

The Rehabilitation of a Football coach: Alienation, Race and “Mucker” Football

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A year after George Foster Sanford died in 1938, his former players and friends paid tribute to the former Yale center and Rutgers and Columbia football coach. The lavish tributes included praise for his character and coaching ability, including a telegram from Paul Robeson who wrote that “no one feels more grateful to Sandy than I for the part he played in my life.” What makes these tributes ironic is that in the early 1900s Sanford was infamous for what one Yale critic called his “mucker football.”

What had led to the opprobrium and praise? Much of the criticism derived from Sanford’s three-year coaching stint at Columbia from 1899 to 1902. In his first year, Columbia defeated Yale, 6-0, in his second year Princeton, and finally in his third Pennsylvania. After his first year a scandal ensued. Columbia had been playing four ineligible “ringers,” and saddled with Sanford’s salary football was virtually bankrupt. He was what Walter Camp and other “amateurs” hated most, “the professional coach.”

Sanford later regarded this stint as a turning point in his life. “But that easy \$5,000 for a short season’s work, that and the virus of the game -- killed my aspirations as a lawyer and nearly ruined my whole career.” When he later coached at Rutgers, he made his players pledge never to coach for money. For a decade, Sanford sport coached at various colleges, but the hostility of Yale football authorities harmed his football ambitions and his business career as well. In 1913, the same year that he failed to get a coaching position at Yale, he was asked to help coach at Rutgers. Though Rutgers played in the first college game, the team had for years had languished. Soon the sole coach, Sanford would have a winning football team. “Articulate, commanding, colorful, dynamic,” writes Richard McCormick in his history of Rutgers, “he immediately became an idol to his players and to the vast majority of students as well.”

His greatest team came in 1917 when an extraordinary athlete, Paul Robeson, sometimes known as the “giant Negro,” was playing end for Rutgers, At a time when racism was at its peak, Robeson braved physical danger and constant harassment to come out for the team and then play in a lynch-mob gridiron atmosphere. Sanford admired Robeson and helped him learn to fight back against his opponents. In return, Robeson became an extraordinary pass receiver tackler, and anchor of special teams.

It appears that Sanford was remarkably free of the virulent racism that plagued the pre-World War I period, and appreciated Robeson's athletic talents that he had first observed when "Robey" was playing in high school. Though Sanford believed that "football is method, not men" and disliked the forward pass, he built one of the best teams in the country around this outstanding player.

Did his success allay the criticism that had dogged his career? In spite of his success, he was never able to coach at his beloved Yale, and his son who was an outstanding pitcher was turned down by Yale in the 1920s. When Sanford retired in 1923, he had refounded the Rutgers' program and had redeemed himself in the eyes of the former players and friends who gathered to memorialize him.