

‘Foolish and Useless Sport:’ The Southern Methodist Crusade Against Intercollegiate Football, 1890-1914

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The leadership of the souther Methodist church viewed the rise of intercollegiate football in the South in the early 1890s with horror and alarm. Methodists denounced the game as an orgy of gladiatorial violence that glorified the animalistic aspects of human nature. Football was little more than “a theatre

of mud and blood,” according to the Alabama Christian Advocate, the official organ of the Methodist church in the state. Opponents of the sport also denounced the drinking and gambling that invariably accompanied a big game. Football thus became a locus on contention in the perennial struggle between the rough male subculture rooted in traditional southern conceptions of honor and the female world of piety and propriety.

The religious opposition to football also illuminates aspects of the deep cultural divisions created by industrialization and the expansion of market capitalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century South. Southern Methodists were not inalterably opposed to the socioeconomic regime of the New South modernizers, but they were wary of the tendency of the market to undermine religious orthodoxy and popular devotion to traditional mores. Football was strongly identified with the Northeastern bourgeoisie, and as such it came to symbolize the irreligion and liberal individualism that many southerners believed had gained ascendancy in that region.

Football also played a role in the protracted struggle between moderate and conservative Methodists for control of Vanderbilt University that culminated in the separation of the church and the university in 1914. In the eyes of the orthodox bishops on the Vanderbilt Board of Trust, the religious moderates who dominated the university administration violated their duty to the church by tolerating the “sinful indulgence” of intercollegiate football. These conservative bishops who vehemently denounced Vanderbilt football simultaneously defended the orthodox position on the doctrines of biblical inerrancy and human depravity, and fought to prevent reunification of the southern and northern branches of the Methodist church. While conservative Methodists eventually made their peace with football, their early opposition to the game carried the tone of a moral crusade.