
Amos Alonzo Stagg: A Retrospective View

HORTON W. EMERSON, JR.
University of Southern Maine
Gorham, Maine 04038

Sometime during the fall of 1981 Coach Bear Bryant will surpass Amos Alonzo Stagg's record of 314 victories as a head football coach. It seems appropriate to briefly re-examine Stagg's career and the forces that shaped him and to remind ourselves how important he was, not only for the strategic and tactical side of football but especially for

the values, attitudes, and rationale for intercollegiate sports in general.

Stagg acquired a value system in his youth that remained consistent throughout his life. His values included the conventional morality of that era: belief in hard work, thrift, self-denial, and so on, that we have come to call the Protestant Ethic. At the same time, influenced first by the book *Tom Brown's School Days* and reenforced later by his Yale experience, he added English ideals of sportsmanship and fair play to his value system. It was at Yale, too, that Stagg developed his ideas about the proper role of football in undergraduate society.

Stagg's views on football were roughly these: it was the only game developed in the colleges and was "indissolubly" bound up with college life; football required far more emotional intensity than any other game both to play and to watch; football generated in players, students, and alumni a feeling analogous to love of country; because of its special nature, football could never be successful as a professional sport.

At the time Stagg finished Yale (ca. 1890) football was spreading from the eastern colleges to other parts of the country and Stagg became its greatest missionary. He helped to spread Yale football and its value system to the Mid West and to the rest of the country in his position as coach and athletic director at the new University of Chicago. And, for many, he came to personify all that was fine and decent about intercollegiate athletics.

Early in the 20th century excessive brutality and other evils threatened the existence of college football. At the same time, Stagg's faculty colleagues at Chicago wanted to abolish it. There were reforms, the nature of the game was altered, the NCAA was formed and the game survived and prospered; but after the "crisis of 1905", Stagg was alert to head off forces threatening football to which he had so fully committed himself. In his view professional football came to be the most pressing of those threats and he devoted a great deal of his time, energy, and prestige during the 1920s to a campaign against it.

Stagg enjoyed his greatest influence during his long tenure at the University of Chicago (1892-1932). He continued coaching for almost a quarter of a century more and his celebrity status increased with his increasing longevity until his final retirement in 1960 at age ninety-eight.

The game evolved somewhat differently than Stagg had hoped. Perhaps his somewhat old-fashioned, romantic, elitist view of sport was destined to give way before the onrushing democratization of our universities. He lived to see the extraordinary success of professional football. He saw the evils associated with commercialization and overemphasis on winning spread to other sports while recurring all too frequently in big time college football. At the same time, one can make a case that in most colleges playing a lower level of football, there is still adherence to the ideal of sportsmanship and to the rationale for college sports that Stagg preached for so many years. Even in the great football factories the game still depends heavily on emotion and can generate the esprit de corps and sense of community that he found so appealing ninety years ago.
