

Excellence and Winning in College Athletics: An Early Model

by

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(Seward C. Staley Address)

The English led the world in 19th-century intercollegiate athletics, but the Americans surpassed the English in the emphasis upon excellence and winning by the late 1800s. Many writers by the early 1900s noted that Americans played more for a desire to beat their opponents than did the British who played primarily for love of the sport. It is theorized that the British practice of social stratification and the American belief in social mobility are keys to understanding the American stress on excellence and winning. America, unlike England, did not have a locked in, stratified society in the 19th century. Performance rather than peirage determined, to a great extent, the place of a person in the social order. In a stratified society such as England's in the 1800s, an individual's status was determined more by birth than by capacity. Thus, performance was of less importance to someone who already knew his rank than to someone who was striving for status in a more open society like America. Using Alexis de Tocqueville's observation that "the great advantage of the Americans is that they have arrived at a state of democracy without having to endure a democratic revolution, and that they were born equal instead of becoming so" with the belief of Louis Hartz in *The Liberal Tradition in America* that America never had an established aristocratic class, it was theorized that American institutions such as college athletics would reflect a different attitude toward athletics than did the British. Harvard, which came closest to being aristocratic of American colleges, was looked at to determine if the British tradition of playing gentleman's sport for recreation and fun or the American emphasis upon winning and excellence would prevail. The early model of Harvard, 1869-1909, was chosen for it was the tenure of president Charles W. Eliot, leading educator, sportsman, and product of the upper class Boston "Brahmins" attuned to the British attitude of gentlemanly sport.

It appears that Harvard's student athletes strongly desired to win in the American spirit almost from the beginning of intercollegiate athletes at the mid-nineteenth century. The gentlemanly-British attitude was more apparent in its faculty and administration than in its student body. In fact, until the faculty took control of intercollegiate athletics in the 1880s Harvard had a winning record against its arch rival, Yale, in both crew and baseball, the two best established sports. The Harvard Faculty Athletic Committee was formed in 1882, and restrictions were placed on athletics to curb the perfection of "athletics practiced in a competitive spirit in emulation of professional athletes and players" and return them to a more gentlemanly attitude of "athletics practiced for sport, social recreation, and health." Once this was done Harvard began to lose steadily to Yale in crew, in baseball, and in the new sport of football. The faculty banned football several times and contemplated banning it on other occasions, while it promoted rules to limit the recruitment of players and adhered to amateur principles.

As Harvard lost its important games to Yale, an institution which was very aggressive in promoting excellence and winning in athletics, pressure was exerted by athletically involved alumni and students of Harvard to carry out policy needed to win. By the early 1900s Harvard was moving toward the win ethic at the expense of the British amateur spirit of sport. Harvard hired professional coaches and a full-time athletic director, it granted

scholarships to athletes for excellence in athletics rather than solely for scholarship, and emphasized the commercial aspects of athletics by building athletic facilities including the first concrete football stadium in America.

The Harvard attempt to preserve gentlemanly sport in the British tradition had failed by the end of the President Eliot era in 1909. It had been unsuccessful, it appears, because that system had not produced what was important in the American society - excellence and winning. The gentlemanly restraints which Harvard had placed on its athletics, generally the Athletic Committee, president, and governing boards, had thwarted attempts to perfect varsity athletics to the level which its chief rival, Yale, had been able to achieve. It is suggested that Harvard authorities were attempting to impose a system of values into American colleges based upon an upper class notion, that for the most part, did not exist in America. If America was "born equal" or "born free" as Alexis de Tocqueville suggested in the 1830s and as Louis Hartz has effectively shown more recently, we can better understand why a more open society will produce excellence and winning based upon performance. America's lack of an effective aristocratic class, with a belief in gentlemanly sports such as England had produced, gave the Harvard authorities little support in their attempt to follow the British model. By the first decade of the 20th century, the Harvard model gave in to the demands of American society, and Harvard began to strive for excellence and winning in athletics.