

Harvard and Columbia and a Reconsideration of the 1905-06 Football Crisis

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Two colleges, Harvard and Columbia, had key roles in the football crisis of 1905-06 in which there was a real threat to the continuance of America's most popular intercollegiate game. In contrast to the statement of Guy Lewis that "the threat to outlaw football was never a serious one" during the 1905-06 period, it appears that evidence from Columbia, which banned football, and Harvard, which was on the brink of abolishing the game, would indicate that football's existence was indeed threatened. Columbia led a movement in which an intercollegiate meeting of college administrators and faculty came within two votes of resolving to ban football. Even more significant was the question of Harvard and its vote. Because of the leading role which Harvard played in the college world, there is evidence to believe that had Harvard voted to abolish football, other significant colleges would have followed its lead.

At Columbia, a series of controversies in the late 1800s and early 1900s involved the payment of football players, cover-ups by student managers, defaults on debts, confrontations with the faculty committee on athletics, and brutality on the playing field. With support from the president and trustees, the Columbia faculty voted to do away with football at the close of the 1905 season. To further its attempt to rid college athletics of the questionable game, both in terms of ethics and injuries, Columbia joined a group of 13 colleges which met on the call of New York University chancellor, Henry MacCracken. At an early December 1905 meeting, they voted on the question, "Ought the present game of football be abolished?" The group came within two votes of voting to abolish football. Not choosing to ban the game, this small group of eastern colleges decided to meet later in December at a reform conference in which all American colleges were asked to send representatives.

Meanwhile, Harvard was reaching the climax to two decades of soul searching about the place of football in colleges. Harvard had banned football several times beginning in the 1880s and had tried to be a leader in inter-institutional faculty control over the fall sport. The renowned president of Harvard, Charles W. Eliot, railed against the moral abuses of college football for a decade leading up to the 1905-06 crisis. By the time of the 1905 season, the question of ethics in football and brutal play were not only Harvard concerns, but were significant issues nationally. President Theodore Roosevelt's early season charge to Harvard, Yale, and Princeton to conduct football "in letter and in spirit" did little to reduce injuries or the win-at-all-cost attitudes of football teams. During the season, Harvard's ruling body, the Corporation, voted secretly to abolish football, but withheld the announcement.

The secret Harvard vote, however, was revealed to the Harvard coach, Bill Reid, who summoned a group of Harvard football leaders to act. They devised a plan to attempt to save Harvard football. The group led by Reid wrote an open letter, using language based upon one of Charles Eliot's critical football declarations. The letter criticized the present game of football and called for radical changes. It asked for an immediate Harvard alumni committee to investigate the subject and suggest radical rules which might save the game. Thus, Harvard, the leading institution in America, put itself in a position of demanding reform if the game was to continue to exist. By the time the American college faculty and administrative leaders met in late December and early January, Harvard was threatening to abandon the game if its own reform policies were not accepted. Through intrigue, Harvard successfully subverted the old and conservative rules committee headed by Walter Camp of Yale. Through Harvard's efforts there was a successful merger of the Camp committee with the new rules committee appointed by the collection of college faculties and administrators, a group which eventually became the National Collegiate Athletic Association. Harvard's proposals, which came from the Harvard alumni committee, were eventually pushed through the joint rules committee, and in close votes the Harvard Overseers, an advisory group, and the Harvard Trustees voted to recind their votes to abolish football. Football was saved at Harvard. Even though some significant colleges such as Columbia. New York University, Northwestern, California, and Stanford all dropped football, it is likely that Harvard's decision to keep the game influenced numbers of other institutions to follow its path. The existence of football, which Guy Lewis suggested a decade ago "was never threatened," was likely in greater jeopardy than was previously thought.



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