

The Death of Archer Christian: College Presidents and the Reform of College Football

*John S. Watterson
Charlottesville, VA*

On November 13, 1909, the University of Virginia football team was playing Georgetown University at Hilltop Field on the Georgetown University campus. With Virginia leading 21-0 in the second half, freshman halfback Archer Christian headed across right tackle, a play that had worked well for Virginia that day. Aided by a blocker in front and a "hiker" on either side, newspapers reported, the freshman halfback struggled to find an opening in the line when the Georgetown defense abruptly converged. According to one account, a defensive back got inside the Virginia blockers and Christian fell across the Georgetown player as other tacklers piled on. When the mass uncoiled, Christian did not get up and the players did not seem to realize at first that he was at the bottom of the pile. Though he briefly regained consciousness and was taken to the Georgetown hospital, he died early the next morning after three hours of surgery, the result of a severe concussion.¹

Archer Christian's death was the third highly publicized football death or serious injury in the fall of 1909. Early in the season, Edwin Wilson of Navy was paralyzed making an open-field tackle and was said to be barely hanging on to life. On October 30, tackle Eugene Byrne of Army was fatally injured in a game against Harvard, and only two weeks later Archer Christian's accident took place. In the week after Christian's death, both Virginia and Georgetown called off the remainder of their seasons. Within a few days, the Georgetown faculty abolished football, as did the Washington, D.C., and Richmond school systems, The *New York Times* grimly observed

The author would like to express his gratitude for assistance to Archer Christian's nieces, Frances Guy and Archer Christian Burke, Professor Philip Schwartz of Virginia Commonwealth University and Dr. Kathy Weise of the University of Virginia.

1. A number of newspaper accounts have been used in this article. The most complete and detailed accounts can be found in the the *Washington Post*, November 14, 15, 1909, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, November 14, 15, 1909, and the *New York Times*, November 14, 1909. Archer Christian's injury probably was an epidural hematoma in which an artery is ruptured and internal bleeding takes place more rapidly than a subdural hematoma. Though victims of epidural hematomas lose consciousness more rapidly, they can be conscious for several minutes after the accident.

that "the other universities are strangely blind to the greater propriety of cancelling all games until the next boy is killed."²

Occurring in the Progressive era of social and political reform, these events caused serious alarm among college presidents and others whose careers or loyalties were tied to football. As a result, clouds began to hover above the college football establishment, particularly the Intercollegiate Athletic Association (to be renamed the NCAA in 1910) and its intercollegiate football rules committee. Gridiron experts and college administrators warned that football faced the danger of abolition or radical change. University of Virginia president Edwin Alderman, after attending Archer Christian's funeral, launched a personal crusade for reform of the rules. There was a less-publicized movement among Catholic colleges to join Georgetown in abolishing football. All told, the events following Archer Christian's death give a glimpse into the attitudes of alarmed college presidents as they confronted their own anxieties and searched for publically correct solutions. Most presidents, even the most recalcitrant, came to believe that changes had to be made if students were to profit from or even survive their college experience, and if the schools were to uphold their battered reputations. As they faced the onslaught of criticism, college presidents as a group showed more concern and willingness to act than they had or have at any time before or after. Though a product of what happened four years before, the crisis of 1909-10 would develop its own peculiar texture shaped both by these events and by the response of college and football administrators,

In 1905, alarm over football injuries had whipped up a storm of opposition, but it had been accompanied by a variety of criticisms. Muckraking articles that first targeted eastern college athletics set the stage for the intervention of President Theodore Roosevelt at the start of the season. Meeting with representatives of Yale, Harvard and Princeton, including the renowned Walter Camp, Roosevelt tried to get the Big Three to set an example by agreeing to play in a sportsmanlike way without brutality. Yet Roosevelt's resort to the "bully pulpit" only invited scrutiny of football during a season of record deaths and mayhem. Unlike most of the fatalities (which did not occur in college play), one death did have major repercussions. In November, the death of Harold Moore of Union College in a game with New York University led NYU Chancellor Harold MacCracken to call first a regional conference which was followed by a national conference in New York on December 28. The second conference led to a permanent organization, the Intercollegiate Athletic Association, and a new football rules committee set up to study and drastically reform the rules. Within a month, this committee merged with the existing rules committee (sometimes known as Walter Camp's committee) and in the next months enacted a series of far-reaching changes. Among

2. *New York Times*, October 7, October 13, November 16, 1909. On the day that Byrne was killed, two other students were killed, one playing for Haskell Indian Institute and the other for the Medico-Chirurgical College in Philadelphia, but these were not as well publicized. *The Daily Maroon* (University of Chicago). November 3, 1909.

these were the 10-yard rule, the forward pass, and the neutral zone between the two lines at scrimmage. The reformers hoped that the old line plunging and pushing game would yield to a more open and less dangerous game.³

Just as important, changes in the relation of football to the academic process rode piggyback on the football rules and injury crisis. For a decade, a handful of college presidents led by Charles Eliot of Harvard and various faculty had condemned football as contrary to the spirit of academic life. Lacking the force of public opinion, few institutions had been able to dislodge the hold of football on student life. The mounting uproar that accompanied the death of Harold Moore and newspaper publicity about the dangers of football enabled the opponents of football to mount an organized campaign. In late November, President Nicholas Murray Butler of Columbia announced that his school was abolishing football; he held to this position despite student demonstrations and alumni protest.⁴

In the midwestern Big Nine, the faculties at the Universities of Chicago and Wisconsin threatened to suspend football. Wisconsin historian Frederick Jackson Turner used his influence to spur James Angell, president of the University of Michigan, to call a conference of the Western or Big Nine Conference. As a result, the conference voted a series of rules designed to curtail the role of football. Though falling short of the two-year suspension urged by Turner, the Big Nine reformers shortened the season to five games, eliminated the big games between major rivals, and imposed eligibility requirements. These changes excited so much student opposition at Wisconsin that Turner was threatened by a student mob that visited his house amid cries of "throw him in the lake," a ritual usually reserved for freshmen.⁵

Though Harvard temporarily banished football (subject to reforms that it had proposed), few schools followed the example of President Butler of Columbia. In the Big-Nine, only Northwestern abolished football, and Harvard reinstated it once its reform agenda was satisfied by the rules committee. On the west coast, the death of Harold Moore had little impact, but here the football crisis had an entirely different outcome. Doubting that the eastern rules committee could undo the damage wrought by two decades of football, the presidents and faculties of Stanford and the University of California dropped football and adopted English rugby. While it had no impact east of the Rockies, the western experiment offered a disturbing

3. John S. Watterson, "Inventing Modern Football," *American Heritage* 36:6 (September/October 1988): 102-113. John Hammond Moore, "Football's Ugly Decades, 1893-1913," *Smithsonian Journal of History*, II (Fall, 1967): 52-53. Ronald A. Smith, *Sports and Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 191-208.

4. *Ibid.* President Eliot's Report, *Harvard Graduate's Magazine*, III (1894), 374-383. President Eliot was a friend of Edwin Alderman, and the former Harvard president was in Charlottesville the week before the Archer Christian injury delivering a series of lectures. Smith, *Sports and Freedom*, 199-200.

5. Letter of President James Angell ["Minutes of the Conference of College Representatives"]. January 19, 1906, Michigan Historical Collections, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Ray Allen Billington, *Frederick Jackson Turner, Historian, Scholar, Teacher* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 264-274.

scenario of what could happen to the American game if misguided reformers had their way.⁶

For the next three years, the rule changes enjoyed public approval, enough to silence the opponents of the forward pass or those who hoped for more sweeping changes. Deaths and serious injuries, as reported in the media, dropped, and just as important no fatalities occurred in highly visible college games. The oft-criticized pushing and pulling in mass plays persisted, but were accompanied by some forward passes and more end runs. Though the big teams scored fewer points, the "trick plays," as the pass and onside kick were called, were popular with spectators. The media jeremiads, which had done so much to fan the crisis, virtually disappeared. The presidents and faculties returned to academic concerns, and the muckrakers found more promising cesspools in political and social arenas.

In 1909, college football awoke to find that the press and public still considered it on probation- First, there was Edwin Wilson's paralyzing injury followed by Eugene Byrne's fatal injury when Army played Harvard, Not until Archer Christian's death after the game on November 13 did the floodgates of criticism break loose. According to the director of athletics at a Maryland prep school, "the game is gradually getting back to the old close formations in vogue several years ago." The culprit was mass play which some experts insisted was given new life by the forward pass, Walter Camp and others commented that the teams had returned to line plunging because they had learned to isolate the tackle. By threatening a forward pass, they could neutralize the defensive backs and concentrate their force on the tackle position. Since five men were allowed in the backfield, this sledgehammer effect could still gain the requisite 10 yards in three downs. It was said that Eugene Byrne had been exhausted by constant runs at his tackle position, and a short forward pass on the play before may have been designed to set up the play in which his spine was fractured.⁷

Eugene Byrne's death revived criticism, but not until Christian's death did colleges and public schools begin to drop football. In Richmond and Washington, the actions against football were directly connected to the fatality at Georgetown. The New York schools abolished football soon afterwards, but for more localized reasons. On the day after the accident, the *Times* ran a remarkably detailed front-page story on the Christian accident, unusual if for no other reason than the accident had occurred almost two hundred miles from New York and between two teams not regarded as otherwise newsworthy. The details of the story left no reason to doubt that the Virginia halfback had been killed in a mass play. In calling for the suspension of football, the editorial in the *New York Times* two days later insisted that the responsibility

6. Roberta J. Park, "From Football to Rugby—and Back, 1906-1919, The University of California-Stanford University Response to the 'Football Crisis of 1905,'" *Journal of Sport History* 11:2 (Winter, 1984): 5-40.

7. *New York Times*, November 15, 1909. *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, November 20, 1909. *Washington Post*, November 21, 1909.

rested on the college presidents who stood *in loco parentis*. Any lingering doubts about football that had resurfaced after Byrne's death had now been raised to the level of a call for action.⁸

Though the *Times* merely described the Archer Christian accident, the human side of such an episode was normally covered by newspapers in heart-wrenching detail. Two weeks before Christian's death, the accounts in the New York press chronicled how Eugene Byrne in a hospital with his family beside him regained consciousness and seemed to be improving. By early morning, he had begun to fade as a head lesion affected his breathing and soon he lapsed into a fatal coma. Like a Victorian death scene, these descriptions exploited the considerable narrative power of turn-of-the-century journalism, and the death of Archer Christian possessed unusual dramatic story elements. Even if the medical details were unremarkable, the events surrounding his demise were made to order for high-profile copy.⁹

As it was reported in the *Washington Post*, *Baltimore Sun*, and the Richmond newspapers, Archer Christian was conscious long enough to ask how close the ball was to the Georgetown goal. After being carried from the field, he was said to have uttered faintly, "Oh, I'm suffering, Pop [Pop Lannigan was the trainer], please do something for me," and lost consciousness. On the sidelines, several "surgeons" were attending Christian, including L. H. Glazebrook, Deputy Coroner of the District of Columbia and a Virginia alumnus. Glazebrook asked the police stationed nearby to call for a stretcher, but the officer refused to leave his post and the Deputy Coroner left to find a telephone. Meantime the police summoned a patrol wagon and then roughly grabbed Christian and slung him aboard, according to one doctor, like a "sack of potatoes." Two of the doctors who had been attending the injured player were barred from the vehicle by the overbearing police. Then, as a final snub to the medical profession, the driver refused to drive to the hospital that Glazebrook indicated but set off for nearby Georgetown Hospital.¹⁰

As the wagon began to move, one of the Virginia players tried to pull himself on board. This was none other than Andrew Christian, Archer's younger brother and a substitute on the Virginia team. The police initially rid themselves of this intruder by wrenching his head until he let go of the wagon. Andrew doggedly refused to give up, however, fighting his way back through the crowd, shouting "that's my brother." When he caught up with the wagon, he clung tenaciously despite repeated blows by the police. The

8. *New York Times*, November 14, 16, 1909.

9. *New York Times*, October 31, November 1, 1909. Michael Oriard, *Reading Football. How the Popular Press Created an American Spectacle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993). Oriard identifies football narratives and the formula for sports stonks on the big games that were developed in the 1890s. Certainly the football death scene was a variation of this, as were the diatribes against football originating in the 1890s.

10. *Washington Post*, November 14, 1909, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, November 14, 1909. The "sack of potatoes" quote appeared in the *Post* account, though at an inquiry held later in the week Dr. Glazebrook testified that Christian had not been handled roughly. Nevertheless, the police were rebuked by the court of inquiry.

crowd, realizing what was happening, tried to help him, some striking at a mounted policeman. Finally the police allowed him to climb aboard.¹¹

The newspapers also incorporated the strange saga of Archer Christian's mother who had come to Washington but not to attend the game. According to these accounts, Mrs. Christian, acting on a premonition, checked into a hotel and then called hospitals after the game (one account had her at the railroad station waiting to return to Richmond when she heard the news). Whatever the exact details, she joined her son Andrew at the hospital keeping a vigil while Archer's father journeyed from Richmond. She also played a part in summoning the renowned surgeon Harvey Cushing from Baltimore to assist the Virginia team physician. Cushing had attended Midshipman Edwin Wilson a month earlier when he had been paralyzed while making an open-field tackle. Though Christian's injury was different—he had suffered a concussion—Cushing and the Virginia doctor spent three hours trying to remove blood clots. Yet the surgery had failed to clear all of the clotting, and the newspapers as they were going to press declared that the chances of the young athlete recovering were no more than one in 50. Archer Christian died at 3:40 a.m., a conclusion that the newspapers had made all but foregone. In fact, few newspapers gave a full account of the game, but instead built their stories around Christian's injury and the controversy surrounding his treatment on the sidelines.¹²

In a separate story, the *Post* dramatically recounted the shock of students when a report arrived, prematurely, that Archer Christian had died. Students from both schools were attending a show at a local theater, a normally raucous event that accompanied the big games in urban settings. When they heard the rumor, some students wept, others rushed to telephones or left for the hospital, and the remainder sat in stunned silence for the remainder of the show. The Virginia quarterback who had taken the snap and handed off to Christian on the fatal play vowed that if Christian died he would never play another minute of football. The shock of these students would be repeated at both Georgetown and Virginia in the following week where memorial services were attended by the entire University community. In an editorial, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* noted a reaction typical in Virginia and Washington, D.C. "It is one thing to read of a player killed at football in Seattle or in Annapolis or in West Point," the editor observed. "It is quite another when the player lives in the next street or the next block, and many of us have watched him grow up from the cradle."¹³ The same could be said of University faculty and officials.

11. *Washington Post*, November 14, 1909.

12. *Ibid.* According to the *Post*, the surgeons removed three large blood clots, but apparently the larger clots remained and were said to be responsible for his death. If Archer Christian had suffered an epidural hematoma, as seems probable, much of the damage had been done within a few minutes of the accident. In such a case, pressure had built up inside the brain either cutting off the blood supply or exerting pressure on the spinal column. Because the surgeons could only speculate as to the source of the bleeding, their chances of boring into the brain where the hemorrhage had occurred were slim and by that time brain damage had probably already occurred.

13. *Ibid.* *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, November 15, 1909. The *Times-Dispatch* had run an article the previous week, just after Byrne died, in which the author criticized the excessive publicity given to football deaths.

University presidents, even if they had no direct contact with the team, had reason to feel uneasy. In 1905, football injuries had led to fissures within the colleges and universities and intense criticism from without. Many presidents who had praised football a few years earlier found their glib support less credible. Though some such as Chancellor Harold MacCracken of New York University were instrumental in reform, it was largely faculty conventions meeting in New York and Chicago that made the decisions affecting football's future. In an era of Progressive reform, the colleges had their share of critics who charged lack of attention to needs of their students, physical and intellectual. The more prominent the college or the location, the more likely that the injury would draw attention. President A. Lawrence Lowell, who had recently succeeded Charles Eliot as president of Harvard, clinically noted some weeks after Eugene Byrne's death: "Personally, I have never been so frightened at the risk of death as the number of injuries and the fact that they take place in the presence of vast masses of spectators, which has in my mind a demoralizing effect."¹⁴

For President Edwin Alderman of the University of Virginia, the death of Archer Christian had both awkward personal and professional implications. Alderman had a reputation as an educational reformer and a supporter of football. When he was president of the University of North Carolina and of Tulane University, he avidly promoted football. While president of Tulane, he also headed the athletic association and had been responsible for hiring the first professional coach. He even urged as many students as possible to try out for the team. No wonder he was given credit for the remarkable turnaround in 1900 when Tulane won all of its games without surrendering a point. Unlike a predecessor who had condemned football as "brutalizing," Alderman once said that he would rather "see a boy of mine on the rush line fighting for his team than on the sideline smoking a cigarette."¹⁵

Immediately following Archer Christian's death, Alderman received a telegram from the president of Georgetown, Joseph Himmel, announcing that Georgetown would cancel the rest of its games. In his response, Alderman also called off the rest of Virginia's schedule which consisted only of its arch rival, the University of North Carolina, which cancelled its season as well. With the funeral in Richmond on Monday, Alderman was caught up in the shocked reaction to the accident. Methodist clergy meeting in Newport News, Virginia, singled out the brutality in football, calling for faculties to make reforms and urging Methodists to have nothing to do with football until there were changes.¹⁶

14. A. Lawrence Lowell to George Harris, December 1, 1909, A. Lawrence Lowell Papers, Harvard University Archives, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

15. Dale A. Somers. *The Rise of Sports in New Orleans, 1850-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), 259-261.

16. Richmond *Times-Dispatch*, November 15, 16, 1909. Alderman may have already made his decision before he received Himmel's telegram: "I am greatly touched by your telegraph and by your sympathetic action cancelling remaining football engagements. Our team, out of respect for their comrade, will disband for the season." The University of North Carolina could have rescheduled another team for its final game on Thanksgiving at Richmond, but by disbanding the team chose not to. Both Georgetown and Virginia had in the previous decade played games in which students were fatally injured—a Georgetown running back in 1894 and a University of Georgia player against Virginia in 1897—but there was little mention of these events, though Georgetown had abolished football for a time after George "Shorty" Bahen's death in 1894.

Alderman also received a note from his friend, the former Harvard president Charles Eliot, who had visited Charlottesville the week before to deliver a series of lectures. On the day of the accident, he happened to be staying at the British Embassy in Washington and probably read accounts of the accident in the Washington newspapers. For almost two decades, Eliot had attacked football from almost every conceivable angle. He had insisted that it had seriously undermined higher education in America. In addition to creating dull minds and broken bodies, Eliot argued that football sent out the wrong message about higher education, contradicting the purposes of academic work and healthful athletics. Far from approving the changes of 1906, Eliot concluded that nothing could change the spirit in which the game was played, and when forced to attend he professed to find the game unbearably boring. Though Alderman and Eliot had apparently not discussed football, the Virginia president would have had to live in a place far more remote than the American South to be ignorant of Eliot's views. While he apparently did not know Alderman's exact feelings, Eliot probably sensed that the Virginia president did not share his disdain for football. Having lectured on athletics and numerous other subjects, the high priest of athletic abolitionism could not resist lecturing Alderman. And, his carefully phrased reflections on football arrived at a crucial moment when they may have proved useful in shaping Alderman's thinking.¹⁷

Eliot did not try to persuade Alderman that football should be abolished, or if he did, it was subtly disguised as a plea to use this opportunity to "educate" the public. Instead he used the opportunity to attack a persistent rationale for football injuries and thereby the contradiction underlying the system of rules. In the 1890s and early 1900s, apologists for football—even faculties and presidents—observed that all sports were dangerous. Just because a handful were killed was no reason to jettison a noble sport, any more than one might abandon the railroads because some workers happened to be killed. Young men, it was said, died in far greater numbers in hunting, boating, riding, and mountain climbing. In his note to Alderman, Eliot delicately pointed out the fallacy of this argument and the weakness of the football analogy. The dangers of football resulted from the "rules of the game, deliberately planned and deliberately maintained." Under such rules, he insisted, deaths were inevitable: "The human body—even the toughest—cannot sustain the collisions and crushings which the rules not only make possible, but inevitable from time to time." In other high-risk sports, the dangers were truly accidental. "In football the deaths, broken bones, sprains

17. "President Eliot's Report for 1892-93," *Harvard Graduate's Magazine*, III (1894), 374-383. These were released early in 1894. Eliot's criticisms of athletics and football periodically appeared both before and after the crisis of 1905-06. *New York Times*, *Boston Herald*, October 24, 1905. *Chicago Record-Herald*, November 27, 1905. Eliot said that the game was "dull" and felt that American college students would spoil soccer if that game were substituted. He had no sympathy for the new rules and as late as March 1909 in his annual report denounced football as a demoralizing spectacle inappropriate for college competition. *New York Times*, March 27, 1909.

and damaged brains result, not from accident, but from the thorough, resolute playing of the game according to the rules.”¹⁸

In ending his letter, Eliot called on Alderman to follow his lead in educating the public: “May not the calamity of yesterday give you a chance to clarify the public thinking on risks in manly sports.”¹⁹ This may have provided Alderman with a way to combine action with criticism. In his reply, Alderman stated that he was probably not that far apart from Eliot’s views, but in fact he altered Eliot’s approach to suit his own needs. Undoubtedly he had suffered personally from the death of a student in an undergraduate body that numbered less than eight hundred. “It was a shocking thing,” he wrote Eliot, “and carried me through an experience which I had never yet had to undergo.”

Shocking as it might have been, it was not enough to convert him to Eliot’s root and branch athletic purism. While building on the core of Eliot’s argument, Alderman left the door wide open to reform. He had always defended football, and even as he contemplated its abolition he continued to find virtues in it. Isolated as the University of Virginia was, it needed a game like football to absorb the attention of the students, unlike colleges in urban centers like New York or even Boston that could do without such student-centered amusements. He agreed that the inordinate risks had to be eliminated and enclosed a statement that he had released to the Richmond newspapers. Eliot might have derived some satisfaction that Alderman was trying to educate the public, though he probably doubted that changes in the rules could resolve the basic problem of the spirit in which the game was played.²⁰

In his statement issued immediately after Archer Christian’s funeral in Richmond, Alderman did raise the possibility of football being abandoned. In fact, the dark threat giving substance to his carrot-and-stick approach was the likelihood of abolition if the rules were not drastically changed. Despite the media attention given to this point, Alderman was not so quick to condemn football as Eliot and other critics might have wished. As he informed Eliot, he was already making plans to attend the convention of the Intercollegiate Athletic Association in New York to plead for reform, possibly at the head of a delegation of southern university presidents. Though the headlines focused on “abandonment,” Alderman had a different goal and strategy in mind.²¹

188. Charles Eliot to Alderman, Edwin Alderman Papers, University of Virginia Archives, November 14, 1909. In the 1890s, William Harper of the University of Chicago commented: “If the world can afford to sacrifice the lives of men for commercial gain, it can much more easily afford to make similar sacrifices upon the altar of vigorous and unsullied manhood.” *University of Chicago Weekly*, III: 13(January 3, 1895): 141.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Alderman to Charles Eliot, Edwin Alderman Papers, November 18, 1909, University of Virginia Archives.

21. Richmond *Times-Dispatch*, November 16, 1909. It is true that the statement released on November 16 and published on November 17, 1909, gives some insight into Alderman’s rapid response to the public relations problem posed by Archer Christian’s death. The progression of his thinking from that point, especially the exact date of his decision to attend the convention in New York, is not as clear, Richmond *Times-Dispatch*, November 17, 1909. Alderman to David Barrow, November 30, 1909, Presidential Papers, Football, 1909-1914, University of Virginia Archives.

Alderman released his statement the day after Archer Christian's funeral in Richmond. In his attempt to educate the public, Alderman obviously wanted the public to realize that football faced a crisis that could lead to its demise. Yet, if a few alarmist paragraphs were stripped away, the bulk of his statement might stand as a tribute to college football. According to Alderman, organized athletics had a positive effect on higher education. Certainly football encouraged courage, self-denial, self-restraint, and unselfish loyalty to a cause. It required skill, daring, and pluck, and it established "ideals of bodily cleanliness." He also referred to the need of American youth for a game that would siphon off its destructive tendencies. As he observed a few weeks later, "there should be some virile game for American lads to play in the autumn months in our colleges, or else their youth and energy would flow in directions less good,"²² No doubt he was recalling the pre-athletic days on college campuses when students tormented the faculty with endless pranks and occasionally engaged in outright violence against the faculty or each other.

Much of Alderman's statement had to do with saving football, and that remained his goal. As if echoing Eliot, he pointed out that far larger numbers were killed in boating, hunting, and riding, Borrowing heavily from the Harvard president, even using some phrases verbatim, he argued that the risks were inherent in the rules of the football. What distinguished football from other sports was that "inordinate risks and danger to life existed in the rules of the game deliberately planned deliberately maintained." Whereas Eliot had stopped there, Alderman went further and offered a solution, If the rules were a problem, it was also true that a committee existed-the Intercollegiate Football Rules Committee-to study the game and monitor its dangers. Obviously these well-intentioned experts had not "struck at the root of the problem." In his final sentence, he set forth the alternative of eliminating the danger or abandoning the game, but he clearly felt that abolition would be a calamity. Obviously the solution would have to come from the American public which should take a stand and demand that the committee not rest until it had solved the problem of death on the gridiron. By implication, the public or the informed public might have to be aroused from their inertia and imbued with reform fervor such as had occurred with political and social changes in the early 1900s. This was Alderman's response to Eliot's plea to educate the public.²³

The immediate reaction of the Georgetown faculty and several public school systems to abolish football lent credibility to Alderman's warnings. Opposition to football had been growing at Georgetown long before the Christian accident, but his death proved the catalyst for abolition. Most of the

22. Richmond *Times-Dispatch*, November 17, 1909.

23. *Ibid.* It is unlikely that Alderman used Eliot's phraseology deliberately, or, if he did, with intent to dissimulate, because in his letter to the former Harvard president the next day he sent a copy of the statement. Alderman to Eliot, November 18, 1909, University of Virginia Archives.

school systems that abolished football left the door slightly open by abolishing football as played under the existing rules. In addition to Washington, D.C., and Richmond, the New York public schools would also abolish football, but that decision had more to do with the death of a high school player and probably that of Eugene Byrne. By the early 1900s, the Progressive criticism of unsafe conditions in manufacturing, mining, and on the railroads reflected a higher degree of concern regarding occurrences that had once been regarded as commonplace. Even college students playing football would be subject to higher standards of safety despite the low ratio of participants to serious injuries. Archer Christian's death came on the same day that a fire broke out in a mine at Cherry, Illinois, killing nearly 500 miners, a tragedy that shared the headlines with Archer Christian's injury in a number of newspapers, including the *New York Times*.²⁴

Even among the relatively quiescent Virginia alumni, there was at least one who had doubts about the value of football. The most ferocious assault came from an unlikely source, Colonel John Mosby, the former Confederate guerrilla chieftain. The old warrior blasted football as "murder" and "an activity that invited brutality." The 75-year-old Washington lawyer grumbled that "a student who has broken somebody's nose at football stands higher than a master of arts." Though Alderman tried to be understanding toward his "old friend," he felt that the old soldier's tirade was neither "judicial, thoughtful, just, or even helpful." Mosby's criticism had a peculiar irony, because Mosby, as a University of Virginia freshman in 1851, shot a fellow student in the neck; as a result he was expelled from the university and sentenced to a year in prison. When they praised football for reshaping student life, defenders of football like Alderman probably had in mind violent, anti-social, pre-Civil War behavior such as Mosby's youthful brush with attempted murder.²⁵

Still if the football rules committee was to isolate the causes of injury, there had to be a common factor linking the accidents. The Wilson and Byrne accidents provided no easy answer to the injury problem. Wilson had been killed making an open-field tackle while Byrne had been defending against a running play. Many critics loudly proclaimed that the pushing and pulling of mass plays had led to the tragedies, and the accounts of Archer Christian's accident seemed to confirm this conclusion. Most accounts reported that Christian was escorted by teammates on either side and a "hiker" in front, perhaps to push or pull him through the tacklers just as he had been pushed

24. *Washington Post*, November 19, 1909. *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, November 10, 1909. *New York Times*, November 21, 1909.

25. John Singleton Mosby to Eppa Hunton, Jr., November 19, 1909. Alderman to Robert B. Tunstall, November 30, 1909. Presidential Papers, Football, 1909-1914, University of Virginia Archives. "I have seen some pretty violent letters about it [abandoning football]. My dear old friend, Colonel Mosby whom I greatly esteem and respect, has written most astonishingly on the subject." Alderman to W. H. White, November 30, 1909, Presidential Papers, Football, University of Virginia Archives, 1909-1914. The undersized Mosby, only 16 at the time, had shot a much larger, bullying student who was about to attack him for some statements he had made, so at best it could be argued that he was acting in self-defense. Kevin H. Siepel, *Rebel, the Life and Times of John Singleton Mosby* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 25-29.

into the end zone a few minutes earlier. The *New York Times* explained that Christian had been dragged across the line and that the ball carrier then stumbled. Just as he was getting to his feet, according to this account, he was hit by several Georgetown players and fell on his back. Many of the newspapers described the players on both teams piling on the downed player.

Alderman himself must have been seeking an answer, for he asked the Virginia football coach, John Neff, for a description of the play that caused Archer Christian's tragic death. Neff replied that the play had been quite ordinary. Led by one blocker, Christian had broken into open territory and had then been tackled. Neff may not have known all the details since the players, in this case perhaps Christian himself, called their own plays. At least one newspaper, the *Richmond News-Leader*, seemed to confirm Neff's account of Christian breaking into the backfield, and the Virginia student newspaper disputed the accounts that said Christian had been killed on a mass play. "Contrary to what has been printed in several papers," *College Topics* reported, "the death dealing play was not one of the dangerous mass formation manoeuvres, and twenty-one players did not heedlessly pile on the injured player." Was it possible Archer Christian's death had nothing to do with mass play at all?²⁶

Faced with this uncertainty, Alderman wisely avoided trying to pinpoint the causes of Christian's death. Instead he tossed the ball to the rules committee. "My whole point is this," he wrote, "the rules makers whom we must trust, and they deserve confidence and trust, must come to know right away that the problem is a grave and immediate one."²⁷ They must remove "death" as the outgrowth of strategic decisions and situations built into the rules. If Alderman was presenting the rulesmakers with an impossible task, at least it allowed him to thrust himself into the reform process. In fact, it was perhaps the only course that he, a moderate and a non-expert, could take. It also fit one Progressive approach that might be termed: "good rules make men good." In a variation of the great watchmaker analogy of the eighteenth century, the Progressives with their faith in systems sought to "fine tune" the mechanisms which they devoutly believed would then run in relative harmony. The reforms of 1906 had merely begun the process by setting up the body to reorder the rules. While these experts had not yet tamed the football beast, they undoubtedly had the capacity to make the correct changes if prodded to action by the public.

Like Chancellor MacCracken of NYU in 1905, Alderman hoped to mobilize a collective force for change. Initially he talked of leading a delegation of 15 to 20 southern college presidents to New York, and in fact wrote to

26. *New York Times*, November 14, 1909. John H. Neff, Jr., to Alderman, December 4, 1909, Presidential Papers, Football, 1909-1914, University of Virginia Archives. *College Topics* (University of Virginia student newspaper), November 17, 1909.

27. Alderman to Murray McGuire, November 17, 1909, Presidential Papers, Football, 1909-1914, University of Virginia Archives.

about 10 of them. But the response of at least one, the president of Tulane, was discouraging. He regretted that he could not make the trip to New York because his school, Alderman's former institution, was too poor. Anyway, he doubted that they would have any influence. Unable to recruit his fellow presidents, Alderman had to settle for a conference of Virginia schools about 10 days before the New York Conference. These delegates agreed with Alderman's views that the rules needed a drastic overhaul, but added that they should cultivate action and quick thinking rather than reliance on sheer weight and force. From far-off Charlottesville, the conference could do little to affect the meeting in New York. Yet it generated regional publicity indicating that Alderman had the support of the football-playing schools of Virginia. Above all, the Virginia meeting underscored Alderman's resolve that football possessed unique educational values and should be preserved.²⁸

As Alderman was trying to save football, the eastern Catholic institutions were moving in the opposite direction. Spurred by Georgetown's action, three presidents met with faculty delegates representing 12 Jesuit schools. Reminiscent of 1906, they discussed the enormity of football's role in college life, its corruptness and hypocrisy. Did this put football at odds with the mission of their institutions, the moral and character-building ideals of Catholic education? They considered the shortcuts taken in recruiting, the high cost of admission to athletic contests, and the way in which football interfered with the athlete's studies. These issues were hardly new. In 1894, President Eliot had kicked off a national debate by describing the ways in which intercollegiate athletics conflicted with academic ideals, and President James Angell of Michigan had made many of the same points in 1906 in an address read to the Chicago reform meeting of the midwestern Big Nine Conference. As in 1906, the educational issues related to football piggybacked on the safety issue. The difference was that the Catholic colleges were far more outside the mainstream than the midwestern Big Nine. For that matter, most colleges and conferences that were inclined to abolish football had debated the topic exhaustively. As a result, the movement of the Catholic colleges had negligible effect on the football crisis, except perhaps to perturb those already worried about the future of football.²⁹

Compared to these Catholic colleges, Edwin Alderman's position fell squarely within the mainstream, and that was its strength. For all of the criticism, football had far fewer shades and hues of opposition in 1909 than in the crisis four years earlier. In this respect, the fear of "abandonment," as

28. Richmond *Times-Dispatch*, December 12, 1909. Alderman to Robert B. Tunstall, November 30, 1909, Presidential Papers, Football, 1909-1914, University of Virginia Archives.

29. Richmond *Times-Dispatch*, December 12, 1909. Also see Georgetown University, Football, April 1910. The correspondence persisted into the spring, but any determination to act collectively to abolish football dissipated. Only one group of schools, the Big Six of the plains states, acted to deemphasize football. Their actions were reminiscent of actions taken by the Big Nine in 1906, including a few attempts by the University of Kansas regents to suspend football. C. R. Griffin, *The University of Kansas, a History* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1971), 658-659.

Alderman called it, has to be placed in context. Even if Alderman had adopted Eliot's radical views, he probably would have enjoyed far less success. For the most part, colleges such as Columbia University that had threatened to abolish football had already acted, and where the faculty had once opposed football, such as in several Big-Nine institutions, the threat of abolition no longer loomed. The Big-Nine had agreed on a series of reforms, and the demands by Harvard reformers had been met by the Intercollegiate Football Rules Committee. The West Coast schools led by the University of California and Stanford had converted from football to rugby. Separated by a continent from the eastern and midwestern schools, they were simply not likely to influence change. Yet what Woodrow Wilson, president of Princeton and a longtime supporter of football, wrote in 1905 still could be said of most school administrators: "I am not ready to have football abolished," he had written, "and yet I am painfully aware of our situation in regard to reform."³⁰

Both Wilson and Alderman were responding to the moral agenda of the Progressive era. In political and economic reforms, public leaders such as Roosevelt and Wilson pressed for modifications in institutional structures rather than outright change. As President Roosevelt's intervention in 1905 indicated, the arena of college football reform was no exception. While the White House meeting generated headlines, it was designed to prevent major changes in football by encouraging a "square deal" on the gridiron. Though the pressure for radical change existed, as Frederick Jackson Turner demonstrated in 1906, it was kept safely within bounds. It is true that the football crises had their variations as the reform impetus more narrowly focused on injuries in 1909, and, hence, the rules, as opposed to the gamut of criticisms in the East and Midwest in 1905-06. There were also more generalized criticisms of college life as the Progressive era widened its focus. Randolph Bourne, a Columbia undergraduate and budding social critic, described in 1910 the crisis of the underserved student: "College presidents and official investigators are discussing his scholarship, his extracurricular activities, and his moral stamina."³¹ Was it possible that injuries in football were evidence of collegiate shortcomings resulting from neglect of administrators rather than the conduct of students and football partisans? If so, the burden had narrowed from the academic community and the football establishment to the college presidents and football experts who sanctioned the rules.

Of course, the injury crisis was immediate and filled with implicit dangers to football. The newspaper publicity surrounding the three major deaths had equalled or surpassed the concern over any comparable injuries in 1905, with

30. Woodrow Wilson to Benjamin Ide Wheeler, December 18, 1905, Football, University of California Archives, Berkeley. On November 19, 1909, Wilson was quoted as saying: "Football is too fine a game to be abolished offhand. I do think, however, that it should be modified to some extent in order to obviate those fatal accidents as far as possible." *New York Times*, November 20, 1909.

31. John S. Watterson, "Political Football: Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson and the Gridiron Reform Movement." *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, accepted for publication. Randolph S. Bourne, "The College, an Undergraduate View," *Atlantic Monthly*: 1081 (November, 1911): 667-674.

the possible exception of Harold Moore's death in 1905. Considering the turbulent debate and threats of suspension in 1905-06, it is not surprising that the earlier trauma preyed on the minds of the football establishment. The normally imperturbable Amos Alonzo Stagg, longtime coach at the University of Chicago, wrote to his mentor Walter Camp in January: "We have certainly got to do something, Walter, for the season has been a mighty bad one for a number of individuals as well as for the game."³² Camp noted that the Virginia representative on the rules committee, who had witnessed the Christian injury, as "formerly not hysterical, now on account of death he is." Though the dangers of football abolition were exaggerated, college presidents and athletic personnel were understandably unnerved. As a result, Alderman had a rare opportunity to play on the fears of the delegates to the ICAA and members of the rules committee. Even the influential Walter Camp, "father of American football," and the Yale football officials, who had weathered crises in the 1890s and 1900s, were not immune to these fears. A committee of the Big Three, initiated by President Arthur Hadley of Yale and including Camp, set out to make an "in-house" examination of the football problem. Though this committee faded into oblivion, the move to create it showed that fear over the future of football or the nature of reform was already invading the citadels of big-time college athletics.³³

Yet Alderman was convinced that he had to create a sense of urgency among the delegates at the ICAA and have it translated into action by the rules committee, not an easy task under the circumstances. After all, he was not leading a delegation nor was he sponsoring the conference as he had in Charlottesville. He was only one of a number of prominent delegates who would mount the podium at the convention. Nevertheless, Alderman managed to convey a personal conviction that could not be easily dismissed or forgotten. He mentioned the "peculiar nature of responsibility because of the death of a football player in the Georgetown game." Speaking twice that day, he made the point that the current controversy was not a case of newspaper hysteria. This was a point that got attention and for good reason. Newspapers since the 1890s were notorious for escalating the level of violence in their accounts of the games. "In dealing with this game," Alderman argued, "you are dealing with our national characteristics." In other words, schools should not simply abolish football out of hand, but had to harness the aggressive instincts of youth to the goals of education. In his plea for reform, he repeated the threat that had animated his public statement in November. There had to be revision in the rules or there would surely be a movement to abolish football. To illustrate the point, he predicted that a bill would be introduced in the Virginia legislature (as indeed there was). When he returned to Virginia, he hoped to tell the lawmakers that the committee was changing the rules to deal with the danger.³⁴

32. Amos Alonzo Stagg to Walter Camp, November 20, 1909, Walter Camp Papers. Typescript, no date, Camp Papers, Yale University Archives.

33. Watterson, "The Football Crisis of 1909-1910: The Response of the Eastern 'Big Three,'" 33-49.

34. *New York Times*, December 30, 1909.

Alderman did make his point, at least with one influential athletic official. Francis Nicolson of Wesleyan University, who was Secretary-Treasurer of the ICAA. Nicolson, who had planned to stop in New Haven on his way home, instead wrote to Walter Camp at New Haven several days later. Camp did not attend the meeting since Yale had not joined the ICAA, and he himself was opposed to faculty control of athletics. In his letter, Nicolson tried to make Camp understand the profound reaction of the delegates. According to Nicolson, "no one who was not at the meeting on Tuesday can appreciate the depth of feeling on this subject on the part of the various college Faculties throughout the country." And he emphasized: "As President Alderman pointed out, this is not hysteria." He warned Camp that the rules committee faced an uphill task because the survival of football lay in their hands. "And whatever your rules," he grimly warned, "if next season, even by unforeseen accidents which could not be prevented by any rules, there are many deaths-I firmly believe American football is doomed, at least for a good many years."³⁵

Had it been worth the effort? By Alderman's reckoning, the vast majority of delegates agreed with his views. According to Alderman, only five of the delegates wanted to preserve the status quo and five wanted to abolish it; the remainder believed that changes were necessary. He might have been surprised by another breakdown of sentiment made by one of Camp's many correspondents. This unknown observer claimed that one faction was made up of college professors and presidents who insisted on radical revision of the rules, even to the extent of creating a new game. The others—he mentioned only two by name—felt that football was open enough and simply required minor adjustments.³⁶

In mid-January, Alderman wrote of the "firm resolve of the authorities here not to engage in football contests any longer." Yet, as always, there was a stubborn ray of hope, a feeling that the committee would find a solution. In truth, the joint rules committee would begin monthly meetings, as Alderman hoped, to address the "danger to life and limb." Methodically the committee tried to hammer out a consensus, an approach that was successful until it reached a still unresolved issue. In spite of substantial agreement, there was intense debate on the still controversial forward pass. Spearheading the opposition, Walter Camp wanted to limit the forward pass to behind the line of scrimmage and limit the defense from spreading out farther than the offense. Camp asked William Lambeth at Virginia and John Heisman at Georgia Tech to try out this package. On the other side, Amos Alonzo Stagg had the coach at the University of Arkansas experiment with freeing the pass from its restrictions. In field trials, Camp also had his Yale team try out the prospective

35. Frank W. Nicolson to Walter Camp, December 30, 1909, Camp Papers, Yale University Archives. Camp had invited Nicolson to stop and "talk football" on his way home, possibly to learn what had happened at the ICAA Convention, but Nicolson was pressed for time and had to settle for the letter.

36. Richmond *Times-Dispatch*, January 17, 1909. Unidentified correspondent present at the convention, Walter Camp Papers, Yale University Archives.

rules changes. such as keeping their feet on the ground while making tackles, hoping to demonstrate that limits on the “flying tackle” were unworkable. However, the death of Midshipman Edwin Wilson in mid-April. after six months of paralysis, ensured that some action would be taken to modify the open-field tackle.³⁷

Except for the forward pass and the flying tackle, the experts were in virtual agreement. They sought in a controlled way to end mass play and to open up the game. For the most part, they agreed in preliminary votes to reforms that included seven men on the line of scrimmage. no pushing or pulling of the ball carrier, and freeing the quarterback to run anywhere (he had been restricted five yards on either side of scrimmage). Finally in May the forward pass survived a showdown ballot by a razor-thin margin of one vote. Yet some of the irksome restrictions had been removed. and now incomplete passes would be returned to the spot where the pass was attempted rather than being declared fumbles or having to be thrown five yards right or left of center.³⁸

Would these changes have saved the lives of Archer Christian. Eugene Byrne, or Edwin Wilson? Possibly Wilson would have avoided injury as a result of the new regulations on the flying tackle. Byrne had been killed on a run across tackle, a play that had been set up by the short forward pass on the previous play. and it might be argued that the number of line plunges across tackle were reduced by the committee’s outlawing of mass plays. As for Archer Christian, it is also likely that the new rules would have prevented an injury, if he were injured on such a play. However, if Christian had broken into the defensive backfield, as the Virginia coach insisted, the reforms might not have changed the outcome at all. Christian had run this play successfully a number of times, which may explain why the defense converged so quickly. If the injury occurred eight or more yards from scrimmage. it was hardly the result of a mass play nor was there a diving tackle involved.

It is possible that Christian used his trademark move when he encountered the Georgetown defenders, a twisting backward leap, and as a result was thrown to the ground, his back across a defensive player and his head slammed into the turf. The *Baltimore Sun*, for example. suggested that he might have been injured in a “backward twist.”³⁹ That possibility, in turn.

37. “Records of Meeting of the American Intercollegiate Rules Committee, 1912.” Walter Camp Papers, Yale University Archives. New York Times, March 6, 8, 28, 1910. Wiley Lee Umphlett, *Creating the Big Game*. John W. Heisman and the Invention of American Football (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1992), 105. Umphlett relates that Heisman wrote to Camp that as a result of his demonstrations he could see nothing worthwhile in Camp’s proposals.

38. “Records of the Meeting of the American Intercollegiate Rules Committee, 1910,” Walter Camp Papers. Yale University Archives.

39. *Baltimore Sun*, November 14, 1909. Morris A. Bealle, *The Georgetown Hoyas, the Story of a Rambunctious Football Team*. Washington, D.C.: Columbia Publishing Company, 1947. According to Bealle, Christian “on line bucks, would rush toward the battling scrimmage lines, turn in mid-air and make a backward broad jump as he hurdled the scrambling linemen.” It still cannot be known with certainty if Christian made a backward hurdle on the fatal play, though the *Baltimore Sun* account suggests it and such a maneuver might explain why he experienced such impact.

suggests another explanation for the lethal conclusion to the abrupt tackle. Probably Archer Christian was not wearing a helmet when the accident occurred. While this cannot be known for certain, a photograph of an end run by the Virginia fullback Kemp Yancey against Georgetown reveals clearly that he was not wearing a helmet. Photos of the Yale-Princeton game on the same day in the New York Times show many, perhaps a majority of players without helmets. One of Archer Christian's nieces related to the author that she had always heard from her family that Archer Christian lost his helmet on the fatal play. The primitive, hard, sole-leather helmets were hot and uncomfortable, and were looked upon by some as an offensive weapon rather than a means of protection. Ironically, the crusade by Edwin Alderman to have the rules reformed and the actions of the rules committee ignored the issue of improving or requiring helmets, probably because it was not part of the public debate and in spite of the notable exceptions more players than ever were wearing "head armor."⁴⁰

The new rules were periodically amended and serious injuries reduced in 1910, though they increased again in 1911. Nevertheless, the results satisfied the presidents and the public, and the football issue would never again create the shrill demands for change that had characterized the 1905-06 and 1909-10 crises. College presidents who had viewed the future of football uneasily could now turn their attention to more traditional academic matters. Woodrow Wilson, who had upset his colleagues at Yale and Harvard by calling for abolishing mass play and inventing a more attractive game, in the fall of 1910 gave football his blessing. Now Governor-elect of New Jersey, Wilson in a short talk to the Princeton football team confidently declared that "the new rules are doing much to bring football to a high level as a sport, for its brutal features are being done away with and better elements retained." As governor and president, Wilson would apply the same moderate, but persistent reformist approach to reform of economic and political institutions.⁴¹

No doubt Edwin Alderman would have agreed with Wilson's views on football reform since he believed that the rules changes were the key to the solution. His crusade, brief as it was, had made some atonement for the tragic loss of Archer Christian, even if it had not precisely addressed the causes of

40. Interview of the author with Frances Guy, March 11, 1993. Christian's other niece, Archer Christian Burke, the daughter of Andrew Burke, does not recall anything about the helmet or lack thereof, but apparently Andrew seldom spoke of his brother when she was growing up. Bill Reid, coach at Harvard, commented in his diary in 1905: "As for head gear. Yale men use at the beginning of the season some made to order out of hair and canvas, which are no where as hot and bulky as those to be bought . . ." Ronald Smith (ed.), *Big-Time Football at Harvard, 1905: the Diary of Coach Bill Reid* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 46. See also E.G. Ryder to Walter Camp, January 23, 1906. Ryder objected to shin guards, heavy shoes, leather shoulder pads and nose guards, but especially 10 head armor. *New York Times*. November 14, 1909. Photo of Kemp Yancey, *Corks and Curbs, 1910*, (annual yearbook), University of Virginia Archives. Football helmets were not made mandatory by the NCAA until 1939.

41. "Talk to the Football Team," November 10, 1910, Arthur S. Link (ed.), *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (65 vols; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966-1994), Vol. 22, 4-5. For a more elaborate discussion of Wilson's economic and Political policies with his approach to football reform, see Watterson, "Political Football: Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson and the Gridiron Crises of the Early 1900s," accepted for publication by *The Presidential Studies Quarterly*.

his death. While it owed some intellectual framework to Charles Eliot, it had been converted into public action, a realm that Eliot as an athletic reformer had largely disdained. In the end, football had not been abolished or drastically altered in Virginia or elsewhere in the gridiron crisis of 1909-10. That was a double victory for Alderman on the one hand and on the other for those in a moderately Progressive football establishment who wanted to nudge football toward substantive but not reckless changes.