

---

# Foolish and Useless Sport: The Southern Evangelical Crusade Against Intercollegiate Football

*by Andrew Doyle*

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY  
WINTHROP UNIVERSITY

Southern colleges should set themselves against this vicious fad. It may do for English lordlings and northern anglo-maniacs, but in the South it is utterly out of place.'

Warren A. Candler

College football has long enjoyed enormous popularity among evangelical Protestants of the American South. Pregame invocations by ministers and postgame prayers by members of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes unite players and fans in a ritual of fealty to shared beliefs. Many southern coaches proudly contend that their work reinforces the Christian values that their players learn at home and in church. Southern evangelicals gather together for college football on Saturday afternoons and for church on Sunday mornings with a similar spirit of respect for the traditions and values they associate with regional identity. Yet this mutually supportive relationship is a striking reversal of the intense hostility felt by an earlier generation of pious southerners toward football. Shortly after the first intercollegiate game in the Deep South, evangelical leaders denounced football as a "theater of mud and blood." A torrent of antifootball jeremiads began within days of Auburn's 10-0 victory over Georgia, in Atlanta in February 1892, and they continued intermittently for the next forty years.<sup>2</sup>

Like their secular counterparts, evangelical critics of football denounced the frequent injuries and occasional deaths that occurred on the gridiron. Violence and brutality were integral rather than incidental to football, asserted the *Alabama Christian Advocate (ACA)*, the official organ of Alabama Methodism. "The very

brutality of the sport," contended the ACA, "tends to so animalize the players as to make fighting come naturally." In an impassioned 1892 denunciation of football, the Reverend C.L. Chilton, pastor of the First Methodist Church of Auburn, listed the various sprains, ruptures, dislocated joints, and broken bones sustained by Auburn players during that school's first football season. This "foolish and useless sport," he declared, was "more properly called a fight."<sup>3</sup>

Evangelicals also joined many educators in denouncing students' eagerness to waste prodigious amounts of time and energy on football. The obsession with football was not limited to varsity players, for a majority of the Auburn student body flocked to the practice field every afternoon to watch intrasquad scrimmages and remained on the field until well after dark. These daily scrimmages proved so compelling, lamented Chilton, that even "learned professors hasten to the scene of the fray." He complained that students were so absorbed with upcoming games that they did not focus on their studies. Evangelical leaders envisioned a pious, highly disciplined collegiate environment that left no room for the passion and frivolity that surrounded intercollegiate football. "Here in Auburn, football is the one engrossing theme during the season," Chilton fumed. "The whole thing is a travesty upon higher education."<sup>4</sup>

Even worse was the drinking, gambling, and dissipation that accompanied off-campus games. Despite a relaxation of the student conduct code that began in the mid-1880s, Auburn still enforced relatively strict standards of discipline and piety on its campus during the 1890s. Students assembled each morning to hear a reading from Scripture, were required to attend Sunday church services, and could be expelled for drinking or leaving campus without permission. Thus, many Auburn students misbehaved with gusto when they found themselves in the boisterous atmosphere of a football weekend in the emerging urban centers of Atlanta, Birmingham, or Montgomery.<sup>5</sup>

Evangelical leaders did not dismiss this misbehavior as mere youthful highjinks. In 1897 the ACA condemned football for its propensity to "convert a crowd of students, inflamed with liquor and excited by loyalty to their institution, into a howling mob of toughs, gamblers, and drunkards." The pastor of the First Baptist Church of Montgomery said that the behavior of students who visited his city for the 1900 Alabama-Auburn game "is such as to startle and shock the community." A Montgomery resident breathlessly denounced the "revelry and debauchery" that the students perpetrated on that same weekend, asserting that they "got enough deviltry . . . and corruption and mischief in the short two days to last them all the rest of the session." In 1913 the president of the Alabama Women's Christian Temperance Union asked the president of Auburn to stop scheduling games in Birmingham because that city's saloons offered too great a temptation to adventuresome and vulnerable young college students. City games offered students almost limitless opportunities for sin, and these complaints clearly troubled college authorities. But they continued to schedule games in city stadiums because gate receipts were exponentially greater than at the smaller and less accessible campus venues. The need for constantly increasing revenues, which

still commands headlines a century later, was an integral aspect of southern intercollegiate football from its inception.<sup>6</sup>

Opposition to football was not unique to southern evangelicals. Well before southerners had even begun intercollegiate football competition, secular and religious critics in the Northeast had voiced strenuous objections to football's brutality, the rowdiness of its fans, and the academic and ethical compromises that universities were forced to make in order to field winning football teams. The Harvard faculty made numerous attempts either to ban or drastically curtail the athletic program there. Opinion journals and newspapers weighed in against the plague of football-related deaths and injuries, which had become a national scandal by the early 1890s. *Nation* editor E. L. Godkin and Harvard president Charles Eliot advocated the abolition of big-time college football, and even such football advocates as Theodore Roosevelt and Caspar Whitney publicly condemned the excessive violence. Nor was misbehavior at off-campus games limited to the South. Harvard, Yale, and Princeton students perpetrated postgame mayhem in the Tenderloin District of New York City that was qualitatively and quantitatively worse than anything ever done by southern students. Editorial condemnations of riotous behavior by the scions of the American elite appeared in such disparate sources as daily newspapers, political opinion journals, the religious press, and the *National Police Gazette*.<sup>7</sup>

The southern Methodist press approvingly quoted from, and often reprinted, the editorial denunciations of both the secular and religious press of the Northeast. They agreed with the *New York Christian Advocate*, *Independent*, and *Outlook* that football was too violent, diverted students' attention from serious pursuits, and fomented postgame misbehavior. Northern and southern ministers alike shared a special abhorrence for football's encouragement of such putative working-class vices as drinking, gambling, and hooliganism among socially privileged collegians. Devout evangelicals of both regions were horrified that young men, on whom society had bestowed its greatest privileges, could behave "like the street toughs at a prizefight."<sup>8</sup>

Football's critics agreed wholeheartedly on these issues independent of their region or degree of piety, but southern evangelicals advanced additional objections to football that neither secular critics nor their northern coreligionists shared. Conservative southern religious leaders held that football was of questionable morality because it exalted the body rather than the spirit. Citing the authority of St. Paul, orthodox southern evangelicals objected on theological grounds to football's brazen glorification of the inherently corrupt and sinful temporal body. They believed that competitive sports in general, and football in particular, fostered an unhealthy obsession with the body that flagrantly repudiated the Christian ideals of self-restraint and otherworldliness. Young men infatuated with "carnal sports," they believed, were likely to lose sight of spiritual matters.

The *Wesleyan Christian Advocate* (WCA), the official publication of Georgia Methodism, called for the abolition of intercollegiate football because "the Apostle Paul teaches us that bodily exercise profiteth little." Football gave reign to "mere animal currents" and legitimized "the lower impulses of the physical man." Within

days of the first Auburn-Georgia game, the WCA denounced football as an unholy, neopagan ritual that reflected the debased values of modern society. "And so the sacred altars, whose incense has been so inspiring to our people in the past, are broken down, and these gods of the sensual and material man have set up their altars instead." Football encouraged young men to "find their pleasure in mere sensual energy" and represented "a swing back to Olympic Greece and her barbarian ideals."<sup>9</sup>

Conservative southern evangelicals held fast to the Pauline doctrine of the mutual incompatibility of body and soul, believing that salvation demanded the repudiation of fleshly pleasures. "The flesh is one of our great spiritual enemies," declared the *Alabama Baptist*, "and it is on a par with the world and the devil. The Apostle Paul clearly shows that. . . his body was one of his great difficulties." Theologically conservative southerners, who had long opposed dancing, held fast to this hard theological line and defined carnal pleasures broadly enough to include competitive sports. Reverend C.L. Chilton recognized the need for exercise, but declared, "Any young man can acquire that at home in the useful emoluments of cutting his mother's yard or driving his father's plow." Another Alabama Methodist agreed, denouncing baseball in terms that applied to all competitive sports. He rejected the argument that, as long as they neither bet on games nor competed on the Sabbath, baseball was "fine exercise for school boys who need exercise." While the game built muscle, "in this case, muscular energy is misdirected." Working the soil, he insisted, built muscle as well as any sport. The ACA advised the state's Methodists to shun both the University of Alabama and Auburn and to send their sons instead to Methodist-affiliated Southern University, "where the YMCA takes precedence over the football team, and where the legs and head are not developed at the expense of the soul."<sup>10</sup>

The uncompromising attitude of these southern evangelicals toward competitive sports contrasts sharply with the more tolerant attitude of theologically liberal northeasterners. By the 1890s most northern denominations had long since abandoned Biblical literalism, thus allowing them to ignore Paul's unyielding doctrine of bodily corruption. The "Muscular Christianity" movement, which sought moral uplift through competitive sports and the development of the body, was predicated upon a denial of the body's inherent sinfulness. Not feeling compelled to abolish football in toto as inherently sinful, northeastern moralists could work to eliminate the sins and moral shortcomings that were peripheral to the game. An editorial in *Outlook* denounced the brutality, drinking, and gambling associated with football, but demanded, "Give us reformed football." While the *New York Christian Advocate* called for the abolition of intercollegiate football in 1894, it stopped well short of conservative southerners' general condemnation of all competitive sports.<sup>11</sup>

Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a Unitarian minister and Harvard Divinity School graduate, was the leading American proponent of Muscular Christianity. His influential 1858 article, "Saints, and Their Bodies," rejected the notion that Christian piety demanded a suspicion of, if not a repudiation of, physical culture and competitive sports. Muscular Christianity emerged from this dramatic

revision of the orthodox Calvinist view of the inherent sinfulness of the human body. Also a militant Christian abolitionist, Higginson helped to finance John Brown's fateful raid on Harper's Ferry and later commanded black troops during the Civil War. Both his abolitionism and his advocacy of Muscular Christianity were cut from the same theologically liberal cloth. In each case, he expostulated a higher morality that superseded explicit Scriptural admonitions. He opposed slavery on religious grounds despite the unequivocal sanction for the institution in Genesis, Exodus, and Leviticus, and he advocated a regimen of sport and physical fitness in contravention of the literalist interpretation of Pauline doctrine. These liberal interpretations of both slavery and physical culture outraged conservative southern clergymen because both embodied an explicit rejection of what they regarded as a clear Biblical mandate.<sup>12</sup>

Conservative southern evangelicals were among the critics of Muscular Christianity, who, according to historians J.A. Mangan and James Walvin, complained that it "tended to exaggerate muscle at the expense of Christianity." These divergent interpretations of the morality of physical culture reflect the deep theological divide between northern and southern Protestantism that endured throughout the nineteenth century. The liberals who dominated the major northern denominations and the conservatives who controlled the breakaway southern denominations had a long and bitter history of disagreement on theological questions. The Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches split into separate northern and southern organizations between 1844 and 1861, primarily over the issue of the morality of slavery. The southern denominations held that slavery was morally acceptable because of the explicit sanction given it in both the Old and New Testaments. Although some antebellum northern theologians continued to argue solely from Scripture, increasing numbers rejected Biblical literalism. They held that an extrapolative interpretation of the Golden Rule overrode the literal words of Scripture and disallowed slavery. Southerners correctly predicted that the same northern theological liberalism that permitted the denunciation of slavery would eventually lead to the abandonment of the doctrines of original sin, human depravity, and Biblical inerrancy.<sup>13</sup>

The theological dispute between southern orthodoxy and northern liberalism extended into the cultural and political realm and strengthened the antifootball views of conservative southern evangelicals. Football's strong identification with the northeastern bourgeoisie made it a powerful symbol of the progressive national culture to both modernizers and traditionalists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was introduced to most southern campuses by professors or students who learned it at northern schools. Intercollegiate football quickly became a litmus test of southern attitudes toward the emerging regime of the New South. Football was most popular among the devotees of the New South program of industrialization, urbanization, and sectional reconciliation on northern terms. Those who saw this new course as a craven surrender to the materialism and freebooting individualism of Gilded Age capitalism were those least likely to embrace the faddish Yankee sport.

Conservative southern evangelicals regarded the New South movement as a Trojan Horse disgorging northern heresy and infidelity into the last major bastion of theologically conservative Protestantism in the world. W.J. Cash's assertion that southerners subscribed to "the dark suggestion that the God of the Yankee was not God at all but the Antichrist loosed at last from the pit" was hyperbolic, but not by much. In the same 1892 issue that contained its first editorial condemnation of football, the *WCA* condemned the "heavy freightage of hate, malice, falsehood, and slander" that northern Methodists had directed toward their southern brethren and denounced "the long, malignant, vindictive, and cruel persecution which New England Methodism has waged against the Methodist Episcopal Church South." Southern Methodism, the *WCA* avowed, "is the only conservative Methodism in these United States." In another 1892 editorial, the *WCA* asserted, "The South and our church have never had a more bitter and relentless enemy than the Northern Methodist church, unless it was the devil himself? Conservative southern evangelicals saw the encroaching bourgeois liberal culture of the North as the secular handmaiden of northern theological heresy. They accused northern progressives and their traitorous southern allies of forcing an irreligious, materialistic, Mammon-worshiping order upon a prostrate and defeated South. Robert Dabney, the leading postbellum southern Presbyterian theologian, warned his fellow southerners not to succumb to the blandishments of this sinful Babylon to the north. Dabney admonished postbellum southerners to avoid the temptation to "become like the conquerors . . . and to share, for a few deceitful days, the victor's gains of oppression." For southern evangelical hardliners, the acceptance of football represented a symbolic surrender to the despised Yankees. Bowing to superior military force was a grim necessity, but slavish emulation of the decadent culture of the enemy was unpardonable.<sup>14</sup>

To evangelical leaders, football was not only brutal, a fountainhead of other vices, and a sinful glorification of the body, it was also a manifestation of the decline of public morality under the ascendancy of New South progressives and their Yankee overlords. In an editorial denunciation of the first Auburn-Georgia game in 1892, the *WCA* declared that football had gained this southern foothold only because of the social degeneration that began with defeat in the Civil War. "This new outbreak [of football] in the South, in contrast with the sturdy integrity of our past history, is but a natural result of lowering the standard of citizenship and manhood." Later that year, the *WCA* asserted that the public demand for college athletics was a proof that a "new regime" had been "thrust upon the people." Warren A. Candler, president of Emory College and a future Methodist bishop, was deeply mistrustful of northern culture and the secularizing agenda of most southern progressives. He stated in 1892 that the obsessive pursuit of victory bred by competitive sports fostered a "materialistic psychology" in which "important matters of mind and morality are ignored."<sup>15</sup>

Southerners most concerned about the debasement of tradition were particularly horrified that venerable southern universities were the wellspring of this morally objectionable offshoot of Yankee culture. Football was a sign that other, more dangerous northern ideas and practices had taken root on southern

campuses. Conservative southern evangelicals regarded football as a symptom of the declension that had rotted away the moral and pedagogical foundations of northern universities. In the two decades following the Civil War, most northern universities abandoned the traditional academic regimen of discipline and piety that had obtained since colonial times. They abolished the classical curriculum with its mandatory courses in Latin, Greek, rhetoric, and moral philosophy and replaced it with the elective system. They also relaxed stringent codes of student conduct and ended compulsory chapel attendance. By the early 1890s the leading northern universities were fully committed to a progressive educational philosophy that valued practical knowledge and encouraged a much freer expression of individual preferences. The modern university of the late nineteenth century placed a premium on the inculcation of skills rather than on the development of character and morals. The meritocratic ideal that informed modern competitive sports was also at the heart of the progressive system of higher education. Piety, moral character, and loyalty to tradition were as irrelevant to success on the football field as they were to success in the modern business world.

Laurence Veysey notes, "In nineteenth century America, educational and theological orthodoxy almost always went together," and traditionalist southern evangelicals were loath to give an inch on either. They revered the system of mental and moral discipline and fought against the new approach of transmitting practical knowledge within an atmosphere of relaxed behavioral standards. Conservative southern evangelicals watched the transformation of northern higher education with horror, and they saw football as an especially odious manifestation of this unwelcome revolution. An 1897 editorial in the *ACA* denounced the "modern scheme of education" at Harvard and Yale that permitted the barbaric spectacle of football while simultaneously diminishing the status of academic pursuits. The mass market entertainment spectacle of intercollegiate football could never have arisen in the highly disciplined and rigidly pious environment of the antebellum American university. The redefinition of the educational mission of the university and the resulting decline in campus piety were necessary preconditions for the growth of football on northern campuses during the 1870s and 1880s.<sup>16</sup>

By the late 1880s southern universities had begun adopting many of these educational innovations, providing an opening for southern students to begin their experiments with intercollegiate football. For evangelicals, a university that permitted football must be far advanced down the path to decadence and impiety. They saw the advent of football as proof that educational progressivism had made inroads into southern higher education. The *WCA* observed, "We are evolving new ideas, and out of them new ways. Our simple-hearted fathers were under the delusion that colleges and universities were institutions for mental training. . . and moral training. Moreover, some thought that a college without Christ was worse than no college at all." The decline of southern higher education had become so pronounced that southern boys were choosing colleges based on the quality of their football teams rather than on the quality of the intellectual and moral instruction. Even worse, permissive fathers were acquiescing in this

abomination. “The foot-ball college is the college no—wild boys being the judges,” complained the *WCA*.<sup>17</sup>

W.P. Fleming, a Georgia teacher and Methodist layman, endorsed the fire-breathing condemnation of the first Auburn-Georgia game in the *WCA*. He declared that football was only one of a number of cultural evils “hitherto confined mostly to the colleges of the North, but which are of late gaining great prevalence in the South.” He charged that while northern schools permitted their students to engage in abominations like football, they “advocate the abandonment of the ancient classics from our curriculums [sic].” Fleming asserted that northern universities had renounced all religious, academic, and disciplinary standards and warned that southern universities were following the same self-destructive path. He called on southerners to defeat “the athletic craze [that] is just beginning to take southern colleges . . . before our higher education will be degraded into what it has already become in some institutions of the North.”<sup>18</sup>

An 1894 editorial in the *ACA* reveals the degree to which football violated the evangelical ideal of the purpose and nature of a university. It sarcastically congratulated the University of Alabama and Vanderbilt for allowing football fans to “witness the refined and polished results of classic and literary culture upon the future statesmen, orators, and divines of Alabama and Tennessee.” Football would have been strikingly out of place in a university whose primary educational mission focused on providing a classical education to statesmen, orators, and divines. Yet in the late nineteenth century, most major southern universities were gradually adopting the progressive educational model. Football was an acceptable, and even desirable, feature of universities that educated aspirants to the new middle class through a professionally oriented curriculum under less than rigid standards of discipline and piety.<sup>19</sup>

The rise of football and the concomitant decline of oratory symbolized this changing campus environment. Since the antebellum era, literary and oratorical societies had dominated extracurricular life on southern campuses, but the meteoric rise of football in the late 1880s and early 1890s quickly reduced them to irrelevance. From the time that Auburn opened its doors in 1859 until the advent of football in 1892, extracurricular life revolved around the rival Wirt and Websterian literary societies. Membership in the “Wits” or the “Webs” defined a student’s social identity, overwhelming even fraternity affiliation. Evangelicals supported oratory as strongly as they opposed football. Oratory reflected the values of the traditional academic paradigm of mental and moral discipline and cultivated the rhetorical prowess valued by generations of southerners, whereas football flourished only in the more permissive atmosphere of the modern university. Local ministers actively supported the literary societies and often served as judges at the semiannual debates. L.S. Boyd, an Auburn student in the 1880s who later served as college librarian, recalled the harmonious relations between the literary societies and the local Methodist church: “There were absolutely no activities in the town except the Methodist Church and the two Literary Societies, the one to save souls, and the others to win medals.”<sup>20</sup>

The ancient arts of oratory and debate were intimately linked to the antebellum cultural tradition and to the pedagogical ideal of mental and moral discipline. Thus, their tendency to perpetuate the worldview of the antebellum South made them suspect to many southern progressives. Walter Hines Page believed that southern collegiate literary societies perpetuated the "medieval" mindset that had long crippled southern development. He believed that literary societies inculcated "the oratorical habit of mind" that valued emotionalism and rhetorical grandiosity over critical thought. He possessed some fond memories of his own collegiate literary society but feared that "it did harm to more boys than it helped." Within the tradition-bound world of the southern campuses of the 1870s and early 1880s, literary societies occupied a privileged position, and athletics were generally seen as a puerile diversion that served no good moral or instrumental purpose.<sup>21</sup>

In a stunningly rapid reversal during the early 1890s, Page's view of literary societies as an archaic and useless cultural form became widely accepted at most southern colleges. Intercollegiate athletics took over their privileged position in southern campus life. The burgeoning popularity of northern, "scientific" football that began in 1892 relegated Auburn's literary societies to secondary status virtually overnight. Students who, a year earlier, had secreted themselves in their oratorical society library after classes went instead to the athletic field either to participate in or watch football practice. Players not skilled enough to make the varsity or scrub teams soon formed class teams. The upwardly mobile students of this New South college had little time, energy, or interest left for an old-fashioned endeavor like debate. Students began to desert both the weekly intrasociety debates and the semiannual intersociety competitions. The Websterian Society did manage to draw one large and lively crowd to one of its weekly debates during the winter term of 1895 by debating the issue: "Resolved, that foot-ball should be prohibited in colleges." (The negative, or pro-football, argument prevailed.)<sup>22</sup>

Tradition-minded students and ministers futilely urged a revival of oratory. In 1895 the Auburn student newspaper, the *Orange and Blue*, observed, "If there is one thing apparent in the college world of today it is the decline of interest in Literary societies." It called for a revival of oratory and debate, for these offered honors superior to those to be won on a football field. "In this time of athletic crazes," it lamented, "we are apt to lose all sense of proportion." The *Orange and Blue* reported that the minister who gave the opening prayer at a poorly attended 1895 debate "strongly appealed to students to renew their interest, urging the importance and necessity of a good literary society training to every ambitious young man." In 1904 the *ACA* responded, "amen with all our heart" to a debater's declaration that his craft should be emphasized as much as football on southern campuses. These admonitions were lost on the vast majority of students. In the early 1890s literary societies were banished from the center of campus life to the periphery. Southern collegiate culture moved closer to the national norm, and football reigned supreme.<sup>23</sup>

Football's triumph over oratory reflects the transformation of the Anglo-American conception of masculinity during the late nineteenth century. A cultural

chasm divided the southern evangelicals' construction of masculinity from that of the national culture. The evangelicals held that oratory and debate developed the reasoned judgment and rhetorical skills that undergirded their equation of manhood with self-control and maturity, Football, by contrast, was a perfect vehicle for cultivating what E. Anthony Rotundo calls "passionate manhood." Advocates of Muscular Christianity and the cult of the strenuous life saw the exuberant passions unleashed on the football field as a remedy for the emasculating "overcivilization" born of bourgeois affluence.<sup>24</sup>

Theodore Roosevelt, the most prominent advocate of the cult of strenuousness, argued that fin de siècle American culture placed "too little stress on the virile virtues." The robust masculinity cultivated by athletics was the essential quality needed by the American "race of statesmen and soldiers, of pioneers and explorers" to fulfill its destiny as an emerging world power. Roosevelt stated that "no amount of refinement and learning, of gentleness and culture" could offset a lack of masculine vigor in the competitive modern world. He thus relegated to secondary importance the very qualities that southern evangelicals regarded as the essence of masculinity. He saw rough competitive sports, especially football, as the best means of developing a "manly race" that could survive in the naked struggle that characterized both modern business and the imperialist rivalry. Caspar Whitney, who, unlike Roosevelt, was not noted for his bombastic expressions of hypermasculinity, echoed the latter's enthusiastic endorsement of the manly sport of football. "Football and athletics generally have been steadily and surely raising the type of our national manhood," Whitney declared. Football, he predicted, "would continue to thrive until our race has become emasculated."<sup>25</sup>

The nascent conception of passionate manhood emerged with the maturing capitalist system. Northern religious leaders and cultural arbiters had become more tolerant of masculine aggressiveness during the antebellum era because it was the engine that drove their highly competitive market economy. Most of them, however, did not embrace it as a positive good. They constructed the ideology of separate spheres in part as a means of repairing the moral damage that men inflicted on themselves and society as a whole in the course of daily business. The influence of Social Darwinism and the demands of Gilded Age capitalism transformed this halfhearted acceptance of unrestrained masculine competitiveness into vigorous approval. The northeasterners who created football defined it as a crucible in which the future captains of industry could hone the survival instincts needed to prosper in the cutthroat business environment of the late nineteenth century. Following the lead of British advocates of schoolboy sports, they saw football as a means of enhancing the qualities necessary to project American power to the farthest reaches of the world in the global imperialist competition. These late nineteenth-century opinion leaders thus made a virtue out of competitive passions that only decades earlier had been merely tolerated as a necessary evil.<sup>26</sup>

Southern evangelicals had no use for a gender paradigm that encouraged men to cultivate aggressiveness and to triumph through will and brute force. The antebellum ministers who had preached the Gospel in the rough-and-tumble

frontier world of the Old Southwest associated unrestrained masculine passions with the ritualized violence committed in the defense of personal honor. They regarded male passions as the primary wellspring of sin, and, for generations, sought to temper the defiance and haughty pride that the southern ethos of honor fostered in men. Their northern counterparts reluctantly accepted male passions as an economic necessity, and they derived some satisfaction from the tendency of business success to accrue to men who adhered to an ethos of thrift, moderation, and sobriety. The relative absence of widely observed bourgeois norms of propriety and self-control in the honor culture of the antebellum South rendered irrelevant the ancillary virtues of the business culture. Southern divines thus had no cause to rationalize competitiveness as a necessary precondition for bourgeois respectability and prosperity.<sup>27</sup>

Military defeat and the end of slavery dealt a severe blow to the southern ethos of honor, but the rise of industrial capitalism during the New South era introduced a new economic rationalization for male aggressiveness into the southern cultural matrix. Late nineteenth-century southern evangelicals fought a two-front war against the contentious masculinity associated with the remnants of the culture of honor and the rapacious acquisitiveness of the Gilded Age business world and the Darwinian paradigm that informed it. Driving this battle was the evangelical assumption that male passions—the very passions cultivated by football—were the single greatest source of human sinfulness. Nineteenth-century southern evangelicals believed that the world was a battleground between explicitly gendered forces of sin and righteousness. “Central to white Southern culture was the notion that men were more sinful than women,” observes cultural historian Ted Ownby. Evangelicals “often spoke as if women could do little wrong.” Men straying from this feminized vision of religious piety were succumbing to the sinful essence of their masculine nature. The language of football’s evangelical opponents—“animal,” “barbarous,” “brutal,” “savage,” and “carnal,”—consistently equated the sport with unrestrained male sinfulness. The mitigation of male passions was the primary goal of the moral and behavioral code constructed by southern evangelicals. Football outraged them because it fostered the male passions that they had devoted such effort to containing.<sup>28</sup>

Nineteenth-century southern evangelicals believed that such qualities as maturity, self-discipline, and quiet fortitude were the hallmarks of Christian manliness. They held to the notion prevalent in the pre-industrial North that manliness represented the opposite of boyishness rather than the opposite of femininity. Impulsive, willfully aggressive behavior could be tolerated in a boy but not in a man. The competitive masculinity cultivated by the business world and by “manly” sports like football was a regression into the immature passions of boyhood rather than the sine qua non of true manhood. The WCA declared that the competitive ethos characteristic of both the business world and gridiron was not authentic masculinity. In the Mammon-obsessed world of the New South, it lamented, “we hav’nt [sic] time to be anything more than money-making or business machines—we hav’nt time to be men.” Similarly, a godly university developed real masculinity through moral instruction, not on the football field.

The WCA contended that a university should “hold the standard of scholarship high, so as to require true manhood to reach after it, and when it is attained, we could feel that we have real men as our sons and not mere prize fighters.” Methodist bishop Warren Candler asserted, “Intercollegiate athletics have engendered hero-worship of successful players to the displacement of higher and nobler conceptions of manhood.” The ACA complained that football had perverted the standard of masculinity to the point that “brain holds a subordinate place to brawn; the ideal man is the one that can kick, rather than the one that can think.”<sup>29</sup>

The popularity of football rested in part upon the cult of Bergsonian vitalism prominent in fin de siècle Western culture. Many American men who felt stifled by their own “overcivilized” culture sought to renew their own masculine identity by emulating the primal masculinity of primitive peoples. Their desire to fashion a male identity that transcended the stultifying constraints of bourgeois society informed the growing popularity of sports, military service, big-game hunting, and wilderness expeditions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Increasing numbers of southerners were sufficiently possessed of a modernist world view to share the dominant culture’s obsession with the antimodern. This conformity to northern cultural norms was based partially on the propensity of the emerging southern bourgeoisie blindly to follow the cultural lead of northerners. It was also a reflection of the growing material wealth of the New South. The middle and upper classes of the New South were experiencing a rapid rise in their standard of living, although they remained far less affluent than their northeastern counterparts. The new men of the nascent southern business and professional world were just beginning to share in the material fruits of the national consumer culture. The anxieties over a perceived loss of virility created by this physically undemanding lifestyle led them to assert their masculinity through, among other things, sports.<sup>30</sup>

Southern football proponents fell in line behind the northern construction of football as a salutary response to the emasculating tendencies of modern civilization. The *Atlanta Constitution*, the primary organ of the New South agenda and a breathless advocate of the “manly” new sport, extolled the virility of young southern football players. The University of Virginia players were “great big giants of men, with hair all grown out long, like the men of Harvard, with great yellow zebra-like stripes around their stout arms.” Southern football players, following the custom established by their northeastern counterparts, wore a thick shock of uncombed hair parted in the middle. Long hair ostensibly served as protective padding prior to the introduction of leather helmets, but it was also a symbolic assertion of robust masculinity. The Auburn student newspaper noted that, following the end of the 1894 season, the players “returned to civilization by having their hair cut.” University of Georgia players, distraught by their 1895 loss to Auburn, cut off their long hair in a ceremonial act of self-abasement. The same year, the *Constitution* proclaimed, “Everybody turns out to do homage to the burly athletes with long locks, who buck each other’s center with the ferocity of the gladiators of ye olden days.” The *Constitution* anointed one long-haired

player as the Samson of the 1893 Auburn team and then mixed its mythic metaphors by also comparing him favorably to Apollo.<sup>31</sup>

Southern evangelicals rejected this fashionable desire to cultivate the vital male force associated with primitive peoples. The closing of the frontier, the end of the Indian wars, and the frightening social problems of America's emerging urban society intensified the nostalgic admiration that many Anglo-Americans felt for Indians. The cult of primitive masculinity of the late nineteenth century was an updated version of the Enlightenment admiration for the natural virtue of the "noble savage." The mainstream sporting culture made a positive virtue out of a model of masculinity reviled as barbarian by southern evangelicals. An 1894 editorial in the *WCA* declared that football reduced the scions of the southern elite to the moral level of uncivilized Indian tribes. A missionary to American Indians stated that football bore a strong resemblance to a violent Indian game that was prohibited by the "tribal codes of all the civilized tribes." Another *WCA* editorial denounced college football as "a swing back to Olympic Greece and her barbaric games" at the same time that Baron Philippe de Coubertain was working to revive the Olympic Games in order to inculcate the primitive vigor of the ancients into the overly soft modern elite.<sup>32</sup>

Evangelicals did not share the obsessive fear that overcivilization had robbed America of its collective manhood. They rejected marketplace values that placed a premium on competition, and their view of women as vessels of virtue and purity made them less fearful of the enervation of a feminized culture. The *ACA* declared that "the higher man—the real man" aspires to "a world that is entered by faith, by conscience, by the power of spiritual fellowship." Evangelicals preferred that a man adopt the "feminine" qualities of piety and moderation rather than give full vent to his masculine passions. The *Nashville Christian Advocate (NCA)* stated that the ideal man should possess the willingness "to suffer and to die, if need be, for the right." This more restrained conception of manhood presents a stark contrast to the overt virility demanded by Muscular Christianity and the cult of strenuousness. Theodore Roosevelt, that easily caricatured epitome of aggressive masculinity, exulted in the masculine virtue of making his adversaries suffer and, if need be, die.<sup>33</sup>

The *ACA* praised the sober, self-effacing masculinity of J.O. Keener, a Methodist minister and president of Methodist-affiliated Southern University in Greensboro, Alabama, when it mourned his death in 1899. The *ACA* lauded Keener for his great strength of mind and character, and noted:

With all his strength he possessed the gentleness of a woman. In the family circle he was a delightful companion. He could sympathize and weep with the afflicted and suffering. For such he was willing to make any sacrifice. He loved truth and admired genuine manhood. He had an utter contempt for meanness.

Keener occasionally "seemed rough in his speech" but was always "ready to acknowledge his error and ask forgiveness" of anyone offended by his occasional lapses into harshness. Not surprisingly, he disliked intercollegiate football. He

initially banned football from his campus, later grudgingly permitted home games while prohibiting off-campus games, and unsuccessfully attempted to substitute soccer for the Yankee variant. Keener embodied the southern evangelical ideal of Christian manliness, but he was hopelessly effeminate by the lights of Muscular Christians. Football's boosters delighted in contrasting the stereotypical image of the robust and muscular athlete with the sickly, pale, excessively studious youth who was not man enough to make it on the gridiron. Thomas Higginson undoubtedly had men like Keener in mind when he lampooned the minister who as a boy was "pallid, puny, sedentary, lifeless, joyless," and "waste[d] his Saturday afternoons in preaching sermons in the garret to his deluded little sisters and their dolls."<sup>34</sup>

The southern evangelicals' rejection of the new model of aggressive masculinity did not make them proto-feminists. Indeed, they were gravely concerned about the entry of increasing numbers of women into the heretofore exclusively male bastions of business, politics, and the professions. Many tradition-minded southerners believed that the cultivation of aggressive masculinity on the football field, far from being the solution to this problem, actually compounded it. The cult of strenuosity represented a surrender to boyish, primitive, or even animal passions and robbed men of their natural superiority over women. Southern evangelicals hewed to the Aristotelian notion that male dominance stemmed from men's superior capacity for reason. They did not regard the newfound passion for football as evidence of superior male reason. The WCA noted that, while men rightly condemned women's "slavery to fashion," football's popularity revealed that men were also vulnerable to this stereotypically feminine weakness. "Football is worse than a fashion-it is a 'fad.' It is worse than either, it is a craze."<sup>35</sup>

The ACA warned in 1893 that the simultaneous advent of coeducation and football was fomenting a disastrous reversal in gender roles. Both Alabama and Auburn admitted women students for the first time in the early 1890s, and evangelicals were horrified when these female students dramatically outperformed their male classmates. "Women are not only eclipsing the young men in the pursuit of knowledge, but are taking on male accomplishments and habits. And here is the trouble," fretted the ACA. Men's obsession with football reduced their capacity to counter this threat to male supremacy. While men wasted their time and energy "on what they are pleased to call physical culture," women were "outstripping them in intellectual progress." The ACA warned that if this trend continued, "the doctrine of Paul will be reversed and woman will no longer be marked as the weaker vessel; for true strength is found not in muscle but in brain." The cult of strenuosity, far from regenerating manhood, was actually weakening it.<sup>36</sup>

Vehement evangelical opposition led several southern colleges and universities to ban or severely curtail football. The trustees of the University of Georgia banned intercollegiate football shortly after its first game, but student unrest and pressure from the Atlanta newspapers forced the trustees to reverse themselves less than a year later. The trustees of the University of Alabama, responding to

pressure from Governor William C. Oates, restricted the Alabama team to on-campus games in 1896. The small campus crowds could not generate sufficient revenue to attract the leading football powers to Tuscaloosa, so Alabama played only three games in 1896, one the following year, and it did not field a team in 1898.

The antfootball stance of the Alabama trustees was bolstered by the surge of grief and anger that followed the death of University of Georgia fullback Von Gammon from injuries he sustained in an 1897 game with the University of Virginia. Sensationalized newspaper coverage of Gammon's death created a groundswell of opposition to football. Daily newspapers such as the *Birmingham News*, *Athens Banner*, *Charleston News and Courier*, and *Savannah News*, which had so recently hailed football as progressive, scientific, and manly, now called for its abolition. Within days, most southern college football teams had disbanded. Three weeks after Gammon's death, the Georgia legislature passed legislation that provided for one year on the state chain gang for anyone convicted of playing football. Governor W.Y. Atkinson, a football fan who had attended the game and witnessed Gammon's fatal injury, was rumored to be willing to sign the bill into law in order to please his grief-stricken wife.<sup>37</sup>

The dead boy's mother, Rosalind Burns Gammon, then sent a letter to Atkinson imploring him to veto the bill, establishing herself in southern sporting folklore as "The Lady Who Saved Football." Rosalind Gammon asked that her son's death should not be used to harm the "athletic cause" to which he had devoted his brief life. Her son believed strongly in "all manly sports, without which he deemed the highest type of manhood impossible." Mrs. Gammon stoically accepted her son's fate as a tragic but unavoidable cost of the pursuit of manly sports. Football proponents seized the opportunity afforded them by the "Spartan" Mrs. Gammon and defended football as a necessary part of progressive southern *culture*. The *Constitution* denounced the antfootball "hysteria" that had overcome the legislature. The *Rome Tribune* argued that if football were prohibited, Georgia students would attend northern schools that permitted the game. Governor Atkinson was thus able to justify his veto as a pragmatic defense of the interests of the state university and as a chivalrous deference to the wishes of Mrs. Gammon. His veto message also justified the risks inherent in football as the price of inculcating a proper level of masculinity in the youth of Georgia. In language that echoed the arguments of northeastern advocates of the strenuous life, Atkinson declared that "football and other manly sports" taught necessary lessons in discipline, self-control, and perseverance "that prepare our young men for the life of today." He also sought to preempt the inevitable criticism from evangelicals by quoting an essay written in defense of football by the chancellor of Methodist-affiliated Syracuse University

The intense furor over Gammon's death was short-lived. Most southern colleges and universities played limited schedules in 1898, but southern intercollegiate football programs experienced steady growth in revenues and attendance over the next two decades. While some southern denominational colleges acquiesced in this trend, others banned or curtailed intercollegiate football.

Emory College, a Methodist school located in Oxford, Georgia, never allowed its students to form an intercollegiate football team. Bishop Warren Candler, Emory's staunchly conservative president, was so convinced that football was a noxious influence that he even prohibited his students from attending football games. (The *Atlanta Constitution* tweaked Candler by noting that Emory students defied his ban and attended games played in Atlanta by Auburn, Georgia, and Georgia Tech.) When Coca-Cola magnate Asa Candler, Warren Candler's brother, made a one-million-dollar donation that facilitated Emory's move to Atlanta in 1919, he did so in the knowledge that his brother would not permit Emory to establish an intercollegiate athletic program. The faculty and trustees of Baptist-affiliated Wake Forest College grudgingly permitted students there to form a football team in 1888 but forced its dissolution in 1895. Other denominational institutions followed suit. Emory and Henry College, a Methodist school in southwestern Virginia, prohibited football in 1895 as well. Wofford College, a Methodist school in Spartanburg, South Carolina, banned it in 1897, and Baptist-affiliated Furman University, in nearby Greenville, eliminated its football program in 1903.<sup>38</sup>

The football controversy at Trinity College, which became Duke University in 1924, illustrates the stark contrast between the progressive, liberal, and secular world view of the southern proponents of college football and the conservative traditionalism of its evangelical foes. John Franklin Crowell, a Pennsylvania native educated at Dartmouth and Yale, assumed the presidency of Trinity in 1887 determined to bring progressive educational methods and cosmopolitan values to the sleepy little Methodist school. Crowell inherited an institution with an enrollment of fewer than two hundred, an annual budget of \$7,000, a dilapidated physical plant, no school library, an underpaid and underqualified faculty, and an academic standing closer to that of a high school than a college. A faction of progressive businessmen on the Trinity Board of Trustees hired Crowell and gave him a mandate to modernize the nearly bankrupt school. The dynamic Crowell gave them more than they bargained for. He expanded enrollment, hired better-qualified teachers, instituted the elective system, and put the school on a solid financial footing. In 1892 Crowell moved Trinity from rural Randolph County to the tobacco manufacturing center of Durham and solicited substantial donations from the family of American Tobacco Company founder, George Washington Duke. Yet Crowell's determination to secularize and liberalize Trinity angered conservative Methodists, who, like him, saw football as a potent symbol of modernity.<sup>39</sup>

While a student, Crowell had become an avid and informed follower of the powerhouse Yale football program and covered the team for the Yale student newspaper and a New Haven daily. An enthusiastic advocate of Walter Camp's ideological justification for football, Crowell regarded it as the perfect means of teaching liberal, meritocratic, and nationalistic values to his southern students. Football, he asserted, would link his students with the progressive national culture and break "the shell of provincialism" that enveloped Trinity. Crowell described football as "a new educational force [that] had entered the South" in a 1939

memoir of his years at Trinity. Football both symbolized and facilitated the dawning era of progressivism, and southern colleges “must possess themselves of its service if they wished to keep pace with the times.”<sup>40</sup>

Crowell had barely unpacked his bags before he was preaching the gospel of football to his students and personally recruiting Trinity’s first football team. He even penned articles for local newspapers extolling the virtues of the fashionable new Yankee game to Carolinians. Crowell’s expertise and the weakness of the competition soon made Trinity a southern football powerhouse. He emulated northeastern universities by staging highly publicized Thanksgiving Day ‘championship match games’ in urban venues. Crowell proclaimed that a victory over the University of North Carolina demolished the “age-long habit of the condescending attitude” that Carolina alumni held toward denominational colleges and gave Trinity “an indefinable prestige of a general but most effective kind.” Following the ideological lead of the northeastern proponents of football, the Trinity student newspaper declared it to be “a moral, as well as a muscle, trainer.”<sup>41</sup>

Many North Carolina Methodists resented the highhanded methods of this aggressive northerner who made no secret of his intention to transform their beloved bastion of piety and tradition into a progressive, secularized institution. Conservative Methodists criticized Crowell for his theological and pedagogical liberalism and saw his support of football as a symbol of all that was wrong with his administration. In 1892 the Western Conference of North Carolina Methodism proclaimed football to be a “source of evil, and no little evil,” and urged Trinity to abolish its team. Members of the Trinity Board of Trustees, two-thirds of whom were appointed by the Methodist Church, pressured Crowell to drop football. Crowell refused and threatened to resign in early 1893 if the board continued to meddle with his football program. The board backed down, but Crowell’s victory proved short-lived. His absolute faith in the moral and educational benefits of football and his determination to maintain Trinity’s football program clashed with the equally resolute opposition of the southern Methodist leadership. In the spring of 1894, the conservatives on the Trinity board finally forced his resignation. Crowell’s successor, John C. Kilgo, permitted only one game in 1894 and disbanded the team the following year. In other respects a moderate, Kilgo cautiously continued much of Crowell’s progressive program. His success was due in part to the good will he obtained from conservative Methodists by sacrificing football.<sup>42</sup>

The demise of football at Trinity and the departure of its Yankee apostle heartened conservative southern Methodists. Yet the failure of their bitter struggle to eliminate the Vanderbilt football program revealed the declining power of conservative evangelicals to define and shape southern culture. Vanderbilt played its first intercollegiate game in 1891 and soon built one of the powerhouse football programs in the South. Methodists offended by football at state universities were doubly outraged by its presence at Vanderbilt. Southern Methodist journals struck a note of appalled incredulity that the leading southern Methodist university was among the leaders in spreading this Yankee abomination through the South. The *WCA* and *ACA* regularly denounced the Vanderbilt administration for

permitting intercollegiate football. The WCA demanded to know how the ten bishops who sat on the Vanderbilt Board of Trust could permit “our Vanderbilt . . . our *Methodist* university” to outrage Christian sensibilities by allowing students to engage in this enormity.<sup>43</sup>

While southern Methodist leaders had the power to enforce their vision of Christian education at institutions such as Emory or Trinity, they did not possess the same degree of control over Vanderbilt. A one-million-dollar donation from Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt in 1873 enabled southern Methodists to establish it as their flagship institution of higher learning. Subsequent gifts from the Vanderbilt family and other philanthropic institutions, notably those funded by Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller, quickly made Vanderbilt the leading university in the South. This huge infusion of northeastern money and the progressive vision of James Kirkland, who became Vanderbilt’s chancellor in 1893, inexorably moved Vanderbilt away from its conservative moorings. A theological liberal, Kirkland was determined to create a modern, secularized institution modeled upon the leading northeastern universities. Like Crowell, he strongly supported intercollegiate athletics and had served as vice president of the Vanderbilt Athletic Association before becoming chancellor. He considered a thriving intercollegiate football program to be as necessary to extracurricular life as the elective system and the employment of professors from northeastern doctoral programs were to the academic program.<sup>44</sup>

Football became an emotional flash point in the twenty-year struggle between Methodist conservatives and the Kirkland administration for control of Vanderbilt. Kirkland’s most vocal critic was Elijah Embree Hoss, a conservative Methodist minister who, from 1890 until 1903, served as editor of the *NCA*, the leading southern Methodist journal. A former rural circuit rider, Hoss possessed a simple but intense piety. In his history of Vanderbilt, Paul Conkin describes Hoss as a “proud, prickly, blunt, dramatic man . . . given to hyperbole and exaggeration,” who bitterly denounced the climate of heresy and permissiveness that he believed had infected Vanderbilt. Hoss “minded not if [Vanderbilt] remained poor if it remained holy.” While he focused most of his righteous indignation on such issues as the teaching of liberal theology in the Biblical Department and the progressive educational methods employed in the Academic Department, Hoss especially deplored football. He published a number of editorials in the *NCA* denouncing the Vanderbilt football program as a disgraceful manifestation of the administration’s wrongheaded thinking.<sup>45</sup>

Vanderbilt football prospered throughout the 1890s despite Hoss’s jeremiads. Hoss became a bishop and Vanderbilt trustee in 1903, but remained powerless to alter the climate of permissiveness and secular liberalism that fostered football, among other abominations. The endless succession of newspaper stories extolling the Vanderbilt football team were a constant reminder that effective control of the premier Methodist university in the South lay in the hands of a liberal administration and the northern plutocrats who bankrolled it. Hoss and his fellow conservative bishops eventually lost a protracted court battle for control of the Vanderbilt Board of Trust in 1914, which severed all connections between

the university and the southern Methodist church. After Hoss lost his lawsuit, the student newspaper rejoiced that the football program was safe from his predations and savagely lampooned him as an irrelevant old crank who had failed to stop the march of progress.<sup>46</sup>

The conservatives' failure to eliminate football at Vanderbilt was emblematic of their increasing marginalization within Progressive-era southern society. The steadily rising popularity of southern football in the quarter century after its introduction to the region in the late 1880s was a function of the growing secularization and liberalization of southern culture. Football survived intense evangelical opposition because many of its strongest partisans were cosmopolitan members of the urban business elite and middle class, who were eager to break what they saw as the oppressive and reactionary influence of religion on southern life. Remsen Crawford, a progressive-minded editor at the *Atlanta Constitution*, threw down the gauntlet to the evangelicals after their criticism of the inaugural Auburn-Georgia game in Atlanta. He denounced the "attacks . . . made by narrow-minded fanatics against this custom of inter-collegiate athletics, so happily begun by southern colleges." The *WCA*, which had long demonized the Atlanta newspapers for their incessant New South boosterism, in turn denounced the "few puerile editors" who supported the disgraceful spectacle of intercollegiate football. Crawford saw football as a means of creating a southern variant of the secular, middle-class culture of the North. If it aroused conservative evangelicals to a state of near apoplexy, so much the better.<sup>47</sup>

Yet, while Crawford and other urban boosters hostile to the evangelical leadership wielded great influence, they lacked the power to force football upon a populace that considered it sinful. Had southern evangelicals possessed the same moral consensus against football that they did against the consumption of alcohol, football might have been relegated to the margins of southern culture. The antfootball crusade of the evangelical leadership failed because a large proportion of the evangelical rank and file refused to accept its argument that football was a threat to public morality, religious piety, and the southern tradition. The hardline stance of the conservatives was informed by the belief that southern religious orthodoxy could not survive in a modern bourgeois culture, and that any breach in the cultural battlements should be resisted at all hazards. A growing number of southern evangelicals, especially those in the growing urban middle class, believed that progress and piety were indeed compatible. They believed that southerners could achieve material progress and a more complete inclusion into the main current of American culture without sacrificing religious orthodoxy and the core cultural traditions that nurtured it. They accepted the Muscular Christian credo that competitive sports were socially and morally beneficial and compatible with Christian piety. Even Elijah Hoss felt compelled to assert that his opposition to football was neither "mere clerical cant" nor "narrowness and Phariseism." Writing in a denominational weekly read almost exclusively by churchgoing Methodists, Hoss must have addressed these defensive rejoinders to the many pious Methodists who rejected his antfootball arguments.<sup>48</sup>

The crusade against southern football gradually lost momentum after the turn of the century, after it became apparent that the leadership's efforts to prevent widespread public acceptance of the game had failed. Their antifootball jeremiads simply did not resonate with the average churchgoer. Many evangelicals regularly succumbed to the temptations of drinking, gambling, swearing, and lustfulness, but the vast majority of these sinners at least acknowledged that, by doing so, they violated divinely sanctioned moral laws. Despite the entreaties of their ministers, most southern evangelicals refused to define football as either sinful or a threat to public morality. In a tacit admission of failure, the fierce editorial denunciations of football in denominational newspapers that were so common in the 1890s became increasingly rare after 1900. Many denominational colleges followed the lead of Vanderbilt and continued to play football despite the opposition of the conservatives. Most of the schools that had banned football in the 1890s gave in to student and alumni pressure and reinstated it during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Wake Forest reinstated its football program in 1908; Furman in 1913; and Wofford, Emory, and Henry followed suit in 1915. Trinity held out until after World War I but rejoined the ranks of football powers in 1920.<sup>49</sup>

By the 1920s relatively few southern evangelicals publicly opposed college football. Warren Candler refused to permit the formation of an intercollegiate team at Emory, steadfastly ignoring the none-too-subtle slogan, "For a Greater Emory and Intercollegiate Athletics," that student editors placed on the masthead of the campus newspaper. Candler published several antifootball diatribes in the *Atlanta Journal* during the early 1920s that reiterated arguments he had made three decades earlier. Spright Dowell, president of Auburn from 1920 until 1927, steadfastly refused to permit any financial or academic favoritism to be given to football players—a policy that placed the powerful Auburn program on a downward trajectory from which it would not recover for three decades. While Dowell couched his antifootball views in secular terms, he was a devout Baptist who attended Wake Forest when that school banned football in the 1890s and who harbored moral objections to the sport. Candler and Dowell were decidedly out of step with southerners' growing passion for college football in the 1920s. (Dowell was fired at the behest of Alabama governor Bibb Graves in 1927 because of the public uproar over declining Auburn football fortunes.) By that decade, the southern urban middle class had come of age, and the evangelical leadership adapted to this new social reality. Football was one aspect of the culture of consumption that a growing number of southern evangelicals felt free to embrace.<sup>50</sup>

In the 1920s many evangelicals came to regard football as a focal point for denominational pride, boosterism, and a bit of harmless hedonism. The crosstown football rivalry between Baptist-affiliated Howard College and Methodist-affiliated Birmingham-Southern College became a festive annual event for many of Birmingham's Baptists and Methodists. In the 1920s each college began scheduling its annual homecoming celebration to coincide with the game. The *Alabama Baptist* and the ACA, which, a generation earlier, had denounced football as an unmitigated evil, promoted the game and urged the faithful to attend. A

Baptist minister in Birmingham urged his fellow ministers to attend the game—an action that would have been unthinkable in the 1890s. Howard even published advertisements in the *Alabama Baptist* boasting that the school possessed both an exemplary moral and religious atmosphere and a winning football team trained by an expert Yankee coach. An impromptu pep rally was held in, of all places, the Birmingham-Southern campus chapel prior to the 1922 Howard game. A football booster approvingly noted that the students “raised the roof” of the chapel. In 1923 the popular Methodist evangelist Bob Shuler called on the clergy to adopt the mindset of a football player. A star player, Shuler declared, “first goes crazy . . . then tears through the line like a wild man.” Methodist bishops, he lamented, “are too sane to sparkle” and should instead spread the Gospel with the insanely obsessive passion of a gridiron hero.<sup>51</sup>

While most evangelicals of the 1920s still vigorously opposed northern theological liberalism and the fashionable vices of the Jazz Age, they became increasingly tolerant of football. The belief that football built moral character in young men by teaching them the value of meritocratic achievement, competitiveness, teamwork, and self-discipline had been a contested assertion in the 1890s, but by the 1920s had become a widely accepted element of culturally defined “common sense.” A critical mass of evangelicals concluded that it could embrace the progressive justification for competitive sports without doing violence to its core beliefs. Also, football was just plain fun. Southern evangelicals who opposed dancing, drinking, prizefighting, and sexual content in movies found that college football was a form of entertainment and excitement in which they could safely indulge.

---

Abbreviations:

- ACA *Alabama Christian Advocate*  
 NCA *Nashville Christian Advocate*  
 WCA *Wesleyan Christian Advocate*  
 AUA Auburn University Archives

1. *Atlanta Journal*, 5 December 1895, 5.
2. *ACA 14* (22 November 1894): 1. Auburn University was officially known as the Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical College between 1872 and 1899, and as Alabama Polytechnic University from 1899 until 1960, when it acquired its present name. Throughout its history, most people referred to it simply as Auburn, after the small, eastern Alabama town in which it is located. For the sake of clarity and simplicity, this essay will do likewise. Auburn and Mercer College of Macon, Georgia, played a game of American football in January 1892, but there were only a handful of spectators, the Mercer players were unfamiliar with the rules, and the teams quit after the first half. The Auburn-Georgia game of February 1892 was thus the first big-time intercollegiate football game played in the Deep South.
3. *ACA 16* (3 December 1896): 1; *ibid.*, 14 (6 December 1894): 2.
4. *ACA 14* (6 December 1894): 2.
5. W.K. Askew, *Class of 1917: The World War I Class*, (N.p.: 1981), 28.

6. ACA 17 (2 December 1897): 4; Undated clippings from the *Montgomery Advertiser*, Scrapbook of Mrs. Patrick Hues Mell, vol. 7, AUA, pp. 34-35; Mrs. Annie K. Wiesel to Charles C. Thach, 20 November 1913, Thach Papers, AUA, File 79.
7. Ronald A. Smith discusses the early attempts of university faculties to exercise control over intercollegiate athletics in *Sports and Freedom: The Rise of Big-Time College Athletics* (New York: Oxford University Press), 118-133; for a discussion of the Tenderloin riots and of the opposition to football in the Northeast, see Michael Oriard, *Reading Football: How the Popular Press Created an American Spectacle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 57-133, 216-228.
8. WCA 56 (9 November 1892): 1; NCA 54 (14 December 1893): 9, *ibid.*, 56 (21 November 1895): 1; Oriard, *Reading Football*, 169-175, 218-228.
9. WCA 56 (9 November 1892): 1; *ibid.*, 56 (2 March 1892): 1.
10. *Alabama Baptist* 19 (17 November 1892): 1; ACA 14 (6 December 1894): 2; *ibid.*, 23 (10 September 1903): 5; *ibid.*, 15 (26 September 1895): 1.
11. Editorial from *Outlook* reprinted in WCA 57 (13 December 1893): 4; editorial from *New York Christian Advocate* reprinted in WCA 58 (19 December 1894): 2.
12. "Saints, and Their Bodies," *Atlantic Monthly* 1 (March 1858): 582-85; see also Tilden Edelstein, *Strange Enthusiasm: A Life of Thomas Wentworth Higginson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).
13. J.A. Mangan and James Wolvin, "Introduction," in Mangan and Walvin, eds., *Manliness and Morality: Middle Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1940*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 3. Eugene D. Genovese discusses the theologically based proslavery argument in *The Slaveholders Dilemma: Freedom and Progress in Southern Conservative Thought* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992). See also Drew Gilpin Faust, ed., *The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830-1860* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1981); Jack P. Maddex, "'The Southern Apostasy' Revisited: The Significance of Proslavery Christianity," *Marxist Perspectives* 2 (Fall 1979): 132-141.
14. W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York Vintage Books, 1941), 83; WCA 56 (2 March 1892): 2; WCA 56 (24 February 1892): 3; Robert L. Dabney quoted in Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980), 86. On the cult of the Lost Cause, see also Richard M. Weaver, *The Southern Tradition at Bay: A History of Postbellum Thought* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1989), esp. 82-95; Paul M. Gaston, *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1970), 154-58; Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).
15. WCA 56 (2 March 1892): 1; *ibid.*, 56 (9 November 1892): 1; Mark Bauman, *Warren Akin Candler: The Conservative as Idealist* (Metuchen N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1981), 69.
16. Lawrence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 1-56, quote from 25. Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz discusses the more permissive attitudes toward football and other formerly proscribed extracurricular activities on late nineteenth-century college campuses in *Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 53-55.
17. WCA 58 (14 November 1894): 1.
18. February 1892 clipping from the Douglasville, Georgia, *New South*, in Mell Scrapbook, vol. 1, AUA, p. 29.
19. ACA 14 (22 November 1894): 1.
20. Levin Vincent Rosser to W.E. Harrell, 10 March 1919, Historical Collection 708, AUA, p. 5; L.S. Boyd, "Recollections of the Early History of Nu Chapter of Kappa Alpha

- Fraternity at the Alabama Polytechnic Institute,” Historical Collection 708, p. 11. The first college in Auburn was the Methodist-affiliated East Alabama Male College, which opened in 1859. The state assumed control of the school in 1872 and established it as a land grant college under the Merrill Act, renaming it Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical College. See William Warren Rogers, “The Founding of Alabama’s Land Grant College at Auburn,” *Alabama Review* 40 (January 1987): 14-37. Joseph Kett discusses the devotion of antebellum collegians to their literary societies in *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America, 1790 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 56.
21. Walter Hines Page [Nicholas Worth, pseud.]. “The Autobiography of a Southerner Since the Civil War,” *Atlantic Monthly* 98 (1906): 158, Levin Vincent Rosser to W.E. Harrell, 10 March 1919, Historical Collection 708, AUA, p. 7.
  22. *ACA* 14 (6 December 1894): 2; *Orange and Blue*, 6 March 1895, 4.
  23. *Orange and Blue*, 3 April 1895, 2; *ibid.*, 6 March 1895, 4; *ibid.*, 17 March 1895, 2; *ACA* 24 (24 November 1904): 2. By 1907 the Websterian Society could not draw even one-third of its greatly reduced membership to its weekly meetings. *Orange and Blue*, 1 March 1907, 27-28.
  24. E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 222-246.
  25. Theodore Roosevelt, “Value of an Athletic Training,” *Harper’s Weekly* 37 (23 December 1893): 1236; Caspar Whitney, “Amateur Sports,” *Harper’s Weekly* 38 (8 December 1894): 1174.
  26. Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 222-246; see also Gail Bederman, *Masculinity and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
  27. For discussions of the battle waged by southern evangelicals against the violence and excessive assertiveness characteristic of the antebellum southern ethos of honor, see Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th-Century American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 118-125; Anne Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge, LSU Press, 1980), 180-185; Matthews, *Religion in the Old South*, esp. ch. 3.
  28. Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation and Manhood in the Rural South, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 11.
  29. *WCA* 56 (2 March 1892): 1; *ibid.*, 56 (30 November 1892): 1; Bauman, *Warren Candler*, 69; *ACA* 17 (25 November 1897): 4.
  30. For a discussion of the cult of primitive masculinity, see Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 227-232. T.J. Jackson Lears discusses the antimodernist sentiments felt by the late nineteenth-century northeastern elite in *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).
  31. *Atlanta Constitution*, 25 November 1892, 5; November 1894 clipping from *Orange and Blue*, Mell Scrapbook, vol. 8, AUA, p. 99; December 1895 clipping from *Atlanta Constitution*, Mell Scrapbook, vol. 1, AUA, p. 48; *Atlanta Constitution*, 8 November 1893, 5.
  32. *WCA* 58 (12 December 1894): 1; *ibid.*, 56 (2 March 1892): 1; *ACA* 17 (25 November 1897): 4. For a discussion of the elite’s obsession with the “primitive masculinity” of Indians and other aboriginal peoples, see Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 227-232.
  33. *ACA* 23 (17 September 1903): 1; *NCA* 55 (6 December 1894): 6.
  34. *ACA* 19 (5 January 1899): 4; Higginson, “Saints, and Their Bodies,” 584.
  35. *WCA* 58 (14 November 1894): 1.
  36. *ACA* 13 (16 November 1893): 1. On coeducation at Alabama and Auburn, see Sellers, *History of the University of Alabama*, 473-485; Leah Rawls Atkins, *Blossoms amid the Deep Verdure: A Century of Women at Auburn, 1892-1992* (Auburn, Alabama: 1992); Helen Delpar, “Coeds and the ‘Lords of Creation’: Women Students at the University of Alabama, 1893-1930,” *Alabama Review* 42 (October 1989), 292-312.

37. This discussion of the Von Gammon incident is taken primarily from George Magruder Battey, *A History of Rome and Floyd County* (Atlanta: The Webb and Vary Co., 1922), 343-352; Jerry D. Lewis, "The Lady Who Saved Football," *The Georgia Journal* (Fall 1991): 12-14.
38. William J. Baker, "When Dixie Took a Different Stand," draft chapter of forthcoming monograph on sport and religion in possession of the author; David Duncan Wallace, *History of Wofford College, 1854-1949* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1951), 108-109.
39. John Franklin Crowell, *Personal Recollections of Trinity College* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1939); Nora Campbell Chaffin, *Trinity College, 1839-1892: The Beginnings of Duke University* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1950); Jim L. Sumner, "John Franklin Crowell, Methodism, and the Football Controversy at Trinity College, 1887-1894," *Journal of Sport History* 17 (Spring 1990): 5-20.
40. Crowell, *Personal Recollections*, 226, 230. For a discussion of the crucial influence of Walter Camp on both the creation of football and the interpretation of its cultural meanings, see Oriard, *Reading Football*, 25-56.
41. Crowell, *Personal Recollections*, 228-229; *Trinity Archive*, quoted in Chaffin, *Trinity College*, 446.
42. Sumner, "John Franklin Crowell," 17-19; Crowell, *Personal Recollections*, 228-230.
43. *WCA* 58 (14 November 1894): 1; *ibid.*, 57 (30 November 1893): 1.
44. Paul Conkin, *Gone with the Ivy: A Biography of Vanderbilt University* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press), 85-184.
45. Conkin, *Gone with the Ivy*, 158; *NCA* 54 (14 December 1893): 9; *ibid.*, 56 (3 October 1895): 2; *ibid.*, 56 (21 November 1895): 1.
46. Conkin, *Gone with the Ivy*, 183, 214.
47. *Atlanta Constitution*, 21 February 1892, 22; *WCA* 56 (2 March 1892): 1.
48. *NCA* 54 (14 December 1893): 9; *ibid.*, 56 (3 October 1895): 2.
49. Baker, "When Dixie Took a Different Stand," 26-28.
50. Alfred M. Pierce, *Giant Against the Sky: The Life of Bishop Warren Akin Candler* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1948), 151-152; Bauman, *Warren Candler*, 68-71. On Dowell's firing as Auburn president, see President's Special Report to the Board of Trustees of the Alabama Polytechnic University, November 5, 1927, Bibb Graves Papers, ADAH, RC2: G200, File: Schools, API, 1927-1930; William G. Gilchrist oral history interview, AUA.
51. *Birmingham Age-Herald*, 21 November 1922, 9; *ACA* 47 (24 November 1927): 2; *Alabama Baptist* 92 (6 October 1927): 8; *ibid.*, 51 (9 September 1920): 16; *ACA* 43 (6 September 1923): 4.