

Reviews

John Sayle Watterson, *College Football: History, Spectacle, Controversy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. ix-xiv+456pp. US\$34.95 (hardcover).

Ever since Allison Danzig's landmark 1956 book on American college football (*The History of American Football*), sport historians have been waiting for another well-written work about college football's storied past which would bring the tale up to modern times, while also expanding Danzig's work with a serious study of the sport's cultural and political past. Finally, with the release of John Watterson's *College Football* by Johns Hopkins University Press, we have a book that goes a long way towards filling that void. Watterson, a history professor at James Madison University, has written a number of articles on the early history of college football and brings a careful attention to research and an accessible writing style to this long-awaited work.

Rather than focussing on great games, great teams and one season after another, Watterson tackles the political and organisational side of football's history. Drawing heavily on primary sources, along with contemporary newspaper and magazine writings, he examines the notable events in the governance of the sport; affairs that significantly contributed to the gradual transformation of the American game into what we see today. Watterson takes up his story with the origins of big-time football in the nineteenth century, including the major controversies of the 1890s that evolved from the game's increasing violence and serious injuries (p. 29). From the earliest days of the sport the 'Big Three' universities of the East (Harvard, Princeton and Yale) had served as the leaders in football's innovations in the style of play and rules. Their influence quickly made its way across the country in the 1890s as former players from the Big three were eagerly sought as teachers and coaches, thus providing much of the example for the prototypes of big-time college football administration that evolved.

After examining the crisis of 1905-1906 when college football faced the threat of being outlawed, and detailing just how little influence teddy Roosevelt really had on matters (contrary to usual football mythology), Watterson reviews the even more significant battles over the rules in 1910 that directly provided the origins of modern football. The struggles of 1910 ultimately overcame Walter Camp's continued opposition to forward passing and eliminated the mass plays that had evolved since 1906, a topic that is one of the most significant in the sport's history yet is frequently ignored in most attempts at football history.

The author continues with the overemphasis and abuses of the 1920s, concluding that by the end of that great period in the game's history, 'no longer was college football – or for that matter, coaching – the preserve of the

“gentleman amateur.” It had matured overnight into a well-paid profession’ (p. 144). Watterson then discusses college football’s hard times during the Depression, and the beginning of the sport’s recovery from the financial hardships suffered by most university athletic programs. Of particular interest is his review of the endorsement of football scholarships by some conferences during the 1930s, and the backlash response of reformers that included the short-lived Graham Plan of the Southern Conference (p. 185).

In an excellent chapter dealing with African American football players at the predominantly white universities, Watterson considers the so-called ‘gentlemen’s agreement’, that specified the northern teams practice of not playing black players in their games against southern or border state opponents. The earliest example cited is from 1934, and while the author’s discussion would have been strengthened by including some of the well publicised cases from the 1920s, he does an effective job of tracing the practice into the 1950s. In the final two chapters, Watterson reviews the revolt of the major universities against the NCAA that led to the formation of the College Football Association, and some of the football scandals of the 1980s.

For observers of current day college football there is not much new here, and the Southern Methodist scandal receives an overlong treatment given that an entire book has been written on the affair (*A Payroll to Meet*). Watterson closes with an epilogue entitled ‘The Great God Football’, in emulation of the famous 1929 essay of the same title by prominent sportswriter John R. Tunis. And in this excellent piece the author presents a summary that includes a discussion of some proposed solutions to the dilemmas posed by college football. A short bibliographical essay will be of particular use to many readers.

There are some errors of fact in *College Football*. The most serious one for this reviewer is the author’s statement that Iowa was readmitted to the Big Ten Conference after the slush fund scandal of 1929 because it had ‘enough dirt on the other conference schools to embarrass and discredit them’ (p. 164). In truth, Iowa was only readmitted after the school reluctantly declared eleven of its implicated athletes to be forever ineligible for further athletic competition. Only then was Iowa readmitted. Also, for a book published by the prestigious Johns Hopkins University Press, one would have thought that the manuscript would have benefited from good copyediting and yet a surprising number of typographical errors, missing words and syntactical problems found their way into the final text.

Nevertheless, *College Football*, is essential reading for sport historians, and provides plenty of new and interesting material for even the most knowledgeable and experienced reader.

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