

Brandeis: Intercollegiate Athletics at a Jewish-Sponsored University

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This paper concerns the establishment and evolution of the athletic program at Brandeis University. In 1948 Brandeis University, the first Jewish-sponsored liberal arts college in America opened its doors. Previously American Jews had established *yeshivas* and rabbinical schools but never before a secular college. Dr. Abram Sachar, the University's first president, and other Brandeis founding fathers felt a visible athletic program was important to the new school. Sports, they believed, would underline Brandeis's American identity, providing an antidote to the popular image of an overly intellectual, physically underdeveloped Jewry. Although Sachar once said that Brandeis was "no more Jew than Princeton is Presbyterian," he knew that motives, support, demographics, and informal ties suggested otherwise. So intertwined had athletics and American higher education grown, that the presence of the former would help make the case that Brandeis, although founded by the Jewish community, was an American university. A solid athletic program would encourage more diversity, conveying to the public that the school was not a mere haven for library hermits. Aware of the pernicious impact big time intercollegiate sports can potentially have on academics, Brandeis aspired to athletic respectability, not dominance.

Just as Sachar recruited big names to give other departments instant credibility, he persuaded Benny Friedman to become Brandeis' first athletic director. With his legendary heroics as a college and professional player, experience as CCNY varsity coach, intelligence, outstanding reputation, and eloquence, Friedman seemed an excellent choice to head Brandeis' athletic program.

Friedman fielded a freshman football team in 1950 despite Brandeis' still miniscule enrollment of four hundred. Although bursary aid was available to a limited number of players, all athletes had to meet Brandeis' demanding academic standards. Nevertheless, in 1951 Friedman produced a varsity football team. After posting a 4-5 won-loss mark in its first season, the varsity football team had a 5-2-1 record in 1952. The number of scholarships and financial support grew. Confident of his own abilities and the direction of the program, Friedman dreamed that Brandeis would develop into a major athletic power.

The debate over the decision to abolish football at Brandeis after the 1959 season serves as this paper's focal point. There were those who feared that the continued growth of athletics would threaten the academic atmosphere at Brandeis. Others had misgivings about Friedman's fund raising activities, and on a small campus any special attention to athletes was bound to create some resentment. Athletic scholarships were limited, then abolished, although commitments to students already at the school were honored. As a result, in 1959 the football team, which had gone 6-1 only two years before, suffered through a miserable 0-7-1 season. Against the strenuous opposition of Friedman, on May 16, 1960 Brandeis University announced the unanimous action of the Board of Trustees to discontinue varsity football.