyche out opposition fans at away matches by drop kicking fifty and sixty yard goals during Wisconsin's pre-game warm-ups with the kicks having the desired effect of silencing the home crowd. Wisconsin's style of play between 1897 and 1899 revolved around O'Dea's superb kicking skills. In the 1890s there was no forward pass in American football and the game was much closer to rugby union in style, though the distinct American invention of the line of scrimmage had already appeared. Play revolved around ball control and positional kicking, the latter of which O'Dea proved to be one of, if not the best, exponents.

American reports referred to O'Dea's success as a football player in Australia before coming to Wisconsin, though some reports erroneously reported him as playing rugby or soccer rather than Victorian (Australian) Rules. O'Dea also was successful in athletics, particularly in the 120 and 220 yards hurdles, though he had not run hurdles prior to coming to Wisconsin. He won several dual meets and took second in a dead heat at the Western Conference (forerunner of the Big 10) championships meet in 1898 where he ran a fifth of a second outside the then world record of 15 1/5 seconds for the 120 hurdles. He also reportedly ran the quarter-mile in fifty seconds.<sup>55</sup> The *Wisconsin Athletic Review* referred to O'Dea as:

essentially the greyhound type of athlete. He was 6 feet 1 ½ inches in height and never weighed, in condition, over 173 pounds. His average playing weight was 163. He was beautifully proportioned, with long, smooth, rippling muscles, sloping shoulders and the easy, graceful coordination of a wild animal. His legs were abnormally long and wonderfully developed, particularly his thighs.<sup>56</sup>

While O'Dea's records cannot be precisely determined as reports of them vary, it is clear that he was regarded as the longest kicker of his day and one of the two or three best overall to have played before the rule changes of 1906 that allowed the forward pass and lessened the significance of fullback kicking.

After an unsuccessful bid to succeed Phil King as Wisconsin's football coach, O'Dea went on to coach at Notre Dame and Missouri in the four seasons after his 1900 graduation in law from Wisconsin. After that, O'Dea went to San Francisco and practised law for an uncertain amount of time. In 1914, he assisted in coaching the Stanford rowing team, but by 1917 he had disappeared. He later claimed he was tired of his football fame and constant conversations about his 'mere student days of the past'.<sup>57</sup> O'Dea stated that he had to disappear so that he could live a normal life. The dominant story that emerged about O'Dea's sudden disappearance suggested he joined an ANZAC<sup>58</sup> regiment of Australian soldiers that stopped in San Francisco in 1917 on its way to France and that he was subsequently killed in World War One.

In 1934, however, it was discovered that a man named Charles J. Mitchell who was working as a statistician for a Californian lumber company was in fact Pat O'Dea. As Mitchell, O'Dea became the secretary-manager of the Westwood Auto Club and a director of the Lassen Volcanic Park Association, a group that led a fight for better roads in northern California. O'Dea defended his 'disappearance' by stating that people only wanted to talk to him about his football prowess, which hindered him from operating as a citizen in real life. Thus, he changed his name and disappeared.<sup>59</sup> In 1934, the chairman of the board of the Red River Lumber Company, Willis Walker, who had played tackle for the University of Minnesota in 1896 heard that Mitchell was O'Dea and contacted University of Wisconsin officials who asked for pictures to confirm. Mitchell's true identity was exposed in one of the stories of the decade and Pat O'Dea reappeared to widespread rejoicing in 1934. Wisconsin invited him as their special guest for the homecoming game against the University of Illinois featuring O'Dea on the cover of the game program and labelling the event as 'Wisconsin's Greatest Homecoming'.<sup>60</sup> With this, Pat O'Dea was hailed in two eras. He was a legendary figure for his punting and goal-kicking as a player in the late 1890s and again as a mysterious figure thought dead who returned to life 35 years after his last game as a player.

### **Re-Making the Legend of Pat O'Dea**

The making of O'Dea as a hero was constructed and reconstructed by the media in the late 1890s and then during and after his reappearance in 1934 until his death in 1962. The local and midwestern regional press certainly built up an aura of almost superhuman abilities around O'Dea in their efforts to portray him as a hero of dramatic proportions. O'Dea's relative exoticism as an Australian and the connection with the powerful legs of kangaroos made him even more of a novelty than he would have been as a long American kicker. Indeed, over time, some of O'Dea's kicks became longer and more spectacular in the retelling. With the reappearance of O'Dea in 1934 after seventeen years in 'hiding', stories of O'Dea's physical exploits resurfaced, especially in Wisconsin and California. Following his reappearance, between October and

December 1934, a series of reports were written that referred to O'Dea as the greatest kicker of all time, even though in the 1890s there were several players, including Herschberger, with whom O'Dea was frequently compared by sportswriters of the day. The O'Dea legend was recounted in the media several times after 1934 with features in the 1950s and again following his death in 1962.

With O'Dea as the guest of honour at Wisconsin's 1934 homecoming game, the game and events surrounding it were described the most fabled homecoming in Wisconsin history. The *Wisconsin News* in Milwaukee published a twelve part series of articles written by Roy L. Foley to commemorate O'Dea's return. The articles focused on O'Dea's life and exploits as a football player calling him the 'greatest football kicker and punter of all time'.<sup>61</sup> Before his return, O'Dea was mentioned on occasion in University of Wisconsin Souvenir Programs for football games, but the attention he received in 1934 was phenomenal. After all, most people had assumed he was killed in action during World War One.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, O'Dea became a hallowed figure at Wisconsin in the years after the War with any artifact linked to O'Dea viewed as 'sacred' and O'Dea thought of as a 'superman'.<sup>63</sup>

On the Friday night before Wisconsin's homecoming game against Illinois, O'Dea addressed 5000 students, alumni and townspeople stating 'I know that the team will win the game in fine style just as we did years ago'. A new march written by Frank Fosgate of Madison was unveiled for the game entitled 'Badger Hero' in honour of O'Dea.<sup>64</sup> On the Saturday morning prior to the game a reception honouring O'Dea was held in the Great Hall of the Memorial Union on campus attended by several former teammates. It was reported that coach Phil King told the 1899 team captained by O'Dea that he would give them all the ale they could drink if they scored in the first two minutes of the game and that O'Dea kicked an early drop goal of 62 yards.<sup>65</sup> This story is certainly exaggerated, though it has been repeated in many subsequent accounts. The game reports at the time did not mention an early long goal. The *Chicago Tribune* stated that Wisconsin moved down the field early and four minutes into the game O'Dea slotted an easy 25 yard goal.<sup>66</sup> Further embellishment of O'Dea's kicking exploits was already being made such as his long punts against Yale were upgraded to 110 and even 117 yards.<sup>67</sup> The homecoming *Souvenir Program and Athletic Review* published for the game featured a drawing of O'Dea on the cover in kicking pose with the lead story by George F. Downer entitled 'Pat O'Dea's Kicking Feats Still Amaze Football Fans'. Downer argued that O'Dea was a football star thirty years too soon and, had he been playing in the 1930s 'his name would echo from coast to coast'. Downer also discussed O'Dea's 1899 long drop goal against Minnesota at some length stating that witnesses placed O'Dea near the sideline and that some accounts have the kick at sixty yards. The player O'Dea eluded on the play was Gilmour Dobie, the coach of Cornell University in 1934. Dobie stated that the kick was

the greatest individual play he ever witnessed in a football game. It appears that if Downer's reconstruction of events is accurate, then the kick travelled at least 55 yards and possibly sixty.<sup>68</sup> Downer also discussed O'Dea's record 1898 drop goal against Northwestern and states that those present commented on how the kick sailed well beyond the posts and travelled 75-80 yards in total.<sup>69</sup> In the same *Athletic Review*, an advertisement for Madison Gas and Electric Company paid tribute to O'Dea, stating his record kick was made in a snowstorm.<sup>70</sup>

In 1949 O'Dea was named to the University of Wisconsin Hall of Fame as one of the top 23 athletes in all sports in the history of the university. Again the story of his arrival, exploits, disappearance and return were reported in the university's daily newspaper.<sup>71</sup> Pat O'Dea died on 4 April 1962 at the age of ninety after an illness. While he was in hospital he received a get-well message from President John Kennedy. O'Dea's obituary in the *New York Times* commented on his kicking achievements including a 110 yard punt, though against Minnesota in 1897 and not Yale in 1899, and his 62 yard goal against Northwestern in 1898.<sup>72</sup>

### **Conclusion: The Kangaroo Kicker, Memory and History**

All too often, the history of sport has been constructed through the memories of those who played or through those who would shape history to their own economic or political ends. The mythical histories of the origins of baseball, rugby union and Australian football are striking examples of this process. On a smaller scale, Steve Hardy has shown in his case study of the development of ice hockey at one New Hampshire school how 'memory twists written as well as lived history'.<sup>73</sup> In the case of Pat O'Dea's kicking achievements, journalists in 1934 often relied on verification of kick distances and events through oral histories provided by O'Dea's contemporaries who had played with him 35 years before. As a result, O'Dea's remarkable kicking feats were made even more astounding. Apocryphal stories such as the one about O'Dea scoring at the beginning of the game to win the beer offered by coach King have become accepted and quoted by historians and journalists writing in 1980s and 1990s when they discuss O'Dea's football achievements.<sup>74</sup>

In the late 1890s press reports commented frequently on O'Dea's skills that were often thought to be unique and in advance of his contemporaries. The reports do, however, suggest that a more balanced view of O'Dea was held at the time. When he was compared to other great players of the day, O'Dea was positioned in the top rank of kicking backs, but by no means was he viewed as superior in all facets of the game. We must allow for a measure of boosterism in the University of Wisconsin sources on O'Dea's career in presenting him as the 'greatest kicker who ever lived'. In order to set the historical record straight, however, we must go beyond the reports released at the time of O'Dea's triumphant return to Wisconsin in 1934 and carefully explore the sources from his playing days both in Australia and the USA.

Pat O'Dea became a star in American college football at a time when press coverage of the game was rapidly increasing. Mass circulation newspapers such as the *Chicago Tribune* had the ability to turn players from local into regional heroes with reputations that were often highly sensationalist. O'Dea finished his career at a time when coverage of football in the midwest was beginning to take the game to a new level of importance. Had he played a few years later, he may have been even more of a popular figure. The rule changes of 1906 that brought in the forward pass, however, changed the nature of the game, and the role of kicking was marginalised as an attacking strategy. The gradual decline in the value of field goals and the rise of the value of touchdowns also meant the kicking goals from the field became less important than during the late 1890s. O'Dea's skills were ideal for the type of football played during the 1890s and Wisconsin was able to build their attacking strategy around his kicking to great effect winning two western championships and narrowly missing two others in the four years O'Dea played football for the University.

## NOTES:

1. Thanks to Melissa Walsh for research assistance and to Robin Crow for providing me with some material on Pat O'Dea in Australian football during 1892-94 and Steve Pope provided me with some initial biographical information on O'Dea in American sources. Librarians at the University of Wisconsin's Archives were most helpful during my work there on O'Dea in 1997. I would also like to thank members of the Melbourne Seminar of the Australian Society for Sports History for their perceptive comments on an earlier version of this work.
2. Michael Oriard, *Reading Football: How the Press Created an American Sporting Spectacle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).
3. Robin Lester, *Stagg's University: The Rise, Decline and Fall of Big-Time Football at Chicago* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 44.
4. *Chicago Tribune*, 8 October 1899; *Daily Cardinal*, 11 October 1899.
5. Lester, *Stagg's University*, 51-4.
6. S.W. Pope, *Patriotic Games: Sporting Traditions in the American Imagination 1876-1926* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 89.
7. A number of accounts erroneously report Pat O'Dea's year of birth as 1876. The birth record of Pat O'Dea in the Victorian Archives in Melbourne have his date of birth as 1872.
8. George F. Downer, 'Pat O'Dea's Kicking Feats Still Amaze Football Fans', *Wisconsin Athletic Review*, 17 November 1934, 9.

9. 'Wisconsin Crews Have Done Well in Adversity', *Wisconsin Athletic Review*, 11 October 1930, 16.
10. University of Wisconsin Archives, Andrew O'Dea Faculty Employment Card.
11. 'Wisconsin Crews Have Done Well', 16-17.
12. *Chicago Tribune*, 23 November 1898.
13. Several leading VFA teams broke away in 1897 to form the Victorian Football League, the precursor to today's Australian Football League of which the Melbourne Football Club is still a member. Melbourne was the first Victorian or Australian Rules football club formed in 1858 and drew many of its players in the 1890s from the private schools in Victoria.
14. *The Australasian*, 14 May 1892. Thanks to Robin Grow references from *The Australasian*.
15. *The Australasian*, 20 May 1893.
16. It was more common for players in Australian football to use the torpedo or spiral punt in this period than it is today. Torpedo punts are only used on occasion to gain extra distance, but accuracy is sacrificed.
17. A discussion of O'Dea's kicking style appears in Downer, 'Pat O'Dea's Kicking Feats', 11.
18. *The Australasian*, 14 July 1894.
19. *Wisconsin News* (Milwaukee), 29 November 1934, The *Wisconsin News* published a twelve part series on O'Dea written by Roy L. Foley upon O'Dea's reappearance in 1934.
20. *Official Football Program, Wisconsin vs Lawrence and Carlton Colleges*, University of Wisconsin, 4 October 1930, 25.
21. *The Daily Cardinal* (University of Wisconsin, Madison), 12 October 1896; *The Alumni Cardinal*, 14 October 1896.
22. For example, see Wiley Lee Umphlett, *Creating the Big Game: John W. Heisman and the Invention of American Football* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), 61; and Tom Perrin, *Football: A College History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1987), 34.
23. *Daily Cardinal*, 4 October. 1897.
24. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, 31 October 1897, 1. The banner headline was 'Badgers Know How to Play the Game' while a sub-head title read 'O'Dea's Kicking, Including a Goal From the 40-yard Line, the Feature of the Game'. The University of Wisconsin's *Daily*

*Cardinal*, 30 October 1897, 1, only reported a goal of 30 yards, but later reports extended the goal out as far as 50 yards. See, 'Wisconsin-Minnesota Football History', *Wisconsin Athletic Review* 29 (October 1921): 12.

25. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, 31 October 1897.
26. *Chicago Tribune*, 31 October 1897.
27. *Daily Cardinal*, 8 November 1897.
28. *Chicago Tribune*, 7 November 1897.
29. *Milwaukee Journal*, 12 November 1897.
30. *Chicago Tribune*, 14 November 1897.
31. *Chicago Tribune*, 14 November 1897.
32. *Milwaukee Journal*, 15 November 1897.
33. *Chicago Tribune*, 14 November 1897.
34. *Daily Cardinal*, 29 November 1897. Later reports summarising O'Dea's career stated he only came off once, but close scrutiny of the evidence shows that he left early in several games where Wisconsin had a good lead or when he had taken a particularly hard physical pounding, and one case where he was sent off.
35. *Daily Cardinal*, 27 October 1898.
36. *Daily Cardinal*, 27 October 1898.
37. *Chicago Tribune*, 13 November 1898.
38. *Chicago Tribune*, 25 November 1898.
39. *Chicago Tribune*, 25 November 1898.
40. *Chicago Tribune*, 25 November 1898.
41. *Chicago Tribune*, 8 October 1899.
42. *Daily Cardinal*, 13 October 1899.
43. *Daily Cardinal*, 14 October 1899; *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, 15 October 1899. The 75 yard kick referred to by the *Daily Cardinal* is the same one the *Tribune* mentioned as going over the heads of the Northwestern players.
44. *Chicago Tribune*, 20 October 1899, special report by Andrew M. O'Dea.

45. *Daily Cardinal*, 21 October 1899.
46. *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, 22 October 1899.
47. *Chicago Tribune*, 11 November 1899.
48. *Daily Cardinal*, 11 November 1899; *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, 12 November 1899.
49. Downer, 'Pat O'Dea's Kicking Feats', 12.
50. *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, 19 November 1899.
51. *Minneapolis Journal*, 19 November 1899.
52. *Daily Cardinal*, 27 November 1899.
53. *Chicago Tribune*, 1 December 1899.
54. *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, 10 December 1899.
55. Downer, 'Pat O'Dea's Kicking Feats', 9.
56. Downer, 'Pat O'Dea's Kicking Feats', 9.
57. Bill Leiser, 'O'Dea, Lost Grid Immortal, Comes to Life', *Sun Francisco Chronicle Sporting Green*, 19 September 1934, 1.
58. The ANZACs were the Australian and New Zealand forces that fought in World War One and were made most famous in their role leading the charge of allied forces at Gallipoli in 1916 where many thousands died. ANZAC Day is commemorated each year in both countries.
59. Leiser, 'O'Dea, Lost Grid Immortal', 1.
60. *Wisconsin Athletic Review*, 17 November 1934, 6.
61. *Wisconsin News*, 21 November 1934.
62. For example, see *Official Football Program and Athletic Review Wisconsin vs. North Dakota State and Bradley*, 3 October 1934, 46.
63. *Daily Cardinal*, 26 September 1934.
64. *Daily Cardinal*, 17 November 1934.
65. *Daily Cardinal*, 18 November 1934.
66. *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, 15 October 1899.

67. *Daily Cardinal*, 18 November 1934.
68. Downer, 'Pat O'Dea's Kicking Feats', 8.
69. Downer, 'Pat O'Dea's Kicking Feats', 12
70. *Wisconsin Athletic Review Homecoming 1934*, 30.
71. *Daily Cardinal*, 4 June 1949.
72. *New York Times*, 5 April 1962.
73. Stephen Hardy, 'Performance, Memory and History: The Making of American Hockey at St. Paul's School, 1860-1915', *International Journal of the History of Sport* 14 no.1 (April 1997): 99.
74. Perrin, *Football: A College History*, 34.