

Athletics and Academics: The Philosophy of Amos Alonzo Stagg

Erin McCarthy

Loyola University

The picture of Amos Alonzo Stagg as athlete and football coach extraordinaire may be a true one, but it is not complete. Today, as universities and colleges are coming under increasing scrutiny regarding the exploitation of the “student athlete,” Stagg takes on a new relevance as not only an educator, but also as a reformer. Stagg, like many others in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, felt there were serious problems in a growing urban society. According to Stagg, physical development was the key to combating the evils of modern life. He saw athletics as a formative instrument in the shaping of not only individual character but also of the greater society. This is the center of Stagg’s philosophy: his belief in the centrality of physical development and its ability to create or transform culture. Stagg did not believe this was something that would happen spontaneously. A new profession was needed in order to insure proper use of athletics as a means toward change. The practitioners would be professionally trained Christian educators.

Around the turn of the century, many Americans were trying to cope with a rapidly changing world, one that was becoming increasingly urban and secular. With the huge influx of immigrants, the transformation of the nature of work, and the emerging revelations in science, many Protestants were looking for ways to preserve the values of their church and the American tradition, as they defined it. As Stagg saw it, modern life was, “a great departure from natural living.” The strength and health of modern society was being destroyed by the attraction of the city and the desire for “luxury and zeal for money.” According to Stagg, modern life was an unnatural “indoor existence.” In the quest for luxury and money, people were becoming increasingly selfish. “We live,” said Stagg, “in an age interested in itself.”

Stagg intended to implement this use of physical development and athletics by creating a new profession, that of Directors of Physical Culture. These directors would be coaches as well as instructors. This new field was made necessary by the realities of modern life, and the problem of the health of the nation fell on their shoulders. These directors would be trained experts, specialists. They would be first and foremost Christian educators who would teach the values of self control, self discipline, hard work and sacrifice, ensuring the continuation of amateur ideals. This approach would provide students with training for life, educators were not preparing students for lives as professional athletes but as men; citizens who would fulfill their duty of service to society in their lives after college. Stagg believed his profession was one of the noblest, unequalled for service. Its responsibility was to build the manhood of the country; a job no one else was doing.

Stagg’s philosophy came from a number of different sources, many of which echoed late nineteenth century attitudes (see: Higham, Fredrickson, and Mrozek), and it could be argued that Stagg was practicing a physical form of the Social Gospel movement of that time. But the most important factor in the shaping of Stagg’s philosophy seems to be his own faith. As a divinity student at Yale Stagg decided he did not have the qualities necessary to become a minister. Instead, Stagg felt he could answer his religious calling through teaching and coaching athletics. Stagg was also greatly influenced by Luther Gullick while at Springfield College (1890-1892).

How successful was Stagg? Not very. Abuses in collegiate athletics continued, and few of Stagg's contemporaries adopted the model Stagg used at the University of Chicago. His own university eventually dropped the physical culture requirement making it voluntary. Stagg's failure was due in large part to his attempt to embrace current trends (advances in science, new theories on diet, exercise, etc.) while trying to turn the clock back to what he felt was a more pure time. Was this possible? And, more importantly, did it ever exist?