

# Sport and “Big Time” Sport: The University of Minnesota Experience, 1882-1905

John C. Chalberg

Normandale Community College

I am presently working on the early years of sport at the University of Minnesota. The time frame extends from the early 1880s and the creation of a commencement week “field day” at the university through the founding of the Western Conference and the establishment of the NCAA. At issue, of course, is the whole question of control of intercollegiate sport. At Minnesota this seems to have been a five-cornered affair (among students, physical educators specifically, faculty members generally, the president’s office, and the board of regents). For a good many years—at least up to the coming into existence of the then Big Nine—it appears that money was controlled by the students themselves through something called the University Board of Control, which was created by students and in which students held a majority voice until 1902.

The physical educators, most of whom came out of the YMCA movement, were torn between their commitment to health and exercise and their desire to support intercollegiate sport. Those faculty members who chose to involve themselves in athletics were among the “heavyweights” within the university. Some were even directly involved in coaching various sports, including football.

The president of the university during this time was one Cyrus Northrup. He appears to have been at best disinterested and at worst suspicious of intercollegiate sport until well into the 1890s. He clearly was no William Rainey Harper.

How did competition among the five parties evolve? Did students feel that sport was being taken away from them, especially since they had initiated it. Who was allied with whom and why? What critical decisions were made to go “big time?” And just when were they made? Along this line I compare events and decisions at the university against a local private college (Hamline) over the same years. (Hamline and the university did compete against one another in a variety of sports during these years.)

The university archives contain copies of the student newspaper, minutes of board of regents meetings, presidential papers, as well as highly interesting—and entertaining—memoirs of a few members of the athletic department. I also attempted to locate papers of important faculty members and players (some of whom subsequently became significant figures in the state’s history).

As a footnote to all this I comment at the conclusion of my paper on the attitude of President Lotus Coffman toward intercollegiate athletics. Coffman was president from 1921 to 1938 (which was one presidency removed from Northrup). I realize that this time period lies outside of my target years, but I recently discovered interesting letters indicating his skepticism about major college sport and the direction in which it was then heading. Given that he presided over the Bernie Bierman glory years, there might well be the makings of something interesting here. He also served as president during the building of Memorial Stadium in the early 1920s. This was initially a student project to commemorate the dead of World War I. Eventually the Coffman years might well make for a separate paper. In this presentation, May conference I focused on the early period, while leaving a small amount of time to draw a comparative reference to Coffman. He seems to have had serious reservations about the role of athletics on the university campus, but if Northrup was no Harper, Coffman was no Robert Hutchins.