
LESTER, ROBIN. *Stagg's University: The Rise, Decline, and Fall of Big-Time Football at Chicago*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995. Pp. xxii, 301. Notes, index, illustrations, appendices. \$32.95.

In 1939, the University of Chicago abolished football and thus essentially withdrew from the prestigious Big 10 Conference. That year, university president Robert Maynard Hutchins privately opposed the policy of Chicago playing lesser opponents such as Monmouth College, Oberlin, or Beloit, as it would diminish the status of the University of Chicago. Publicly, Hutchins claimed that the "football situation has nothing to do with the academic reputation of the university" (p. 183). Robin Lester's book *Stagg's University* explores the paradoxes and hypocrisies not only of Robert Maynard Hutchins, who is best remembered for abolishing football at a major university, but also the paradoxes and hypocrisies of athletics in all of higher education. Lester's book effectively places the University of Chicago and college football in the social context of higher education. One might say that much of the University of Chicago's reputation in the 1890s and early twentieth century was built with John D. Rockefeller's money and with the hiring of Amos Alonzo Stagg by the university's first president, William Rainey Harper. With Stagg's hiring came football as a mass industry on an important American campus. It lasted until Stagg's last years as coach and the eventual banning of football under President Hutchins.

Stagg's University is a revision of a University of Chicago dissertation written in the 1970s. In the intervening two decades of intermittent research, during Lester's career as a preparatory school administrator, he gained additional insight into higher education and the place of athletics. The book is a particularly worthy choice for publication by the University of Illinois Press to be included in its lengthy series on sport and society. While there have been a number of notable books in the series since the first in 1986, Mel Adelman's *A Sporting Time: New York City and the Rise of Modern Athletics, 1820-1870*, Lester's volume is the series' first winner of the North American Society for Sport History Book Award.

The volume is academically solid, scrupulously researched, and written with style. The footnotes, principally primary sources, extend to 67 pages. The selection of photographs is excellent, and the captions are an education in themselves. The text is written with a grace seldom found in an academic book. For instance, Lester writes that Amos Alonzo Stagg "had the characteristics of a medieval saint: He was long on focus, short on perspective. And, like the saints, he was not above assuming the martyr's mantle, so much so that he came to identify his own best interests with those of his institution. Stagg's career and contributions demonstrate that he had overcome much with the odds against him.... Those searing early experiences had forced him into a siege mentality. It was frequently the five-foot-six-inch Amos Alonzo Stagg facing the world alone.... Therein lay an enormous need and an attendant strength and capacity to move others and to create"(p. 14). Later, Lester tells of the demise of football under Robert Maynard Hutchins: "Intercollegiate football at the University of Chicago fell in 1939

because of the convergence of four factors: (1) Stagg's mythic purity as a university legacy against which to measure the present; (2) a university leadership willing to abolish the game; (3) the ultimate disastrous season; and (4) university constituencies willing to consider and accept the abolition of football. In September 1939, only the first two of the four factors were in place" (p. 164). But all four came together that fall. Lester's narrative is compelling, and, in short, if you want to understand the place of intercollegiate athletics in the larger American society in the twentieth century, this volume is the place to start.

What will you learn about human nature, higher education, and athletics from reading Robin Lester's book? You will learn that Chicago's president in the 1890s, William Rainey Harper, the P.T. Barnum of education, was a child genius who received his Ph.D. at age 18 with a comparative study in Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, and Gothic—and that Amos Alonzo Stagg did not even begin high school until he was 18. You will better understand the "evangelical influence" on Stagg, Chicago, and football: The evangelical businessman John D. Rockefeller, who bankrolled the University of Chicago; the evangelical preacher Dwight L. Moody, whom Stagg served as a young man; and the "evangelical" politician Teddy Roosevelt and his place in the 1905-06 football crisis. Unfortunately, you won't learn much about an "evangelical" woman sport separatist, Agnes Wayman, who Lester notes was a type of "cheerleader" for women's sport as an undergraduate at Chicago in the first decade of the twentieth century.

You will discover that Coach Stagg was doing at Chicago what other coaches were doing nationally: 1) trying to keep athletes eligible, 2) recruiting high school athletes, 3) operating a training table, 4) setting up athletic dorms, 5) separating football players from the rest of the university student body, 6) pandering to the physically elite, and 7) scheduling patsies to create winning records. At the same time, you will find out a great deal about the internal institutional politics of football and the university. For instance, the book discusses presidential involvement in creating successful athletics; faculty involvement in resisting athletic dominance; governing board micro-management of athletics by Board of Trustees president Harold Swift, who recruited "Swift's Premium Hams" to play for Chicago; and university president Robert Hutchins "lining up his ducks" to successfully abolish football at Chicago.

While the pluses far exceed the negatives, several issues are left wanting. We know little about Stagg's relationship to the black community in Chicago. Was, for instance, Stagg interested in getting a black Chicagoan, Fritz Pollard, to play for him at the time of World War I? We know almost nothing about women's involvement with Chicago athletics or its football team—although Lester notes a women's "auxiliary elite" with no elaboration. Lester does note that Stagg hung around a women's residence hall long enough to pick out a freshman coed, Stella Robertson, who became his wife of more than 60 years. You will also not learn about the promotion of University of Chicago football through the medium of the 1920s radio. What was the significance of the first intersectional radio broadcast of the Chicago-Princeton football game in 1922? Why was Chicago chosen? What impact did it have on football, on Chicago, or on higher education?

It is also curious why Robin Lester does not do more with the Chicago-Notre Dame situation. Why didn't Stagg's team play Notre Dame in the twentieth century—especially since one of Stagg's former players, Jesse Harper, coached at Notre Dame? Did Stagg fear coaches Harper and later Knute Rockne? Did it have to do with Stagg's vanity? Did it have to do with a contest for football supremacy in Chicago, where Notre Dame played many of its home games? Or, as I suspect, did Stagg, a muscular Christian moralist, have anti-Catholic biases that perhaps reflected the pro-Baptist, anti-Catholic biases of Chicago? Stagg, one learns from the book, was noted for doing "the heavy pious."

With these questions and a few misgivings, I can recommend Robin Lester's *Stagg's University* as a fine read and an intellectually stimulating treatment of University of Chicago football.

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