

# American College Football: Its Growth and Significance, 1869-1914

R. S. OFFENBERG

Massachusetts Board of Higher Education

The Princeton-Rutgers contest of 1869 is usually cited as the first football game played between American colleges. This is true only if it is understood that the football played that day was the soccer or kicking style of play utilizing a round ball and not the running style of play with the egg shaped ball that evolved from English Rugby and became the basis for the uniquely American adaptation of the game.

The shift in style of play came rapidly after 1869. It began at Harvard in the early 1870's, and within a few years a distinctly American game had taken shape.

While football clubs were organized at many institutions during the 1870's, football received a mixed reaction on most campuses. At many schools, the football program was an outgrowth of spontaneous student interest, was not well organized, had no full-time coach, and was not restricted to men attending the institution.

During the 1880's, the sudden growth of the game was retarded on many campuses as retrenchment against the new activity began to take shape. Faculty members became outspoken critics of the game and wanted the sport discontinued as they believed it was drawing too much attention away from the colleges' academic mission.

It was not until the decade of the 1890's that the game flourished; however, amid the tremendous popularity of college football during the 1890's there arose a growing disenchantment with the physical brutality associated with the game. Some schools abolished football and the furor continued until after the turn of the century when the Intercollegiate Athletic Association (later the NCAA) was organized (1905-06) and significant rules changes were introduced.

By 1914, most of the physical abuses were gone and the modern rules had largely been established. Football had helped to open doors for many students whose ethnic background might have precluded a collegiate experience. Alumni control had been institutionalized. Coaching had become more professional. As a public relations tool football assisted in bringing publicity to many institutions. The concept of the student athlete was well received. College football had matured; "Saturday's hero" had arrived.



Head Table at the Seward Staley Address