

# The Navy Saves Collegiate Sport: The United States and the World War II Athletic Experience

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World War II and its gradually increasing demand on military manpower had by May 1943 drained virtually all able bodied men from American College campuses. Despite the increasing reliance on 17 year old and draft deferred athletes, it was likely that intercollegiate sport would have completely disappeared from the national scene by Fall 1943. The attendant structural impact on post war intercollegiate sport can only be pondered, for many schools who did drop their sport programs—especially in football—did so never to return.

The United States Navy with its successful intramural and varsity program of World War I, and with a leadership friendly to competitive athletics, not only revived mass competitive play for the uniformed sailor but injected a liberal manpower pool into the barren collegiate scene. Its pre-flight varsity concept was campus based, collegiately inspired, and a motivator to intercollegiate programs. The midshipman officer schools (V-12) lifted huge numbers of prominent and budding athletes from languishing programs and spread them over a landscape of over 100 contract schools. Navy and NCAA decisions to allow these "90 day wonders" to claim collegiate eligibility allowed sport to thrive. The resultant stampede led to "All Americans" changing campuses, to five and six years of eligibility, and the outpouring of a virtually limitless player and coaching pool into the post war scene. Every ranked football team in the 1943 Associated Press poll was Navy based.

The intercollegiate rush led also to a debate and a reevaluation of the traditional role of physical education. The victory of "team play" over individual disciplines had consequences for emphasis in sport for beyond the war years.