

The Role of Harvard University in the Development of International College Athletics

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In 1867 the Harvard University Boat Club and the Oxford University Boat Club initiated an exchange of several correspondences calling for a plan to organize an international collegiate rowing contest. Not until 1869 did the plan actually come into fruition, and Harvard University became the first American institution of higher learning to compete in an international collegiate athletic event.

On August 27, 1869, the Harvard crew met the Oxford crew for a contest in fours with coxswains on the Thames River in England. The race, which consisted of a four and one-quarter mile course, was won by Oxford by four lengths. The popularity of the event was evident in the estimated one million spectators who lined the banks of the Thames, the heavy betting that accompanied the race, and the news coverage which followed the event. American and British newspapers gave considerable attention to the results of the race. The *Echo*, the first British newspaper to carry an account of the race, sold 25,000 copies of its "extra" in three-quarters of an hour. The London *Times* devoted three columns to the event, in addition to a column-long editorial. The New York *Times* gave all except one column of its front page to the race, while the Chicago *Tribune* considered the event sufficiently newsworthy to give four of its six front-page columns to a description of the event. The press boat that followed the racing crews had representatives from at least fifteen American newspapers.

The press treated the race as more than just a unique athletic event between two universities of different countries. The event provided an opportunity for taking stock, for comparing the two branches of the Anglo-Saxon race after nearly a century of separation, and for testing the respective merits of American and English character, culture, education, boat building, diet, and muscle.

The next sport that Harvard students contested with a foreign university was football. In the 1870's Harvard developed a style of football that differed from the soccer style of football played by many American colleges and universities. Harvard's style of football allowed for picking up, carrying, or throwing the ball and holding or pushing with the hands. In the spring of 1874 the Harvard University Foot-Ball Club received a challenge from the McGill University Rugby team for two matches to be played in Cambridge, Massachusetts. One game was to be played under the Harvard rules of football, and another game would be contested under the Rugby rules.

The first match was played on May 14, 1874, and it was won by Harvard. There were about 500 spectators who had paid fifty cents to see the match. The second match was contested the following day, and it was governed by the Rugby rules. The contest resulted in a tie, and this was the first intercollegiate game of Rugby played in the United

States. The following autumn, October 23, 1874, Harvard's football team journeyed to Montreal for a rematch with McGill under the Rugby rules. The Harvard team stunned the 1,500 spectators as they defeated McGill in Rugby.

The games contested between Harvard and McGill introduced the Rugby style of football to American colleges and universities, and this style influenced many collegiate football teams to modify the existing soccer style of football. The interest brought on by the Rugby style of football prompted a reorganization of the Intercollegiate Football Association. A meeting for this purpose was called to order on November 23, 1876, in Springfield, Massachusetts, and the meeting resulted in a new Intercollegiate Football Association with Princeton, Harvard, and Columbia as charter members, and Rugby rules were codified.

Track and field athletics emerged as another sport that Harvard students competed in internationally. In 1899 the first of a series of four quadrangular track and field meets was organized between Yale, Harvard, Cambridge, and Oxford universities. In 1899 Harvard and Yale sent track and field teams to London; in 1901 Cambridge and Oxford journeyed to New York; in 1904 Harvard and Yale returned to London; and in 1911 the four universities met in London. The scoring consisted of a combined Harvard and Yale score versus a combined Oxford and Cambridge score. The first meeting was won by the British universities, 54; the second meeting resulted in a 6-3 win for the American universities, and the same results prevailed during the third meeting; the fourth meeting resulted in a victory for the British side. Therefore, the four meetings resulted in a tie.