

The Harvard-Yale Dual League Plan of the 1890s: A Failure of Elitism

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When Harvard and Yale chose to isolate themselves athletically in crew in the 1870s, a Dartmouth student said sarcastically: "Harvard and Yale delight in their own company best." A decade and a half later, Harvard and Yale attempted to do for all major sports what they had done previously in crew. A dual league would tell the entire athletic world that Harvard and Yale, like Oxford and Cambridge in England, were something special and apart. That the Dual League plan of the 1890s failed, tells us a great deal about the nature of American society. Athletically it might be stated that if one wants to "play ball" in egalitarian America, it is most difficult to do so attempting to remain a social elitist. The paper's theme is that in a highly competitive society based upon an ideal of egalitarianism, it is nearly impossible to be an elitist and aloof, and at the same time to remain in the mainstream of American life.

For Harvard and Yale, the retreat to dual competition occurred first when the two institutions were beaten by the small, "freshwater" colleges such as the Massachusetts Aggies, Amherst, and Cornell at the intercollegiate regattas of the 1870s. By the 1880s when intercollegiate athletic problems began to multiply, the Harvard Overseers, part of Harvard's governing body, formed a committee to study athletic abuses. A recommendation of one member of the committee was to limit Harvard competition to contests with Yale only. Harvard participated with a number of other colleges, and in football alone was a member of the Intercollegiate Football Association which included Pennsylvania, Princeton, Wesleyan, and Yale. As Football was the key sport by the late 1880s Harvard felt that it was necessary to beat the other members before it could acceptably withdraw from the league. Only Princeton (and of course Yale) stood in the way. The 1889 Harvard-Princeton game was not a Harvard victory, but an eligibility controversy and the brutal nature of the game gave Harvard cause to break relations and set the stage for a possible dual league with Yale.

Beginning in 1890, negotiations between Harvard and Yale to produce a dual league were begun. The Yale negotiator saw the chance for making "the grandest college alliance ever made between two great universities - one which will elevate college sports and elevate us far above possible rivalry." Harvard, though, because it was a step or two above Yale in prestige, negotiated from a position of strength and generally made demands which Yale felt compelled to reject. For five years, negotiations were carried on, often using participation with Princeton and Pennsylvania as a wedge to gain a bargaining advantage.

Five years from the break in Harvard-Princeton relations, Harvard and Yale played in another brutal football game. The game produced broken bones but more importantly broken relations with Yale in all four major sports for nearly a two year period, including crew which had for two decades been a joint dual competition. The break in the Harvard-Yale crew relations created an opportunity for the perennial rowing power, Cornell, to once again row against Harvard. Yale, miffed, sailed to England to row Oxford. Harvard

remained to row against Cornell and Columbia, and open the door to its social inferiors. When the “mechanics” of Cornell whipped Harvard, Harvard could not easily retreat without charges of cowardice. The next year, Yale was drawn into a triangular meet with Cornell and Harvard and both Harvard and Yale were beaten. The crew example clearly showed the dilemma of Harvard and Yale. If they remained withdrawn and aloof, they could not prove that they were best. If they participated and lost, it was even clearer proof that in athletics they were no longer superior.

The 1890s dual league proposals were not the last of the attempts by Harvard and Yale to stand above and apart from other colleges, but future attempts were no more successful. If Harvard and Yale wanted to compete in America, they had to meet the competition. If they would not, they would eventually lose the struggle. Egalitarian America would not countenance the attitude of a Harvard man who said in 1889 at the beginning of the Harvard-Yale Dual League attempts: “I can only add that if we are left alone we shall be in excellent company.” Neither Harvard nor Yale could for long separate themselves from other colleges and remain as leaders in American intercollegiate athletics.