
John L. Griffith: Catalyst for an Emerging Profession

by
Wayne M. Ladd
University of North Carolina

John L. Griffith emerged as a dynamic force for the development of sport in the educational setting during the first half of the twentieth century. Although not an outstanding athlete, Griffith used his administrative expertise to influence a wide range of sport activities. He was a significant innovator for sport programs, a noteworthy administrator in various sport organizations and a key spokesman for those involved in the sport profession.

Early in his career he organized the Drake Relays which along with those at the University of Pennsylvania became the premiere track events in the nation. For a short time he was a key individual at the University of Illinois coaching school where a pioneering effort was made to develop coaching as a profession. Shortly thereafter Griffith edited and published the first journal for athletic coaches. These early innovations were indicative of his attempt to service the emerging profession with an intellectual and scientific foundation.

With that base Griffith moved into the national arena. In 1922, the Western Conference (Big Ten) appointed him as its first commissioner. His service in that capacity subsequently gave him access to leadership positions in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), The National Amateur Athletic Federation (NAAF) and the Athletic Institute. (He became the national spokesman for the inclusion of athletics in the educational setting). The issues which Griffith raised became the staple defense for athletics over the next thirty years in American education. His death in 1944 served to close the period of innovation and organization of sport in the educational arena.