

Redefining Athletic Excellence in the 1960s

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In 1964, late in the fourth quarter of a football game, Princeton kicked a field goal to seal a narrow 55-0 win over the University of Pennsylvania in front of Penn's Homecoming crowd. The field goal clearly signaled that the 1950s Ivy League quest for sanity in sport was nearly at an end. Within the next five years, Penn itself would dynamite the remnants of Ivy League civility by firing its Ivy-covered athletic director, Jeremiah Ford II. Ford, who exuded moral ethics from every pore, would be replaced by Fred Shabel, who exuded winning from every pore. Shabel took Penn's athletic program to the top of the conference and, in a few cases, to the top of national rankings. No one at Penn and few outside accused Shabel of illegalities. He ran a clean program. But the differences between Shabel and Ford were those of night and day, and their positions on sport and winning and the fortunes that awaited them were symbols of the redefinition of excellence that took place at Penn in the 1960s. The reactions and approaches to winning at Penn were in concert with a broader shift in sport from an ideology of service to an ideology of winning. This subtle but important

shift took place when those qualities around which the ideology of service had been built were plunged into confusion by the particular conditions of the 1960s.

The uncertainty about the nature and role of the university, the crisis of student protest, the civil rights movement, and above all the Vietnam War, bred confusion and misunderstanding about the nature and worth of manliness, physical prowess, hard work, and opportunity. All of these were cornerstones of sport's ideology of morality. These qualities and the ideology which they supported had not, before the 1960s, been out of fashion as an ideal even when their credibility was strained by reality. In the 1950s, the Ivy League had even made morality quasi-official by bricking in the ideology as the keystone of a competitive ethic in which we can hate enough to beat each other but trust enough to schedule each other. The 1960s rendered these ideals obsolete, at least temporarily, by undercutting the consensus which they previously had enjoyed among different campus elements.

The Vietnam Era initiated and aggravated unresolved tensions that existed in sport and related concepts: the ah-around versus the specialized individual; intellectual versus physical qualities and expression; effort versus talent; individual autonomy versus group control; manliness versus feminine compassion; physical fitness versus competitive sport. The lack of agreement over standards to apply to these and other issues lead to an attempt to clarify with numbers (wins and losses, students enrolled, grants awarded, buildings built, dollars gained) what, in effect, could not be clarified - excellence. Winning and losing athletic events represented resolution without the rewards provided in an earlier time by the ideology of service. Winning became its own reward.

At Penn, the switch from Ford (a living relic from *Tom Brown's Schooldays*) to Shabel (who brought with him, young aggressive coaches, a knack for recruiting of all kinds, and a belief that sport does not heap benefits upon winners and losers in equal doses) was evidence that the university was prepared to be evaluated by the new yardstick of excellence, winning for its own sake.