

# The Debates Between Harvard and Yale Begin

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In January 1892, America's two oldest universities - Harvard and Yale - met for the first of a long series of intercollegiate debates. Although literary and debating societies had been part of the undergraduate student culture since at least the eighteenth century (and forensic disputation a part of the formal curriculum since the Middle Ages), the type of debating which emerged in the last decade of the nineteenth century took a special form: It replicated, in many prominent ways, the intercollegiate athletic contests which had so rapidly arisen in the decades following the Civil War. The methods of reporting these verbal events in the *Harvard Crimson*, *Yale Daily News*, and other student (and alumni) publications, as well as in the popular press, bore many similarities to the manner in which the annual intercollegiate football game between the two rivals was reported. In opening the second joint debate at New Haven in March 1892, presiding officer Chauncy Depew declared: "If I were the referee I should say 'Go', if I were the umpire I should say 'play ball'." Although several hundred individuals might attend these debates, those who endorsed a return to public speaking as an important part of training men for the bar, the legislature, and public life were sometimes concerned that interest was flagging. Nonetheless, in the 1890s and early 1900s the Harvard-Yale debates (and somewhat less so their joint debates with Princeton) routinely were depicted as important "intercollegiate" events, and the debaters were frequently compared (albeit in microcosm) with athletes. Several of the same dilemmas which arose in connection with athletics (e.g. method of coaching, how best to insure a continuing source of participants) were also present in debating. As with so much else in student life, the Harvard-Yale model of joint intercollegiate debates was soon followed by other colleges and universities.