

“Paying Homage to the Brilliant Sons of Alabama:” The Southern Response to University of Alabama Football, 1920-1931

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The quality of southern college football had been second-rate at best prior to 1920, but this competitive inferiority was reversed over the next fifteen years. The University of Alabama’s undefeated record in four Rose Bowls between 1926 and 1935 was an achievement of great symbolic importance to an entire region plagued by a persisting historical legacy of defeat, poverty and alienation from the mainstream of American life. The paper explores the social and cultural significance of the southern response to the intersectional success of the Alabama football program between 1920 and 1935, and examines what this reveals about the ambivalent attitudes of white southerners toward their own past and their relationship to the ascendant industrial order and emerging mass culture of the nation as a whole.

Some viewed Alabama’s success as a vindication of unadorned southern nationalism. Yet these chauvinistic declarations of regional pride were tempered by the desire of the southern middle class to combine the traditional southern ideals of the planter elite with the pragmatic tenets of what George Tindall calls “Business Progressivism.” This fusion of old and new was the essence of the New South ideology, which combined a desire to share in the material progress of modern industrial capitalism while still retaining the traditions and folkways that so deeply informed the southern identity.

The political maturity of the urban middle class in Alabama coincided during the 1920’s with the rise of the football program at the University of Alabama to national stature. The leadership of this

rising elite was comprised largely of Alabama alumni, and they were eager to equate the prowess of their football team with the growing spirit of progress and regional boosterism they were creating in the state. Alabama Governor Bibb Graves, an Alabama alumnus and leading Progressive figure in state politics for two decades, glowingly touted Alabama's victory over Washington State in the 1931 Rose Bowl as proof that Alabamians were indeed capable of becoming part of the national economic mainstream.

Donald Mrozek and others have noted that early collegiate football served as a practical example of the "socially efficient" practices of teamwork rigorous training, and the precise execution of carefully conceptualized strategies. The southern Progressives, like their north-eastern counterparts two decades earlier, saw football as an important popular symbol of a well-ordered industrial society with a loyal and productive working class. Yet football also embodied the qualities of bravery, martial valour and masculine virility that white southerners so proudly claimed as their tradition. The heroism of the Lost Cause and the efficiency of the modern industrial world harmoniously coexisted in a sport that was adopted by southerners as a metaphor for the New South itself.