

# The Rise, Decline, and Fall of Intercollegiate Football at the University of Chicago, 1890-1940

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This paper is a brief story and analysis of the way in which one major American university developed and used football and how that game and its public followers altered some of the policies and values of the University. This influence was so marked that a new generation of University leadership determined that activity must cease. The case study is enlarged by the intercollegiate relations which the rise of football occasioned.

American intercollegiate football was still in its first generation at the opening of the University of Chicago in 1892. The leaders of the rise of football at Chicago were President William Rainey Harper and Athletic Director-Coach, Amos Alonzo Stagg. Intercollegiate football soon became an important symbol of the University. The careers of the spectator, the coach, and the player provide a comprehensive development and show, respectively, the interplay of community and university, the "professionalization" of another occupation in America, and the alteration or abuse of academic standards and student life. Together, the three elements demonstrate the industrialization of a leisure activity.

By 1905, Chicago was the intercollegiate football leader in the West and Stagg's teams remained a national power through the season of 1924. The public was led to believe that the Chicago football system was a paragon of intercollegiate athletics during this period. The reality of Stagg's undertaking was far from that carefully preserved image. Chicago's athletic leadership led in forming values and erecting an intercollegiate framework which would later prompt the deterioration of Chicago's own competitive position.

Intercollegiate football at Chicago experienced an absolute and comparative decline from 1925 through 1938. This was evident with the spectators, the coach, and the players. The decline was comparative because the scale of the business elsewhere increased greatly in the 1920s as national prosperity and the rise of the state universities pushed the football industry to remarkable heights. It was absolute because of the evolution of educational policy at Chicago.

Intercollegiate football was abolished at the University of Chicago in December of 1939 because of the convergence of three factors: University leadership which was certain of the rectitude of its educational philosophy and of its decision to abolish football; a failing football enterprise which required change; and enough of the varied University constituencies who could perceive the failure of the industry and who would agree to a final solution.

The rise, decline, and fall of intercollegiate football at the University of Chicago indicates that the sport produced a subculture in American higher education which proved capable of creating and altering academic standards and values. The American community impinged on the university and college more graphically, and perhaps more significantly, at the football stadium than anywhere else. This study demonstrates the arresting nature of the game for the American mind, the vulnerability of American higher education to the coming of the extra-curricular activity, and the fragility of the values of American higher education after the sport had become lodged on the campus.